

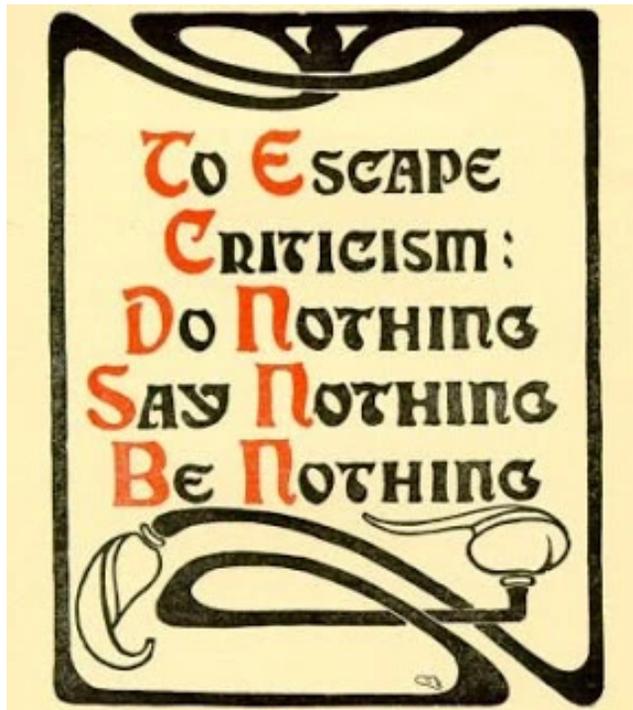
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LOSTGARDEN

A blunt critique of game criticism

May 8, 2011 by Daniel Cook / comments 78

Note: This essay has gone through a couple drafts based off extensive feedback (which you can read below in the comments). I'm aiming for a version of this essay that is less likely to violently misinterpreted by a majority of readers. Apologies for altering the context of any of the comments below...an unfortunate peril of live editing. Again, let me know where I'm wrong. Let me know which portions makes sense.



I read Ben Abraham's weekly summary of game criticism over at [Critical Distance](#). Unlike a decade ago, there is now an absolute deluge of essays being written about games. I see reactions, counter reactions, and copious commentary. What is difficult to find is good writing that dreams of improving the art and craft of games.

There are three areas of improving writing on games:

- **We need better methods of filtering game criticism.** The types of writing about games have exploded. With communities of writers attempting to support highly divergent goals and audiences, simply understanding if an essay is useful is a huge challenge.
- **We need writers who are more deeply educated in the art, craft and science of games.** The majority of “game criticism” tends to be informed by a narrow population of gamers, journalists and academics specializing in the humanities. We are often missing experienced perspective from the sciences and the developers of games. The vast body of game criticism is written by people that I would consider partial game illiterates. They are dance judges who have watched *Dancing with the Stars*, but who have never danced.
- **We need a defined class of game writing that focuses on improving games.** The existing community will continue writing about the experience of gaming. But what if there were a small group that wished to do more than talk about playing? Imagine holding your writing to the standard that asks you to *ratchet forward the creative conversation*. For this tiny crew, judge your writing on its ability to directly improve the art, culture and science of games in an incontrovertible fashion.

The blossoming of shallow game criticism

When I started writing about games, there was hardly anyone talking about games in a thoughtful manner. At best, you had the chatter of more vocal gamers. Even journalists were little more than gamers with a bigger podium. The developers snuck in peer conversations once or twice a year in hotel bars and then went off to toil in intellectual isolation. An admittedly sad state of affairs.

Today, we've got the developer blogs on Gamasutra, dozens of conferences, the efforts of the Escapist, the rise of the intellectual game journalist and the slow blossoming of academic writing. The *language* has improved dramatically. With the arrival of communities of like-minded bloggers and the co-opting of various university departments, writers find themselves encouraged to say what little they can say in increasingly wordy missives. Each week I find myself inundated with essays that appear on the surface to be fascinating treasure troves of insight.

When I invest my time digging past the fresh coat of erudite language, much of the content is a regurgitation of the same tired discussion from ages past. Consider Adam Ruch's recent article "[First Or Third Person – What's Your Perspective?](#)" (I chose this example not to be cruel, but because it was at the top of Ben's recent list of game criticism.) Adam is introduced as "a PhD candidate, currently writing about Video Games Criticism" and "a pretty smart guy!"

Yet the essay is little more than a series of personal descriptions of how he feels when he plays certain games. There is little insight that couldn't be gained by sitting down with a beer and a controller. There is no attempt at gathering empirical evidence. Adam could have saved everyone a vast amount of time with the TL;DR summary: "In 3rd person you can see (and thus empathize) with a visualized character and in 1st person, you can't." Once you strip away the laborious language, you have yet another bit of fluffy gamer opinion written by a young student.

There's a clear and obvious need for writing by young gamers attempting to think about their hobby. Without such essays, you never gains the skills needed to write something better. But there needs to be a better filter.

Classifying game criticism

To create a filter, it helps to ask "what is game criticism?" This simple question results in a large range of definitions, each of which is vigorously defended by bespectacled tribal groups.

- **Traditional reviews:** The stated goal is to inform players if they should purchase or try a specific game. Enough information is given to enable players to compare various games without actually wasting time or money playing them. Reviews cover games ranging from the latest Mario blockbuster to a smaller indie title deserving of attention.
- **Playthroughs:** Where reviews are often (but not always) dry affairs that attempt objectivity, a play through seeks to describe the emotional experience of a game through a single player's eyes. Though I suspect many would disagree, I see the subjective descriptions of gaming found in [New Game Journalism](#) as a type of playthrough.

