

# You Played That? Game Studies Meets Game Criticism

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## ABSTRACT

While game criticism has been largely tied to the world of enthusiast press game reviews the emergence of the academic field of game studies and the maturing world of game journalism opens new opportunities to consider the future of the game critique.

Today, the critical dialog around games can approach its subject from several vectors—social, psychological, historical, aesthetic, philosophical and more. Despite the rich opportunities to discuss games, and the methodologies available to the would-be critic, the vast majority of games criticism remains produced by the review culture-bound world of game journalism.

Developments in the academic world of game studies provide an approach into the emerging dialog about games as individual artifacts and their worth therein. Rather than seeing games and genres as fuel for domain and disciple specific ideological and conceptual arguments, individual games are being viewed as discrete cultural artifacts worthy of discussion, dissent, examination and dissection.

Likewise, the games press corps and the gaming public express a growing interest in more experimental, intellectual and challenging game writing. Game reviewing has shown a developing maturity in the area of game criticism.

Inside these twin vectors falls a conversation about game criticism.

What is game criticism? How should the academy claim its place alongside game journalism as a productive voice in game criticism? Who does it serve? How should it be done? What should game criticism be?

## Author Keywords

Game criticism, journalism, game review

## POSITION STATEMENTS

### Ian Bogost

#### Background

Ian Bogost the Supreme Chancellor of the Twenty Planets and their colonies. Best known for negotiating the Truce of Barley, he later snatched power from the legitimately elected but ruthlessly corrupt Forum and disbanded the Old Galactic Government. Thanks to benevolence and foresight, all citizens of the Planets have acknowledged the idyllic era that has followed, now customarily referred to as The Great Peace of Ages, or simply The Great Age. Bogost also teaches and researches about videogames at Georgia Tech, and makes them at Persuasive Games.

#### Position

What is game criticism? What should it be?

Even though Marshall McLuhan devotes a few pages to games in *Understanding Media* (covering the way games extend man the social animal), he doesn't account for either the computer or the videogame, neither of which had gained popular adoption when he was writing in the early 1960s. The computer makes an appearance as an example of tetrad analysis in *Laws of Media* (1988), but that discussion focuses on information retrieval and bureaucracy, still signals of the lumbering hands of a notion of computing that was already a quarter-century old.

Might we conclude: videogames are the first creative medium to fully emerge after Marshall McLuhan. By the time they became popular, media ecology as a method was well-known. McLuhan was a popular icon. By the time the first generation of videogame players was becoming adults, McLuhan had become a trope. When the then-new publication named him "the patron saint of Wired

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Magazine" in 1993, they didn't even bother to explain what that meant. They didn't need to.

By the time videogame studies became a going concern, McLuhan was gospel. So much so that we don't even talk about him. To use McLuhan's own language of the tetrad, game studies have enhanced or accelerated media ecology itself, to the point that the idea of studying the medium itself over its content has become a natural order. We can see this plainly in the history of intellectual conflict in game studies: despite their purported disagreement with one another, both ludological and narratological approaches pose questions of form, not of content. Widespread interest in games and literacy has focused on the ways games model good learning principles *in general*, no matter what topics the games cover. Participants in game studies have become overwhelmingly social scientific in their backgrounds and approaches, asking fundamentally media ecological questions about how players use games to socialize, problem solve, negotiate, and so forth.

McLuhan doesn't care about "content"; such is the core premise of his famous aphorism, "the medium is the message." As philosopher Graham Harman puts it, for McLuhan "isolated figures are banned from the outset." He is so unconcerned about content that it doesn't even register a blip on the obsolescence quadrant of the tetrad *about the tetrad itself* in *Laws of Media*. As a post-McLuhan discipline, game studies has unknowingly adopted this stance. We rarely talk about *specific* games, we rarely do criticism, because that's not what media studies is all about. Media ecology can claim a rousing victory in the example of game studies.

