Critical Literacy: Game Criticism for Game Developers

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Introduction

As video games grow beyond the purview of a devout subculture, they are attracting scrutiny from audiences more numerous and diverse than ever before. The expanding public wants to know: What is a "good" videogame? What makes it "good"? The definition of "good" has connotations stretching from commerce to entertainment to art to explorations of a social issue. The body of work related to game criticism is already growing; authors are writing about their interpretation and perception of games and, through the simple act of writing about games, the structure of game criticism is already beginning to formalize.

As game developers, critics, and ultimately game players, we ought to cultivate a culture of criticism, a critical literacy, within the community to take advantage of the ongoing, critical discussions to better discuss, evaluate, and learn from games.

Games exist as today's predominant cultural artifact and their power as a cultural form is interaction; the power for players to directly choose actions within a situation and see the emergent ramifications from a perspective different from their own. A critic's job is to call attention to the forces that create this interactive power and to tease out that power from other developers. While developers tend to approach games from the rule set or from dynamics that support desired play, a critic's chief concern should be aesthetics.

Although aesthetics is understood to deal with the creation and appreciation of beauty, this paper will refer to the operational definition posited by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek (2004): "Aesthetics describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with game systems." Aesthetics are ultimately what the game offers because through interaction a player will experience a set of behavior that emerged from their play; they effectively become the authority on their own experience with that game. An astute critic can unpack this experience and examine it through that lens of interactivity; ultimately comparing their experience against the creator's intent if they so choose.

By contrast, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) posited one form of criticism that views works as wholly independent from their creators since the meaning should be objectively and directly inferred from the work itself. They argue that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art." This view is extreme. Works being created, especially within our community of games, exist within a context of which critics should be aware. Their writing is a form of feedback for developers, a vehicle advancing this creative form. A deep reading into the game developers is unnecessary but an understanding of the intention of the game allows a critic to subjectively discuss if a work was successful for what it was trying to do. This is one aspect of criticism, and individual critics can choose to instead focus on a game's technique in execution or their emotional response to it.

To be clear and avoid confusion, criticism is distinct from review. Game review focuses on commerce-driven evaluation and often provides an overview of the game experience with advice to potential customers. Game criticism is a mixture of thoughtful and shrewd examination to unpack a game's aesthetics, the desired emotional response, within the largest context of the medium. Criticism is

uniquely positioned to celebrate what is special about this medium in a historical and cultural context that is not concerned with sales. Although developers and critics do not directly work together, their combined attention toward fostering a community of critical literacy will propel creative growth.

Fundamental Feedback

The varying kinds of game criticism express their differences from one another through their target audience. Some forms of criticism reflect back to the creator of the work, reflect to their peers, or reflect to their readership as an audience-at-large. Moreover the content of the critique can span a wide variety of topics such as beauty, narrative, mechanics, technology, or social issues related to games. Game development has become increasingly accessible with the explosion of tools for game creation, and this paper specifically focuses on the feedback loop between critics and developers, including potential critics and potential developers.

As game critic and essayist Lana Polanksy (2012) points out, deep readings of games can "help articulate an inchoate idea that you couldn't otherwise discuss." Critics can penetrate the workings of a game experience and ascribe vocabulary to those elements, providing readers with a conceptual toolkit for talking about games. Taken a step further, game criticism can call attention to easily overlooked games, analyze why successful games might still be bad games, and provide reflection for developers as they explore new games; this is a fundamental feedback cycle.

Furthermore, game criticism can explore in-depth what it means for something to be "well played," a concept that this journal pursues exclusively. By unpacking an experience and parsing out the meaning, critical analysis can define the criteria for what makes a game engaging

and well executed. The onus for engaging with this critical discussion is on the community of developers, critics, and players because the advancement of games as a cultural form directly benefits the experiences they have through these games.

State of the Practice

Currently, there are a few scattered sources for game criticism and they all take different approaches. The way in which they conceptualize games and the manner in which they discuss it draws in diverse audiences from people looking to be entertained, to be informed, or to examine games under a new perspective. These different approaches are crucial; they allow audiences to explore the critical landscape, seeking viewpoints that align with or challenge their own. Moreover, the following critics are writing to evaluate their experiences with games and not to inform audiences of a commercial product since they assume the audience has either knowledge of the game or has played it themselves. The list below is not comprehensive but establishes a sample of what exists today.

