Review bombing in gaming.
What are review aggregators used for?
The case of the DEI / Anti-DEI review battle in video games

The construction of taste in video games has historically been linked to the specialized press and the specific treatment that for decades established the rating as the benchmark for consumers and game producers.

Since gamersgate, the rating issue has been the subject of debate, and tests have evolved, but it's the emergence of user opinions and online discussions that are increasingly disrupting launches. Our previous study on cultural battles highlighted the arrival of political subjects carried by a community outside gaming, animated by a few "gatekeeper" accounts generating a great deal of engagement, but ultimately little readability in the overall online conversation. The review phase is then the moment to publicize their cause and exist in the public media space.

This study aims to analyze the notion of video game review and the dynamics that underpin it in the context of cultural battles that disrupt launches. Particular attention will be paid to Assassin's Creed Shadows and a destabilizing practice: review bombing, i.e. the massive, time-contracted influx of negative ratings to lower the average and alter appreciation.

Introduction

From video game reviews to the supremacy of commentary

An analysis of online discussions reveals the growing importance of commentary over traditional criticism of a cultural work. Commentary consists in descriptively asserting one's primary feeling, and mobilizes individual emotion as an analytical regime. Far from the ideal of a rational public space pre-existing social media, it is a juxtaposition of individual feelings immediately expressed. With moral issues, commentary becomes passionate. Identifying these moral issues under a banner like DCI facilitates the aggregation of subjectivities and continues to reinforce the phenomenon of being alone together.

In contrast, professional critics aim for a form of objectivity, mobilizing not sentiment but other interpretative categories such as the history of an art form, its technique and aesthetics, in a perspective that goes beyond the author of the analysis, and whose work of production is not in the instantaneous reaction, but on the contrary inscribes the cultural good in a duration.

Once these two definitions have been established, it's interesting to consider the role of opinion leaders and specialized media: are they commentators or critics? Gamergate has led to a growing awareness of the role of specialized journalists, and their need to go beyond technical analysis of games to include social and political issues. As a result, some editorial teams have abandoned the note. However, rating aggregators have remained the benchmark, while at the same time giving way to comment aggregation as a new category of judgment, if not as a major category in the assessment of a game. De facto, the weight of professional critical analysis has collapsed in relation to the supremacy of the commentary community. The raids organized to lower a game's rating reveal the risks of such vagueness and plunge the creators of cultural products, and video games in particular, into a situation of great uncertainty.

The specialized press, itself a cultural product talking about a cultural good, is faced with this dilemma: should it be a community platform, putting the themes of passion and indignation on the agenda and gaining an audience, or should it become a prescriber of tastes, establishing new categories of judgment and once again becoming a point of crystallization and a leader of opinion, even if this means incurring the wrath of part of the community?

Changing categories of judgment and a new media system for video games

These avenues can be explored in subsequent analyses. We can already consider that, while tastes have evolved, online comments are part of a partial opening-up of video gaming, and confirm that gaming is a major subject of discussion, for those who play, streament or watch it. A remarkable phenomenon, they are emerging at a time when the decline in social capital has facilitated the emergence of new forms of civic engagement over the past 30 years: engaged comments reflect this interest in civic issues, whether they relate to consumer rights or the place of citizens. Their nature depends above all on the spheres of discussion, with hyperspecialized politicized influencers on the one hand - in view of the moral crusades they undertake - and the more mainstream press on the other.

Video game and geek culture journalists in the mainstream media are a good example of this ability to talk about video games in a different way. They help to make video games an open work, subject to multiple interpretations, a sign of the medium's maturity. The counterpoint to the reign of commentary could lie in the establishment of professional criticism similar to that of the other arts, positioning video games no longer as a consumer product, but as an art form as important as theater or cinema.

Video game criticism thus falls into two categories with different regimes
- the historical press, operating under the regime of truth, with a set of professional practices, rules of deontology and a work of mediatization of fire and production of proof where appropriate
- online commentators operating on the basis of emotion, with the cardinal value being emotional engagement through feeling rather than reason.

In the case of video games, media treatment has often found itself at the crossroads of these two regimes, due to an industry prone to passion and emotion. While the test has been discredited, it was an attempt to objectify the game, inscribing it in an art history and, by extension, shaping taste for video games by proposing an interpretative grid. Criticism, on the other hand, has freed the game from these criteria, proposing more subjective readings - assumed as such - whose value, and this is the main challenge, is linked to the nature of the authority. To put it simply: in the past, the authority of criticism was linked to the prestige of the issuing media, whereas today, authority is linked to the number of social media followers. While audience has always been a decisive criterion, it's the illusion of influencers' status as spontaneous individual opinions that calls into question the nature of their positions.