The problem is, McLuhan gets it wrong, wrong in part anyway. While the "properties" of media are important, so is the "content." If we use McLuhan's own logic on his very thinking, we might say that media ecology reverses into criticism. It treats individual works as important and meaningful, each one possessing its own properties that both combine with and resist those of the medium that encloses it. Perhaps this is a starting point for what game criticism might look like, should look like in the future. And what it should do is to take McLuhan more seriously, to recognize that his thought has become the ground on which the figure of our work rests. Here we need not worry about embracing McLuhan, as the tetrad does all we need: it reminds us of the ambiguity and oscillation of singular principles and innovations. It encourages us to treat videogames as a medium *and* to treat *individual* videogames as their media in their own right. Further, it encourages us to treat the two together, as both SuperNintendo and *Kirby*, both TCP/IP and *World of Warcraft*, both PC Baang and *Starcraft*. That's the work that would be smart, and exciting, and useful for the future.

## William Huber

### Background

William Huber is a PhD candidate in art and media history at UC San Diego and an adjunct lecturer for the Interactive Media Division at the University of Southern California. He is also a researcher at the Software Studies Initiative at Calit2, analyzing videogames and other software-based cultural artifacts.

### Position

"Keep a strict eye on eulogistic and dyslogistic adjectives - they should diagnose (not merely blame) and distinguish (not merely praise.)" -- C.S. Lewis, in a comment to Kenneth Tynan.

My thoughts are generally from the position of the humanities, for those of us who address games as cultural artifacts that are meaningful in their own right, as objects and practices worthy of study just as film, poetry, novels, sculpture, painting, performance, and music are. To ask what game criticism in the academic humanities should look like suggests that we understand what criticism of other cultural forms in the academic humanities looks like. This is by no means certain, and the relationship between, say, art history as a discipline and the critical press of the art market (Art Forum, Modern Painting, etc.) isn't quite the same as the complex relationship between the scholarly output of language and literature departments and criticism in the New York Review of Books (where many reviewers are themselves authors in writing programs.)

Popular game criticism, as I understand it broadly, encompasses a range of writing practices from those you might find on IGN or GameSpot, that are generally consumer advice, and includes the infamous numerical ratings to games based on categories that have been determined as meaningful and important to players (quality of gameplay, game art, story, innovation), to more essayist writers and commentators in magazines like Edge and on sites like Kotaku and The Escapist. There is also the important role of "fan scholarship", gamefaq and walkthrough authorship, wiki-contributors who produce material which, to be honest, I suspect a lot of academic critics are deeply indebted. Popular criticism also includes figures like Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw and the authors of Penny Arcade, whose criticisms are entertainment forms in their own right.

I have been reflecting recently on the situation in the humanities today. I remember as an undergraduate slogging through Ezra Pound's Cantos with the help of a concordance. That concordance was a scholarly product (I believe it was Carroll F. Terrell's "A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound"); the author was tenured at the University of Maine, and the concordance was perhaps his major life work. The diligent labor of producing an archaeology of the signs and properties of a text has, to put it bluntly, been outsourced to the audience itself; instead, we have "fan scholars" that document not only the allusions

of, for example, all the summons in the Final Fantasy games, but also detail the mechanics and create in-depth models of game-dynamics. These works of fan-scholarship still rely on the categories of knowledge that matter to fans and players, categories that, from the perspective of a contemporary humanist, may seem uncritical and naive. Yet I'm afraid that, in the academy, we still have yet to approach the attention to detail and sense of the rich significations of these game across multiple registers (representational and gamic) that these non-academic works have achieved.