Perhaps the most visible critic is Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw of the video series Zero Punctuation, a production of The Escapist Magazine. Although Yahtzee's criticism of games is primarily geared for entertainment and is perhaps the most review-like in its quick delivery format, he is vocal and critical of how the games he plays are designed. He celebrates, laments, and lampoons concepts and tropes, and draws attention to things that might otherwise be overlooked. He is a positive force for game developers because he shows that the audience cares and has a capacity to appreciate a well-crafted experience. By brazenly pointing out all of the repetition, overused tropes, and dull characters Yahtzee tries to shame developers despite the commercial success of this repetition. While large-scale development is not able to respond to this critique, small-scale development is poised to tread new ground because of it.

Extra Credits, another video series, is dedicated to examining games through a more academic perspective. Each episode is tied around the central tenets of how games are made, how we can make them better, and how we can be better for it. Moreover, some episodes feature a segment about games that might have been overlooked and why people should play them – a prime example of elevating culturally significant work. Extra Credits is devoted to promoting the status of games by figuring out what it is about them that appeals to us and how we can foster that connection so it is strong and enduring. It challenges its audience to examine the games they play and why they play them, ultimately raising the collective literacy of their audience.

Founded by a former Wall Street Journal culture reporter, the publication Kill Screen reads more like a journal than a magazine. From their website (Warren, n.d.), the publication is interested in the "intersection between games, play, and other seats of culture from art to music to design." The difference here, as the magazine points out, is that the quality of the writing fosters a thoughtful discourse about games and since the articles do not synchronize with game releases the discussions tend to be richer. There seems to be a demand, or at least perceived demand, for quality writing and well-researched journalists contributing to a single publication among the din of blogs and free, online magazines like Kotaku and Polygon.

The Well Played journal takes a close, penetrative reading approach to examining games. This forum is chiefly concerned with the meaning found in the experience of playing games and is driven by deep and often personal close readings. Some explorations bear a resemblance to travel journalism in which the player ventures into a new world, records his or her thoughts, and returns to share the fruits of the journey. By taking the time to reflect upon a game's experience, authors can suggest new words and concepts for developers and audiences alike so that they can better describe the medium. For example, Caro-

line Williams (2011) delved in the "deceptively simple choice of what game to play" by examining the avatar as an enactment of identity and a function of "who to be for the next few hours;" and Charles Ecenbarger II (2012) analyzed group dynamics in World of Warcraft, outlining the stages a randomly generated group will experience such as emergent leadership and breakpoints.

Each of these sources of criticism has its own style and methodology as well as its own audience; games attract a wide demographic and criticism ought to reflect that spectrum. It is worth keeping in mind that these sources are all discussing, advancing, and deeply caring about the same thing: games. Interested readers are also encouraged to consider the works of individuals such as Michael Abbott, Jesse Schell, Ian Bogost, Anita Sarkeesian, Mattie Brice, Clint Hocking, and Leigh Alexander.

Elevating Significance through Feedback

A critic can guide readers to what games, or aspects of games, are worthy of our attention. Critics set their criteria and put forth the beneficial aspects to which we should and should not pay attention as well as the pernicious aspects to which we should and should not pay attention. In the developer-critic feedback loop, this can manifest for developers as an insight to the perception of their games. Criticism can be a window into how others perceive the work, enabling developers to compare that perception to their own intention and see where it does and does not match.

For criticism to flourish, the critic should be mindful of which qualities are important in a game and recognize that a whole could be more than the sum of its parts. A score is not the only valid metric for games especially since they are consumed in a different manner from other forms of media. By elucidating their appreciation through written and spoken word, critics can encourage game developers to strive with each

new game and to push past commercially-driven development and into innovative development.

Anita Sarkeesian is an example of one such critic who has been directing the attention of her audience to harmful stereotypes and tropes within the context of gender roles in video games. She has been an outspoken critic of the depictions of women in games, particularly commercially successful ones, and her criticisms have starkly highlighted the misogyny in video game culture. Sarkeesian (2011) has produced six videos to examine tropes that involve women such as the "Evil Demon Seductress" and "The Straw Feminist." More recently, she has devoted her attention to the most widely used gender cliché: The Damsel in Distress. Her analysis (2013) shows how a constant reinforcement of women as the naturally weaker gender can have a detrimental effect on society as a whole, particularly in a wide-reaching medium like video games. She devoted a substantial amount of time unpacking this one particular trope and her work is a prime example of establishing what is significant within games as a cultural form. These tropes as plot devices are reasonable in moderation, although the overuse of these lackluster writing techniques is indisputable, even if viewers disagree with her argument. Her criticism also doubles as a form of feedback, providing insight for developers who might not have otherwise understood what those aspects mean or recognized the effect those aspects have.

Through leading discussions about the aesthetics, the core emotional response evoked in the player, and how they tie into a game's mechanics, sensory aspects, technology, and narrative, critics are positioned to consider their perception of a game in relation to the developer's intention. However, just as it is the critic's responsibility to elevate significant works despite poor reviews or poor commercial success, it is also their responsibility to be critical of highly successful works since these commercial achievements do not always translate to good games.