- **Gamer culture:** The impact of games on the culture and identity of the players.
- **Connecting games with the humanities:** An academic exercise in which various aspects of games are described as being part of an ongoing structure of philosophy, movie criticism, literary criticism, art history, rhetoric, etc.
- **Connecting games with the sciences:** An academic exercise in which games are analyzed using the tools of psychology, sociology, economics, etc.
- **Industry analysis:** A discussion of large scale trends in the industry such as platforms, new business models and the ever popular unexpected debacle.
- **Game analysis:** “Here’s a working game. Here’s the experiment. Here are the repeatable lessons I learned.”
- **Meta-discussions of game criticism:** Discussion of the goals, best practices and changes in the broader field of game criticism. This article is one example of such an article.

Types of writers: To complicate matters further there are several distinct populations of writers who come with their own goals and target audiences.

- **Journalists:** Writers paid to create content for a publication. The larger goal of the publication is often to acquire readers that pay the bills which in turn has a strong impact on the style and content of the writing. Typically journalists targets their writing at mainstream gamers or a sizable niche (such as PC gaming). The goal is to inform, entertain and build a sense of community. There is rarely any explicit call to make games better. Rock Paper Shotgun is a good example of journalists engaging in reviews, playthroughs and the occasional piece of industry analysis.
- **Gamer Hobbyists / Students:** People who come from a background of playing games and what to share their thoughts. There is rarely a larger goal and just the fact that someone is reading what they write is often encouragement enough to continue. The audience is often far narrower since there is no economic reason to broaden the reach.
- **Academics / Intellectuals:** People who are attempting to build a larger tradition of analysis. They exist in a self-contained, self referencing world of past papers, publishing, and tenure. Their audience is other academics and the language is often hyper specialized. External communication is rare and

the bigger goal is the preservation and extension of existing systems of value.
There are rare academics that do original experimental research (thank you!).

- **Developers:** People who make games. Their audience is other game developers. The higher goal is to improve the art and science of games so that games are always become better: more expressive, more appealing, more efficient, more effective, more successful.

None of this is clearly defined. The types of writers mix together in unexpected ways. They change roles over time. They intentionally obscure their perspective. For example, the writing of journalists for certain sites like IGN may mimic the writing by hobbyists. Or a student might assume the role of an intellectual to give their writing stronger trappings of authority. Some of the writers for Rock Paper Shotgun have started making games.

Amusingly, all groups feel like they are in the minority. Hobbyists feel that they must constantly burst forth in YMCA-style song about gamer pride or the Man will crush their love of games. Journalists feel no one appreciates their heroic efforts at balancing gamer passion, cultural translations and commercialization. Academics huddle in their isolated departments and wonder why no one listens when they speak the Truth (as defined by a philosopher from the 1970's). Game developers are too busy crunching or being fired to write much and generally respond in grunts as a result. 'Touchy' is as good a description as any single segment for the entire crew. Which makes even agreeing on goals, categories and terms difficult.

Here's an attempt: If I were to categorize Andy's article: He is a student acting as an academic, writing what is essentially a playthrough that in turn masquerades as game analysis. The fact that he is a student writing a playthrough is fine. The multiple levels of deception are what initially raised my hackles.

Given this, if you fail to disclose your perspective, you are very likely wasting the precious time of your reader. If you deliberately obscure this information (as I've seen many student or indies tempted to do) you are being a dishonest member of our community. Hey! Stop doing that...there is no shame in writing openly and honestly that you are a gamer expressing your love and appreciation for games. Just don't obscure your intent with faux intellectualism.

Taking inventory

Given this classification system, what do we have in abundance and what are we lacking? Here is what I see: (and this admittedly may be biased by my own personal consumption habits):

- **Dominant Majority:** Journalists and hobbyist gamers writing reviews and playthroughs make up the bulk of the writing on games. There are very naturally more gamers than any other group so it is quite reasonable that gamers and those that serve gamers produce the highest volume of game writing.
- **Growing Minority:** Academics and intellectuals connecting the dots between games and the humanities are another major category and rally under the 'game criticism' label.
- **Dwindling Minority:** Game analysis, and essays that connect games with the sciences are far less common. There are a handful of trade sites like Gamasutra that keep the light alive, but in general it is a desert out there.

The limitations of writing only by gamers

When I look at this distribution, something strikes me as odd: the vast majority of the rest of writers listed above do not make games, nor do they understand how games are made. I can understand that there are many writers who are happy just to marinate in the warm communal bath of gamer burbling. I've heard many a gamer tell me that they have no need for any additional knowledge or perspective on games other than what they gain through the playing of games.

Yet I also imagine a mythical writer that wants to uncover additional insights into what makes games tick. For these curious souls, having hands-on experience making games gives them the ability to observe nuances that no other gamer-only critic could manage. For those of you instantly think of C++ when you hear the term 'making games', I am very specifically **not** talking about programming or technical skills. By making games, be it board games, inventing new sports or making even the simplest of indie games, you gain insight into the fundamental structure of games and how they produce the end user experience that we all find so valuable. You start to understand interaction loops, pacing, skill acquisition, randomness, how narrative supports mechanics, play styles and dozens of others of foundational game concepts

that are difficult to derive from the experiences of being just a gamer. These are not passing trends in engineering or technology. These are the bones of what makes a game a game.

Consider the act of judging dances. Dancing (like making games) is a highly technical craft that may be enjoyed superficially or judged in a rigorous fashion. On one hand you have a trained dancer. On the other hand, you have someone who has watched Dancing with the Stars, but never fully engaged in the practical mastery necessary to understand the foundations of the art. I submit that if both have comparable skills of analysis and communication, the one with personal experience as a dancer would make the more informed critic.

