Game Worlds: A Study of Video Game Criticism
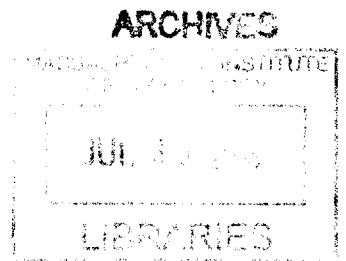
By

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A.B. English, Princeton University 2011

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relation between criticism and establishment of narrative forms and genres, focusing on the cultural situation of video games. Comparing the context of early film criticism and contemporary video game criticism, I argue that the public negotiation of meaning and value codifies a new medium as it emerges. In the case of digital games in particular, contemporary critics approach the question of "what is a game" rhetorically, rarely addressing it outright but allowing metatextual considerations to influence their readings. I trace the sites of criticism, moving from newspapers and weekly periodicals in the case of film, to blogs and web publications in the case of digital games, and explore how the shifting reception of each form took hold in the different media available. I focus especially on the state of public video game criticism today, locating the persuasive strengths in the ability for quick communication between writers, as well as the easy dissemination of digital games. I ground my analysis in the game criticism produced in response to *Dear Esther* (2011) and *League of Legends* (2009) that visibly struggled with ideas of narrative, game, and interactivity.

Thesis Supervisor: Nick Montfort
Title: Associate Professor of Digital Media

DEDICATION

For my grandfather.

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Chapter 00: Introduction

Imagine for a second that you are playing a game. This game has text that you move through, reading it all in order. This game tells a story, describes another person's life. You are not this person, but you pretend. The game ends, and you don't feel like you have won at anything, or even that there was anything to win. So you write a blog post where you argue that the formal qualities of what was called a "game" don't seem to fit the definition of "game" that you believe in, and so that it has no right to be called a game. Instead, you call it something different, a word that the creators did not use to describe their work. It is a "zine," and should be respected on those terms. Other writers notice your blog post, respond with blog posts of their own, defending the game, defending you, or just making arguments about the nature of public discourse. Eventually the debate blows over, until the next time that someone makes a game without a protagonist, or without meaningful choice, or without simulation.

This, in a nutshell, describes the state of games writing today. The narrative above comes from a set of blog posts in response to this Twitter provocation by Leigh Alexander, games journalist and writer for outlets such as *Gamasutra, Edge,* and *Kotaku*:

> "when people say games need objectives in order to be 'games', i wonder why 'better understanding another human' isn't a valid 'objective'"
>
> "games need 'challenges' and 'rules', isn't 'empathy' a challenge, aren't preconceptions of normativity a 'rule'"[1]

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[1] Tweets by Leigh Alexander, quoted in Raph Koster, "A Letter to Leigh," *Raph Koster.com,* http://www.raphkoster.com/2013/04/09/a-letter-to-leigh/.

The first response that started the discussion of formalism and goals was an open letter to Alexander by Raph Koster, game designer. In it, he speaks personally and invokes his subjectivity repeatedly when making claims such as "The unique power of games, to **me**, lies in the conversation between player and designer," and asking fundamental questions as "Can we, should we, do *I*, exclude these things from the realm of games?"[2] This invocation of subjectivity continues through most of the participants in the debate, such as Andrew Vanden Bossche, writing for *Gameranx*,[3] or Michael O'Reilly, writing on a personal site.[4] On the other hand, notable participants such as Tadhg Kelly, who will reappear in Chapter Two of this thesis, write in first-person and claim the subject-position of formalist, but then asserts the dominance of their position over all others while dismissing "zinesters" (his term applied to a group of self-described game creators) as "yellers and name-callers" without engaging with the debate at the heart of defining cultural categories.[5]

On the other hand, those falling under the "zinester" categorization use the term "formalist" to denounce those who are more interested in rule systems than in individual reactions to games. Leigh Alexander's tweets, above, contain this kind of critique of "formalism"; that it is too concerned with clearly defined qualities such as goals and rules to critique the nature of this interest and push it forward in a meaningful way. To the Twine designers, such as Anna Anthropy and Porpentine, it is exactly the formal qualities of the medium that allow them to create their games, though they overlook this in favor of making structural critiques of the games industry, or of non-personal games. The position of "formalist" does not describe an interest in formal qualities, as one might guess from Raph Koster's reaction.

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[2] Raph Koster, "A Letter to Leigh." Bolding mine.

[3] "The Tyranny of Choice," *Gameranx*, 23 April 2013, http://www.gameranx.com/features/id/14224/article/.

[4] "Definitions, Formalists and Zinesters," *Kayinworks*, 15 April 2013, http://kayin.pyoko.org/?p=2383.

[5] Tadhg Kelly, "Formalists and Zinesters: Why Formalism Is Not The Enemy," *What Games Are*, 13 April 2013, http://www.whatgamesare.com/2013/04/formalism-is-not-the-enemy.html.

Instead, it captures a community of interpretation that focuses around this interest but also goes further. According to the "zinesters," the "formalists" are overly concerned with subject categories and classifications, in an exclusionary way.

Both terms, "formalist" and "zinester," convey oppositional discourse thrown from another subject position. They characterize certain critical approaches to games, albeit negatively. Moreover, these terms have become pervasive in the discourse due to an original disagreement between individuals, not camps.

I offer this debate not as an activist call to a revolution in games criticism, or to condemn "formalists" or "zinesters" for their views, but as an example of the role of critics and criticism in effecting very real concerns. It is also an example of the power of community and open debate, and a taste of the medium-specific qualities of games criticism that will be explored further in Chapter Two with an examination of the discourse surrounding *Dear Esther*.

Who Critiques the Critic?

The critic, in the public imagination, is a gatekeeper and a tastemaker. A short flash game on the web game hosting site *Kongregate*, *Passage in 10 Seconds*[6], parodies this conception of critic to mock the "games as art" debate that ionized the field of popular games writing. The main portion of the game mocks the game *Passage*, a critically recognized artistic game. The end, however, lowers the curtain on the game and exposes the audience of impeccably dressed gentlemen, one of whom pops out his monocle and proclaims, "Now this is art!" A similar parodic response to efforts to define "game" can be seen in a tweet by Zoë Quinn: "2012: Are games art? 2013: Are

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[6] *Passage in 10 Seconds,* hosted on *kongregate*.com, 19 February 2010, http://www.kongregate.com/games/raitendo/passage-in-10-seconds.

games GAMES!? 2014: Are games!?!?"[7] This tweet in particular was often retweeted and received a number of replies. Something about this reduction of debates resonated with people.

To some extent, the critic as gatekeeper is a common understanding of how the critic functions in a media ecosystem. The critic decides what is worth watching, or reading, or eating, or listening to. This critic, however, has absolute cultural power in such a system. The ways in which this power is constructed and broadcast reflect existing societal norms.

We see from the recent debates over formalism and games that defining terms is a political move that can exclude non-hegemonic voices from public discourse. Definitions set the limits of a community, scoping its concerns. Arguing over definitions can establish theoretical and interpretive camps, providing a productive frame for discourse and analysis. But definitions can also be used to exclude particular groups from participation, especially when these definitions are also classifications. Despite this exclusionary potential, non-mainstream voices in games criticism have places of their own, often on blogs and Twitter, in which to speak and build community.

For example, on *Kongregate* these games are tagged with genre classifiers. In 2011, *Kongregate* added the tag "art" as a descriptor to some of their games, acknowledging a particular aesthetic of Flash game design. A significant portion of the games in the "art" category tend to emulate an 8-bit aesthetic, with heavy narrative involvement and short playtime combined with pixelated and true-color graphics. The highest-rated game in this category, *The Company of Myself*, is a simple platformer with narrative overlays between levels. As a whole, the story is one of loneliness and coming to terms with it; the single-player experience reflects this, as the player character is the only human on screen. One commenter on *Kongregate*, writing before the introduction of the "art" tag, expresses a desire for "an area just for games with storys

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[7] Tweet by @ZoeQuinnzel, 13 April 2013, https://twitter.com/ZoeQuinnzel/status/323139488207495168.

like that."[8] This is where the "art" tag comes in. As used on *Kongregate*, the tag describes games of this type. It also, however, applies to Flash systems built for the creation of art, such as *Draw My Thing!*, which is an earlier web version of the popular mobile game *Draw Something* in which two players take turns drawing a word, and guessing the word from the drawing. On *Kongregate*, we see a tag that uses a loaded word, "art," to describe two very different kinds of systems. Does this mean that only these two kinds of systems are art? Does this mean that other games on *Kongregate* are not art? Do the creators of this tag believe in a tightly-defined sense of the word "art?" The answer to all of these questions is no, but this is a perfect example of a loaded definition that can exclude creators. Perhaps that trading card game designer feels strongly that their game is art, but the tags on *Kongregate* do not indicate this.

With this in mind, can arguing over definitions ever be a productive engagement? Liz Ryerson's tweets on 10 April 2013 ask of games critics online that they take into consideration the ways in which formalism and structural critique can affect individual persons.

> "I wish people could talk about the structure of games without creating exclusionary theoretical frameworks that serve to reinforce privilege" - @ellaguro, Liz Ryerson, 7:36 PM, 10 April 2013

> "I wish people could talk about the structure of a game without making excuses for its design dissonances or problematic ideological content" - @ellaguro, Liz Ryerson, 7:40 PM, 10 April 2013

> "i wish people understood how to talk about the structure of a game while also talking about how it functions as an expressive work of art" - @ellaguro, Liz Ryerson, 7:45 PM, 10 April 2013

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[8] preischadt, review of *The Company of Myself*, kongregate.com, 24 October 2010, http://www.kongregate.com/games/2DArray/the-company-of-myself.

Ryerson's tweets point to what she sees as problems not with games but with games *discourse*. As guiding questions for this thesis, however, we can use Ryerson's questions to investigate whether there exist models for critical writing, both about games and about other media forms. Ryerson's questions express a desire to be able to discuss games, both structurally and expressively, both as objects of design and as personal experiences, both within ideologies and free from oppressive structures. More than the actual content of these questions, the mere fact that they exist makes this thesis necessary. How *do* people talk about games, now?

Overview

This thesis begins with a short comparative study of film criticism in the 1920s to 1940s and games criticism in 2004-2013. These two periods were chosen as representative of a particular state of new media reception, a few decades after the introduction and acceptance of said medium, but before established modes of engagement. These two times offer a picture of media in transition, media in public, media in contestation. Thus, they exemplify how publics form around media, negotiated through critical discourse. It must be said, however, that my thesis takes *criticism* as its focus, and not the new media themselves. I examine film criticism and games criticism, not as a sort of literature review of dominant discourses, but as objects of study in their own right. Self-identified critical writing points to questions of networks, of audience, of creativity, of value.

After the comparative example of film criticism and games criticism, I devote one chapter each to more detailed case studies of two games, *Dear Esther* and *League of Legends*. For these two games, I begin with a third-party site devoted to contemporary games criticism,

Critical Distance, and work outwards from there to investigate structures of peer networks and styles of discourse.

The example of film criticism was chosen both for its comparative and contrastive elements. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I wanted a critical mode that was not yet established but would be as an important part of cultural existence. Film offered this, in spades. The film critic today is a public figure, a tastemaker, an intellectual. Roger Ebert was the perfect example of such an individual, offering a model of engagement to millions and inviting himself into their theaters, a respected arbiter of what to watch, an unabashed admirer of both big-budget Hollywood cinema and smaller art-house films. Moreover, the games community at large takes cues from cinema, whether in spectacle, production standards, or audience size. On the topic of criticism, games writers bring in references to film and film critics, and self-consciously appropriate modes of interpretation from those of film. On the other hand, film criticism captures a unique historical moment in media engagement. The widespread popularity of film, combined with its newness, accounts for some of this uniqueness. But the rest of it is perhaps the responsibility of the critics, curators, filmmakers, and audience members of the day. Perhaps games criticism will never have the cultural cachet of film criticism, but that does not mean it has failed in its goals—if there can even be a unified set of goals. As similar as games criticism seems to be to film criticism, its differences may prove more illuminating. While it is true that literary criticism, music criticism, and sports criticism engage with many of the same topics as games criticism, the idealization of film within the games community renders it an effective historical example.

Methods

This thesis focuses on "game(s) criticism," seeking to capture and describe the rhetorical

strategies and interpretive communities that are in use in contemporary video games culture. In

deciding what counts as "criticism," I look for writers that describe themselves as "critics" or

their work as "criticism," or sites such as *Critical Distance* that aim to collect and curate "critical

writing." I mainly examine online critical writing in English, due in part to the plurality of voices

in the digital sphere and to the duplication of outlets in print. Sources like *Kill Screen* offer print

magazines to complement their online offerings, but newspapers with video game columns more

often simply replicate the material online.

Discussing "criticism" bears some difficulty, as critical writing can be found in a variety

of settings, but there are useful models of criticism in works of meta-criticism such as Noel

Carroll's *On Criticism*. I take writers at their word, relying on "About" pages of blogs or other

sites to identify critical writing. The curatorial site *Critical Distance* offers a weekly round-up of

what they consider the best critical writing; I have chosen to focus on this site in particular as a

representative case study of contemporary video game criticism. Once particular voices, outlets,

or writers have been identified, I move through and trace these voices through the publications

that host them. This means using the search engines built into blogs, or their in-house tagging of

content, or their author pages, to discover other relevant writing. In this way I follow the threads

of discourse in the way that a reader new to the content would. I also avoid creating ties between

works that would have no actual connection.

Additionally, I restrict my analysis to popular, or at least public, critical discourse. While

a fair number of games critics come from an academic background or are in academia at the time

of writing, I exclude their academic pieces from this project except as necessary. Instead, for the

games criticism, I focus on personal blogs, multi-writer sites, and third-party sites. Print outlets

appear sporadically, but the overwhelming majority of games criticism today happens online. For

film criticism, newspaper and fan magazines offer the platforms for critical discourse. Pinning

down medial influence on the formal qualities of criticism is difficult with this cross-media,

cross-historical comparison, but a discussion of such influence is necessary to this project.

This thesis is limited to the North American and British popular contexts, including a

large contingent of writers from Australia. I do not examine writers from other countries except

when they write for blogs or press outlets in my area of study. I am also limited to online writing.

While print journalism and discourse is the idealized model for many of these writers, the

economic realities limit many writers to online writing only. This does not imply any kind of

stigma against online writing, or any kind of judgment of cultural value equivalent to economic

value. Looking at online writing allows me to examine a wider range of voices than if I were to

limit myself to commercially successful print outlets. On the other hand, I do explore the

apparent desire of many of these writers to achieve economic viability through their writing,

turning to crowdfunding or traditional print institutions for support.

Perhaps games critics are concerned not with the cultural standing of games, but of

games criticism. Many critics within my sample come to games criticism from a place of love for

video games, a love born from a childhood of play and a training in more traditional fields of

aphumanistic inquiry: English, Film Studies, Media Studies. Yet when it comes to games, they

are perhaps told that they are not worthy objects of study, or that they should grow up and look at

other things. *If only games criticism were a viable occupation,* they might think, *if only I could*

make a living off this thing that I love.

