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Why Games Criticism Never Went Mainstream

It's because games are so utterly unlike other legacy forms of culture

Recently I was reading the daily newsletter of Dan Hon — which is fantastic, and y'all ought to subscribe to it — when he linked to this tweet by Gene Park, the games reporter for the Washington Post ...

It's an excellent point. I've been thinking about this a lot, because I've been doing long-form magazine feature reporting about video games since the late 90s, and for about six years in the mid-00s I wrote video-game criticism for *Slate* and *Wired*.

Back in the 00s, most writing about video games in mainstream mass media fell into two buckets:

1. Anxious op-eds about whether video games would turn the Youth of Today into wall-eyed sociopaths (if they played first-person shooters) or lazy cretins who never finished high school (if they played nearly anything else)

2. Short reviews of games, highly functional and focused on whether you ought to buy it; your standard one-to-five-star rating.

There was vanishingly little critical writing about games. When I say "critical" writing, I mean "critical" not in the sense of "poking holes in something", but in the original meaning of literary criticism: i.e. writing that tries to make sense of a particular form of culture. Why do we like it (or hate it?) How is it shaped by the aesthetics, the culture, the civic life of the day? What are the techniques of its creators? How does it reflect or comment on the human condition? Why does it sink its talons into our souls, and carry us away?

Criticism, in other words, is much more than just a one-to-five-stars review. It's trying to figure out what a piece of culture *means.* When I wrote for *Slate* and *Wired* on games, I told the editors this was my hoped-for goal. I wasn't going to write reviews. In fact I might totally ignore a huge, multimillion-dollar bestselling title if I didn't think it did anything new or noteworthy — while, conversely, I might lavish 2,000 words one gnarly specific aspect of low-selling, not-great game, if it were usefully revealing about the form and meaning of games.

This sounds insufferably grandiose, lol. But really I was just trying to give games the same treatment that cultural writers have traditionally given books, movies, music, theater and TV!

Anyway, the point is, back in the 00s I predicted that within a decade, mainstream media would be awash in excellent games criticism. Why? Partly because of demographic change. If you want meaty criticism to get greenlighted in a mass publication, the editors have to agree that it's worth it. In the 90s and early 00s, when I was pitching pieces about games to my editors, this wasn't yet the case; most were boomers who thought games were deeply trivial. But I figured that by the 2010s, many top editors would be Gen Xers who'd grown up playing games and would be far more likely to commission complex games writing; and behind *them* would be the cohort of millennial kids currently entering/leaving college, for whom games would be a *duh*-obvious part of their cultural landscape, and worthy of tons of coverage.

So, yeah, in 2005, I'd have argued that by 2022 we'd exist in a world where video-game criticism would be all over the mass media, hanging low on the branches, sun-ripened and ready to pluck.

As Gene Park notes, though, this has not happened.

Why?

I've thought about this for years, too, and thus I have *thoughts.* In no particular order, here's *Why Games Criticism Never Took Off In Mass Media*...

1) Mainstream media has shrunk

It's an obvious point, but — legacy mass media is a lot smaller than it was 20 years ago. The writing staff at newspapers in the US has shrunk by 26% since 2008; magazines are thinner; the staffing of TV shows is sparser. The shrinkage is particularly noticeable in arts sections and verticals, which historically always get slashed in hard times.

So games were arriving as a mass cultural subject precisely as legacy media began dramatically curtailing its cultural coverage. When outlets were employing far fewer people to write about books, TV, movies, theater and music — forms they were already comfortable with — the likelihood that they were going to expand into a whole new area was minimal.

2) Games are weirdly work-intensive to write about

If you want to do authoritative criticism about the experience of playing game, it takes a mammoth amount of time.

If you want to write a solid book review, or essay of book criticism? It's work intensive, sure: You need to read the book (or books), chew over them, then read or re-read/skim related material you're previously familiar with (if you're planning a big essay). But this is a manageable amount of hours; a few solid days of immersion. If you're writing about a new movie? It takes two hours to watch it. Reviewing a new TV show can be much more time-intensive, but even a long season these days will be perhaps 24 hours of watching.

Games, on the other hand, can require dozens and dozens of hours to fully play out. If you've got a narrative game, maybe you can knock the main narrative off in a handful of hours — but that might only be a small chunk of what's in the game. Experiencing the rest

could take days and days; I know people who beavered for weeks as completionists with *Grand Theft Auto* titles. Or consider something like Fortnite, where a single round can be over in fifteen minutes. Much faster! Except that you don't start to grasp the strategy for many more rounds, and it can take days or weeks to grasp the deeper intricacies of the gameplay mechanics.

Sure, you *can* write a quick review just by dipping into a game. But again, if your goal is to write authoritative criticism, a quick dip-in won't be nearly enough. You really ought to put in the hours.

The upshot is, the economics of game criticism are truly terrible. If you take your freelance fee and divide it by these bonkers hours you sink into playing the game, the pay is risibly low. It's easily 5–10X less profitable than writing even the most complex piece of book criticism I've ever done, and book journalism is already pretty low-paying.