(It needs to be said: The existence of educated judges does not obsolete the right of the audience to judge. Dancing with the Stars would not exist if it wasn't for the people in the audience yelling out their own scores, filling message boards with thousands of comments, organizing around favorites and doing all the things that passionate members of a community do. Games are the same. An educated minority only add richness to the conversation. It does not lessen the existing conversation.)

In general, game criticism tends not to be informed hands-on knowledge about what it takes to make a competent game. In the past week of essays on Critical Distance, I found 1 writer of 12 had any declared experience making games.

This is all of course highly intentional on the part of the promoters of game criticism by gamers. When they look for role models in other media, they see no need for understanding the lowly techniques of creation. Naive consumption without a deep understanding of form is seen by some as a means of recording a gamer's reactions without undue outside influence. Purely evocative media as music, video, writing or painting can often be reasonably well described using tools from the humanities and the personal reaction of an individual. If I want to understand a novel, a single sample has limitations, but it can convey the essence of the experience surprisingly well.

Yet though games do possess evocative elements, they also are driven by a functional heart that resists being reduced to only the softest of sciences. Bridges, though

undeniably aesthetic and cultural objects, can also be understood as functional or economic creations. Playthroughs, aesthetics, rhetoric, literary theory, film theory, art history may be one set of valuable perspectives, but if you only rely on these, you will fail to paint a complete picture the babbling, whirring human-mechanical reality of a games.

There is so much about games that is missing from the majority of today's writing. Games have much in common with functional works involving mathematics, psychology, governments, economics or other complex systems. Given population A with skills B, we experimentally validate that we get result C. We have a rich tradition of design practice stretch across Miyamoto to Sid Meier to modern metrics-driven social games. There exists game design theory stemming from folks like Chris Crawford, Eric Zimmerman and Raph Koster. The instinct of practicing designers alone is an immense iceberg of unwritten knowledge just waiting to be described and shared.

These are vast fields that are mostly untapped by today's writer. And for good reason. You can only dig into them at the root if you devote a large hunk of your life to mastering them through direct experience. This means making games in a thoughtful manner and then sharing those insights with those who will only play. Such people are rare. We need to train more of them.

Wanted: Game analysis

I suspect that it is too late for the field of game criticism to ever again broadly mean 'critical thoughts about games'. Somewhere along the line we imported wholesale too much baggage from media that long ago stagnated under the weight of navel-gazing divorced from practice.

Instead, we need a new field of discussion. Let's expand up on the topic above I called Game Analysis.

- **Goal:** Advance the art and science of games. Simply looking at what exists is not enough. Instead, we leverage what exists in order to to ask what is next and create the conceptual language and tools that get us there.
- **Audience:** Anyone interested in deeply considering how to improve games.

Who can write on this topic? Pretty much anyone. Your work will have more impact if you educate yourself in the following ways:

1. Make games. Again and again and again. Understand why games work by making games that work.
2. Study the fields of science that deal with complex functional systems.
3. Devour any and all existing writing both on games and on other unrelated fields to see if they might move the dial forward.
4. Share and discuss useful thoughts from your newly enlightened perspective.

Simply making games does not make you a good at game analysis. I have a friend who makes games, but publicly writes gamer-esque ramblings. Then he wonders why no one pays attention. A developer ranting about their personal, emotional experience with the controls in Super Meat Boy from the perspective of ‘Dude, I’m a gamer just like you” no more improves the state of games than a 13-year old gamer engaged in creating entertainment for his blog. Think deeply about what you do and contribute meaningful writing. I love the visual of a ratchet. Every click advances and builds a foundation of steel that will not let the whole fall backwards.

For those with real world understanding of how to make games better, ask yourself the following questions about what you write:

- **Grounded:** Are you basing your theories off empirical evidence? Do not write something merely because you had a feeling to express.
- **Aware:** Do you know what other people have written in the past? Do the research and be an informed commenter.
- **Insightful:** Does your writing add a substantial new perspective or tool that moves the conversation forward? Do not rehash the same old thing simply because you have an opinion on the currently popular meme.
- **Actionable:** Does your writing identify a course of action that previously was obscured? Do not let an exploration of an idea wander off into vague hand-waving. Ask the reader to perform an experiment that increases the knowledge of the community as a whole.

There is a clear benefit when you follow these guidelines.

- Your writing stands out from the muck. The world craves a path forward and the intelligent people you attract by being a grounded, aware, insightful and actionable writer open doors that you would never otherwise find.
- You improve the world. Your small contributions build upon the work of others to create a mountain of human endeavor that builds our medium to heights we can only barely imagine.

As a small closing note, I do realize that many writers are happy writing as only gamers or only journalists or only a specific sub-branch of academia and see no need to branch out.

But we can do more. I come at this topic with the personal belief that *merely rehashing the works of others is not nearly enough*. As a creator, you have only a few short years to build something great that changes the world. Hold yourself to a higher standard.

Be more than a gamer who is writing about personal experiences. Be more than an academic trying to force games into a 200-year old history of criticism. Take this weekend, grab some dice and build a game. Play test it (you aren't building games unless you do). Polish it. Release it. Ask yourself what this tells you about the nature of games and incorporate that critical perspective into your writing. As years pass and you release your 10th or 20th game, reflect on what have you learned. Share your journey with the world and raise the level of conversation.

take care

Danc.