The question of financing content is also an element that changes the editorial. In a newspaper, criticism is part of an editorial line collectively produced by all the columns, and film criticism is often in line with the tone of international politics. The medium is nonetheless financed by advertising and certain public subsidies, when the press is considered a sine qua non of democracy. But criticism is not directly impacted by sales; it's the media as a whole that acts as a buffer and temporizer.

For social media, i.e. an influencer on social networks, editorial content is not produced by a set of different sections, but rather co-produced with the audience who like, share, and therefore validate on the fly, making a permanent editorial board without participating in the responsibility of financing. So the influencer's business model lies in satisfying algorithms, whereas for the press it was minimal rules of deontology and the objectives of funders.

We focused our analysis on the live case of Assassin's Creed Shadows, following on from our study of cultural battles. We postulated that the cultural battle reaches its apogee during the production phase of video game reviews, notably when user comments and ratings are opened up.

1. Classify review

We distinguish several areas of video game criticism, which are differentiated according to different criteria:
- those that require you to have played the game in order to comment, whether through the professional relationship established with press relations, or the very nature of the medium itself, as on YouTube
- those requiring an account linked to personal data identifications as opposed to anonymous ones. This point is particularly important when it comes to the circulation of negative reviews.
- those that have a system for validating comments by the community. In this case, it's a question of organizing comment feedback, because if there are like/dislike systems for comments, when there aren't any, the work of mobilization is done by multiplying the number of unique comments.

These three criteria provide an initial framework for understanding:

	track if played	identifiable account required	community validation of analysis	community	degree of professionalization
press	yes	yes	yes	peer & audience	professional
influencer video game	yes	yes	yes	audience	professional
influencer other	not mandatory	yes	yes	audience	professional
Steam	yes	yes	yes	other players	amateur
Metacritics	no	no	no	no	amateur
Google	no	non	yes	users	amateur

The press plays the game before producing its review, according to the classic process of receiving the game via press relations, then writing the article, and embargoed until a certain time. This relationship of trust between producer and journalist is part of journalistic ethics. The review produced is then analyzed by the audience in the comments, as well as by the community of video game testers who, since gamergate, have been trying to guarantee professional work.

Influencers, depending on their degree of professionalization (if they make a living from their videos), work in a similar way to press relations. There are different categories of influencers: video game influencers, whose job is to test games, can be likened to journalists in terms of the production system and their need to remain independent (in any case, there's a definition

issue in the field), as opposed to generalist influencers who do product placement and can be monetized for product placement, which is regulated by law, and who don't so much produce an analysis of the game as a subjective vision, either around extracts or while playing.

The other three areas - Steam, metacritics and Google - are open to users, and thus value the opinion of the end consumer. This rating method is used in many consumer industries, from hotels to restaurants, and is part of an initial need to establish trust in commerce and the goods sold. This is the hypothesis of the collective intelligence of crowds that governed the knowledge Internet of the 2000s, with mutualized systems such as Wikipedia. This system was then instituted as a judging criterion by platforms, with an impact on customer relations - the over-solicitation to leave a categorizable review, and therefore a rating.

These three areas have different ratings according to the following law:
1. technical rating constraints reflect a degree of critical requirement and a model of reliability.
2. the closer the constraints are to professional ethics, the smaller the gap between press and player opinions
3. conversely, the weaker the technical constraints, the greater the difference.

As a sub-factor, the degree of distance from the critic's work has an impact on the relationship to the community, according to the following rule: anything that aggregates opinions promotes conflictualization.

This law applies to all goods, but is highly performative in the world of video games, which has historically given pride of place to ratings. We can call this law the law of critical distance from video games.