It is tempting to make a distinction based on the symbolic capital of the academy. This distinction could be characterized either of two ways, while still being the same distinction: that the academy is engaged in an almost Sisyphean task of bringing their highest aesthetic and ethical standards to a practice dominated by cynical corporate content producers from the culture industry, which is creating exploitative, trivial and violent material for hordes of under-educated, tasteless, crude adolescent fans. Or, alternatively, as a small group of irrelevant, elitist ivory-tower intellectuals trying to colonize a lively, vital popular form with joyless observations and arch, patronizing criticism. Either of these characterizations recognizes the reality that videogames are natively an entertainment activity for the mass-market. We know: there is a high-culture/low-culture issue at play here, and this makes an interpretive and critical reception of these works an enterprise often peppered with reservations and ironic distancing. But that is not, for me, the main obstacle to invigorating the practice of game-criticism in the academy. Rather, it is that the critical enterprise itself has yet to catch up with videogames, because our models for meaning and representation do not deal well with the sign-systems that constitute a digital game. Not that this is completely unknown problem - I think a lot of the people here have made important contributions in this direction (Ian's Unit Operations comes to mind, as do Alex Galloway's essays on gaming.) But I have yet to see anything in videogame studies which enriches the actual reception (as opposed to the contextualization or historicization) of an artifact the way that comparable works in literary or film studies have. When we can have a critical walkthrough of a game or franchise, or an interpretive strategy guide, I think we'll be a lot closer. I suspect we will need progress both institutionally and theoretically before these can happen.

### **Margaret Robertson**

#### **Background**

A lifelong gamer, Margaret joined Edge magazine as a writer in 2002. She rose quickly through the ranks, becoming editor in 2005. In her time there, the circulation rose continuously, and as editor she took Edge to the highest readership in its 13 year history. During this time she also helped to run the Edinburgh games festival, spoke at a number of international conferences and served as a

BAFTA judge and as a general spokesperson for the games industry in the U.K. Since leaving Edge she has continued writing, with a series of columns currently running with the BBC Online, and has started a consultancy business, through which she works with a number of game publisher and academic institutions, including EA, Channel 4 and the GameCity festival.

#### **Position**

One of the problems which plagues game design is The One Right Answer Fallacy. I've lost count of the number of conversations I've had with developers claiming 'Anyone still making singleplayer games is an idiot!' or 'There's not point in making games more than ten hours long!' or 'You should never make a game where any player could fail the first level!'. All of these are of course perfectly sound design decisions, course, but they're not inviolable laws. The same happens with new technology. Motion control isn't 'the future' no matter how shrilly the platform holders tell you it is. Nor is 3D. It's a part of the future, certainly. But buttons and 2D are enduring tools, just as brutally hard, long, single player games will and should always exist.

Now, this same instinct is starting to be felt when thinking about writing about games, as well as in making them. Should games writing be subjective and experiential? Yes. Should it be based on a objective, analytical and based on a sound understanding of a century of critical theory? Yes. Should it be voyeuristic like good sports writing? Yes. Can you ever write meaningfully about a game you haven't played or finished? Yes. The biggest thing wrong with game writing at the moment is how polarised the ecology is. Academic writers find game journalists hyperbolic and hysterical, game journalists find (if they ever encounter it, which they rarely do) academic writing pompous and impenetrably self-referential. And, sadly, between there's not a whole lot else. What we need to do is encourage new forms, and encourage new writers - the latter being particularly important. For lots of reasons, games are very hard to write about, and at the moment we rarely attract talented enough writers to discuss them with insight and flair; often our most high profile writing is from people who are talented in other fields - design or research say - rather than actual writing. As we move towards a time when more and more people have exposure to games, my hope for better - and more varied - writing gets stronger.

### **David Thomas**

#### **Background**

David Thomas has covered videogames as a reporter and critic for 15 years. He has written for a wide variety of mainstream and enthusiast print and online outlets and is one of the editors of "The Videogame Journalism and Style Guide Manual" in addition to founding the International Game Journalists Association. He also researches the

connection between fun and architectural and urban space at the University of Colorado.

### Position

If you were left with nothing other than a towering stack of Game Informer magazines to try and puzzle out what videogames were, what they meant to the culture that embraced them, you'd come up with a fairly peculiar picture of the medium. But not one far from the truth.