Example game analysis

Some game essays that fit the criteria above. Heaven forbid I write an essay like this one without giving some positive examples. 😊

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- Redesigning Wild Ones into Playdom's Top Game: A Social Game Design Reboot:
[https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/124606/Feature Redesigning Playdor](https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/124606/Feature_Reducing_Playdor)
- The Lives of Three Dying Games: <https://web.archive.org/web/20111230144019/http://www.insidesocialga>

[lives-of-three-dying-playfish-games](#)

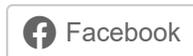
- Donkey Space: <http://gamedesignadvance.com/?p=2346#>
- The Psychological Weight of History: <http://www.psychologyofgames.com/2011/03/the-psychological-weight-of-history/>
- Extra Credits: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCODtTcd5MlJavPCOr_Uydg
- Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight <https://web.archive.org/web/20110812024944/http://rfrost.people.si.u>
- @Play: http://www.gamesetwatch.com/column_at_play/
- Game Criticism: Why we need and why review aren't it: <http://playthisthing.com/PmpMM/game-criticism-why-we-need-it-and-why-reviews-arent-it>

Responses to common comments

- **Most game criticism is not for developers so none of this matters:** You are correct. This essay is only for those rare writers who wish to improve their craft by mastering new perspectives that are fundamental to the art and science of games.
- **Game criticism is not about improving games. It is about studying what exists:** I understand that there are people who prefer to be historians, catalogers and masticators of culture. There is still room for both catalogers and people who dream about the future. Perhaps not under the banner of 'game criticism' but certainly within games as whole.
- **But making games is engineering and that is dull and soulless:** No, it isn't. Only a small portion of making games is the technical craft of drawing numbers on cardboard (if it is a board game) or getting triangles to show up (if it is a 3D video game). Games are about building systems of rules, affordances and people. They are art, science and community rolled up into one giant holistic act of creativity and play. To make games well, you need to understand the whole picture. I desire more writing from this holistic perspective, not from one narrow and highly uninformed perspective.
- **How will game developers know what players are feeling if not for game criticism?:** Game developers are constantly looking at a vast range of

quantitative and qualitative data. The entire process of game development is built around observing players and adjusting the game (thousands of times!) till the system reaches a desired state of operation. Individual opinions are constantly taken into account. I personally love watching players and asking them directly what they feel. In light of this, having a piece of well written criticism is often interesting, but needs to be balanced against the weight of other (often more representative) players. Since the critic almost never understands the systems underlying their experience, most notes on improvements or root causes are typically wildly off base. This isn't the fault of the game critic. They simply lack access to both the dozens (or thousands) of player data points and the intimate knowledge of the game mechanics. Perhaps one out of a hundred provides a minor insight into a specific game.

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78 Comments



Daniel says

May 9, 2011

For the sake of completeness, I thought I should link my response to this piece here, too: https://www.hugedomains.com/domain_profile.cfm?d=redkingsdream&e=com

★ Like

Reply



Anonymous says

May 9, 2011

Dan: there seems to be an easy answer to the need you feel to have \”a new field of discussion\” that supports \”better methods of filtering game criticism\” — start your own peer-reviewed publication. If one of the problems is that a lot of new writers are unaware of the basic steps involved in game development, and another is not knowing or just rehashing a lot of the topics in MUD-DEV archives, why not found a new journal that helps educate and disseminate what you want to read? Be agile and test the market. People will either respond positively if you raise the bar, or else we'll be pretty much in the same situation. Except there will be even more academics and web comics.

★ Like

Reply



Pippin says

May 9, 2011

Here's another, rather pithy, take on the piece, though it doesn't engage at all with the whole \”game criticism sucks right now\” angle because that wasn't the bit I felt was worth commenting on:[Developers! Developers! Developers!](#)

★ Like

Reply



Breakdance McFunkypants says

May 9, 2011

Here is my short list of blogs everyone should read if they want pure *quality*:[Kelly:http://whatgamesare.com/Short](http://whatgamesare.com/Short):<https://emshort.wordpress.com/Bogc>

★ Like

Reply

Ren the Unclean says



May 9, 2011

The most telling part of this article is the image you have at the top. "To escape criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing." Your article frames this quote as an indictment against critics, implying that they stifle creation. The reality is that it is an indictment against creators who look for validation for their work in criticism. Basically, the job of a critic isn't to help creators, but to inform consumers. Pleasing them should not be your goal, just as helping you be better at creation should not be theirs. Granted, you each may be able to learn something from the other, but your jobs are not (and should not be) as intertwined as you seem to think they are.

★ Like

Reply



Kee-Won says

May 9, 2011

In reading the post and the responses, it occurs to me that part of the issue is the lack of a commonly accepted vocabulary and structure for critics and creators. The critic praises a game for 'immersion' and 'replayability', terms so broad as to mean nothing to the creator. To quote Ben Abraham: "There are a myriad number of characteristics that go into evaluating a game on this criteria: variation, openness, procedurality, linearity, aesthetics, etcetera, etcetera. Notice here that I'm not avoiding replayability not just because It's Not A Word but also because it obscures all these factors that go into what gets lumped under 'replayability'." So the critic lacks the language to describe to the creator both what he loves and hates about the creation, leaving both sides confused on how to actually move the discussion forward. Certainly part of the discussion will always remain subjective; No amount of technical advice will turn Salieri into Mozart. But there will also always be a technical element that can be discussed in a common language. When two teams play in sports, we attribute part of their performance to 'heart, character and desire' – things not measurable on any stat sheet. At the same time, we have a commonly defined set of measurable metrics (batting avg, completion %, etc.) that provide insight to the team on how they can improve for the next game. Wouldn't it help

both the critic and the creator to speak the same language so we can improve our next game?