Although this community of games critics is admittedly small and tightly networked, I

believe it offers much more than a simple overview of a group of people. The example of this

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group highlights the importance of personal connections and social ties in creating "interpretive communities." The literary critic and professor of English Stanley Fish writes on this concept of an "interpretive community," setting it aside as a community of practice more than anything else:

> "As that structure emerges (under the pressure of interrogation) it takes the form of a 'reading,' and insofar as the procedures which produced it are recognized by the literary community as something that some of its members do, that reading will have the status of a competing interpretation."[9]

What makes an interpretive community is an agreement over the terms of a reading. Though this seems to suggest a text-focused approach, it is actually mediated through personal relationships. This thesis explores this duality of criticism, and how communities are formed both by shared ideals of reading and shared histories of engagement. Fish is explicit about how institutionalized these practices are, noting that "the shape of that activity [interpretation] is determined by the literary institution which at anyone time will authorize only a finite number of interpretative strategies."[10]

In the case of games criticism, we see the same duality at work. Communities of practice identified by particular editorial sites, along with particular games of focus, drive critical interventions. Many of these critics know one another outside of their professional lives, and communicate personally through direct online tools. Certain games come in and out of vogue, especially smaller indie titles that might not receive public attention without the critical eye. The very insularity of this community makes it worthy of study, not as a representation of all critical writing but as an examination of how certain interpretive practices are normalized and propagated.

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[9] Stanley Fish, "What Makes an Interpretation Accessible," *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, 345.
[10] Ibid, 342.

The main mode of analysis is close reading, informed by rhetorical descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis is a form of textual analysis that "is intended to focus attention on the rhetorical act itself."[11] Following the method of descriptive analysis, I approach critical writing as worthy of study, as "critics should make descriptive statements solely on the basis of the *content of the discourse itself*" and "use extrinsic materials and sources only under very limited circumstances."[12] I take criticism as the object, and perform a reading of contemporary critical writing, using *Dear Esther* as a focal point to unify the different writers and discourses in my study. If *Dear Esther* helps capture the state of games criticism today, my second case study, *League of Legends*, offers both an example of its failure to address certain kinds of games and a possible vision for the future.

Because of its contested status as a "game," *Dear Esther* offers a perfect example of the structures of games criticism. For this reason, I use *Dear Esther* as a case study to illustrate and investigate these structures, such as blog networks, use of twitter, and style of discourse. In particular, *Dear Esther* becomes a site of public contestation of the formal qualities of a medium. This debate recurs whenever a new work pushes the assumed limits, such as with Twine games, the subject of the debates over "formalism" in 2012-13. Twine games, an example of which appears in Figure 1, are a new form of hypertext fiction written in a graphical editor with a node map. Pieces of the game are "nodes," which contain text and any other content in html. Once a Twine game has been published, it appears as a web site that may be navigated by the player. Some Twine game creators frame their works as traditional hypertext works, like a choose-your-

[11] Campbell and Burkholder, *Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric*, (Wadsworth, 1997), 27.
[12] Ibid., 19-20.

own-adventure, but some experiment with the form and integrate elements of web browsing such as embedded video or text style effects.
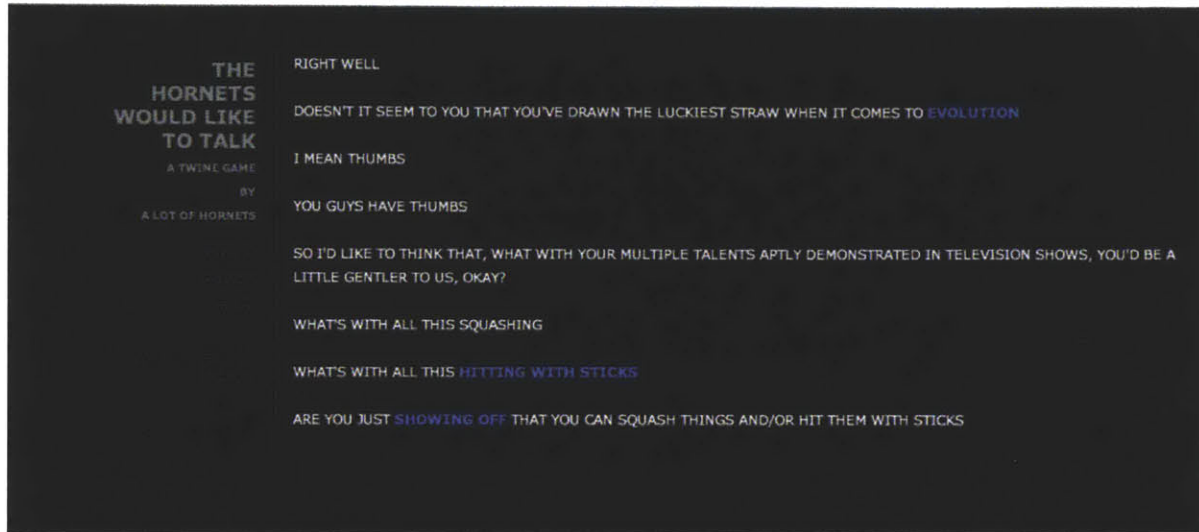
Figure 1: A screenshot from a typical Twine game. The title and author are on the left. The game plays through the text in the right frame, and blue words indicate links to story nodes.

With *Dear Esther* in particular, "interactivity" is the issue of the day. Critics rally around this term to either justify its consideration as a game, or to protest it. The use of the term, however, is not necessarily sited in any kind of academic discourse, but comes from critics' understanding as players modeling interpretations. The importance of *Dear Esther* is that despite being a perhaps unconventional game, the volume of written responses by established game critics and distributed through established networks implies that it is a conventional site of criticism.

League of Legends, on the other hand, is an outlier to the field of games criticism despite unequivocally presenting as a "game." Some of the central ludic qualities of *League of Legends* are that it is an online, multiplayer game, with clearly-defined win-states. As discussed in Chapter 3, the few critical responses to *League of Legends* are limited mostly to character design or to player communities. For this reason exactly, the example of *League of Legends*

complements *Dear Esther* and identifies the gaps in that critical discourse, as well as suggesting

alternative critical modes for games criticism.

It is true that the two examples chosen as case studies are easily characterized as "story-

based" (*Dear Esther*) or "rule-based" (*League of Legends*) games. The reactions to these two

very different kinds of games limn the field of games criticism. I do not intend to oppose these

games through this lens of narratology vs. ludology, and in fact, I will return to this dichotomy

and offer an alternative rendering of it based on a study of games criticism. This thesis is not a

study of games, but of games criticism. I must acknowledge the power of this dichotomy,

however, in contemporary games culture. Gonzalo Frasca, in 2003, attempts to characterize the

"so-called narratology versus ludology debate" within game studies and clarify what he sees as

"misunderstandings".[13] Two years later, Jesper Juul orients the reader of *Half-Real* by

introducing early game studies as a "discussion between narratology... versus ludology".[14] These

two terms absolutely dominate critical approaches to games; even in a 2011 conversation

between Tom Bissell and Simon Ferrari published on *Paste Magazine*, the two participants frame

themselves as participants in the "former quarrel in game studies between the so-called

'ludologists' (those who study videogames as games before all else) and narratologists'."[15]

Clearly, the terms of this debate act as convenient references for identifying critical responses to

games. Critics mention their stance in relation to an imagined community of either narratologists

or ludologists, depending on their rhetorical goals. On the other hand, it is an overly reductive

dichotomy and falls to the wayside once the preliminary assertion has been invoked by the critic

[13] Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place," in *Proceedings of International DiGRA Conference*, pp. 92-99. 2003, http://www.ludology.org/articles/frasca_levelup2003.pdf.
[14] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 15.
[15] Tom Bissell and Simon Ferrari, "On Videogame Criticism," *Paste Magazine*, 18 February 2011, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2011/02/tom-bissell-and-simon-ferrari-on-games-criticism.html.

in question. Instead, the ways in which critics discuss games, and the rhetorical and discursive

processes that characterize such discussions, depend on more nuanced frames of meaning-

making. These frames are the object of my study.

Moreover, understanding the invisible networks behind such critical frames is essential to

contextualizing their function in an interpretive community. Such forces as medium of criticism,

personal social ties, and academic history play strongly on an imagined "dominant critical

discourse." More than a discourse, however; the real concern here is the creation of a public. The

public in question is the homogenized audience for video games.

Literature Review

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida offers a nuanced breakdown of three "apparatuses" of culture,

describing the functions of "political" culture, "mass-media culture," and "scholarly and

academic culture."[16] While this is a general deconstruction of culture at work, the identification

of *how* such cultures perpetuate themselves is a guiding principle of this thesis. What Derrida

analyzes for hegemonic culture may be analyzed for hegemonic sub-culture; the same systems

and apparatuses function in each substratum. On this note, he argues:

> "whatever may be the conflicts, inequalities, or overdeterminations among [the three
>
> cultures], they communicate and cooperate at every moment towards producing the
>
> greatest force with which to assure the hegemony or the imperialism in question. They do
>
> so thanks to the mediation of what is called precisely the media in the broadest, most

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[16] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 65.

mobile, and, considering the acceleration of technical advances, most technologically invasive sense of the term."[17]

And while this thesis does not necessarily assert an imperialist view of games criticism, the creation of an informed public through the public negotiation of cultural value is a viable site for analysis. Derrida's breakdown is useful not just for focusing on the medium-specific influences of culture, but also for distinguishing between the "mass-media" and "academic" cultures of discourse. Journalists and bloggers are of course not the only ones concerned with creating models of interpretation. Since the beginning of the new field known as "game studies," and even before, academics have proposed critical approaches to games.

For example, in 2001 one of the influential early games scholars, Espen Aarseth, penned an editorial as editor-in-chief of the newly-launched *Game Studies*, an online open-access journal of game studies. In his article, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," Aarseth argues for the creation of a new distinct field of "computer game studies" with its own vocabulary, inspired by other disciplines but unique to games. To Aarseth, the theories formed around cinema or stories fail to account for the characteristics of games, such as the fact that computer games are "not one medium, but many different media."[18] Placing the study of games solely within media studies, sociology, and English effaces the unique features of games. While he did not explicitly mention "criticism" in his editorial, Aarseth's piece captures the impulse of scholars to build ways of interpreting digital games.

Since Aarseth, scholars within game studies have approached the problem of academic criticism directly. Ian Bogost, in *Unit Operations*, outlines a "literary-technical theory," integrating the work of classic media scholars, like Benjamin, and systems biologists or network

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[17] Ibid, 66.
[18] Aarseth, Espen. "Computer Game Studies, Year One". *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1.1 (2001): 1-4. Accessed 10 Dec. 2011. http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html.

theorists. This theory serves as the foundation of his proceduralist[19] analysis for video games and

the starting point of Bogost's vision of a humanities field united with social science, natural

science, and design. As a work sketching the edges of "game studies," *Unit Operations*

foreshadows the instinct towards definition of some of the critics in my study. Additionally,

Bogost's analysis locates sites of interest, such as the concept of "fun,"[20] that appear in the public

works of criticism that I analyze. Like Bogost, Jesper Juul is another academic in the field of

game studies who approaches criticism, though from a formalist angle. According to the subtitle,

his book *Half-Real* situates games "between real rules and fictional worlds;" this dichotomy pops

up in this thesis several times, especially with the discussion of Dan Pinchbeck's *Dear Esther*.

Juul's *Half-Real*, like Bogost's *Unit Operations*, directly addresses the cultural status of games—

just like many of the critics I study.[21]

Criticism has been a concern of writers and critics for years, drawing such notable figures

as Oscar Wilde and T.S. Eliot into reflections on their own critical processes. The field of meta-

criticism, or philosophy of criticism, intrigued literary scholars in the 1950s and 1960s before

winding down. Meta-criticism found itself within the study of aesthetics, as a way to identify

objectively what interests viewers or readers. Instead of doing a close reading of individual

works of criticism, however, meta-critical works look more to making objective and prescriptive

statements about critical language and engagement. Perhaps the best example of works like these,

productive but general, is Noel Carroll's *On Criticism*, which moves through centuries of art

history and literary history to argue for the evaluative function of the critic, beyond all else.

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[19] In games studies, proceduralist refers to someone who sees games first and foremost as a system of rules. This system of rules conveys a rhetoric by asking the player to participate in a process.

[20] Ian Bogost, "An Alternative to Fun," *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 111-127.

[21] Juul, *Half-Real*, 20-21; Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 114.

Instead of engaging deeply with the critical discourse, Carroll remains above the text and speaks generally but incisively, from long experience as an academic and as a critic. In marked contrast, the edited volume, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, takes a more detailed approach to criticism, focusing each chapter on a close reading of a different aspect of film criticism. The editors, Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, begin with an interest in the "achievements and potential of film criticism."[22] This drives their compilation of a volume ranging from discussions of key terms and their relation to medium specific qualities of film, to provocations asking readers to consider works of video art as critical discourse and open the possibilities for "criticism." The strengths of this volume lie in the varied approach—by featuring a range of writers, the volume can approach criticism from a range of perspectives, pinning down the object of study through a variety of methods and theoretical frames. This very strength is the major weakness of the book, however; the variety of perspectives sometimes gets in the way of a larger picture of "film criticism." Still, this book serves as my model for this study, as I seek to use the same multifaceted approach, dominated by close reading and rhetorical descriptive analysis, to take snapshots of different aspects of games criticism. In contrast to this book, by focusing on a set of writing around one particular game, I avoid some of the questions that appear on the general applicability of their model. Like the authors featured in this book, I am particularly interested in the details of critical discourse: key terms, the ways in which those terms are negotiated, the networks of communication between writers and audiences, and the possibilities for new, non-prose critical discourses.

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[22] Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

Chapter 01: The Structure and Discourse of New Media Criticism

Today, video and computer games are enjoyed by many as entertaining diversions, and considered by few to be artistic expression. Leaving aside the question of technology or consumerism, the lack of a supported mainstream discourse of criticism certainly hinders the cultural position of games. Looking to the case of early film, however, reveals that the current status of games is an expected part of the establishment and canonization of a new medium of artmaking. Furthermore, the particular questions raised by the critical discourse around games are the same questions as those raised by movies: the role of spectatorship, the interpretation of entirely new media forms, how to reach out to non-fan audiences.

Film criticism flourished in the newspapers and smaller magazines before it made a position for itself in academia. In contrast to pure reviews, informing viewers which movies they should attend and why, film critics made a case for cinema on its own terms. Haidee Wasson, writing about the relationship between criticism and its medium, argues that the film critics were "identifiable persona[e] that functioned to organize regular commentary on cinema's unique if sprawling significance, *making cinema into news.*"[23] Despite this ephemerality of early film criticism, its essential quality of seeming current and somehow reflective of modern times, it succeeded in creating an informed public who could discuss movies on the level of cultural significance.

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[23] Haidee Wasson, "The Woman Film Critic: Newspapers, Cinema and Iris Barry," *Film History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 154-162, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815632.

The primary outlets for video game[24] news and criticism today are web sites and blogs, rather than print media or television. Twitter, in particular, is a particularly active site of games-related discourse. Unfortunately, the ephemerality of this discourse often erases shifts in consciousness about games or major debates that blow over with time. For this ephemerality and other reasons, the community of games writers lacks context for situating formative questions in how to treat the medium. Manifestos come and go, but real change happens slowly, and often without awareness of prior attempts. Calls for establishing legitimate games criticism appear every few years, but without referencing the past ones.

For instance, in 2004, Matteo Bittanti gave a talk entitled "Make Better Criticism" at the Game Developers Conference, one of the largest industry events in video games. In this talk, he laid out a clear distinction between criticism and reviews, and focused attention on the need for proper criticism as opposed to more product reviews.[25] Four years later, responding to a session at GDC 2008, Greg Costikyan "rant[ed]" at the "conflation... of 'reviews' and 'criticism'."[26] Again, four years later: the same distinction, the same lament that "there's virtually nothing we can point to today as 'game criticism'"[27]. Fast-forward another four years, and we have Helen Lewis claiming "the lack of a serious cultural conversation about games" in 2012.[28] Clearly the issue is not a lack of manifestos and calls to action, but something more pervasive, something

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[24] In this paper, I use the terms "games" and "video games" to refer to the world of digital games and, more specifically, video and computer games. The distinction between video games and non-video games is irrelevant for the purposes of my thesis, which focuses rather on the issues of cultural reception of digital interactive play. While issues of platform are certainly in my mind, especially their relationships to cultural reception, it is not critical enough of an issue to split hairs and indulge in pedantry over the purity of the term "video game". This does not mean, however, that I will not examine the terminology that critics of digital games use, just that for my own writing, I am interested in all of the above.