Limitations of Rubric-based Review

It is wise for critics to examine the limitations of the current, score-oriented review culture to refine the culture of criticism. Scored reviews are not necessarily unhealthy for the medium but they are shaping how the audience thinks and talks about games, and this has ramifications in market research for new games. Games require a substantial time commitment by players and the review culture has taught players that a low score is not worth their time since players can glean a proxy experience from both a review and a single number. Games are subjective experiences and a critical, close reading of the subject matter might reveal more of the inner workings to the audience.

Game journalist Peter Nowak (2011) points out the discrepancy between the review standard of games and of movies, particularly how poor writing seems to have a disproportionately minor effect on game reviews. Gear of War 3 earned an aggregate review score of 91 out of 100 and one reviewer, who awarded the game a 9 out of 10 on IGN, highlighted the action while glossing over the poor writing (Lynch, 2011). Nowak emphasizes that "great action movies rarely score in the top percentile without great writing." If writing, or any aspect of a game for that matter, is truly not a concern for a game, then their reviews should reflect that position with an appropriate score. However, since reviews help propel sales, the spectrum of acceptable review scores is crunched to the upper end of the scale rather than being truly representative of the game experience within its context.

Jamie Madigan, a psychologist who writes about the cross-section of games and psychology, wrote about the effect of rubric-based scoring for subjective experiences. He found research by Timothy Wilson and Jonathan Schooler (1991) that indicates how rubric-based judgments of subjective things might lead to poorer evaluations. Their research involved asking college students to taste different brands of strawberry

jam and rate them. Students who were asked to simply rate the jam had ratings that corresponded well to those of experts. On the other hand, students who were asked to analyze why they felt the way they did had ratings that agreed less with those experts.

Wilson and Schooler (1991) go on to conclude that by analyzing the reasons for their choices, the students' were shifting their attention to criteria that might not matter and then basing their choices and ratings on those criteria. Madigan (2010) highlights this study because when reviewers evaluate a game based on a rubric with elements such as graphics or sound it can "exacerbate this limitation and lead [them] to consider what should be irrelevant information when making [their] ratings." It is for this reason Madigan also seeks out more organic reviews or close readings of games that give him more information about the actual experience.

Awards represent another limitation of rubric-based reviews since games are typically selected as being the strongest in their category with no reasoning or transparency. This value judgment offers little to no justification for why that game is receiving that specific award which in turn provides no feedback for developers. This is a flawed form of feedback because the message this sends is to emulate the apparent success and not the direction of decisions that led to that end result. It is easy to show when something is lacking, but it is equally if not more important to explore why something is done right.

It can become awkward to provide a single number to represent a game's score and thinking along a rigid rubric might even limit the reviewer's ability to assess the game as a comprehensive experience. The lesson for critics here is to find ways to describe parts of a game with words that accurately and succinctly portray the critic's experience, both good and bad. Critics are not writing to inform customers and thus can value different elements within games. Instead of an

abstracted, numerical score, critics can provide the developers with an articulated expression of their perception which reinforces the critic-developer loop and encourages the community to engage culturally with criticism.

Critical Vocabulary

Current game discussions often use a shorthand vocabulary, wherein concepts are referred to through a significant game and discussions refer to intangible but well-known elements within those games. To an outsider it might appear incomprehensible, but within the community describing a new shooter as, "similar to Halo but with some Uncharted cinematic flair," would make complete sense. This is especially true of games that popularized a particular mechanic or genre such as Myst, DotA or Farmville. This referential shorthand is insufficient for the community because it takes the power of description away from the critics and developers, and allows other groups to define what this shorthand means. Ian Bogost (2006) raised this issue in his critique of the widely infamous Bully by Rockstar Games. He pointed out that the media was taking the game very seriously but the videogame community was not; this allowed "legislators and attorneys and media watchdogs [to] define the terms of the debate." In many ways, the subculture-specific, shorthand vocabulary is to blame. While a more sophisticated language might not benefit this specific situation, a more game-literate culture would.

Just as writers of criticism find new ways to describe aspects of games, so do developers as they work on the games. During production developers have to find terms to describe the elements that they are working with; programmers need names for their variables! If you have played a social game then you are probably familiar with "doobers" (Reynolds, 2010) or small objects that can be clicked on to reward some resources. If you click a person and coins rain onto the ground, those

coins are all doobers. If you have played a first- or third-person action game, then chances are you have "frobbed" (Raymond, 1996) a switch or button. It is an old, hacker term that essentially means "to use" and has been accepted by programmers as any usable object in the game. These are only two examples of many terms that developers use during their project cycles. It is entirely possible, and probably better, that these words never see the light of day but the mere fact they exist show that the language of games is evolving and, more importantly, growing as a result of development.