★ Like
Reply



Adam says

May 10, 2011

Seeing as that I was cited here as being part of the problem, I present my response to this piece. Enjoy reading it, if you have time, that is.

<http://flickeringcolours.net/v2/?p=187>

★ Like
Reply



Jesse F says

May 10, 2011

That was a well-written and insightful response, Adam. Thank you for the forbearance that I utterly lack.

★ Like
Reply



Anonymous says

May 11, 2011

Hmm...It's an interesting idea but I think the bigger issue is how we're reviewing games, not necessarily who is reviewing them. The issue is that we're trying to determine what's \"good\" or what's \"bad\" which just doesn't work. Especially with such a variety in way people enjoy games now and the types of game enthusiasts there are. It seems every game affects everyone differently in varying degrees of course. I for one found a game like Borderlands completely enjoyable while some of my friends think it's just a boring \"Shooter\" with just \"Grays and Browns\" and \"repetitive\" game-play. I especially think scores and final judgments on the game's

quality are just counter-productive to the medium, industry, and creative merit of games. I think almost all games have that in common: They should be enjoyed. Though I'm sure if it's a sequel a developer is either trying to please their existing fans, getting new ones, or probably both. What I think would work is just measuring a reactionary experience, or even comparing what you got against what you expected. This isn't just my idea either; this is what UX testers look for when testing an interface against an audience. They watch their reaction while using it; if they're frustrated they are frustrated there's not much room bias or agendas that is exactly how the interface affected them at the time of use. This way just about anyone could review it and offer a valuable critique and the more there would be like that, the more accurate it would be for helping developers improving the game. I'm just a web designer & developer myself but whether you're designing games or websites, there are some similarities. When I want useful feedback for improvement, I look for reactions instead of judgments. I don't need people to try and understand what makes my site good or bad, what makes features work or not work. What I do need to know to make good decisions is how it makes them feel, like it doesn't matter how clever my commenting system is if no one enjoys using it or gets some satisfaction from using it to comment. And a designer/developer wouldn't even be the best source for criticism either as they've either seen it before or have enough experience to figure those interfaces more easily than the intended audience.

★ Like

Reply



Anonymous says

May 11, 2011

Even art is measured in a pretty similar way. It's either continually enjoyed by enough people to carry on or it isn't and it gets forgotten. While there have been many contests & competitions, those decisions are often long forgotten and sometimes a runner-up's work has been enjoyed more by society than it was by the judges. However, if you have to try and judge what's good or bad, then I completely agree that it should be someone who has some training or experience with what "good" is. But there's still going to be plenty of the same faults as different developers value different things. For instance, I just had a twitter conversation with one who thinks it's ridiculous that games are valued by their difficulty, and the specific game he was talking was Dark Souls. So while developers would certainly

have a better, more technical grasp of what they're experiencing there would still be a ton of room for inconsistency. But don't get me wrong; I know this isn't a very realistic solution. It wouldn't be nearly as financially viable. If someone reads an IGN article on a game they're expecting good things from and the reviewer informatively explains their experience with it. There's not going to be any traffic coming to that site because the reader disagreed with the reviewer's judgment and threw a fit on Twitter which encouraged more people to visit that site and read that review. But I do think for the sake of gaming using more reactionary reviews, more than trying to determine what's good or bad and right or wrong with the design, will be more useful for developers, and even offer readers better insight as to what they could get out of the game instead of what the reviewer thinks the totality the game offers.

★ Like

Reply



Tynan says

May 11, 2011

This comment has been removed by the author.

★ Like

Reply



Tynan says

May 11, 2011

Dan, as a fellow practitioner, I appreciate you having the courage to tackle this. As I have slowly, jerkily learned more and more of the craft, I have become more and more dismayed at the almost complete lack of good design craft writing. It is nearly non-existent. What is present is mostly actively misleading. I think people like us have to recognize that the ecosystem of academia-style game studies really exists largely on its own, for its own purposes, which have less to do with the actual construction of games than we might think at first. Personally, I take a dim view of any thought with little application to reality. This does absolutely not preclude an appreciation for philosophy or humanities, it only requires a very strong filter while reading fields like this which are infested with navel-gazing. Philosophy, linguistics,

etc do have applications when done properly. Writers like Nassim Taleb and Steven Pinker have proved this to me, when I had almost lost hope. Much – possibly most – game criticism is drivel. We should recognize, however, that there is a decently large space of writing which is worthwhile for purposes having nothing to do with design craft. The perverse economics of the education system have vastly inflated this sector beyond its optimal size, and allowed it to collect a mass of intellectually useless hangers-on. The sheer weight of these followers serves to obscure both worthwhile game criticism and worthwhile design craft. I think the same thing happens in any field where it is hard to judge competence without having it yourself. Without proper “global” filters, the chaff obscures the wheat until you can barely even perceive the wheat at all. My takeaway is that we need better filters. Finally, in response to the numerical lean of the responses to this article, just remember the selection bias which determines who has time to read these blogs and write in places like this. “It’s hard to get a man to understand something if his job depends on not understanding it.” - Mark Twain”

★ Like

Reply



Moses says

May 11, 2011

While, blogger just lost my long explanation of how your characterization of Adam is both inflammatory and inaccurate. The short version is that it's extremely insulting to say a doctoral candidate with a bunch of published papers is “a student acting as an academic”. That might be an appropriate thing to say about an undergraduate, but by the time you're as far down the path as Adam has gotten, he very clearly is an academic. Additionally his blog post is not “masquerading” as anything, and it definitely isn't a playthrough (even by your own definition). Whatever you want to say his post is, there's just no evidence that he was trying to pass it off as something it isn't There are things to critique in that particular piece of writing, but your characterization of him and his post is both incorrect and basically insulting.