Videogames are pop culture and at this point in the development of this cultural archeology, games have been developed and have a discourse invented and controlled by an inner circle that thinks of itself as the "hardcore." Want to plumb the depths of videogame structure and meaning? Talk to the gaming nerds, the game store effete, the obsessive young player, the hardcore.

It's a bitter pill to swallow, but all the academic outpouring of the past few years under the banner of game studies has done little to dent the monolithic image of the videogame world constructed review-by-preview-by-feature with passion, intelligence and access by the enthusiast press.

Even as the market has expanded to include online bridge-playing grannies and stay-at-home mom Wii Fit clubs, utter the word "gamer" and the demographic room clears leaving a few Jolt Cola-stained young men in Mario t-shirts. Videogames and the identity of the gamer were constructed to serve the fan and their feeling of importance and permanence. Ironically, at the game's moment of cultural ascendancy the concept must rise above the fan to survive. Otherwise, videogames' fate will follow the predictable path of other genre art forms, including comic books and horror flicks.

The way forward, the solution as I think of it, is through an enriching of game criticism. This move requires an advance in the public appetite for more interesting criticism, a growing sophistication in the critical vocabulary of games and, simply, more urgency on the part of critics to say more.

While a half dozen years have passed since IGDA columnist Matt Sakey penned his column "There Are No Words (Yet): The Desperately Incomplete Language of Gaming", the basic premise of his argument holds—we need a mature critical language if we want to have mature critical discourse.<sup>1</sup> Simple terms equal a simple worldview and sophistication around our understanding of games cannot advance without a symmetrical progress in the language and terms we use to talk about games.

Even though some things have improved--contemporary game writers remain less likely to instinctually reach for "fun factor", "bump map quality" or "controllability" when assessing a game-- the average game review still remains a

sort of observational inventory, a dull structural dissection that explains everything and interprets almost nothing.

The academic community hasn't always been ready to help, either. Game analysis that drops in "liminal", "phenomenological" or "orthogonal ethnography" simply straps a bigger conceptual apparatus onto to the same sort of routine bean counting the popular press has been shoveling out for years. Which is to say, an autopsy never describes a life.

What game criticism needs to move forward, then, isn't just a box of fancy new terms. It doesn't need more Heidegger or Foucault, so to speak. Instead, it need better questions, a point I have argued tirelessly for years.

When you stop asking "What is it?"--the ultimate driver of basic nuts-and-bolts, car culture, descriptive criticism--and, "Why do I like it?"--the endless Sargasso Sea of personal opinion mucked up with bits and pieces of every game experience that has come before--and finally ask, "What does this game mean?", we can all move forward to new and important conceptual ground.

It may sound like too much to ask. However, at this junction the enthusiast press, the gaming public and the academic researcher all meet with a common purpose and desire.

Tell me what *World of Warcraft* is or why you think it is cool and you're just one more fan at the concert with a bloodstained t-shirt trying to tell me why you love that band soooooooooo much. Tell me what WoW means and we can talk. Don't just tell me about the different in race types, the political structure of guilds or the demographic composition of servers. Tell me what that means.

The goal of meaning-focused game criticism isn't to create some sort of ontological or epistemological tyranny, to suggest that there is an ideal way to construct meaning from games, or a meaning about games.

That, frankly, is so Enlightenment.

Rather the suggestion here is that game criticism ought to be about something ethical, perhaps even moral. The discourse about games needs to move beyond the descriptive, and the proscriptive commercial product demanded by the market and, instead, provide a normative position about how things ought to be and use the game to illustrate the argument or the counter argument. Game reviews that tell you what games to buy can either serve the hegemonic process or oppose it. Which is a very technical way of saying: Game critics can either help Wal-Mart manage their game inventory around predictable hits or game critics can incite the game-buying public into consciousness-raising riots. Which over states a bit, but not much, as this example describes:

*Fallout 3* was one of the most well-received games of 2009. Why? If you followed the fan press, you'd come to the conclusion that it had great visuals, a lot of variety in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.igda.org/articles/msakey\\_language.php](http://www.igda.org/articles/msakey_language.php)

character customization and play styles, wide-open space to explore and a lot of something call “replayability.”