2. Assassin's Creed Shadows: criticism as the central battle in the culture war
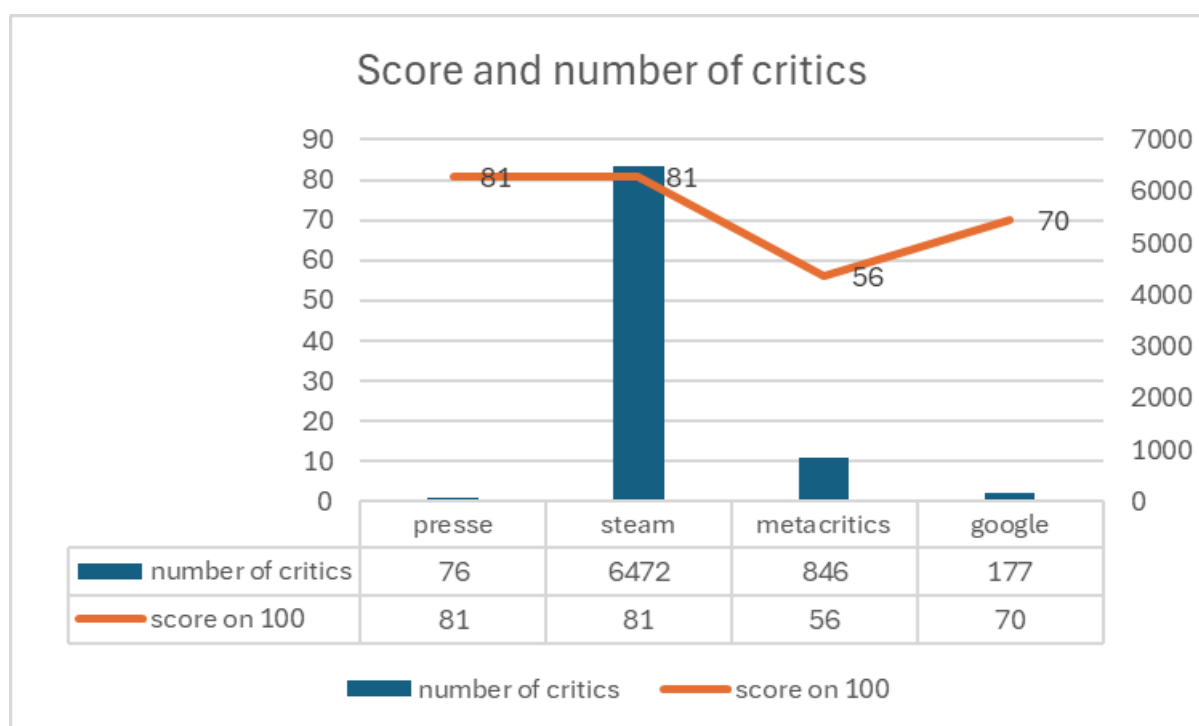
1. *A global view of the balance of power*

We've analyzed the first 36 hours of the launch of Assassin's Creed shadows, Ubisoft's highly controversial game.

Chronology of key review production dates (UTC) :
- March 18: first reviews published on March 18, after the 6 p.m. embargo was lifted.
- March 19: worldwide release on ubiconnect at 11pm
- March 20: worldwide release on console at 00:00 and on PC (steam) at 5:00
- March 21: metacritics opens at 8pm

To complete the main quest in Assassin's Creed, you need to devote at least 45 hours to it. This means sending the game several days in advance to professionals so that they can finish it, form their own opinions and then produce the review. We estimate that this work requires a minimum total of 50 hours.

With this in mind, the worldwide release of Shadows, assuming two full days of uninterrupted work, will result in a review of the entire game on March 22 at 11pm. Professional criticism and reviews do not follow the same production process or the same logic, and reviews can be issued with little or no playing time.

Score and number of critics

	presse	steam	metacritics	google
number of critics	76	6472	846	177
score on 100	81	81	56	70

data as of 12:00 on March 22

The specialized press and user reviews on Steam give a score of 81/100, while Metacritics (56) and Google (70) diverge.