[25] Matteo Bittanti, "Make Better Criticism: A Mature Form of Cultural Analysis," *Game Developers Conference*, San Jose, March 24, 2004.

[26] Costikyan, Greg. "Game Criticism, Why We Need It, and Why Reviews Aren't It." *Play This Thing.* February 24, 2008. http://playthisthing.com/game-criticism-why-we-need-it-and-why-reviews-arent-it.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Helen Lewis, "Why are we still so bad at talking about video games?" *The New Statesman*, November 19, 2012, http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2012/11/why-are-we-still-so-bad-talking-about-video-games.

wider that concerns the cultural status of games at large. Without an awareness of these

numerous manifestos, newcomers to criticism who approach it from a love of games first and

foremost often find themselves surprised by a critical silence. Lewis' piece in particular captures

this ignorance, not from any deliberate desire to negate the work of critics but from these critics'

lack of exposure in wider gaming and non-gaming culture.

Reviews vs. Criticism

Before embarking on the larger project of analyzing video game criticism, I must first define my

terms. "Critical discourse" can refer to a wide range of writing, and in the case of games as

mentioned above, "reviews" and "criticism" are often conflated. In the world of literature,

engagement with texts can range from Library Journal-style assessments of whether a book is

worth acquiring to entire bodies of work on a particular text's relationship to culture, authority,

and transnational media flows. The same range is possible with games; though it is clearly an

unfixed thing, distinguishing between "reviews" and "criticism" illuminates their competing

mandates and opens up the possibility of examining how games writers call attention to

particular elements. Chuck Klostermann defines reviews as "consumer advice,"[29] and this

captures the dominant function of reviews: telling you, the gamer, what to buy for your own

enjoyment, and why. In contrast, L.B. Jeffries responding to Klostermann, defines criticism's

dominant function of vision: "having an image about what that artistic medium should be doing

and talking about the moments where that is happening."[30]

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[29] Chuck Klostermann, "The Lester Bangs of Video Games," *Esquire.com,* June 30, 2006,
http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0706KLOSTER_66.
[30] L.B. Jeffries, "Does Video Game Criticism Need a Lester Bangs?" *Popmatters.com,* December 01, 2008,
http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/66256-do-video-games-need-a-lester-bangs/.

The distinction between reviews and criticism echoes, but does not mimic, the "representation/utility" distinction that I develop throughout this thesis. If "representation" indicates a focus on interpretation of the work, and "utility" indicates a focus on attaining and communicating success on the work's own terms, then criticism leans heavily towards the representation side of things. Without utility, however, a critic would not be taken seriously. Who would trust a literary critic who did not know how to turn pages? Who would trust a film critic who assumed that all colors on screen were negatives? Reviews, and especially hybrid reviews such as the "Remembering *TIE Fighter*" discussed below, remind us that effective criticism contains at least a hint of utility.

As an example of the different modes of critical discourse, I present three very different pieces of writing, from different times, all on the game *TIE Fighter*.[31] First, a simple review of the game, complete with a rating of 8.8 (great). This review discusses technical features of the game such as the "flight modeling" and the "high-res" 640x480 graphics, as well as narrative and gameplay elements such as the variety of spacecraft and the lure of playing as a member of the "Dark Side".[32] The review is a scant four paragraphs, and features the memorable opener, "TIE Fighter is the best space combat game ever made." As a piece of criticism, it fails to model meaningful experiences in gameplay or to question what *TIE Fighter* means for space combat games. It is concerned solely with the game as a self-contained experience, except ranking it among other space combat games and mentioning its ties to the Star Wars media universe. As a review, it is effective, clear, and informative.

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[31] LucasArts, 1995.
[32] T. Liam McDonald, "Star Wars TIE Fighter: Collector's CD-ROM Review," *Gamespot*, May 01, 1996, http://www.gamespot.com/star-wars-tie-fighter-collectors-cd-rom/reviews/tie-fighter-collectors-cd-rom-review-2534973/.

On the other hand, the two other pieces offer a very different kind of engagement with

TIE Fighter. In 2008, Edge Online runs "Remembering *TIE Fighter*," a look back onto the

compelling gameplay and narrative of the game.[33] A year later, L.B. Jeffries reframes *TIE*

Fighter in "TIE Fighter: A Post 9/11 Parable."[34] Both are written over ten years after the release

of the original game, unlike the contemporaneous review. Moreover, they both attempt to locate

TIE Fighter in a cultural context and springboard off it into discussions of agency and

experience. Jeffries argues that *TIE Fighter* allows us to critique post-9/11 America through the

ability to "experience being a servant to a massive government just after a terrorist attack", an

experience that is unmediated by critical views. Instead, the expectations placed on the player

create an understanding of how imperialism functions that, years later, can layer a new

perspective onto existing discussions of US imperialism.[35] Instead of looking forward to explore

where the game can go, the Edge Online piece looks back at where it came from. It looks closely

at the gameplay and the narrative, placing it in the context of other genre forms. At the end,

however, it enters the review framework, explicitly comparing TIE Fighter to the preceding

game in the series, X-Wing. In so doing, the Edge article models a hybrid form that, in

retrospect, assesses the cultural value of a game while modeling how to interpret it. Each of these

three works does what it intends to do, and clarifies the distinction between review and criticism

while hinting at the fluidity of any such definitions.

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[33] "Remembering TIE Fighter," *Edge Online,* September 27, 2008, http://www.edge-online.com/features/remembering-tie-fighter/.
[34] L.B. Jeffries, "TIE Fighter: A Post 9/11 Parable," *PopMatters,* August 11, 2009, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/column/108452-tie-fighter-a-post-911-parable/.
[35] Jeffries, "Post 9/11 Parable."

Practical Matters of Industry and Artistry

In Bed with the Industry?

A frequently leveled charge against mainstream video game journalism is its close relationship to

the industry. Outsiders to games see such publicized events as Spike's Video Game Awards as

perfect examples of game culture as pure, uncritical entertainment. Within the gaming

community, major sites such as Penny Arcade criticize the institution of "Games Journalism" for

"playing along with the industry PR machine."[36] On some level, these accusations are entirely

founded, but it is important to remember that cultural artifacts are always on some level intended

as entertainment. Early film reviews, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, often parroted press

releases from studios. Instead of making simplistic charges, looking to how film culture allowed

for the flourishing of critical and academic discourse can suggest ways for games critics to

grapple with supporting industry as well as artistry.

The claims of games journalism's entanglement with the PR firms are not entirely

exaggerated. A recent illustrative example, "Doritogate," refers to a set of events in late October

and early November of 2012 that revealed the close relationship between the gaming press and

corporations, both game companies and sponsors. Kotaku, one of the major online voices in

games journalism, reports on the "multi-part mess" involving several different, but concurrent,

events. Former *Eurogamer* columnist Rab Florence's opinion piece critiquing the current state of

games journalism, "Lost Humanity 18: A Table of Doritos," covers the crux of the scandal.[37] The

rest of the events comprising "Doritogate" occurred in response to Florence's column, and

involved editorial decisions on the part of *Eurogamer*.

[36] "About," *Penny Arcade Report*, Accessed December 02, 2012, http://penny-arcade.com/report/about.
[37] Rab Florence, "Lost Humanity 18: A Tale of Doritos," *Eurogamer*, 24 October 2012,
http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-24-lost-humanity-18-a-table-of-doritos.

The two events called out by Florence consist of the 2012 Games Media Awards (GMAs) and an interview with Geoff Keighley sandwiched between an ad for *Halo 4* and bags of Doritos and bottles of Mountain Dew, both products stereotypically associated with gamer culture. The interview was a simple promotional spot in which Keighley, of course, discussed the Mountain Dew "XP" event which provided in-game benefits for the newly launched *Halo 4* upon buying Mountain Dew products. Keighley, as well as PepsiCo, drew criticism for capitalizing on his professional status as a video game show host (Spike TV's *GameTrailers TV*) and executive producer of Spike TV's Video Game Awards (VGAs). The defining image of "Doritogate," and the one that gave it its name, is a still from the aforementioned interview with Keighley (see Figure 2).

Florence called out this interview for its illustrative power with respect to games journalism. The accidental rhetorical power of the "dead-eyed" Keighley surrounded by commercialism allowed Florence to segue into a larger critique of the ideology behind this press, moving on to bring in the GMA Twitter contest and standards of reviewer ethics. He describes television games journalism as "a televisual table full of junk, an entire festival of cultural Doritos," and print games journalism as just fitting into this culture.[38] He goes on to excoriate this culture for marginalizing good writing and valuing relationships with brands above journalistic or even critical integrity.

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[38] Florence, "Lost Humanity 18: A Tale of Doritos."
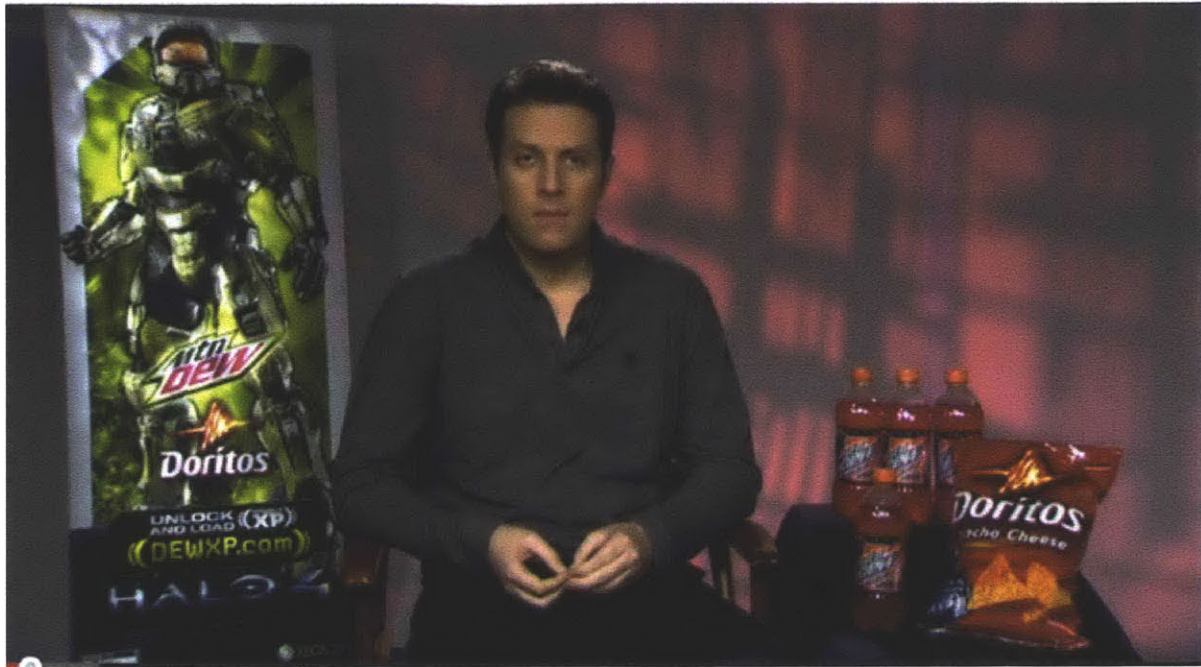
Figure 2: A still from an interview that became the defining image and the eponym of
"Doritogate," for good reason.

The 2012 GMAs, a UK games awards ceremony sponsored in part by the game *Defiance*,

offered a Twitter contest to win a PlayStation 3. Games journalists covering the show entered the

contest by tweeting the sponsored hashtag ("#GMADefiance") using their professional Twitter

handles. Some of the tweets contained nothing more than the hashtag.[39] This incident's inclusion

Florence's piece was to point out the close and almost thoughtless crossover between personal,

professional, and consumer lives in contemporary games journalism.

Florence's *Eurogamer* piece included references to the journalist Lauren Wainwright's

Twitter account, containing a defense of the GMA Twitter contest and public praise of the recent

release of *Tomb Raider*. To Florence, Wainwright's position on the GMA event only cast

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[39] Tweets compiled by Jarosh into a forum post on *NeoGAF*,
http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showpost.php?p=43594664&postcount=627.

suspicion on her praise of *Tomb Raider*.[40] After a complaint by Wainwright, *Eurogamer* editors

removed the direct references to her from the column without consulting Florence. This violation

of what Florence saw as journalistic integrity led to his quitting the publication, but "Doritogate"

continued with the revelation of Wainwright's work for Square Enix, a publisher whose games

she covered.[41] Ultimately, this "mess," consisting of these repeated and concurrent events, raised

public interest in questions of journalistic ethics and, more importantly, increased interest in

games writing at large. The predominant understanding of games journalism, as shown by

"Doritogate," was of a journalism "almost indistinguishable from PR"[42].

This kind of close association of press to industry is nothing new, however. Jeffries

paraphrases from an interview with the music critic Lester Bangs in which Bangs described his

problems with music criticism's ties to industry: Bangs resented that "the editor actively sought

out people who already liked an artist or album for a review. Reviews were often expected to

find at least one good thing about albums from certain labels."[43] While this is likely not all that

different today, there are alternatives to industry lapdogs. The film press outgrew the days when

reprinting of press releases counted as legitimate journalism, and the games press will also move

beyond this incentivized journalism model, given time. Encouraging criticism in mainstream

press outlets will hasten the process, as it provides an alternative engagement with the media

form.

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[40] Rab Florence, "A Table of Doritos," original column preserved on NeoGAF forum post by Iknu,
http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showpost.php?p=43585928&postcount=48.
[41] Stephen Totilo, "The Contemptible Games Journalist: Why So Many People Don't Trust The Gaming Press (And Why They're Sometimes Wrong)," *Kotaku*, November 05, 2012. http://kotaku.com/5957810/the-contemptible-games-journalist-why-so-many-people-dont-trust-the-gaming-press-and-why-theyre-sometimes-wrong.
[42] Rab Florence, quoted in Totilo, "The Contemptible Games Journalist: Why So Many People Don't Trust The Gaming Press (And Why They're Sometimes Wrong)."
[43] Jeffries, "Do Video Game Critics Need a Lester Bangs?"

Entertainment and Critique

Video games and movies are both sold as entertainment experiences, and sometimes even

compared by entertainment-hours per dollar. The issue isn't that entertainment requires judgment

of worth, but rather, that those judging the worth receive real incentives from those doing the

making. Standards of reviewer ethics are clearly delineated for consumer goods, in a way that

they are not explicit for works of art. In the USA, the Federal Trade Commission actually

regulates reviews and under the principles in their "Endorsement Guides." One of these

principles actually states, "If there's a connection between the endorser and the marketer of the

product that would affect how people evaluate the endorsement, it should be disclosed."[44]

According to this guide, then, games critics must be aware of their public status and reveal their

relationship to industry groups. These standards have somehow not taken hold in the mainstream

gaming press. It cannot be stated enough that this is not a condemnation of how games writing,

both journalism and critique, is today. Instead, it is offered as a reminder that all new genres

receive debate over how best to consider them. At some point, the film press moved from

reprinting recycled praise to running reasoned reviews; where was this point, and how can we get

games there?