★ Like

Reply



Anonymous says

May 11, 2011

You should move your \"draft status\" disclaimer to the top of the piece until you're ready to remove it. Also, each new draft should be published as a new post. At the very least, that will push the edited content to feed subscribers. It also has the benefit of transparently preserving the evolving context of the discussion.

★ Like

Reply



gludion says

May 11, 2011

There is probably meaningful research about the role of critics in any field (ie painting, literature). For sure they must have some knowledge of how the works are done. I would be interesting to compare the status of critics in videogame with those of other fields. However I must admit I often had the feeling that critics in videogame somewhat failed still missed the point in some way, either the point of videogame themselves and the way they are done, either the point of having a clear idea of what the game criticism should be.

★ Like

Reply



Geraldo Nascimento says

May 12, 2011

We need more than criticism, we need proper history in the art of gaming.

★ Like

Reply



Dave says

May 13, 2011

Dan — Is this now the final draft? Sounded like you might be planning a third?

★ Like

Reply



Phil Carlisle says

May 15, 2011

Actually, I have a lot of sympathy with Dan here. As a game creator, it can get terribly frustrating the amount of effort that goes into analysing our output without any real attempt at identifying solid foundational problems and more importantly solutions. Basically, it feels as a creative, that all critique is negative. It isn't particularly surprising that Dan has this reaction. I'll give you a case in point: visit <http://www.digra.org> (the "digital games research organisation") and find me the papers that actually contribute to the field of making games. Contrast this with the number of papers that discuss the nature of games, or the effect of games on players, or on the theory and ontology used in game criticism etc. My point being that there is a lot of energy directed to the current output of games, without much thought on the direction of that output and on the fundamental contributions to it moving forward. Honestly, if you read many of the game design books on the subject I think there is a huge amount of effort needed still in this area (most game design books are shallow and almost entirely useless with a few key exceptions). So I think what Dan is suggesting (and I support) is that there is an imbalance currently where so much effort is given to the response to the extraneous view of games, rather than the creative aspect. Much of what is passed off as creative similarly has very little to offer but anecdotal evidence achieved via personal experience. I agree that perhaps Dan could have found a different term to use for the title of the post and that maybe game criticism isn't quite the term we're looking for. But I'm wholly on Dan's side in that I yearn for a situation as a creator where I can read useful critique of games that actually teaches me something that I could not grasp intuitively by merely playing the same games. I suspect the bigger issue is that the game industry itself has not figured out a method of critique that allows for development of design theories and critical appraisal as much as any problem with external review/criticism. I will however, offer that there are certainly efforts to move towards the type of critical analysis that Dan is suggesting, but it may take several generations for us to achieve the shift. My own design undergraduate programme

has this goal as part of our curriculum and hopefully others are attempting to do the same. Eventually as the tools of constructive criticism become more engendered within the industry, we will see a more solid basis for moving the narrative of the creation of games forward. I'll be posting some of our research findings on [altdevblogaday](#) at some point, which hopefully will contribute to the kind of writing that Dan (and I) wish to see.

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Reply



CraigB says

May 16, 2011

*(This comment actively shocks me. What do you think game developers are *doing* with those metrics, surveys, play tests and thousands upon thousands of iterations on a game?)* This might as well be where I jump in. Danc, while I appreciate your perspective, I can't help but apply it to moviemaking. You disparaged the comparison a bit, but is an equally technically challenging enterprise, and another relatively young medium of expression. Three things still stand out, if you go with that analogy. First, you seem to be claiming that "educated layman" film criticism isn't truly necessary, because we have focus testing and test audiences. That's what your "thousands of data points" comes down to when you apply it to television or film. Anybody with a lick of sense would realize that that's just silly. Focus (and play) testing is an incredibly useful tool, but many a movie has been absolutely ruined by too-slavishly following what was written on the little test audience cards, and there are certain films beloved (or at least admired) by critics that test audiences almost certainly despised. Second, you seem to see criticism as a scientific enterprise. That's not really what it's about. Connecting film (or game design) to sociology or economics is very nice, but any social scientist is going to tell you that it isn't actually going to necessarily be that fruitful. Sure, EVE needs an in-house economist to keep their byzantine in-game economy running, and a film studio is going to need to be mindful of the money, but an economist isn't going to be much good when it comes to sorting out what's any good or not. Criticism is supposed to be about **discussing the medium as a form of artistic expression**. Yes, that's going to get back to the humanities at some point, because the social sciences can't (and don't try to) answer that sort of question. After all, how the hell can anybody sort out how to "make it better" when nobody is discussing what better *is*? 3) This still boils down to "film critics should be

film directors\”. Game design is technical, but so is film direction; they just require different skills and backgrounds. Yet anybody who said that above sentence would get laughed out of the room! The most celebrated critics in film may have done a bit of writing here and there, but that doesn't mean that they were celebrated directors. In fact, there are practically no celebrated film critics who are *also* celebrated film directors, or at least none I can think of. Why would that be, if it weren't for the fact that *creating and critiquing require different skill sets*? Most game designers probably aren't good enough writers to be a top-notch critic in the first place, since writing is as much a craft and an artform as game design is. (Albeit one that requires a lot less math.) Finally, I think a bit of realism is called for here. The problem with game criticism is that there's little audience for it and no money in it. I'm sure we could go off on a very entertaining tangent about how publishers, developers, and audience alike have little appetite for real, honest-to-goodness capital \”C\” Criticism. The point is, though, that anybody who *can* make games *will* make games, if only because writing about the things is seen by too many as little more than an entry path into the industry. What you're prescribing is not better criticism, but more bloodless \”game reviews\” from low-paid freelancers. Thanks for an interesting piece. As someone who exults in the growth of \”game criticism\” as proof of the maturation of the medium, however, I can't help but hope that your attempts to dissuade fall on deaf ears. I want MORE, not less. Let the audience decide what they see as valuable.