A closer look at the deviations from the press reference score confirms what is at work in the law of critical distance from video games: Metacritics has the widest deviation, even though it shares no technical constraints with the profession.
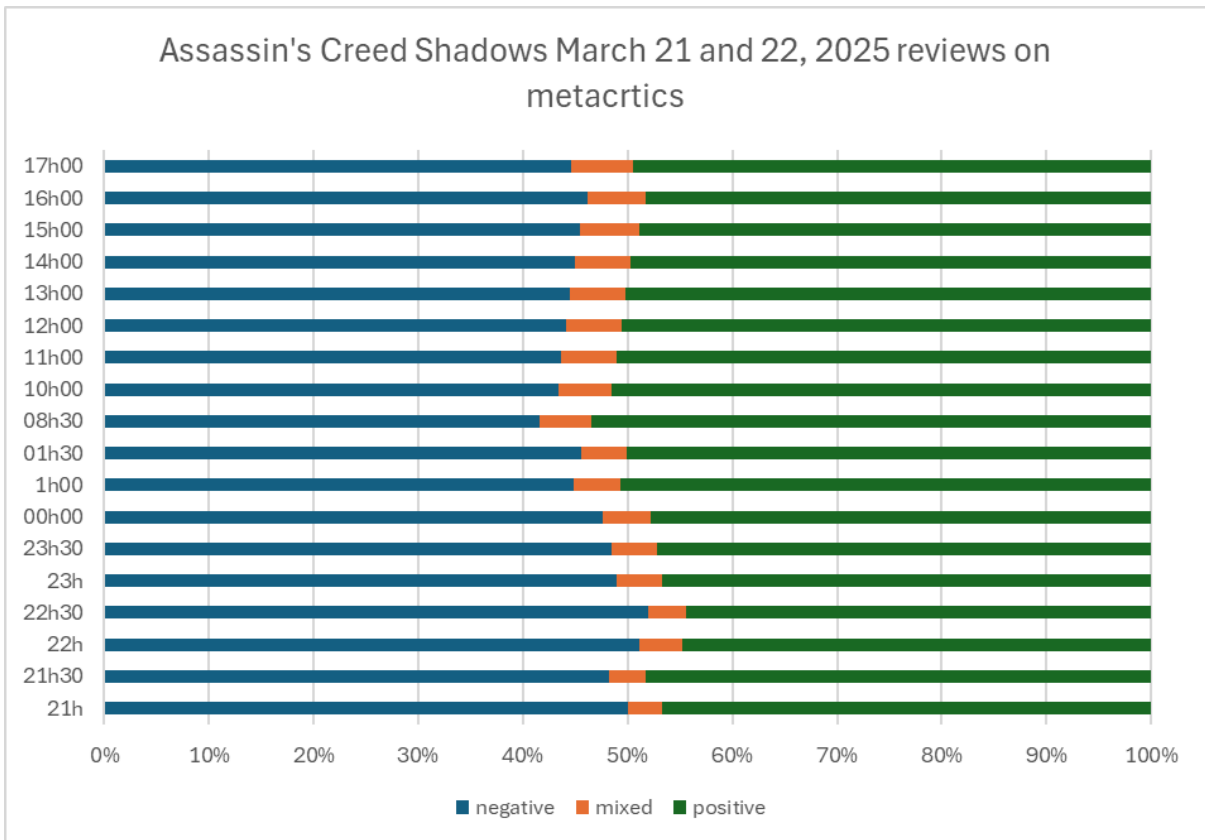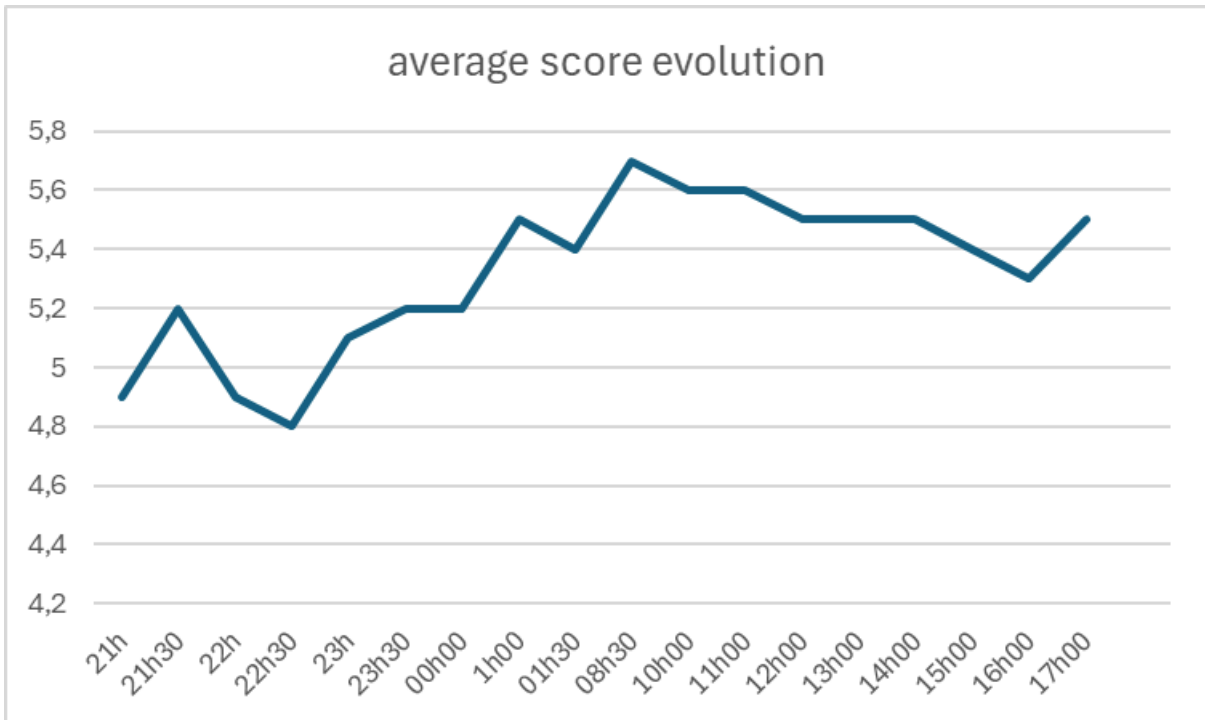
NUMBER OF REVIEWS AND TYPES OF DEVIATIONS
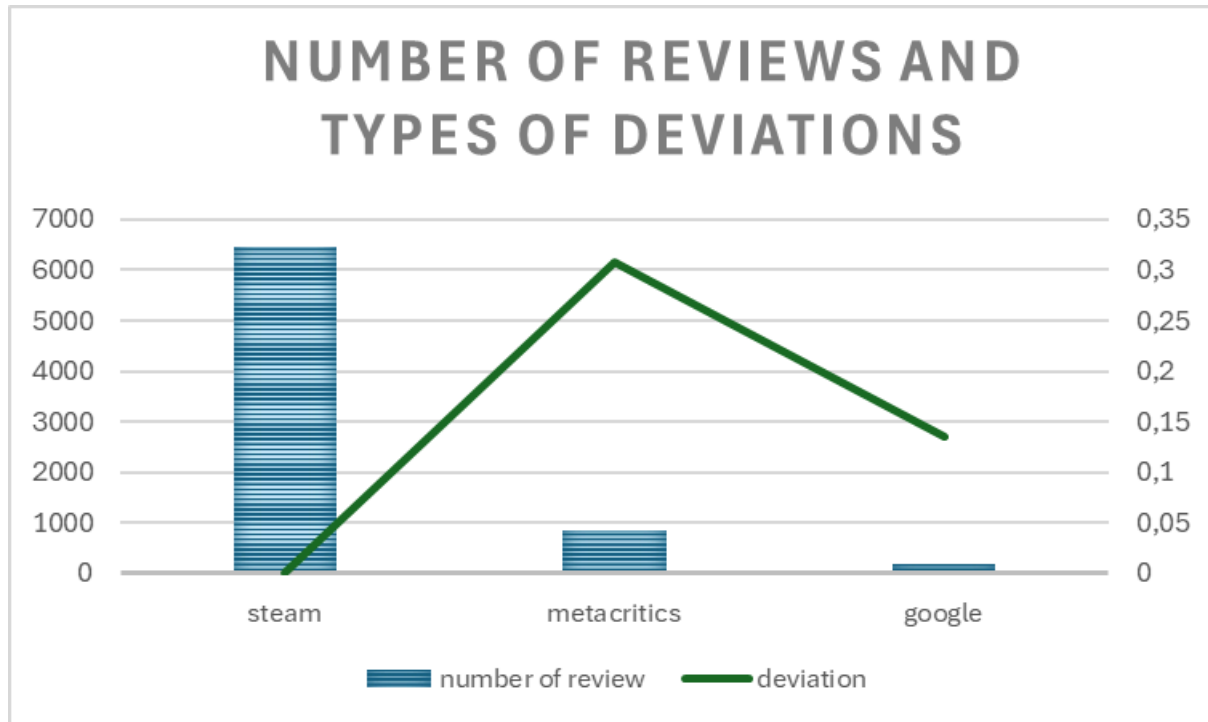
data as of 12:00 on March 22