One of the most critical factors in this shift in film was the mainstream support of other

voices. Dismissing an entire medium is perfectly easy when there are no writers producing good

content, but in turn, this dismissal means that any writers who do are summarily ignored. There

is no greater proof of the persistent blindness by outsiders towards any critical voices in games,

to the point of assuming that there can be no critical writing. Writing for the print edition of a

UK non-gamer periodical New Statesman, Helen Lewis penned an article claiming no one was

[44] "The FTC's Revised Endorsement Guides: What People are Asking," *business.ftc.gov*,
http://business.ftc.gov/documents/bus71-ftcs-revised-endorsement-guideswhat-people-are-asking.

creating games criticism and perhaps never would.[45] Again, rather than respond defensively[46] to a

generalized claim, it is important to take Lewis' piece as a reminder of the mainstream

inaccessibility of good games writing. This, more than the lack of fancy graphics or richly

interactive narratives, is the main challenge to games' public standing: outsiders have no

guidance in how to approach games as anything other than an entertainment product, and so,

they don't.

The Great Art Debates of Film and Video Games

Iris Barry, formative figure in early film criticism, notes the debates about film as art that

circulated around the late 1930s and early '40s. These debates were most notably prompted by

the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library, the foundation of which Barry

describes in a 1969 issue of Film Quarterly.[47] Barry was herself a major British film critic and

popular writer on film in the preceding decades, and curator and director in the aforementioned

Film Library. Starting in 1932, Barry and her colleagues worked tirelessly to plan and manage a

library for a young medium. They started from the problem of film's disappearing history,

asking, "How could movies be taken seriously if they were to remain so ephemeral, so lacking in

pride of ancestry or of tradition?"[48]

The importance of a curatorial stance on the public reception of a new medium cannot be

overstated. Without efforts to preserve materials, scholars in the future have nothing to study.

Barry herself pointed out the difficulty involved in researching movies without access to the

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[45] Lewis, "Why are we still so bad at talking about video games?"
[46] I should note, however, that I did respond defensively, along with quite a few other people, on Twitter. This reaction is also, I feel, perfectly understandable; to feel invalidated and neglected by exactly the institutions you write against.
[47] Iris Barry, "The Film Library and How It Grew." Film Quarterly 22, no. 4 (Summer 1969), doi: 10.2307/1210306.
[48] Barry, "The Film Library," 20.

primary sources, beholden to "dead scrabbling through the inept film criticism of yesteryear."[49]

And without objects of study, new scholarship cannot be produced, to be evaluated and

considered legitimate.

Only recently, the same museum announced their decision to collect and exhibit a set of

fourteen video games under the aegis of Interaction Design.[50] This marks a huge step forward for

the cultural value of games, though the focus on design sidesteps the "games as art" debate. At

the historical moment in which the Museum of Modern Art announced their new collection,

games have been accepted by a wider public as objects of psychological or design-oriented

study, but very seldom as artistic and aesthetic experiences. This debate, however, is constructed

in popular discourse as a circular one: games are not art, because no one talks about them

intelligently; no one talks about games intelligently, because they are not art. Instead of

wandering around forever, looking to how cinema critics justified their medium of interest can

inspire games critics interested in expanding their reach.

Third Party Networks

Though it may seem like a useful debate over definitions and limits of the field, the content is

much less important than the fact of debate. Critics, as well as designers and players, engage in

public discussions that establish networks of alignment within the entire space of "games

criticism". Colleen Macklin, a professor at Parsons and a game designer, weighs in on the salient

issue of strict formalism and definitions, offering lessons from the art world: "The one thing that

the art world has figured out is that 'is it art?' is not an interesting question. Instead, art is a

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[49] Iris Barry, "Motion Pictures as a Field of Research," *College Art Journal* 4, no. 4 (1945): 209, http://www.jstor.org/stable/772344.

[50] Paola Antonelli, "Video Games: 14 in the Collection, for Starters," *Inside/Out: A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog*, November 29, 2012, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/.

community of practice in dialogue, and what the community calls 'art' are practices that are all very different."[51] Critics, then, are a part of this community of practice, and engage in dialogue with one another and with particular games, and create interpretive communities[52].

It is easy to be optimistic, however, about the nature of community and communication online. Is it warranted? Are games critics actually engaging in conversations with one another on their blogs, through linking in their posts, or via some other means? And if so, where do these conversations happen, and how public are they? If, as we've seen in the preceding section, there is rarely direct citation, where does the community coalesce?

The preceding discussion of citation is important not only for illustrating the self-reflexive nature of much of the critical community, but also for highlighting the mechanisms through which communication happens. The importance of linking and of citation draws from an academic tradition of citation for integrity, but also brings in the affordances of web technologies, such as pingbacks or link trackers, that make it easy to identify who has linked to a post and thus open a two-way channel of communication. Instead of a writer citing a piece just to respond to it, links allow the original writer an easy way to respond as well. This presumes, however, that all online writers use links and pingbacks in the same way.

Personal bloggers may have their own iconoclastic standards for citation and links, but these standards are not uniform. We have already seen that the three writers featured in the previous section link minimally, if at all, to other writers. On the other hand, the *Bit Creature* piece by Lana Polansky and featured in Cameron Kunzelman's Twitter rant as an example of good citation, links liberally to other online critical discussions.

[51] Colleen Macklin, "Que es mas macho?", *colleenmacklin.tumblr.com*, 14 April 2013, Accessed 14 April 2013, http://colleenmacklin.tumblr.com/post/47982808290/que-es-mas-macho/.
[52] In the Stanley Fish sense, most definitely.

With multi-author sites, the standards are clearer, due to the necessity of distinguishing

between different authors. In these cases, such as in *Nightmare Mode, Medium Difficulty,* or

Border House Blog, individual authors write under their own bylines, which are also tags on the

site that link to the author's past work. Still, while there might be intra-author citation through

linking, writers refrain from bringing in outside voices directly through links unless they are

arguing against a prominent voice. These multi-author sites for criticism feature a roster of

regular writers supplemented by occasional guest posts. They use blog templates and deliver

content on a schedule. Few of these sites are able to offer compensation for their writers, relying

on ad revenue to pay for hosting and domain registration. The question of money is ever-present

in the critical community, as writing full-time for a blog rarely pays a living wage, or even

supplemental income.

Some new publications, like *five out of ten magazine*[53] or *re/Action zine,*[54] define

themselves by their commitment to paying their writers. *five out of ten* has put out three issues so

far with a mission statement that "videogame criticism is worthwhile and good writing is worth

paying for."[55] This publication avoids advertising and corporate sponsorship, and simply shares

the profit from each issue between the five writers; each writer is paid twenty percent, minus

fees, for at least one year after publication. The much newer *re/Action* promises a pay of two

hundred dollars per piece of over one thousand words, *"once funded."*[56] These two sites combine

existing modes of print publication with online crowdfunding efforts to create a kind of online

zine, explicitly in the case of *re/Action.*

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[53] *fiveoutoften,* http://fiveoutoftenmagazine.com/.

[54] *re/Action Zine,* http://www.reactionzine.com/.

[55] "About," *fiveoutoften magazine,* http://fiveoutoftenmagazine.com/about/.

[56] "About," *re/Action zine,* http://www.reactionzine.com/about/, italics mine.

Other venues of long-form criticism rely on crowd-funding efforts. Brendan Keogh, for example, writing over fifty thousand words on *Spec Ops: The Line*, sold his PDF ebook through *Gumroad.com*, a site enabling easy sales of digital content. The book, *Killing is Harmless: A Critical Reading of Spec Ops: The Line*, produced enough revenue to warrant putting in the effort to create a proofed and edited Kindle version. In April 2013, Rowan Kaiser, a freelance video game and pop culture critic, started a *GoFundMe* campaign to raise money for a long-form book of criticism on the *Mass Effect* trilogy of science-fiction role-playing-games. In a month, the project raised over three thousand dollars, five hundred dollars more than requested, and was successfully funded[57].

Sometimes, these multi-author sites decide to host a conversation. They bring in writers, both writers from the site and guest writers, to discuss a topic or to respond to one another. In this way, these sites position themselves as sites of critical inquiry essential to the games community at large. But these are special events, and the individual bloggers and games critics write in the critical mode most familiar to public intellectuals: the isolated monograph published in various venues. These writers, consciously or not, emulate the conventions of print publication in their online pieces. Thus, they decline to take advantage of the affordances of blog networks, but this does not mean that these networks do not exist at all.

Instead, third-party sites become the platforms for conversation among critics. Whether sites devoted to games writing, such as *Critical Distance* or even *Good Games Writing*, or un-specialized web technologies like Twitter and Google Groups, games writers find places to engage one another as experts, specialists, fans, and meta-critics.

[57] Rowan Kaiser, "Possibility Space: A Mass Effect analysis...," *GoFundMe*, 9 April 2013, http://www.gofundme.com/2joch0#.

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The most closed version of this discussion happens on a Google Group. In early 2013, a group of self-described games critics and games journalists created a Google Group for practical discussions around games writing.[58] The Group is active today, with all topics visible to the public and posting closed to members. Any Google user may apply to become a member, and a publicly visible list of Twitter handles lists forty-six games writers, journalists, critics, and scholars. The content of the group is thus naturally focused on professional questions, with some interesting larger debates such as "Reviews/Criticism: Describing a Game vs. Analyzing it".[59] As a semi-closed resource for games writers, this Google Group illustrates both the small size of the community as well as the necessity for social capital. Without some connection to a member in the group, especially to Cameron Kunzelman and Maddy Myers, the two founders, an individual cannot access the community.

Another place where meta-discussions of games criticism occur is on Twitter. Twitter's function as a social network open to institutions allows for the crossover between personal bloggers and multi-writer sites, between meta-discussions of games writing and criticism of games, between personal social ties and networks of scholarship. The interactions on Twitter, like the Google Group, skew towards in-group social networks, especially due to the formal qualities of the platform. Twitter recognizes directional ties in the form of "follows," and restricts communication based on the strength of these ties. Any individual can tweet at you publicly by using an "@-mention," and if two individuals follow one another, they may send Direct Mentions privately. The layered privacy creates a system where you must approach strangers publicly before any kind of non-visible communication may occur. Brendan Keogh and

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[58] "Game Words Incorporated," *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!forum/game-words-incorporated.
[59] "Reviews/Criticism: Describing a Game vs. Analyzing it," topic in "Game Words Incorporated," https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!topic/game-words-incorporated/kTcuvY4H7KM.

Leigh Alexander have both written about the ethical responsibilities of Twitter users, focusing on

the possibility for unbalanced conversation due to unequal social circles.[60] [61]

Twitter also becomes a place for anarchic or subversive responses to mainstream gaming

and even to mainstream games criticism. The debates on formalism invoked in the introduction

to this thesis began with provocations on Twitter, and many of the figures involved in Twine are

avid tweeters—@aliendovecote (Porpentine), @auntiepixelante (Anna Anthropy), @m_kopas

(Merritt Kopas), just to name a few. These users tap heavily into the aesthetic features of "Weird

Twitter," such as absurdist or surreal phrases, invocations of fetish sexuality, and unconventional

spelling and capitalization.[62] Still, social structures underlie this aesthetic movement.

Returning to the earlier mention of Storify, understanding how Twitter functions in

games criticism helps explain why Storify has the power that it does. Twitter's ephemerality

makes lasting discussion nearly impossible after only a few days. As a supplement to Twitter,

Storify can be used both to preserve heated debates where tweets are deleted after time, and to

keep tweets in circulation past their effective expiration date. Tweets are lost quickly, due to the

infinite scroll interface on a user's profile. Infinite scroll, as a web design feature, allows for

seamless scroll-back to previous content, but by avoiding pagination makes it difficult to keep

track of older content that used to be accessible by simply changing page numbers in the URL.

Infinite scroll fits Twitter's aesthetic of a real-time news-ticker, but hinders lasting

conversations. In the games writing community, Storify, combined with other third-party sites,

acts as communal memory.

[60] Brendan Keogh, "Journalism, Storification, and Harassment," *Critical Damage*, 21 February 2013, http://critdamage.blogspot.com/2013/02/journalism-storification-and-harassment.html.
[61] Leigh Alexander, "Feedback Loop," *LeighAlexander.net*, 3 May 2013, http://leighalexander.net/feedback-loop/.
[62] Sebastian Benthall, "Field Notes and PSA: Weird Twitter," *Digifesto*, 11 August 2012, http://digifesto.com/2012/08/11/field-notes-and-psa-weird-twitter/.

Storify allows its users to create "storifys" by searching for tweets using Twitter's own search interface, and collating these tweets. Users can add media from other social networking sites, such as images from Facebook or Instagram. Users can also insert links to a news article or a Google search result. Additionally, Storify allows users to include context in the form of plain-text between interpellated media, and captions. As such, Storify's main functionality is a curatorial one, one that allows for easy collection of media and especially tweets.

On the other hand, the site *Critical Distance* functions as a "critical archive" of games criticism, producing weekly round-up posts with contextualized links to a set of curated content. The term "critical archive" draws on the dual mandate of preservation and rhetoric. The editors of *Critical Distance*, as games writers themselves, "aim to capture the videogame criticism 'zeitgeist' and act as a 'memory bank' in this notoriously short-sighted and quick forgetting industry."[63] Moreover, they disperse authority among their readers, "drawing upon our and our readers' collective memories and experiences, gained by reading the diverse range of blogs and websites we frequent."[64] While the final round-ups are written by the editorial team on a weekly rotation, links are suggested via Twitter, email, or their contact form. In this way, *Critical Distance* keeps some of the sense of community, while also being highly accessible to outsiders.

An important function served by *Critical Distance*, more than the contemporary attention to new posts, is the added context for each link. A typical reference in the round-up post has explanatory text, a hyperlink, and often includes a blockquote from the piece in question. Figure 2 captures all three of these features.

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[63] "About, *Critical Distance*, http://www.critical-distance.com/about/.
[64] Ibid.

The recent release of thechineseroom's *Dear Esther* on Steam has also generated some (certainly less charged) commentary. The first, from Michael Abbott, suggests the unusual game's influences should include Soviet montage. Jordan Ekeroth, meanwhile, dives headfirst into the psychological and spiritual crisis of the experience, writing:

> *In the end (and beginning, and all in between) Dear Esther is about being alone, and that can be a temporarily beautiful thing, but ultimately maddening.*

Figure 3: A write-up of two posts on *Dear Esther*, showing the plain text, the blue hyperlinks, and the italicized blockquote from one of the posts.

On Criticism

Though Barry had, in her criticism, taken mainstream cinema as equally valuable to "purely experimental and 'art' films,"[65] she acknowledges that not all shared her assessment. She identifies the value judgments of the "aesthetes," who were only convinced of Hollywood film's merits when established tastemakers from other artistic fields accepted and analyzed the movies in question. This moment in film criticism resonates with contemporary games criticism, in that games critics find themselves justifying the medium to one another. Criticism of games has followed a slightly different trajectory, however. Early game critics in academia—Aarseth, Juul, and Bogost—began with established video games like *Pong*, while the proliferation of blogger-critics centered around "art games" like *Bioshock* and *Passage*. Early game critics in both academia and the public sphere found themselves justifying not just their object of study but their study itself, so well-known games presented a perfect opportunity for critics to engage one another in public discourse.