★ Like

Reply



CraigB says

May 16, 2011

It sounds to me that you're asking less for a wholesale revolution in games journalism than for the creation of a professional journal of game development. I wholeheartedly endorse this post. There is room for both discussion of development by professionals *and* woolly-headed criticism by tweed-choked academics. They just both need to be clearly collected and curated. The Internet isn't very good at that. A serious professional journal would be.

★ Like

Reply



Danc says

May 16, 2011

@CraigB\”That's what your \”thousands of data points\” comes down to when you apply it to television or film. Anybody with a lick of sense would realize that that's just silly. Focus (and play) testing is an incredibly useful tool, but many a movie has been absolutely ruined by too-slavishly following what was written on the little test audience cards, and there are certain films beloved (or at least admired) by critics that test audiences almost certainly despised.\”This is probably worth it's own post.

– Movies are a technically complex task- Making movies contains multiple iterative processes. – On the surface, this seems to make games and movies comparable in terms of the creative process. However they aren't. Playtesting is not just a 'useful tool'. It is a fundamental reality of making games. It is not a secondary process tacked on at the end by business people as it is with movies. A developer that does not do playtesting is 99.999% of the time going to make a broken game that is not fun, not evocative, not emotion and not functional. This goes for small games, big games, board games and video games. It is a basic property of games. Games build experiences by using carefully crafted stimuli to evoke a specific emotion in a specific circumstance. This results in building blocks of experience that are used to construct a scaffolding. If the base building blocks (really learning loops) are not reliable, the whole thing fails. However, you can't just 'imagine' a building block of a game. You run experiments on players. And you tune and tune and tune until the learning loop works reliably. An image, video or sentence can't 'fail'. A learning loop can. With movies, the primary cycle of editing involves the creator/editor as both the audience and the problem solver. With games, because they are functional hierarchically nested learning loops in which a person's experience changes as they play the game, the creator / editor is inherently corrupted and need to go outside to a representative audience in order to iterate honestly upon the game. This is a fundamental difference in the creative process. Unlike movies where 'play test' are excuses to compromise the creative instinct of the director, a 'play test' + iteration in a game is how fun and emotion are crafted. Every single game you have ever loved has gone through this basic process of game design. You cannot make a playable game without listening deeply to players. (There are mythological exceptions in the boardgame space, but they tend to prove the rule.) Games are not movies. Nor books. Nor paintings. Nor plays. The creative process of making a game is nothing like that of such media. I've painted, written, been in plays and made games. Making games is a radically different form of authoring. We do a grave disservice to the process of understanding games by assuming the same rules and theory from linear,

evocative, non-interactive media apply wholesale. We create systems of rules, affordances and players. We can't make games without players. It doesn't work. take care, Danc.

★ Like

Reply



CraigB says

May 16, 2011

Danc, my post didn't get published. I think that's a bit of a problem, considering that people can't judge it for themselves. Playtesting is "a fundamental aspect of making games". Fair enough, though I suspect that there are indie games out there that haven't been playtested to anywhere near the same extent that a Valve game is—but then again, there are independent films out there that aren't shown to test audiences, whereas big budget productions are. Certainly your comment about "designer as inherently corrupted" does apply to pretty much any other medium, as others have pointed out. A writer without an editor will have plenty of "failed sentences". (Trust me. Sentences CAN fail.) But the real point, and it's been made by other people, is that neither the iterative nature of game development nor the existence of playtesting *somehow exempts games from deep critical analysis*. They are **NOT** engineering. They are **NOT** physics. Like photography, television, and film, they *use* these things, but the whole point of the enterprise is expression in some form or another. The fact that Lord of the Rings employs CG modelers, foley artists, and other technical experts to bring the vision to life does not mean that you should be fully conversant with any of these things in order to properly critique the film. Ebert isn't a director, nor is he a CG artist; but people still pay attention to what he says about how LotR affected modern film. You seem to think that the only person who could possibly do so is James Cameron. And, um, no. I'm not sure that you seem to know what criticism is *for*. Sure, it's subjective. But, to me, it's not about improving the craft. It's not even necessarily about sorting out what is or isn't art. It's about sorting out what a work is trying to express (whether from a ludology or narrative point of view), where it fits in with the other works in the form, and the extent to which it succeeds in accomplishing what it set out to do. That's one of the reasons I'd prefer a critic who has demonstrated that they know about the development of the form and the tensions within it, and how to properly write about it over someone who's an ace coder. If a coder has never played Civilization, System Shock, Doom,

Super Mario Brothers, Fallout, or the other games that serve as touchstones for the form, *he's going to be a terrible critic*, just as a film critic who's never seen Citizen Kane and Taxi Driver is going to be a terrible film critic. (That's also why your MMO specialists aren't that useful. If your only experience is WoW, how can you judge any other MMO's worth as a development in the medium?) Again, what you seem to be hungering for is some sort of professional journal where people can develop the craft of game design, programming, etc. That's fine. That's great! I wholeheartedly support that. But there's also a role for the gaming equivalents of Pauline Kael, A.O. Scott, and Roger Ebert. Oh, and by the by: if you've never made a movie, how can you possibly judge how comparatively technically difficult it is? By your own reasoning, you can only judge those things that you make.