This has a direct effect on the very nature of rating, and favors what we can describe as classic review bombing, here strongly marked by issues that confirm the second law: the more virulent the criticism, the more distant the ratings, the more content reflects other concerns.

2. Metacritics, what's it all about?

From the outset, the metacritic rating was very widely spread, between 9/10 and 0 and 1, reflecting a pitched battle between the game's supporters and its opponents.

If the advantage is given to the game's supporters with an above-average score, a rather remarkable fact in an industry where, according to the principle of exit, voice, loyalty, it's the malcontents who now express themselves on social networks.

European
Videogame
Observatory

average score evolution

Assassin's Creed Shadows March 21 and 22, 2025 reviews on metacrtics

■ negative   ■ mixed   ■ positive

3. Themes covered in the reviews

Assassin's Creed Shadows not only elicits criticism of classic video game elements (gameplay, optimization, writing), but also becomes the catalyst for a broader rejection, expressed by a section of gamers opposed to certain editorial and cultural orientations. A significant proportion of negative opinions seem to be structured around ideological contestation, in very marked terms: constant references to a game perceived as "woke", accusations of propaganda, and rejection of LGBTQ+ or multicultural representations. These criticisms, often redundant and virulent, can skew public assessment of the game.

One of the most divisive points concerns the use of the character of Yasuke, presented as a samurai. Several critics denounce the game's betrayal of Japanese history, lamenting the lack of cultural fidelity and the use of historical figures in fictional arcs perceived as distorted. One wrote: "Calling him a samurai stretches the truth beyond recognition", while another lamented that "Ubisoft wanted a flashy diversity token to wave around, regardless of how it fits into the cultural context".