The "snobs" of Barry's time were won over by lectures by figures such as the well-known poet W.H. Auden and the film scholar Erwin Panofsky, at that time a scholar at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. Such lectures, open to the public, enhance the status of film in culture due to the broader appeal of the speakers. This does not, however, discount the

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[65] Barry, "The Film Library," 26.

work done by other, lesser-known individuals. In this way, we see that criticism functions to model interpretations, and so the critic must be both recognized and depersonalized. Moreover, these debates about artistic merit were clearly a major part of the discourse around cinema in the early to mid-twentieth century; part of the critic's job is to make a case for the object of criticism as art, art worth talking about. Clayton and Klevan, generalizing from the history of film criticism, assert that "one task of criticism is to highlight significance where one might not have thought it to be."[66] Additionally, the circular relationship between art and criticism, highlighted above, transforms this statement into Cavell's "what is not criticizable in this sense is not a work of art."[67]

In *Art Worlds*, Becker makes a claim for appreciating the roles of critics, distinct from appreciative audiences, in the production of art. Critics produce rationales, which "typically take the form, however naive, of a kind of aesthetic argument, a philosophical justification which identifies what is being made as art, as good art, and explains how art does something that needs to be done for people and society."[68] Becker points to the critic's role as a justifier, but this assumes that the form in which the artist in question works is already taken seriously. The critic's role is not to defend the possibility of art in a given medium, but to make a case for this particular piece of art. What, then, is the role of the critic when the medium itself is not taken seriously as art? And how do critics create these "aesthetic argument[s]" and "philosophical justification[s]" for an entire medium?

Games criticism today struggles vocally with the issue of legitimizing video and computer games as an area of engagement, and part of that is in identifying meaningful experiences in play that is judged by outsiders to be solipsistic, immature, or even dangerous. It

[66] Clayton and Klevan, eds, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 10.

[67] qtd. in Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 3.

[68] Howard Saul Becker, *Art Worlds* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 4.

is important to note, however, that just as games today are perceived as bad influences, films were in their early days. And film critics, just like many other critics of non-canonical media, self-identified these meaningful experiences, writing their subjectivity into their criticism. As Clayton and Klevan remind us, however, criticism is a unique form of writing in which "the 'subjective-objective' relation is one of those false dichotomies that nevertheless holds a surreptitious power."[69] The critic, writing from his or her personal experience, must create a universally relatable perspective in order for the criticism to inspire an affective response to the work in question. This hybrid mode, Clayton and Klevan identify as the potential for "*inter*subjectiv[ity],"[70] wherein the unique perspective of the critic resonates with those of the readers.

In practice, however, striking a balance between subjective interpretation and objective analysis can be difficult. This tension marks both early film criticism and contemporary games criticism; how much of the critic must be inside the piece, and how much of the text can the critic read in isolation. On a wider level, this tension is at the heart of ongoing debates in literary theory, arguing between Reader Response theory where everything is interpretation and New Criticism where everything is text. The critics that grapple with a newer medium, however, display this tension in inescapable ways.

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[69] Clayton and Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 3.
[70] Ibid.

Introducing the Self

Whether music, film, television, or games, the question of how to negotiate between the

experience and the object becomes a formative issue in establishing a critical discourse. Richard

Combs offers the example of the 1970s film critic Pauline Kael, who interleaved

"personal/sociological asides" with "observations of the movie before her."[71] Kael, like many

others, experienced cinema as an entire "communal experience" rather than as an experience of

spectacle with accidental sharing.[72] How can this aspect be ignored in writing about film, even if

it varies by the day and by the location of the cinema? By focusing explicitly on the people

watching the movie, Kael was able to address issues of reception and subjectivity without

making unreasonable claims as to the universality of her perspective.

Games writing, too, has embraced the small moments in player interaction that define the

experience of gameplay. Beginning with Keiron Gillen's 2004 manifesto inaugurating a style of

New Games Journalism — "New Games Journalism... argues that the worth of a videogame lies

not in the game, but in the gamer"[73] — and continuing through to today, we see a strain of games

criticism that begins with the player's experience as an entrée into the game, the player's

subjectivity as a start to the game's reading. For non-gaming audiences, this kind of criticism can

equip them with tools to discuss games, or even approach and play themselves. Tom Bissell is a

perfect example of this phenomenon. He enjoys mainstream success as the author of *Extra Lives:*

Why Video Games Matter, a long-form meditation on the experiences in gameplay and their

importance to culture.

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[71] Richard Combs, "Four Against the House," Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, eds, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 125.
[72] Ibid., 122.
[73] Kieron Gillen, "The New Games Journalism," *Kieron Gillen's Workblog*, March 23, 2004, http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress_html/assorted-essays/the-new-games-journalism/.

On the other hand, New Games Journalism/Criticism can be an excuse for sloppy writing, in that it can encourage writers to move away from speaking about the game. Cameron Kunzelman critiques what he sees as the failure of New Games Journalism to live up to its promise and as bad games criticism: it "centers around the experiences of the author–here is my real point–and sometimes those experiences don't line up with any kind of argument or analysis."[74]

Criticism is a major part of games culture, though it has historically been overlooked in favor of the games themselves. Comparing games criticism today to early film criticism, and to other kinds of criticism, allows for a deeper understanding of the evolution of media forms, and of the function of games as art objects. The debates that cycle endlessly about the invisibility of games criticism or its ineffectuality are not new debates; any new medium experiences growing pains. Rather than lamenting the sorry state of affairs nearly fifty years after the nascence of digital games, it is more productive to contextualize and move forward.

A major point of possibility for games criticism, and one that has come up in recent months, is the expansion of the audience to include non-gamers. The term "non-gamer" as used here refers both to people who do not play video games and to people who play video games but consider themselves outside of games culture. An individual who enjoys the occasional game of *Call of Duty* or *The Sims*, but does not follow video game news or discuss the experience with others, would be considered a "non-gamer." It may seem as though this would be counter-productive and ensure the marginalization of games, but actually, equipping individuals in

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[74] Cameron Kunzelman, "On New Games Journalism," *This Cage is Worms*, 20 July 2012, http://thiscageisworms.com/2012/07/20/on-new-games-journalism/.

culture with the critical tools they need to engage with games, *even if they have not felt that drive yet*, can open up the gaming community and fully realize games as an artistic cultural product in their own right.

Chapter 02: Is *Dear Esther* a Game?

About Dear Esther

In June of 2008, a mod called *Dear Esther* hit the Source mod scene. It was a mod for *Half-Life 2*, distributed on *moddb.com*, a common site for distributing, tracking, and reviewing mods for various games. Based on the critical reception, in 2009, the developers announced a "complete overhaul of the visuals and level design",[75] which soon turned into a thorough remake and independent release of *Dear Esther* through Steam in 2011.

Dear Esther. I have burned the cliffs of Damascus. I have drunk deep of it. My heart is my leg and a black line etched on the paper all along this boat without a bottom. You are all the world like a nest to me, in which eggs unbroken form like fossils, come together, shatter and send small black flowers to the very air. From this infection, hope. From this island, flight. From this grief, love.
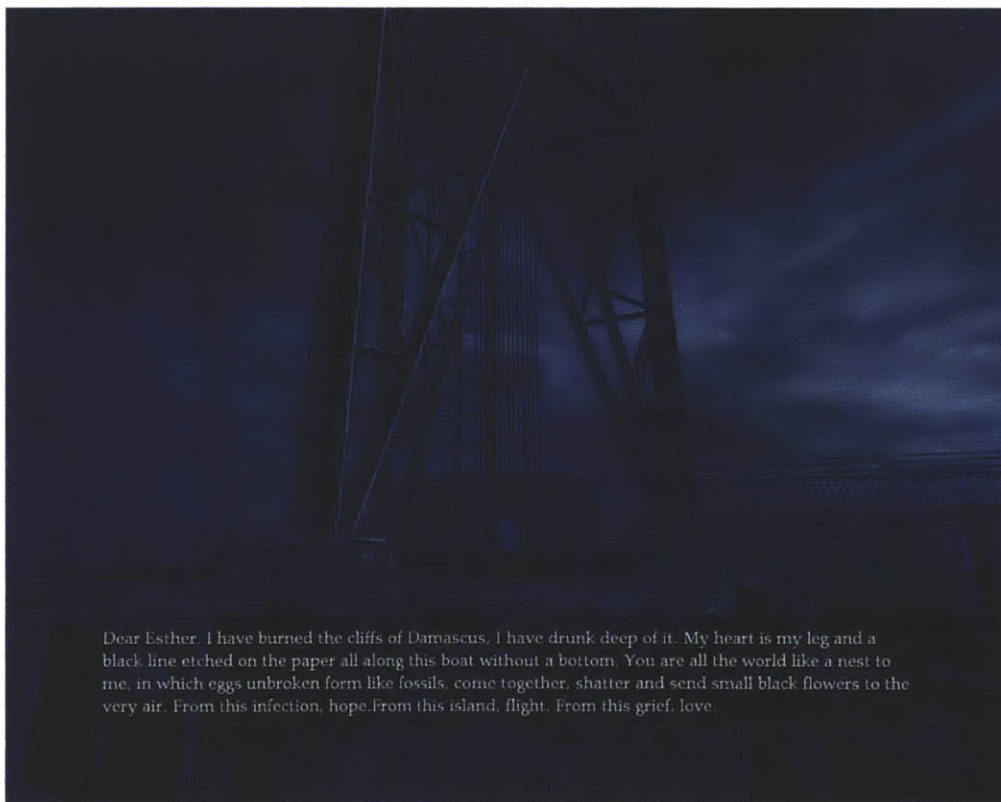
Figure 4: A screenshot from *Dear Esther* showing the voiceover text and the top of the island.
Source: Nick Brakespear, Plughead, http://www.plughead.net/dear-esther-alternative-opinion

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[75] "About", *dear-esther.com*, 2013, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://dear-esther.com/?page_id=2.

Dear Esther is a first-person experience set on one of the Hebridean Islands off of Scotland. The bulk of the gameplay consists of walking around this island on fairly constrained paths, listening to audio diaries triggered by location, and looking at the surroundings. The male narrator of the audio logs, who may or may not be the player character, speaks to the eponymous Esther about a variety of topics, always speaking in a slow, melancholy tone and about past events. One notable flashback actually removes you from the island setting, depicting a car crash scene. The rest of the game progresses through the island, from the low hills and docks under the sun, through the bioluminescent caves, and finally to ascending the peak at night.
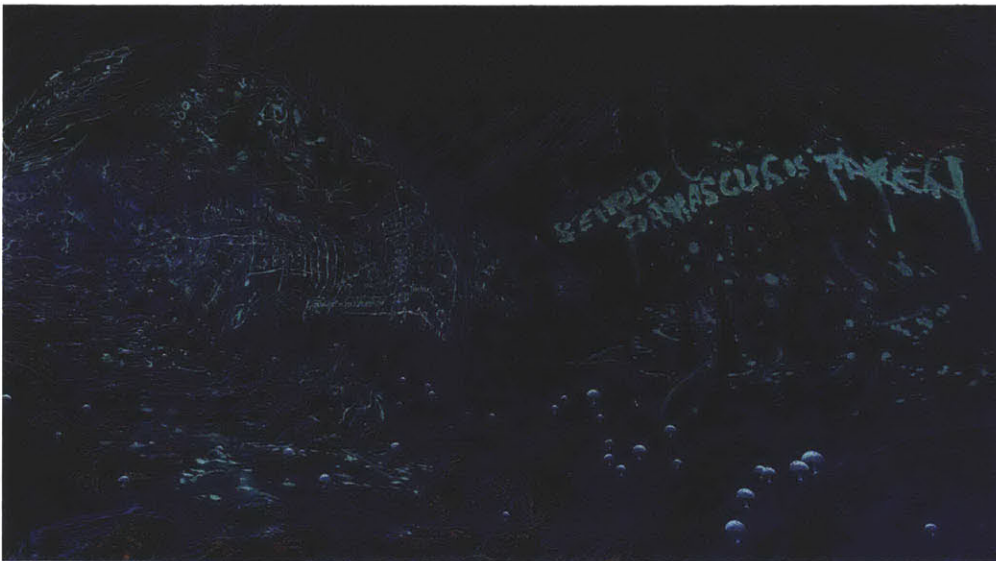
Figure 5: A screenshot of the updated visuals in *Dear Esther*. Source: NAG Online, http://www.nag.co.za/2013/02/18/game-candy-dear-esther/

The game's web site offers an elevator pitch for *Dear Esther* that highlights its main features: "You explore a deserted island, uncovering a tale of love, loss, grief and redemption, delivered through stunning voice-over and soundtrack and set against one of the most beautiful

environments yet created in a game."[76] While this is intentionally hyperbolic, it calls attention to the importance of story and atmosphere in *Dear Esther*.

Though both I and the game's site have spoken generally about the content of *Dear Esther*, I have shied away from specifics. The game itself is self-consciously a slippery object—many of the graffiti, audio diaries, and even physical features of the island are randomly generated for each playthrough. This makes any definitive statements about the game's narrative or aesthetic qualities exceedingly difficult. Critics cannot describe particular aspects of the game's representation and expect their readers to have had the same experience. On the other hand, *Dear Esther* itself is a fixed object, and one fixed quality of the game is its very randomness. Some critics recognize this fundamental slipperiness—Katie Williams, a regular contributor to *Unwinnable*, writes personally and intimately about arguing with her then-boyfriend about whether the water in a small creek in *Dear Esther* ran one way or the other.[77] In this way, through *Dear Esther*, a small moment between two people becomes an opportunity to examine the nature of perspective.

Both the original mod and the remake of *Dear Esther* were distributed through established game distribution channels, and the remake is a commercial product on Steam, featured in the 2012 Winter Sale. Both versions of *Dear Esther* paratextually assert game-ness through their pages on the two distribution sites as well as the game's own web site.

The site through which *Dear Esther* was originally distributed, *moddb.com,* is a third-party site that hosts a variety of PC mods. The term "mods" refers to a "modification" of an existing game system; Alexander Unger defines the term more precisely as "any modification of the software code of a proprietary digital game made by nonemployed fans or gamers that is

[76] "FAQ," *dear-esther.com,* http://dear-esther.com/?page_id=133.
[77] Katie Williams, "Esther's Bones," *Unwinnable,* 27 April 2012, Accessed 7 April 2013, http://www.unwinnable.com/2012/04/27/esthers-bones/.

produced and distributed via the WWW."[78] Within the mod community, "vanilla" refers to the

original game as shipped. There are two main categories of mods: first, mods developed to add

content to a vanilla game, such as new clothing for player characters in a role-playing game; and

second, mods developed as stand-alone game experiences built using existing engines, such as

Dear Esther. A discussion of mods will return later in this chapter, with a look at their critical

potential.

As a hosting site for mods, *moddb.com* features such things as descriptions of the mod,

user reviews, and download links. The front page of a given mod contains a short description, an

image from the mod, brief details on release year, genre, source game, and themes, as well as

reviews. On *moddb.com*, *Dear Esther* is classified as a "single player", "first person shooter"

with "horror" themes.

Players, as well, expect *Dear Esther* to be a game. The few early (pre-remake) reviews of

Dear Esther on *moddb.com* focus on the compelling story, such as this one from August 2008:

"This is definitely **one of those stories** where you must go through it twice to fully understand

what is going on, and there is a lot appropriately left to speculation. There is no combat, but it

works in favor of it's unique style."[79] Most of the early reviews, however, have no text, only

scores of 8-10 (where 10 is considered excellent). The overall scores on *moddb.com* for *Dear*

Esther (mod and independent release) are overwhelmingly positive, with 59% of reviews rating

Dear Esther at 10 out of 10. Only 5% of reviewers gave *Dear Esther* a score of 1 to indicate an

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[78] Alexander Unger, "Modding as Part of Game Culture," in *Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Games Studies*, ed. Johannes Fromme and Alexander Unger (New York: Springer, 2012), 514.
[79] bigboss233, Review of *Dear Esther*, *moddb*, 10 August 2008, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/members/bigboss233/reviews/page/2. Emphasis mine.

extreme, but rare, negative reaction. *Dear Esther* appears on *moddb.com*'s list of the one hundred

highest-rated mods.[80]

On the other hand, the descriptive content on the *moddb.com* page, as well as the game's

own web site, position *Dear Esther* as a non-ludic experience. The mod page describes *Dear*

Esther as follows: "Built in the Source engine, it abandons all traditional game play, leaving only

a rich world soaked in atmosphere, and an abstract, poetic story to explore".[81] The "History"

section of the game's web site features the same text, minus "Built in the Source engine",

naturally focusing on the design goals of the project.