This is why I've often said that most of the truly in-depth thinking about games comes from outside the marketplace: I.e. standout essays by fans or scholars meditating on a game. To be sure, there are some occasionally superb long critical essays at places like Vice or games publications like Polygon. But I'm just as likely to get a glimpse of this in a sprawling Reddit post.

3) Games writing is categorically weird: More similarly to car journalism, travel literature, and sports writing than to TV and movie reviews

Traditionally in mass media, editors put games writing in the entertainment section, or arts verticals. This was and is, I think, a subtle mistake, and it's part of why it's never really found a home there.

Experiencing a game is weirdly different from experiencing a TV show, a movie, a play or a book. However participatory those older media are — however much one is swept up in them, and interacts with them emotionally, spiritually, and physically — they are, to use a drab but accurate phrase, "lean back" culture. They're on rails: You're the audience, experiencing the art — the artists and creators talking to you.

Games, on the other hand, require you to *do things.* They typically require you to master techniques. And sometimes you have to immerse yourself in a virtual environment, learning it the way you'd learn a city.

This makes game criticism less like traditional arts journalism and more like other types of writing you'd find outside the "entertainment" sections.

For example, automotive journalism. Part of the challenge of doing automotive journalism is describing what it's like to *use* the vehicle. How does it handle? What are the sightlines like? Is the automatic transmission sluggish or peppy? This is oddly reminiscent of what it's like trying to describe the play mechanics or physics of a game. What's it like to *move about* inside the game? To control things? To get your proprioceptive bearings?

Or consider travel writing: You go to a country or city, immerse yourself, and talk about what it's like *being there.* This is eerily close to the task of describing what it's like being inside an open-world game. Or think about sports journalism: It, too, is a weird sister of video-game writing — you're describing the existential joys and pains of humans struggling to excel inside a system tightly constrained by arcane rules. (The difference is that with games criticism, the journalism is written by the athletes themselves.)

Another genre I'd throw in here is memoir. Games are experiences, and so writing about them is inherently akin to memoir.

The point is, games criticism is more similar to these seemingly far-flung journalistic forms than it is to traditional criticism of books, movie, theater or music. And I think this is a subtle part of why games criticism never quite took off in mainstream media. The editors — and even we games writers ourselves — couldn't quite mentally fix the Linnean taxonomy for this *platypus* of a genre. A truly superb piece of games journalism ought to be like some unholy goulash of *The New York Review of Books* mixed with *Consumer Reports,* with a dash of *ESPN* and *The New Yorker* thrown in for mouthfeel. It breaks traditional journalistic categories.

4) "Narrative" isn't always important with games. (Nor, sometimes, are visuals)

A surprising amount of mainstream games criticism winds up trying to answer the question, *is the story in this game any good?*

Now, that can definitely be an important thing to ponder; some games tell absolutely spellbinding stories. But many more either tell no story at all (because they don't need one; as with chess, they cut purely to the play-mechanics) or they tell incredibly insipid stories (because the point is to have *just enough* cliched narrative to give you an excuse to luxuriate

in the play mechanics for 50 hours. For these games, the story will never be Job One, nor does it need to be).

This is another reason mainstream media has historically had trouble figuring out how and where to slot games in their cultural coverage. Their bread and butter, for decades, was primarily writing about books, TV and movies. These are genres where story is (nearly always) central. But this left the editors (and, again, even we games writers) intellectually unprepared for a medium where narrative was *a* component, but not always the crucial one. It didn't help that the humanities curriculum in high school and university teaches us tons about narrative, but essentially zero about "ludology" — the philosophy of play, or, why we find games (from backgammon to Wordle to Halo) so compelling.

This narrative-first lens was why I've had countless mainstream media editors ask me "when will there be a video game with a story as good as a novel?", which is precisely as off-base as asking, "when will there be a novel with a play-mechanic as intellectually and spatially intriguing as *Portal*?"

Relatedly, the other thing mainstream outlets tend to obsess over is the visual nature of games. ("What are the graphics like?") This focus on visual aesthetics was understandable; games are a deeply visual medium! But one's experience of a game is also, quite primally, the experience of the game mechanics ... and that's not really visual at all. Indeed, it's invisible; it's *experience*. It's happening in the mind and body of the player. These experiences can certainly be written about, but they're ludological qualia — they're about the agony and ecstasy of striving within an byzantine system.

(It's also worth noting that if you're writing about a persistent online game, part of the cultural meaning is the relationships you forge with other players — ranging from years'-long interactions with your tight-knit online besties to intriguing one-off experiences with randos. So, what category of writing is *that* similar too? Maybe ... civic or political journalism about life in your town? I can't quite slot this one into its correctly-shaped hole. At any rate, it's utterly unlike reviewing a movie or a book.)

So, to recap: video games have struggled to find a toehold in mass media because they're uniquely unremunerative for the writers, and don't fit easily into existing review genres.

I'm not saying they're *better* than those other genres! Good reviews and criticism of books and theater and music and movies and TV are transcendent. But the tools we use to write about those things tend to shatter in our hands when we apply them to games.

(Enjoyed this missive? Then why not play the meta-game of Medium, and slap that clap button? It can be pressed fully 50 times per reader!)

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