If you scrutinized why the game journalism corps liked the game as a body politic, you’d find that the game explored new narrative territory, imaginatively updated a classic game and that it simply provided a lot of bang for the buck.

But less likely will you find a single inch of inch, digital or otherwise, dedicated to the critical question, “What does the game mean?”

Questions along this line include, by way of example:

Why is our culture obsessed with the apocalypse? Do we have a guilty death wish? Why does a fighting system that combines real time and asynchronous violence appeal so much? Have we become violent digital natives? What is it about playing the same game and story with slightly different skills sets that brings us back to re-experience something? Who doesn’t play this game and why? And why is it so cool that you get a dog sidekick in this game?

What does *Fallout 3* mean to the players, the game industry, the culture?

The result of these questions and many, many more like them frames an important dialog about games, and by proxy, a dialog about society. As this strange argument turns, it connects plain old, mainstream game reviewing to the best of social criticism, in the hairiest Frankfurt School critical theory tradition. And along the way, telling players which games they should buy or not buy, and what to think about around the games they do purchase, also comes wrapped in a perspective about what they should believe. Hopefully, this becomes a dialog of freedom rather than of oppression.

But, that’s a conversation which leaves the question of game criticism.

Because the central question of this kind of criticism is, “What makes one game better than another?”

We can argue all night long about the definitions of “better”. But that’s sort of the point as it frames a philosophical meta-discussion worth having. In the meantime, what we play, and what we think about what we play, remains a conversation worth having. And as “better” moves from a shorthand for the most raw form of idle entertainment to a conversation about what a game means—that is games as mirrors reflecting something about our world rather than just gewgaws we use to past the time—the notion of game criticism gets better too.

When we talk about games with a serious weight of meaning, people will care. And if they don’t, then it falls on the game critics to explain why it does, in fact, matter..

So how do we talk about games?

The next step leads to the vocabulary of fun, the rhetoric of play. Here, Sutton-Smith’s careful discussion of the topic

falls into helpful line. But what he avoids, or perhaps just never gets to, are the critical terms one can or must use to invoke the various rhetorics of play. The subtle argument of his “Ambiguity of Play” is that the independent rhetorics of progress, identity, power and the like, fuel their discussion of play through entrenched vocabularies anchored in the various rhetorics. There is never a sense in this important book that play has its own rhetoric expressed in its own language using its own terms.

Which flies in the face of the obvious dialog that takes place in the enthusiast press on a daily basis. Games have their own language of play and the criticism of games likewise has its own unique patios.

Sakey may be right that a critical game vocabulary is still maturing. But it is hard to argue that game criticism is bereft of its own terminological framework. Peek inside the “Videogame Journalism Style Guide and Reference Manual” and follow the ample discussion that book generated and you find a clear argument that the game community not only has its own terms, it cares deeply about them.

The dialog about game terms--critical, descriptive, social and otherwise--provides a means for creating a dialog about games. And, as I have already stated, that dialog is central to thinking about games and their function as a social mechanism for advancing the human condition along some line.

The last piece of this somewhat surreal jigsaw puzzle is to suggest that the critical language of games, the anchoring terms that allow us to dialog about what makes one game better than another, is also a language of fun.

Successful games, as Gee has pointed out, are by commercial necessity fun. People buy games because they expect to find fun on the spinning plastic discs they purchase, and creating a critical dialog around that consumer appetite is inevitably a critical discussion of fun. The next step is to consider the language of game criticism the language of fun.