Returning to the negative reviews on *moddb.com*, the ones posted after the re-release on

Steam, we see that these come from a negative engagement with the ludic qualities of the piece. I

examine these reviews as clearly distinct from the criticism that is the subject of my thesis, but as

a contemporaneous record of the player response. Iris Barry's reminder of the difficulty of

"ephemeral[ity]" comes to mind.[82]

One reviewer, notably, praises the writing and pans the plot, writing, "A game requires

gameplay. The written dialogue is very good, but this is a plot with no obstacles, no antagonist;

There's just nothing to it."[83] This reviewer continues, "Just because a game is art doesn't mean it's

not allowed to be fun as well."[84] Interestingly, this reviewer does not dispute that engagement

with plot can be meaningful gameplay, but rather, critiques *Dear Esther*'s plot for having no

room for such engagement. Other reviewers take issue with the medium, offering such

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[80] "100 Highest Rated Mods," *moddb.com*, Accessed 30 July 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/rated.
[81] "Summary," *Dear Esther, moddb*, 15 February 2011, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/dear-esther.
[82] Iris Barry, "The Film Library and How It Grew." *Film Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Summer 1969), doi: 10.2307/1210306.
[83] KarthXLR, Review of *Dear Esther, moddb.com*, 15 September 2012, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/dear-esther/reviews?filter=t&rating=1.
[84] Ibid.

judgments as "[it] wasn't a game. It was an interactive audio book,"[85] or "Walking simulator 2.0."[86] Two reviewers point out that the "game looks more like a movie mod than an actual playable mod."[87] These reviewers react to the non-ludic aspects of the work, and react strongly; there is very little about the content, but a great deal about the place of interactivity in *Dear Esther*.

To contextualize and complicate these reactions, I offer a short history of *Dear Esther*'s production. Dan Pinchbeck at the University of Portsmouth, UK, created *Dear Esther* as an art game to push the boundaries of narrative experiences in games. Work on the original mod was supported by a "speculative research grant from the Arts & Humanities Research Council, UK, to develop three mods, each exploring a different angle on storytelling, or affective structures".[88] Dan Pinchbeck himself released the mod only a year before submitting his PhD dissertation on ludodiegesis in first-person shooters. Clearly, Pinchbeck was concerned with the idea of conveying narrative experiences through the first-person perspective, but with different interactions than shooting.

Pinchbeck has a response to the players questioning the choice of video game as medium for *Dear Esther*. In his defense, he argues that the story could be conveyed in another form, but:

"what I think is fundamental to it, the reason it works, is because you are in it controlling

the movement and perception. The fact that it operates so much on not knowing really

[85] capsule56, Review of *Dear Esther*, *moddb.com*, 16 February 2012, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/dear-esther/reviews?filter=t&rating=1.
[86] thedarklord0211, Review of *Dear Esther*, *moddb.com*, 25 January 2012, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/dear-esther/reviews?filter=t&rating=1.
[87] PurpleGaga27, Review of *Dear Esther*, *moddb.com*, 17 April 2011, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/dear-esther/reviews?filter=t&rating=1.
[88] Dan Pinchbeck, "Dear Esther: an interactive ghost story built using the Source engine," in U. Spierling and N. Szilas (Eds.), Interactive Storytelling: First Joint International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling (ICIDS 2008), LNCS 5334, pp. 51-55, 2008. http://www.thechineseroom.co.uk/PinchbeckStorytelling08.pdf.

who these people are, and what their relationships are, and where you are, and if its real –

so much of this is anchored within the relationship between the player and the avatar." [89]

Dear Esther as a story fails without this player experience, one that emphasizes not violence and

meaningful effect on the world but *perception*. Pinchbeck continues to claim a clear history of

this kind of mechanic in other commercial first-person games. To Pinchbeck, games offer a

unique way of inviting their players to understand reality through perspectives situated in their

avatar.

Rather than an isolated development experience, however, Pinchbeck saw player

response as imperative to the success of the project; the intent was to create mods that could

"succeed as games in the public domain."[90] The player response to the original mod was

successful enough to go forward with a remake and commercial sale of *Dear Esther*. What about

the critical response?

Defining "Games" in Conversation

Similarly to the fan or general player response, critics and bloggers writing in response to *Dear*

Esther fixated on the limited interactivity and tried to establish definitions of "game" around

Dear Esther. Their public negotiation of definitions, drawing on commonly-understood

conventions of game mechanics, illustrate how criticism echoes academic discourse while

pinning down what it means to be a "game" in a way that can exclude particular human

experiences and creations. Yet despite being games critics writing in blogs devoted to games, a

common debate as discussed previously is whether the work actually qualifies as a game or not.

Perhaps it is more useful as a straw man, however; entrants reference the debate without

[89] Phill Cameron, "Interview: Moved By Mod—*Dear Esther*'s Dan Pinchbeck," *Gamasutra*, 1 July 2009, Accessed 7 April 2013, http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=24217.
[90] Ibid.

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explicitly linking to any individual examples. An important limitation on the concept of "public

negotiation" is the frequent lack of cited references to other writers and opinions. This network-

without-nodes will be explored in the following section.

Cite Your Sources!

When discussing an artifact like *Dear Esther*, similar points of contention crop up repeatedly.

Games critics fixate on the same limited interactivity that the reviewers on *moddb.com* did for

the original mod. Instead of writing similar short comments on the same web page, however,

games critics often write long-form criticism, defined as prose of several paragraphs or more, on

their own personal blogs. Without the unified framework of the mod review, where users can

easily reference particular usernames or directly rebut posts, how do games critics online engage

in arguments?

Often, these critics reference a contextual awareness of current debates without actually

citing prominent voices in said debates. For instance, Tadgh Kelly, the sole blogger at *What

Games Are*, writing several months after the 2011 rerelease of *Dear Esther*, opens a short blog

post as follows: "Although there are plenty of equivocations doing the rounds to redefine the

term 'game' in order to include it in the club, *Dear Esther* (much like *The Stanley Parable*) is not

a game."[91] Presumably, the comparison of *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable* references a set

of blog posts and critical pieces writing about both at once. This association of the two games

continues through 2012, with Miguel Penabella writing "An Ode to Stanley & Esther" in

Medium Difficulty, a multi-author blog like *Nightmare Mode* or *Border House Blog*.[92] The

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[91] Tadgh Kelly, "What *Dear Esther* is not...", *What Games Are*, 27 February 2012, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.whatgamesare.com/2012/02/what-dear-esther-is-not.html.
[92] Miguel Penabella, "An Ode to Stanley & Esther," *Medium Difficulty*, 20 November 2012, Accessed 1 April 2013, http://www.mediumdifficulty.com/2012/11/20/an-ode-to-stanley-esther/.

original source of this comparison, however, is left unlinked and thus inaccessible for someone stumbling onto this conversation from a later date.

A few weeks after Kelly, Tom Hoggins, writing about *Dear Esther* in his regular "Video Game Review" column in the Telegraph, opens with a similar assessment of the critical landscape: "Much has been made of the very nature of Portsmouth University lecturer Dan Pinchbeck's experimental work, Dear Esther. Questions over whether its haunting, ethereal ghost-walk even qualifies as a game."[93] Both position themselves in direct contrast to a nameless mass of critics, though on opposing sides. They do not link to individual pieces to support their sense of the prevailing discourse, though that kind of situated response is not necessary for the kind of positional rhetoric in these pieces. Instead, these pieces argue for their own definitions of key terms in opposition to an imagined mass conception of these terms.

We see a similar opening, though with a different focus, in a 2012 *Gamasutra* piece by Adam Bishop chronicling his own reaction to *Dear Esther*—a standard subject of "games criticism" and similar to the personal New Games Journalism. *Gamasutra*, as the "online free version of Game Developer Magazine," features an interesting mix of industry-focused news, academic articles, and developer interviews. In this case, Bishop offers a close reading of *Dear Esther* to defend its classification as a game. He opens as follows:

> "Many discussions of Dear Esther [hyperlinked to Wikipedia page on *Dear Esther*] centre around the question of whether or not it is actually a game at all. To me, that question is not especially interesting, at least not in the way that it's normally meant. When people complain about some pieces of software not really being "games" they usually mean this first definition of the word from the Oxford English Dictionary:

[93] Tom Hoggins, "Dear Esther Review," *The Telegraph*, 5 March 2012, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/video-game-reviews/9115437/Dear-Esther-review.html.

> 1 *a form of competitive activity or sport played according to rules.*
>
> I don't think all video games necessarily need to be games under that definition. I think
>
> of "video game" as a separate category of things, some of which are traditionally
>
> categorised games and some of which are not."[94]

In this appeal to "many discussions," the definition of "game" under contestation is rendered

irrelevant. Bishop cites the dictionary definition of "game" from the *Oxford English Dictionary*,

standard source of English majors across the world, then attributes this definition to the

oppositional group of "people" who "complain about some pieces of software not really being

'games'." Instead of arguing against this definition, Bishop establishes the category of "video

game" as something not necessarily consistent with it. Bishop never contests this definition,

unlike the two bloggers presented above. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the definition of

"game" be quoted and attributed in a way that the strawman "game" was left anomalous in the

posts by Kelly and Hoggins. It is still, however, tapping in to a community of criticism without

actually connecting with it.

This issue of citation, or lack thereof, is one that comes up in meta-discussions by games

critics online in attempts to self-regulate the community of practice. For example, an academic-

cum-blogger, Cameron Kunzelman[95] wrote a "Twitter rant" in late 2012 against games critics

who do not cite other writers. The mechanics of the Twitter rant are fascinating: tweeters rely on

their follower network to disseminate the message to the intended audience, while fitting into the

140-character limit. Often, the "rant" refers to a series of tweets that must be read in order,

though readers may single out particular salient tweets and retweet them out of context.

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[94] Adam Bishop, "I Spoke With Esther," *Gamasutra*, 12 October 2012, Accessed 1 April 2013,
http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/AdamBishop/20121012/179254/I_Spoke_With_Esther.php.
[95] Previously quoted in Chapter 1, note 33.

Additionally, this sequence of tweets was archived into a Storify by Darius Kazemi[96] and

disseminated in that form via Twitter. Storify essentially offers the possibility of permanent

curation of tweets; a more thorough discussion of Storify appeared in Chapter 01 in the section

on "Third Party Networks."

Kunzelman bookends his rant with two tweets in all caps that identify the interceding

tweets as the content of the rant. These tweets only refer to the formal qualities: first, that it is a

"RANT ABOUT VIDEO GAMES WRITING," and second, that it "MAY BECOME A BLOG

POST IN THE FUTURE"[97]. The blog post is the culmination of a critical intervention, a place

for lengthy prose with hyperlinked citations, but the Twitter feed is a place for broadcasting

rants. Kunzelman addresses these tweets generally to "People who write about games"[98] and not

to particular individuals—there are no @-mentions in any of the tweets comprising the rant, and

only in the last tweet does Kunzelman link to an external site as an example of "games criticism

[being] good".[99] Though it might seem that Kunzelman's rant goes against his principles for

citing and addressing specific people, there is actually no tension. Attacking particular people is

not the purpose of citation, it is drawing them into conversation and respecting their

contributions to the discussion. On this topic, Kunzelman points out that "If you are writing

about Dear Esther, you know that literally dozens of other people have written thousands of

words on that game."[100] Not citing those people, by either linking to their work directly or by

citing it in more conventional formats suited to print work, cuts them out of whatever

[96] Darius Kazemi, "Cameron Kunzelman on writing about games", *Storify*, 20 November 2012, Accessed 14 April 2013, http://storify.com/tinysubversions/cameron-kunzelman-on-games-writing.
[97] Cameron Kunzelman, Tweet on 20 November 2012, https://twitter.com/ckunzelman/status/270969679802163200.
[98] Cameron Kunzelman, Tweet on 20 November 2012, https://twitter.com/ckunzelman/status/270969799922839552.
[99] Cameron Kunzelman, Tweet on 20 November 2012, https://twitter.com/ckunzelman/status/273817829382434816.
[100] Cameron Kunzelman, Tweet on 20 November 2012, https://twitter.com/ckunzelman/status/270969898472189952.

conversation the writer hopes to have with a public. It also implies that the writer makes their

critical engagement with the piece and only the piece, writing in a vacuum.

From the three examples of Kelly, Bishop, and Hoggins, however, none of whom linked

to other pieces directly and yet referenced the conversations in sweeping generalizations, we see

how these writers draw on straw-man versions of other critical engagements to make their

arguments. There is no implication of having been the only writer to discuss *Dear Esther*, and in

all cases, that kind of implication would shatter the rhetorical stance. These writers offer

definitions of "game" against their view of the prevailing opinion, setting themselves off as

experts.

Criticism and Contestation

Criticism not only functions to increase audience and literacy for a new medium, but as a place

of contestation of the limits of that medium. Though it seems like this overt contestation would

be effective in furthering the critical discourse around games, it actually only contributes when it

generates useful concepts for analysis. Arguing over whether *Dear Esther* is a game or not does

not contribute, but arguing over whether *Dear Esther* is interactive, and in what ways it is

interactive, is useful for identifying ideologies behind interpretive communities.

Interactivity

While some critics responded when the original mod was released, the majority of critical

response to *Dear Esther* came after rerelease on Steam. This does not suggest a relationship

between distribution platforms and critical response, beyond the increased visibility and access

on Steam. It is, however, important to note that the Steam release had significantly improved

visuals, and cost ten dollars, while retaining the same interface and game elements as the original

mod. To this end, a common negative response by fan reviewers on *moddb.com* was to point out the relationship of cost to gameplay. One reviewer, after pointing out the lack of gameplay, argues that "this makes one of the worst HL mods of all time in the HL series. Why? Because the remake will not be free."[101] The signifiers of "gameness", namely for-cost distribution on a gaming platform, come with expectations for interactivity. How else to explain the preoccupation of critics with the interaction or lack thereof in *Dear Esther*?

We have already seen how Kelly, Hoggins, and Bishop discuss how *Dear Esther* qualifies as a game, or not. But critics also discuss whether it is "interactive" in similar terms. Tommy Rousse, writing about *Dear Esther*, argues that the predominant understanding of "interaction" is the ability to "affect the environment around me."[102] This kind of interactivity relies on either constructive or destructive force—a force conspicuously absent from the entire play experience of *Dear Esther*. Michael Abbott, also writing about interactivity in the game, notes that "heck, you can't even run, jump, or pick up anything."[103] Within *Dear Esther*, though the player uses the WASD and mouse interface common to the first-person shooters it builds on, the avatar is limited to walking. Clicking the mouse, instead of shooting bullets, only zooms the camera in.

Despite this limitation, some critics including the aforementioned Abbott, still persist that *Dear Esther* is interactive. This interaction, instead of affecting the environment, exists in a more subtle way. Instead, *Dear Esther* invites interaction through a process of "assembling coherency."[104] Rousse compares this kind of interactivity, one that takes construction into the

[101] PurpleGaga27, Review of *Dear Esther*, *moddb.com*, 17 April 2011, Accessed 5 April 2013, http://www.moddb.com/mods/dear-esther/reviews?filter=t&rating=1.
[102] Tommy Rousse, "On Ruining *Dear Esther*," *Oh No! Video Games!*, 19 March 2012, Accessed 1 April 2013, http://ohnovideogames.com/on-ruining-dear-esther.
[103] Michael Abbott, "Dear Eisenstein," *Brainy Gamer*, 20 February 2012, Accessed 1 April 2013, http://www.brainygamer.com/the_brainy_gamer/2012/02/dear-eisenstein.html.
[104] Abbott, "Dear Eisenstein."