On all platforms, but particularly on PC and Xbox, critics dwell at length on the inclusion of homosexual romances and non-binary characters. While some express embarrassment at their supposed anachronism ("In feudal Japan… pronouns? Really?"), others use virulent, even hateful language. One player sums it up: "It's like Sims dating. And the other character is a 90 lb lesbian", or 'Gay samurai sim - not my Assassin's Creed'. Diversity-related content is often accused of having been forcibly integrated, to the detriment of historical coherence or narrative.

A significant proportion of reviews, especially on PC and Xbox, adopt a particularly virulent tone, often politically oriented. These include comments hostile to diversity, inclusion and Ubisoft: "This is peak woke stupidity", "Ubisoft pandering to modern identity politics", or "A disguised sermon, not a game". Others went even further, evoking: "If the paying public wants it, it has to fail" or calling for Ubisoft to be bought out to put an end to its perceived militant orientation. Many of the comments use similar wording, rejecting any representation perceived as "woke", and displaying a principled rejection of the game, whatever its actual content.

Critics	Frequency	Verbatim
Hateful, racist, conspiratorial, homophobic, transphobic remarks	Very common	« Zionist propaganda », « SJW trash », « Woke stupidity », « Blue hair trannies », « Racist woke pigs »
LGBTQ+ representations perceived as forced	Very common	« Forced inclusion », « Cringe pronouns », « Gay samurai sim »
Instrumentalization of diversity (Yasuke, etc.)	Very common	« Diversity token », « Historical fabrication »

Inclusion of non-binary characters	Common	« Non-binary romance », « Bathhouse scene with pronouns »
Overall rejection of inclusion as a principle	Common	« Stop woke games », « Ubisoft pandering », « Fake representation »

Criticism from players also concerns the gaming experience. These criticisms focus on three main areas: the feeling of repetition, the lack of commitment and the technical limitations of the production.

Players point to a lack of renewal in the game's mechanics, deemed too similar to those of previous titles in the saga. Many also expressed weariness at what they saw as a systematic recycling of the Ubisoft formula. One comment sums up this impression: "I have the feeling that I've played this game quite a few times before, but instead of Japan, it was set in the Viking era, the Greek era…". The game's loops - infiltration, combat, exploration - are seen as identical to those of Valhalla or Odyssey, "same ctrl+C ctrl+V game", with no real evolution.
As a result, the experience is often described as boring or uninvolving. Despite the regularly praised graphic quality, the open world is perceived as empty, redundant and lacking in life. Side quests, enemy AI and animations are frequently cited as "outdated" or "lifeless".

On the technical front, critics point to insufficient optimization, particularly on PC. Performance is said to be unstable, bugs numerous and animations rigid: "Even on my RTX 3080 it doesn't hold its smooth 60 fps at 1440p on ultra". Others denounce persistent bugs, clipping, rigid or broken animations: "Bug all is said RTX 5080 - a shame".