Game designers also step into the role of a developer-oriented critic to evaluate the works of their peers. Coined in 2002 by Nick Pelling (Marczewski, 2012), "gamification" is the use of game-thinking in a non-game context and has exploded in usage to describe loyalty programs or achievement badges. "Ludonarrative dissonance," coined by Clint Hocking in 2007 (Hocking, 2007), refers to the conflict between a game's narrative and its game play. These are both useful terms within their context, but the danger here is recognizing that a term is only as good as its widely known or accepted definition. By contrast, examples of words that are more widely understood include mechanic, goal, win state, and feedback loop.

Film makers and critics had to come up with terms to describe the concepts within film. Film has a plethora of shot angles, editing techniques, storytelling techniques, and the list goes on. Consequently, each of these elements is named so professionals, critics, and audiences can discuss the film with a shared language. While it is important for games to differentiate themselves from previous media it would be foolish to disregard film criticism because it raises so many questions. Would the same criteria for films apply to games? Why or why not? What would game criticism ignore from film criticism, and what kinds of tools would need to be created to address those areas? There are a multitude of different sources for new game vocabulary,

but these sources are diverse and each concerned with their own work and words. Game critics are in the best position to collect and curate the formal vocabulary of games because vocabulary outlines how people think about and discuss games. This curatorial role would transfer and popularize vocabulary being developed in various sub-communities that may not always communicate with each other such as game design and game studies. Armed with useful vocabulary, critics can lead the community through a deeper understanding of what games are saying so that the game community can properly discuss it amongst themselves as well as with the public-at-large.

Moving Forward

Erik Kain (2012) recommended that games should be consumed and discussed with an approach that is more similar to a book club than a movie review. This is a strong format, ideally if done in person with one member championing a game for each meeting, because it allows people to share and cultivate their views on a game with a community already familiar with the experience. This exists to some degree through venues such as IndieCade which hosts the Well Played sessions. The particularly exciting aspect of these sessions is that a person will explore one game in-depth with the game creator(s) present to challenge the speaker or answer questions.

As an alternative to in-person meetings, these "book club"-type meetings are also happening online with leaders taking the form of blog posts or videos to crystallize their thoughts and start a discussion on forums or in the comments. This format allows for ideas to bubble to the surface based on popularity or accessibility which allows for anyone to contribute to the discussion. People have also taken a curatorial role for organizing and presenting these articles and organic discussions, such as "This Week in Videogame Blogging" on Critical Distance.

Critical discussions are happening all the time; developers and critics can openly challenge ideas and conversations spin off as a result, both online and in-person. All parties ought to engage with this discussion to promote a community that is critically literate because criticism is an essential vehicle for driving the growth of our cultural artifacts. If we make games, talk about those games on a penetrating level, share how we respond to those games, and in turn continue to make games based on that feedback then we only stand to benefit.

In Conclusion

The critic is positioned to lead discussions, and through their reflections developers can recognize their triumphs and missteps. Critics have a responsibility to elevate culturally significant works, drawing our attention to both beneficial and pernicious aspects of games. They should consider how a rubric can deeply influence one's reflection of a game and hamper the descriptive power of that reflection. Finally critics should consider how vocabulary itself shapes how we talk about something and what we can learn from current game vocabulary as well as vocabulary that exist within other media.

Each medium has something that it can do powerfully, a certain power that that medium alone can truly capture beyond any other medium. For books, it is the power of description and dialogue for the reader can ponder over each phrase and re-read if he or she chooses. For film, it is the power of editing for a succession of images can convey a complex idea in mere seconds and provoke a powerful emotion with a corresponding and well-timed score. For games, it is the power of interaction; the power for players, who are no longer observers or spectators, to choose within a situation and perform a course of action to see the consequence from a new perspective. This is fundamentally different from reading about or watching the same sequence of events. Games present deep systems for players to explore and master, as well

as new techniques of storytelling unprecedented by other media. Perhaps Extra Credits said it best in their episode "Art is Not the Opposite of Fun" (Portnow, Floyd, & Kretzschmar, 2011) by observing that "studying games, thinking more intently about games, giving them the same amount of attention and respect we give any other medium is not going to make them worse." We need to nurture a community that is critically literate; one that can discuss our perceptions of game experiences, properly evaluate those experiences, and create new games that advance the medium further.

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Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Bradley C. Buchanan for his insights and feedback, and John Sharp for his guidance during the writing process.