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mind-space of the player and "interacts with your mind's predilection for constructing story," with the dominant processes of fiction.[105] Both Rousse and Abbott take understandings of interactivity from film and literary reception theory and apply them to justifying *Dear Esther*'s status as a game. This kind of cross-media theory, however, falls short of explaining *Dear Esther*'s ludic power. If the only interactions in *Dear Esther* are those that occur in books or movies, then why not classify it as one of those? Instead, both of these critics actually rely on the combination of this mode of interaction with existing game interfaces; the first-person shooter's interface imbues this interaction with ludic meaning.

Fun

Besides "interactivity," "fun" is another recurring term in reviews of *Dear Esther*. Bishop, previously quoted above, compares the re-release to the original mod and notes that the artistic rework "made the experience great to look at but didn't help make it much fun to actually be involved in."[106] For him, "fun" makes a game worth playing, and does not necessarily refer to mindless gratification, but rather to some ineffable quality that draws a player into an engagement with the work. Fun separates viewership from engagement, and is directly related to the player's interactivity. Other critics, too, ascribe "fun" to deep engagement: according to *international hobo*, *Dear Esther* lacks "the addictive fun associated with the thicker offerings in the marketplace."[107] Here too, the "addictiveness" of fun implies that fun is born from engagement with a game, and more importantly, that that "fun" is compelling and perhaps a bit dangerous. Perhaps "fun" is that essential quality referred to as "flow" by psychologists and

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[105] Rousse, "On Ruining *Dear Esther*."
[106] Adam Bishop, "I Spoke With Esther.
[107] [ihobo], "The Thin Play of Dear Esther," *international hobo*, 11 July 2012, Accessed 2 April 2013, http://blog.ihobo.com/2012/07/the-thin-play-of-dear-esther.html.

media scholars, that state of deep engagement with an object that removes the person from an awareness of external reality.[108]

In addition, such a state ensures that the experience of play feels immediate, as the player is drawn into the game. Miguel Penabella, writing for *Medium Difficulty*, reflects this distinction between "fun" play and a more "technical" kind: *Dear Esther* "diverts the player from gratification and "fun" into a different state of playing, namely, to experiment with the game's technical limitations."[109] This is still, paradoxically, a deep engagement with the work, though one highly concerned with the particular technology of the game instead of an addictive sensory overload. If fun is immediacy, then *Dear Esther*'s "not-fun" is all about the medium.

On the other hand, some critics ascribe "fun" in games to the experience of challenge. An unnamed blogger, arguing "Why Challenge Matters," notes that *Dear Esther* lacks "that thing that is so integral to a fun game: challenge."[110]

In an interview, Pinchbeck discusses the shifting relationship of games to what he calls "pure, escapist, fun," noting:

"we don't demand that any other form of media has to make us feel great and happy and powerful all the time, it's quite the opposite often. So it makes sense that games are getting into this, that there's no contradiction between wanting to continue an experience and the experience itself being quite harrowing or unsettling. That's drama, and people have been doing that since before they were writing, it's as old as human culture. Of

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[108] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is responsible for the contemporary understanding of "flow" with respect to engagement, but the term appears in game studies and film and TV studies as well.

[109] Miguel Penabella, "An Ode to Stanley & Esther."

[110] "Why Challenge Matters," *thoughtwrites*, 7 January 2013, Accessed 2 April 2013, http://thoughtwrites.tumblr.com/post/39929001970/why-challenge-matters.

course games are going to tap into that and I think it will make them better games as a

result."[111]

In Pinchbeck's formulation, "fun" is not a quality of the game that compels a player to lose

himself or herself in play. "Fun" is not a quality that bestows a sense of immediacy on the whole

experience. Instead, "fun" is a positive emotional response to happy, uplifting content. This

conception of fun allows Pinchbeck to present *Dear Esther* not as a challenge to contemporary

understandings of gameplay, but as a challenge to contemporary expectations for the emotional

and cultural role of games—as capable of tragedy as plays or novels. Later in the interview, he

praises the possibility for "games offering a wider emotional range."[112]

The different uses of "fun" by the creator of the game and the critics indicate the different

focuses on each of their parts. While critics do respond to *Dear Esther* as tragedy, they also

respond to it as what they consider a game. The fascination with challenge, with flow, with

immediacy, suggests that perhaps calling the medium "video games" is deceptive, and rather, the

medium is a vehicle for conveying a thing that is a "game."[113] Examining these critics' repetitive

use of the term "fun" in relation to *Dear Esther* reveals a deep consideration for the formal

structures of their interest, and an intuitive sense, drawn out through criticism of particular games,

of the boundaries of the field.

Critical Power of Mods

Dear Esther, in addition to illustrating the state of games criticism, itself offers a new function—

the mod as a piece of criticism. Tapping into the power of mod cultures as transformative

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[111] Phill Cameron, "Interview: Moved By Mod—*Dear Esther*'s Dan Pinchbeck."
[112] Ibid.
[113] This idea came up briefly in conversation with Scot Osterweil, MIT, in April 2013. I am in his debt.

works—works like fan-fiction that build off existing works in order to subvert or augment their themes, *Dear Esther* critiques the first-person shooter explicitly while offering a new way to integrate mimesis and diegesis in gameplay.

Like many of the games critics identified in this thesis, members of the mod community are often non-commercial participants. In fact, according to Unger's definition quoted above, a mod must be created through free labor to be considered a mod, as opposed to an official "patch" to fix a game system or "downloadable content (DLC)" to add content. Without the commercial impetus, mod communities are supposedly freed to focus on critical or artistic endeavors; they represent a "true" fan engagement, unhindered by publisher standards. Mods, especially ones like *Dear Esther*, can also model new directions for gaming by taking advantage of interfaces that players are already familiar and comfortable with. As we have already seen, *Dear Esther* began its life funded by a grant to support new directions in storytelling in commercial games. Succeeding in this goal, the final product, according to its creator Dan Pinchbeck, represents "a large step forward in game narration, finally moving beyond feeding us cutscenes and expository dialogue."[114] More importantly, the original reception of *Dear Esther* reveals that at least some players also have a deep interest in different modes of storytelling and narration. As a mod attempting to push current trends and offer a new path to commercial viability, *Dear Esther* fulfills its promise.

Yet another impulse supported by mods can lead to engagement with games and the games industry. In an interview conducted by Phill Cameron of *Gamasutra*, Pinchbeck describes his motivation for creating the mod on an existing first-person shooter:

"What happens when you ditch traditional gameplay out of an FPS space and what that leaves you. So you have nothing but story to keep a player engaged – is that possible?

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[114] Phill Cameron, "Interview: Moved By Mod—*Dear Esther*'s Dan Pinchbeck."

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What kind of experience does that leave? What does the space you free up by losing all those gameplay mechanisms and activities allow you to do?"[115]

This guiding question is less commercial and more critical; it is exploratory in the sense that it implements a thought experiment that questions the nature of existing games. This impulse complements the desire to find new directions in gaming, by asking what the current forms such as the first-person shooter actually offer at heart. By removing "traditional gameplay," Pinchbeck questions the structures of first-person perspective. The mod itself is a critical examination of a game mechanic, isolating it and asking whether it is still compelling. Instead of presenting an argument through long-form prose, Pinchbeck's mod invites debate through the simple means of commercial success: if players like it, it is worthwhile on its own.

In this way, *Dear Esther* offers games the potential to be critical works in their own right. Though the predominant mode has historically been long-form prose, there is nothing to prevent other media from conveying critical interventions. The short Flash game referenced in the introduction, *Passage in 10 Seconds*, is another example of this discursive form. These two examples remind us not to discount games themselves in a search for critical engagements; the prevalence of text-based criticism even in a media ecosystem dominated by online forms is both a nod to the persistence of print culture and a marker of how much text dominates intellectual and discursive literacy. How would Kunzelman's call to cite one's sources apply if games criticism were predominantly transmitted through games themselves? How would one even cite a game properly in a blog post? This difficulty gets at the heart of what Iris Barry also noted for film: the evanescence of certain media can hinder their study, and here, it is something that can hinder their use as conversation.

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[115] Ibid.

Mods, however, show a way around this issue, by directly referencing and modifying their source material, automatically tapping into the same player community and taking advantage of their familiarity with it. As a mod made in Valve's Source engine for first-person shooters, *Dear Esther* draws on the same interface elements and graphical textures to present a very different conception of the first-person experience of gameplay. An important difference between mods and long-form prose criticism, however, lies in the author. For a piece of critical prose, especially in the cases that we have seen, the author is a single figure given voice across a variety of sources; writer bios accompanying their pieces often come with a Twitter handle or personal blog site. With mods, however, due to the nature of community development, the creators are often either anonymous, pseudonymous, or a collective. Instead of traditional critical texts, mods are closer to fan-fiction or other transformative works in that they contain critiques within them.

Conclusion

The contestations around *Dear Esther*, arguing over its status as a game, or its cultural power, expose the structures of contemporary games criticism. Twitter, blog posts, online newspaper reviews, all of these sources become transmissive media for a public conversation about the game. These conversations, invoking subjectivity, narrative, and critical concepts such as "interactivity," capture the predominant concerns around the meaning-value of games. Moreover, the nature of such conversations—limited links except via third-party networks, or status-conscious invocations of academic references—shed light on the invisible social scaffolding of a critical, interpretive community. The power of these interpretive communities cannot be denied,

as certain critics recur over and over again as emblems of particular rhetorical stances towards games.

Moving away from structural features of games criticism as a potentially hegemonic public, *Dear Esther* also highlights trends within cultures of reception. Returning to the model of subjectivity explored in Chapter One, *Dear Esther* invokes an awareness of its slipperiness. *Dear Esther* is self-consciously and obviously different with each play-through, rendering moot any attempts to define "the game." Still, the structure of play of the game, with its single-player limit and difficulty of replay, invites authoritative criticism explaining exactly what occurs within it as a critical entrée into the game. With *Dear Esther*, we see an emphasis on interpretation of symbols on the part of those justifying its status as a game, and an emphasis on a particularly narrow view of interactivity on the part of those denying it. While these two subject positions have historically fallen into narratology, on the first part, or ludology, on the second, I suggest that there is a different contrast at work, one more suited to criticism than to games themselves. I will explore this contrast, what I term the "representation"/"utility" distinction, in the next chapter through the example of critical responses to *League of Legends*.

Chapter 03: League of Legends and Critiquing Multiplayer Interactions

Introducing League of Legends

League of Legends is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) type game released in 2009. The MOBA genre draws from Real-Time Strategy (RTS) and Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games to create a unique experience of highly individual player-vs-player (PvP) fights combined with a structure of team-based play.
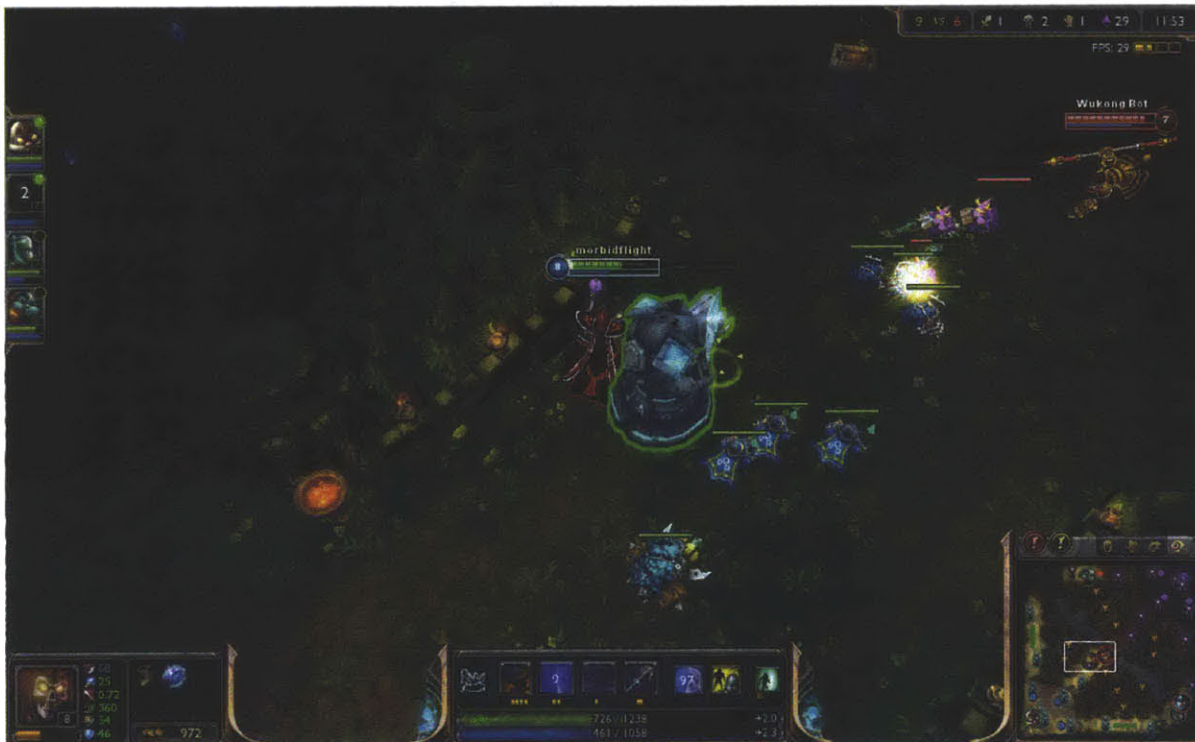

Figure 6: An image of the main game mode of *League of Legends*, centered on the player's champion. In this image, the essential features of the game are visible: two opposed champions (with summoner names), the smaller minions, and one friendly turret. We also see the user interface, including a minimap on the bottom right and champion information on the bottom left. Source: in-game screenshot taken by author.

In *League of Legends*, the main game mode is a matchup between two five-person teams, Blue team and Purple team, on a square map with three "lanes". The lanes lead between the two team

nexuses, placed on opposite corners of the map. Between the three lanes, there is a jungle, more

perilous than the lanes due to a lack of friendly turrets, also known as towers, and limited vision.

(See Figure 3 below for a map of this game mode.) Generally, teams will place one member in

each of the top and middle lanes, two in the bottom lane, and one in the jungle to help as needed.

In this way, PvP fights occur in the lanes in the early game, and as turrets fall, the map opens up

and the game becomes a fight for visibility and map control. The ultimate goal of the game is to

destroy the other team's nexus, located at the heart of their base. Players select a champion from

a pool of a possible one hundred and thirteen to represent them in the match; different champions

have different strengths depending on the role you wish to play on the team. During the game,

players acquire gold by completing map objectives and killing minions, and use this gold to buy

items that increase their team's chances of winning.

Figure 7: The Summoner's Rift map for 5v5 play in *League of Legends*, with the two sides labeled by color and the three lanes (in light beige) outlining and bisecting the map.
Source: *League of Legends Guide, MMOfan.com*, http://www.mmofan.com/league-of-legends/walkthrough/summoners-rift.html.

Claimed by its developers to be the most popular game today, with an estimated monthly

active player base of 32 million in the fall of 2012[116], *League of Legends* is a powerful newcomer

to the world of eSports. It has an established professional scene, with a presence at tournaments

such as Major League Gaming and seasonal events such as Collegiate StarLeague and the

League of Legends Championship Series. As with many other competitively played games such

as *Starcraft* and certain first-person shooters, there exist huge online communities of players

devoted to perfecting one's skill at the game. These sites also host, sometimes more explicitly

than others, reflective discussions on the game itself.