4. Calls for review bombing

Several private Discord forums, run by Ubisoft detractors such as DeiDetected and "FCK_DRM" (the Pirat_Nation Discord), have explicitly called for review bombing on Steam, Metacritic and Google reviews of Assassin's Creed Shadows. (Pirat_Nation's Discord), have explicitly called for review bombing on Steam, Metacritic and Google reviews of Assassin's Creed Shadows. These calls invite the community to write negative reviews. Others call for comments in meme and parody form, like "Johnny Somali Simulator". This sphere feeds itself through parody and derision, like an echo chamber inviting detractors to create opinions, each more parodic than the last.
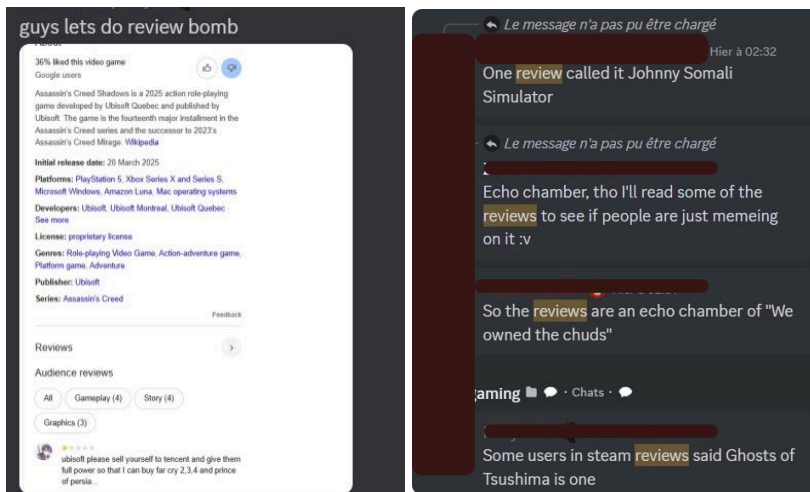
Review bombing is also intended as a criticism of the rating system, highlighting the difference between press and player ratings. The Pirat_Nation Discord automatically shares posts from the X account of the same name. This detractor criticized the rating system after an initial wave of review bombing.
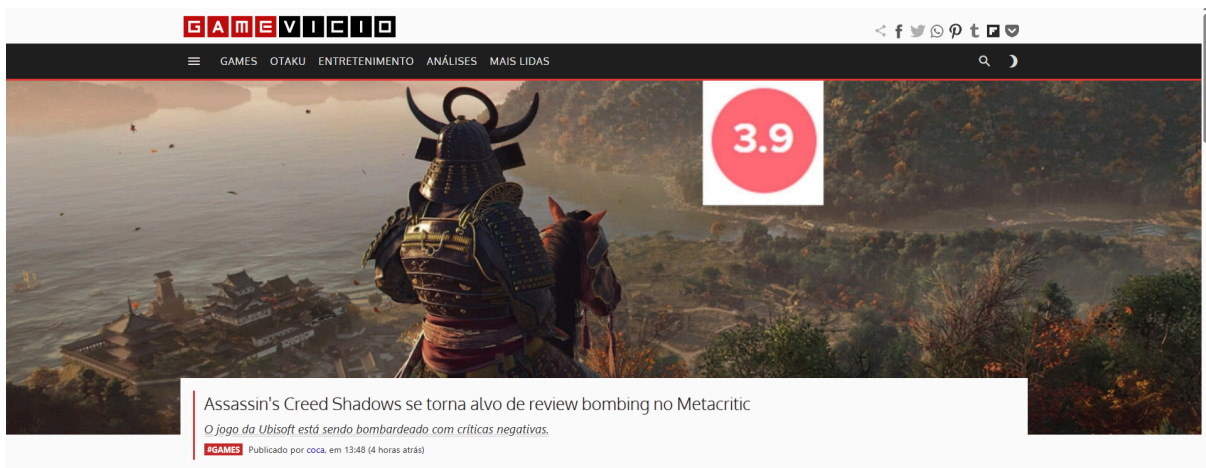
Brazilian trade journal Game Vicio was able to identify the beginnings of review bombing.

Conclusion : Assassin's Creed Shadows face au review bombing

The gap between press scores and community ratings is usually relatively small, below 10%, except when the game is open to discussion, such as Elden Ring's difficulty.

Comparison with 2024 success

	Users critics		Press		
	total	note	note	number	différence
elden ring	18923	8,2	96	86	14,58%
astrobot	4506	9,2	94	135	2,13%
Helldivers 2	2462	7,4	82	67	9,76%
Indiana Jones and the Great Circle	1532	8,3	86	76	3,49%
Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown	1173	8,4	86	83	2,33%

When the gap is greater than 25%, we are very often confronted with protest action by users who use the review as a space for contestation, with the hope of influencing sales. This is an interesting approach, because along with social networks, it remains one of the ways in which consumers can make their presence felt in the public arena.

Games subject to review bombing

	first page	negative	mixed	positive	total	note	press	number	difference
GTA V	PS5	494	37	277	808	3,8	97	66	60,82%
Star Wars Battlefront II	PS5	7300	631	1300	9231	1,8	68	62	73,53%
Mass effect 3	xbox 360	1400	564	2500	4464	6,3	93	74	32,26%
Dragon Age Veilguard	PS5	5000	634	2400	8034	3,9	82	73	52,44%
Stellar Blade	PS5	349	273	6600	7222	9,2	81	134	-13,58%
The Last of Us Part II	PS4	68100	8900	87400	164450	5,8	93	121	37,63%
Assassin's Creed Shadows	PS5	503	62	546	1111	5,4	81	76	33,33%

Star Wars Outlaws	PS5	1200	368	1300	2915	5,4	75	89	28,00%

In 2015, the Star Wars Battlefront 2 game came under heavy attack for challenging the publisher's commercial policy of integrating microtransactions at a time when the industry was looking for growth drivers to boost revenues from their productions. Here, the coordination action concerns consumer policy.