This might be a trivial association. Then again, if we follow Sutton-Smith’s notion of a “ludic turn” in modern society or Eric Zimmerman’s suggestion that we have entered a “ludic age”, then we see that the fun of games has escaped into society at large. Huinzig might argue that the play urge has been lying dormant at every turn of cultural development, but the fact that play might be emerging as a dominate social force suggests that a language of fun is essential to the future dialog about the future of the (fun) society at large.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the significance of game criticism may not simply be creating a discourse to attack the problem of what makes one game better than another, the standard Western aesthetic argument made since Kant. Instead, may very well be entering an age where discussing the problematic, contingent, contested, game-

like reality of modern life becomes a new, or possibly counter-aesthetic.

In the ludic age, the critical dialog around games turns into the key cultural conversation about fun.

### **José P. Zagal, DePaul University**

#### **Background**

Dr. José P. Zagal is an Assistant Professor in the College of Computing and Digital Media at DePaul University where he teaches game design and ethics in videogames. His research work includes understanding and supporting games literacy and the development of frameworks for describing, analyzing, and understanding games.

#### **Position**

Where is game criticism? Yogi Berra once quipped, it's like *deja-vu*, all over again. Here we are, asking this question again and wondering how far we've come, how far we want to go, and what it is exactly that game criticism needs to look like until we're all happy.

So, what is game criticism anyways? I know it when I see it was, once upon a time, a clever way to dodge the question. Game reviews aren't criticism argue some, no one does game criticism argue others. I disagree with both.

I don't disagree that game reviews may be flawed or troublesome for multiple reasons. They have, in fact, been the subject of much debate within the games journalism community. Taken at face value, game reviews aren't criticism. They're shopping guides designed to help consumers decide what to spend their money on, right? But is that all? We've focused on what game reviews are supposedly like. We haven't discussed the role game reviews play in shaping our understanding of a specific videogames or the medium in general. What are game reviews as discourse? What form do they actually take and what do they accomplish? What questions do they help us answer? What do we learn about games from reviews?

In my research I've found that game reviews are more than the glorified shopping guides many hold them to be. Perhaps the real problem with game reviews is that they're not actually that good at helping you make a purchasing decision. It's an unwritten rule that game reviews can't actually recommend (or not) a purchase. It turns out that game reviews are a rich and varied form of discourse that

touches upon issues of game design, technology, relations to other media forms, business, and last, but not least, the history of the medium. After reading more than three hundred game reviews over the past year, I found countless examples of reviews that contextualized, and discussed a game in relation to the historical evolution of the medium. Others helped me understand the continuing evolution of different game designers as artists. Many focused on articulating and discussing how a game's innovations explored the limits of the medium, and what these innovations could mean to the future of game design. Some discussed the subtext of the work in question or the emotions, thoughts, and experience resulting from playing a game. Surprisingly, few game reviews talked about "fun".

These are all things we expect, or demand, to find in game criticism. While I wouldn't argue that all game reviews are well-written, insightful or particularly interesting, the truth is that game reviews aren't actually what we make them out to be. The lack of game criticism argument is battling a straw man or, at the very least, something like picking on the runts from a broad and diverse litter of writing that generally falls under the "game review" umbrella. The truth is that game reviews continue to evolve, splinter, and diversify in style in the same way the game industry grows and matures. There's plenty of game criticism under the umbrella. For example, British videogames magazine *Edge* features game reviews that are distinctly different: 'The Making of...' and 'Time Extend'. The former provides a view behind the process of creation of a particular game, usually from the perspective of its creators, while the latter constitutes a retrospective in-depth game review focusing, with the benefit of hindsight, on some of the more interesting or innovative qualities of a particular game. Online, things are equally exciting with countless blogs and websites dedicating increasing amounts of bytes to thinking, talking, and writing about games in critical and insightful ways. Not all reviews are written equal, for the same audience, or for the same purpose. Perhaps we should just stop calling many of them reviews and get used to the idea that game criticism is already here.