★ Like

Reply



Danc says

May 16, 2011

Hey CraigB...not sure what happened to your original post (it came into my email, but didn't make it to the site for some reason...I think blogger has been acting up lately.) If it is okay with you, I'll past it here: CraigB says..(*This comment actively shocks me. What do you think game developers are *doing* with those metrics, surveys, play tests and thousands upon thousands of iterations on a game?*) This might as well be where I jump in. Danc, while I appreciate your perspective, I can't help but apply it to moviemaking. You disparaged the comparison a bit, but is an equally technically challenging enterprise, and another relatively young medium of expression. Three things still stand out, if you go with that analogy. First, you seem to be claiming that "educated layman" film criticism isn't truly necessary, because we have focus testing and test audiences. That's what your "thousands of data points" comes down to when you apply it to television or film. Anybody with a lick of sense would realize that that's just silly. Focus (and play) testing is an incredibly useful tool, but many a movie has been absolutely ruined by too-slavishly following what was written on the little test audience cards, and there are certain films beloved (or at least admired) by critics that test audiences almost certainly despised. Second, you seem to see criticism as a scientific enterprise. That's not really what it's about. Connecting film (or game design) to sociology or economics is very nice, but any social scientist is going to tell you that it isn't actually going to necessarily be that

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★ Like

Reply



Danc says

May 16, 2011

CraigB says (continued...) This still boils down to "film critics should be film directors". Game design is technical, but so is film direction; they just require different skills and backgrounds. Yet anybody who said that above sentence would get laughed out of the room! The most celebrated critics in film may have done a bit of writing here and there, but that doesn't mean that they were celebrated directors. In fact, there are practically no celebrated film critics who are also celebrated film directors, or at least none I can think of. Why would that be, if it weren't for the fact that creating and critiquing require different skill sets? Most game designers probably aren't good enough writers to be a top-notch critic in the first place, since writing is as much a craft and an artform as game design is. (Albeit one that requires a lot less math.) Finally, I think a bit of realism is called for here. The problem with game criticism is that there's little audience for it and no money in it. I'm sure we could go off on a very entertaining tangent about how publishers, developers, and audience alike have little appetite for real, honest-to-goodness capital "C" Criticism. The point is, though, that anybody who can make games will make games, if only because writing about the things is seen by too many as little more than an entry path into the industry. What you're prescribing is not better criticism, but more bloodless "game reviews" from low-paid freelancers. Thanks for an interesting piece. As someone who exults in the growth of "game criticism" as proof of the maturation of the medium, however, I can't help but hope that your attempts to dissuade fall on deaf ears. I want MORE, not less. Let the audience decide what they see as valuable.

★ Like

Reply



Chris says

May 31, 2011

Hi Danc, My favourite part of the current article is the qualification of a new term: Games Analysis. I'm an experienced software engineer, on the first steps toward becoming a well rounded game designer. I have picked up many of the best books (Jesse Schnell comes to mind) and follow some of the most interesting blogs (Click Nothing), but separating technical analysis full of insight from subjective criticism has always been a challenge. Gamasutra obviously features post-mortems very heavily, and has a healthy offering of game analysis, but beyond that I look to trade sources such as Game Developer Magazine and GDCVault, or direct from experienced authors, such as Chris Hecker and Jon Blow. It is clear from the comments and from the general community that has arisen around Game Criticism that the term is now quite loaded, in the sense that it has a shared and broad meaning, and often tends to the subjective, rather than systemic. The emotive language in earlier drafts clearly challenged that shared meaning for many people. Game Analysis instead suggests a much more analytical and rigorous approach, which better reflects the conceptual models and deconstruction that game designers and creators use in furthering our understanding of the craft. By being clear in the distinction of these two separate forms of writing, your advocacy for more analysis is less confrontational, rather than suggesting "criticism" has more value (to the medium) when it is technically/systemically based.

★ Like

Reply



Tylhandrias says

June 7, 2011

Huge apologies for jumping into the comments without reading the preceding ~60 comments, but I just wanted to say: This article is amazing, thank you so much! I'm hoping to write 'case studies' of games over the next few weeks (at

<http://immutablestrings.blogspot.com/>) that might, if I'm lucky, count as critical analyses.

★ Like
Reply



Anonymous says

July 14, 2011

Hi Dan, after reading your initial post + (most of the) follow-up comments, I just wanted to give you a virtual thumbs-up for tackling such a far-reaching and politicized topic. In-line with your Game Criticism delineations, I've now added a disclaimer to my essay repository (found at <http://www.metakiosk.wordpress.com>) to more effectively capture what type of writer I am (Student) and also to better define my essays' purpose (Connecting with Humanities + Industry Analysis).Thanks,/D

★ Like
Reply



Anonymous says

September 7, 2012

Good points. Thought provoking. And thanks for the positive examples. (Look forward to reading them.) The question you touch on about knowledge of production being a prereq for insight into what it is produced is one that pops up here and there and everywhere – like a little prairie dog. Can you create insightful critique of a painting without knowing how to mix colours or create paint sfx? Analogies: poetry, film, architecture, religion, cars... [your functional cultural artefact write-in candidate here].My perspective is that the experience of the user as a critic – and hence the quality of their output – is enhanced by an understanding of (a) the limitations of the production environment, whether it be working memory, in the case of syntax, or tools, in the case of the engraving of stone tablets, and (b) the (possible emergent, possibly violated) conventions of a form.@HASTark

★ Like
Reply