Mass effect 3 and The Last of Us 2 have both been the subject of controversy. In the case of Mass Effect 3, the review bombing forced Bioware to redo the ending, which was judged not to meet expectations. The RPG aspect of the game, inviting players to play according to their preferences, was not an issue, even if the lesbian kiss between extraterrestrials was controversial. Here, it was more a question of trust and keeping promises to players. The Last of Us 2 marked a turning point in the debate on wokism, and generated a great deal of criticism from a group of gamers massively mobilized to attack or defend the game, acclaimed by the press and gamers alike. It's worth noting that even games such as the undisputed bestseller GTA V have been criticized for its latest release on generation 8 consoles, which is considered a mere update.

Games that have been the subject of controversy because of their representations deemed too woke have all received the same treatment, with a strong mobilization of negative reviews, and a pronounced differential with press ratings and user opinions. The Stellar blade case is also the object of mobilization, but this time in favor of the game and the publisher's decision to maintain the sexualized design of its heroine.

BREAKDOWN OF METACRITICISMS FOR GAMES THAT HAVE BEEN THE SUBJECT OF CULTURAL BATTLES
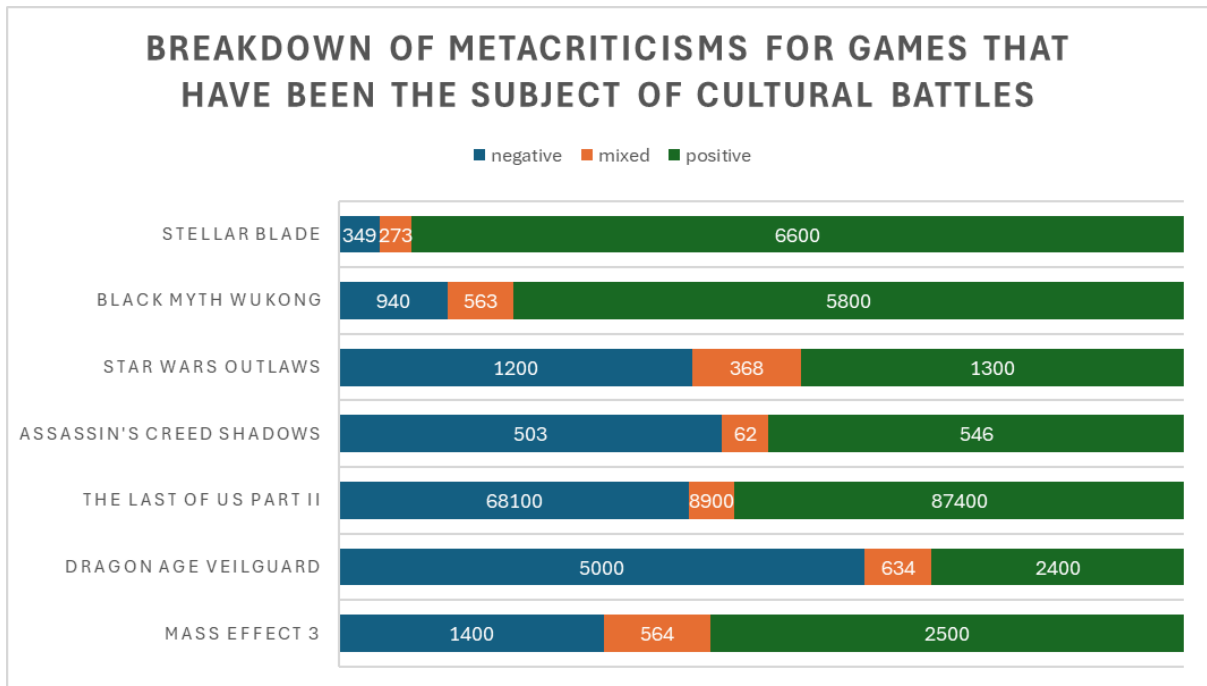
The very structure of the distribution of comments is identical, whether it's hyper-weighting to make one's point, or the over-representation of notes with militant comments Assassin's Creed is subject to this type of attack, even if the community seems to resist more strongly than in the case of Dragon Age Veilguard.

In the light of this study, we feel it's important to distinguish between the space of criticism of games as works of art, and criticism of the subjects supported by games, which have become the focus of attention of communities outside gaming. The collusion of these two spaces makes it difficult to read a launch, while at the same time helping to highlight the mobilizing force of video game cultural battles. Our law of critical distancing from video games is illustrated by the proliferation of messages that should not be seen as criticisms of the game per se, but should really be considered as a repertoire of political action in order to exist in the public space. In this sense, the blurring of the boundaries between professional criticism and users' opinions is coupled with a rejection of traditional "legacy media" (to be understood in the computer sense as an element inherited from an earlier version of the system), a discourse promoted by techno-libertarians in favor of subjectivities and individualities with large surfaces on social networks.