Riot Games, the developer of *League of Legends*, cultivates an open relationship with

players and fans of the game. Riot backs professional and high-level amateur tournaments with

cash prizes, supports Season 3 professional players with salaries[117], and allows all players to

weigh in on decisions to punish toxic behavior of others. Riot has encouraged open discussion of

changes to gameplay, and makes a visible effort to respond to fans on their official forums and

via social networks such as Twitter and Facebook.

This environment of fluidity, both between amateur and professional play, and between

consumers and producers, creates a rich landscape of discourse that is contained within

ostensibly practical concerns such as particular events, particular items, or particular styles of

gameplay. This, combined with the invisibility of the game in "mainstream" games criticism,

erases from the dominant discourse particular concerns about and methods of approaching

multiplayer, competitive games.

[116] Evangelho, Jason, "'League of Legends' Bigger Than 'WoW,' More Daily Players Than 'Call of Duty'," *Forbes Online*, October 12, 2012, Accessed February 26, 2013, http://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonevangelho/2012/10/12/league-of-legends-bigger-than-wow-more-daily-players-than-call-of-duty/.
[117] Rus McLaughlin, "League of Legends Season 3: Taking the 'e' out of e-sports," *Venture Beat*, January 29, 2013, Accessed March 13, 2013, http://venturebeat.com/2013/01/29/league-of-legends-season-3-taking-the-e-out-of-e-sports/.

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Mainstream Sources

In discussing "mainstream" coverage of *League of Legends*, I look at the same sites that serve as

main sources for the other two case studies. For example, I look once again at *Critical Distance*,

a source examined in Chapter Two with a discussion of *Dear Esther*. *Critical Distance* bills itself

as a curated archive, creating a weekly round-up of critical writing on video games. *Critical*

Distance gathers posts via a recommendation system on twitter or via email, as well as the

efforts of the editorial team. The editorial team consists mostly of bloggers who produce what

they consider "games criticism" as well as consuming it. Currently, Kris Ligman, Alan

Williamson, Eric Swain, Ian Miles Cheong, Katie Williams, and Cameron Kunzelman form the

core editorial staff, with occasional guest editors[118].

> *Critical Distance* sets itself up as follows:
>
> "With our coverage we aim to provide both an entry point into the wide network of like-
>
> minded blogs and websites, and to promote up-and-coming or lesser-known authors. We
>
> are not, however, a site for original writing that is criticism itself, instead we aim to
>
> capture the videogame criticism 'zeitgeist' and act as a 'memory bank' in this notoriously
>
> short-sighted and quick forgetting industry"[119]

Keeping this statement of purpose in mind, an experiment: how often does *League of*

Legends or another eSports title show up in the kinds of critical posts that are featured on

Critical Distance? Searching the archive of *Critical Distance* using their own site search tool

reveals three compilations linking to posts on *League of Legends*. Two of these compilations are

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[118] For example, March features four women editors, in honor of Women's History Month. Only two of the March editors are on the regular editorial staff.
[119] "About", *Critical Distance*.

from December and August of 2012, and one from November 8, 2009, within two weeks of the

open release of *League of Legends* on Oct. 27, 2009.

For a site that has had weekly round-ups since 2009, the numbers are dismal. I searched

for some other games, popular and indie, using the same interface (*Critical Distance*'s in-site

search). Here are the results in the order that I thought to search them, and remember, *League of*

Legsnds had 3 hits:

Search Term	Number of results
"mass effect"	68
"bioshock"	41
"spec ops the line"	50
"journey"	48
"fallout"	43
"borderlands"	8
"call of duty"	42
"battlefield"	13
"street fighter"	4
"pokemon"	15
"tetris"	8
"xcom"	11
"dota"	3
"dayz"	5
"diablo"	11
"world of warcraft"	21

Table 1: search terms and frequencies on Critical Distance, search performed 26 Feb. 2013

I also attempted to widen the net by searching for "league." This produced 14 results,
only 3 of which referenced *League of Legends* and were in fact the original three results from my
first search. All of the games on this list had more results than *League of Legends*, except "dota"
(*Defense of the Ancients*), another eSports/RTS title.

Back to these elusive three posts. One of the posts, from December 2012, highlights a
then-ongoing discussion around character design: responses to Todd Harper's open letter to Riot
Games to claim Taric as gay. The other two posts, one from August 2012 and one from
November 2009, discuss the *League of Legends* community and its notorious toxic behavior;
these posts try to explain why the relationship between players within the game is often so
riddled with negativity and zero-sum competitiveness.

Unlike in the other two case studies, we see no discussions of narrative style, no
discussions of capitalist ethics, even no discussions of gameplay or interface. Instead, the posts
focus on character and community. So, let's dive into how these two subject areas work within
League of Legends, and how they are discussed in critical pieces and community discussion alike.

Character

Defining "character" in *League of Legends* can be surprisingly tricky. On one hand, **champions**
are probably the most commonly identified "characters" in the game, with names, appearances,
and particular playstyles. The champions are the face(s) of the game and they are the player's
interaction with the game world. As in *Diablo* or *Warcraft*, you control the character's
movement and action to an extent, with paths and auto-attacks handled by the game itself.

On the other hand, champions do not persist as player avatars past the duration of a single match. This strange feature is also supported by the lore. One of Riot's guides to gameplay identifies the **summoner** as the player's persistent character in the persistently unstable narrative world, a force of political balance who fights by summoning champions.

"A player in League of Legends takes on the role of a Summoner – a gifted spell caster who has the power to bring forth a champion to fight as their avatar in Valoran's Fields of Justice. With all major political decisions on Valoran now decided by the outcome of the contests that take place in the battle arenas, a Summoner is the key force of change on the continent"[120].

This convoluted relationship of summoner to champion allows Riot to sidestep the ludic issues raised by quasi-persistent champions: the champion serves as the in-match "avatar" of the summoner, in the same way that the summoner serves as the invisible in-game avatar of the player.

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[120] "Summoner Information", League of Legends Learning Center

The image of the loading screen, below, illustrates the complexity of the summoner/champion relationship: priority is given to the selected champion, but information about the summoner is still available to the other players. The loading screen features a block like the one below for each player involved in a game, with up to ten players visible in the largest game mode. The large bear, taking up the majority of the space allotted to a given player, is also named—"Volibear" in large text. Underneath the champion's name, the player's "summoner
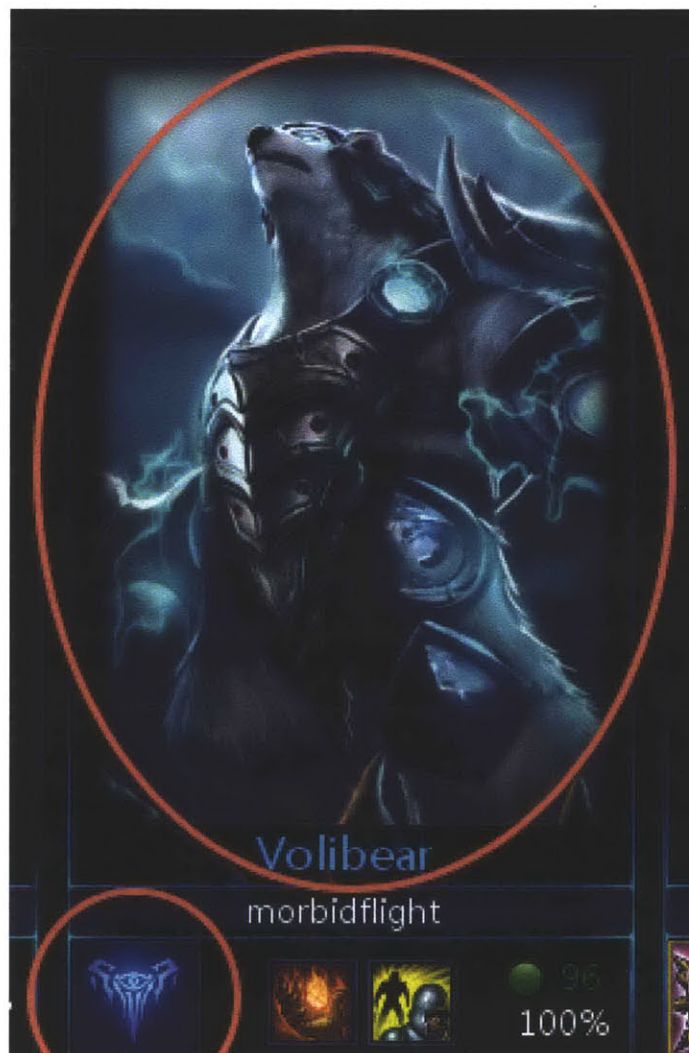

Figure 8: The loading screen displays an image of the selected champion (the large bear) and the summoner's avatar (the icon in the lower left corner)

name" appears in smaller text, along with an icon representing that summoner and the two chosen summoner spells, discussed in the following paragraph.

There are a few characteristics of summoners and champions that complicate the idea of character in *League of Legends*. In the guide to gameplay quoted above, it describes particular actions that are explicitly not given to the champions, and instead placed on the summoner: "Summoners, for example, can heal their champion, damage opposing minions directly, teleport their champion anywhere in the Field of Justice they are in, fortify their team's turret defenses, and a slew of other game-impacting results" ("Summoner Information", League of Legends Learning Center). These actions are known as "summoner spells" within the game.

So we can see that **summoners** and **champions** both impact the game during a match, and summoners, though they do not have a manifestation on the field, have a direct connection with the game world. The player, however, controls both directly in the interface, and the two are placed on the same ontological level.

	Summoner	**Champion**
Appearance	Persistent: summoner icon, easily changeable, reflects proficiency	Persistent: bought skins
Skill Trees	Persistent: runes and masteries	Temporary: in-game leveling of skills
Name	Persistent: summoner name/username	Static: unchangeable
Level	Persistent: summoner level	Temporary: in-game based on farm
Personality	None	Static
Narrative	None	Static: backstories that do not change
Gender	None	Static

Table 2: Summoner and Champion identity attributes (static = unchanging, persistent = changeable but stored in the system, temporary = in-game changes that are erased after a match)

Within the discussions featured on *Critical Distance*, discussions of character are limited

to issues of representation. Writing in The Border House blog in December 2012, Zoya Street

challenges Todd Harper, asking, "Why do you think you know that Taric is gay?"[121] In his

original post, Harper pointed out stereotypes of closeted gay male identity that Riot works into

the character design of Taric, one of the champions in *League of Legends*, while keeping that

character relatively free from stigma due to his strength as a champion in the game[122]. Street,

argues against what they[123] feel is a cis-normative and hegemonic interpretation of non-hetero

sexuality, instead suggesting that Taric can serve as an example of a straight man who enjoys

playing with stereotypical ideas of gender and sexuality. In critiquing Harper's post, Street

admits to never having played *League of Legends*, and instead reacting on the basis of

representation. On this note, Street writes, "And even though I don't play *LoL*, this call for an

apparently feminine male character to come out as gay is deeply troubling to me as a

genderqueer person"[124].

On one hand, it is crucial for outsiders to a game, as to any media artifact, to be able to

comment on its work in culture without having to consume it wholesale. In fact, the discussion

by Street echoes an earlier public controversy among dance critics in the 1990s. Prominent dance

critic Arlene Croce, writing in the *New Yorker*, reviewed "Still/Here," a work by Bill T. Jones, a

"black, gay, and HIV-positive choreographer."[125] The strange thing about this review, however,

is that Croce never saw the work in question. Instead, she used her review as a platform to talk

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[121] Zoya Street, "Why do you think you know that Taric is gay?", The Border House, 19 December 2012, Accessed 24 March 2013, http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=9898.
[122] Todd Harper, "An Open Letter to Riot Games", 18 December 2012, Accessed 24 March 2013, http://www.chaoticblue.com/blog/2012/12/an-open-letter-to-riot-games/.
[123] Street prefers "they" as a gender-neutral singular pronoun.
[124] Street, "Why do you think you know that Taric is gay?"
[125] Maurice Berger, "Introduction: The Crisis of Criticism," Maurice Berger, ed., *The Crisis of Criticism*, (New York: The New Press, 1998), 1.

about so-called "undiscussable" works—art that made itself so intensely personal that it was

"beyond the reach of criticism."[126] Croce sees these works as a descendent of the kind of

postmodern dance that placed itself "against interpretation," and pitted "the freedom of the

audience to judge versus the freedom of the artist to create."[127] In approaching "Still/Here,"

Croce models a new kind of critical response to mitigate this opposition. She first identifies

"three options" for the critic of art: "(1) to see and review; (2) to see and not review; (3) not to

see."[128] She argues, however, that "strange occasions like 'Still/Here'" allow the critic "to write

about what one has not seen,"[129] as the mere existence of the work in the public sphere can

provide something worth evaluating.

Croce's review, published in the *New Yorker*, set off a "near-cataclysmic response" from

the art world and the academic world. Within a few years, Maurice Berger edited from the

responses a volume, *The Crisis of Criticism*, that sits firmly within the tradition of meta-criticism

and uses the Croce affair to question the cultural role of the art critic, whether as journalist or

academic. All this from the basic question of whether someone has the right to evaluate a work

without experiencing it in its entirety—a question that is front-and-center when talking about

games. Can critics respond to games without playing them? In the case of the Harper/Street

discussion, not having played the game prevented an engagement with the aspects of the

character that emerge in gameplay. Does this prevent us from heeding Street's points about

Taric's representation?

Street's post on Taric's relationship to stereotypes of gayness relies heavily on an

interpretation (Harper's original post) and static para-ludic assets available even outside the

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[126] Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," Maurice Berger, ed., *The Crisis of Criticism*, 16.
[127] Ibid., 23.
[128] Ibid., 16.
[129] Ibid., 16.

game. Harper's post draws on these static assets to identify "wink-and-a-nod" characteristics, designed by Riot, to invite interpretations into Taric's sexuality. His suggestions for making a role model out of the character do, however, draw on elements of gameplay such as Taric's role as a strong, viable support character. At heart, though, all of the posts in this conversation, including signal boosting on the part of Patricia Hernandez at *Kotaku*, reflect on representation, one of the few things about *League of Legends* that is fixed.

In a similar vein, and true to their guiding philosophy of carving a space for marginalized identities in gaming, *The Border House* hosts other discussions of representation in *League of Legends*. Out of eight posts tagged with "league of legends", five (not including Street's critique discussed above) are also tagged with "character design"[130]. The two remaining posts are also tagged with "esports", and the contents of these fall into the community/toxic behavior category explored later. The breakdown apparent in *Critical Distance* continues even after tracing the posts back to their sources.

One of the difficulties of discussing character in *League of Legends* lies in the narrative complexity at work in the game. It is a narrative complexity that is almost invisible to the players, but Riot has clearly taken great pains to establish the consistency of every part of gameplay. We can see narrative decisions being driven by gameplay and design elements, explicitly leveraged to further ludic goals and not paradigmatic ones. These decisions cannot be read easily within the structure of formal criticism as practiced online, especially not in the hegemonic narrative-centered criticism. The interpersonal aspects of *League of Legends* also resist analysis, but for very different reasons.

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[130] "Tag Archives: league of legends", *The Border House*, Accessed 24 March 2013, http://borderhouseblog.com/?tag=league-of-legends

Multiplayer Interactions

League of Legends is a game with no built-in singleplayer. You can create a bot game and be the

only human player, but that sort of play takes the main gameplay mode, multiplayer, and

substitutes bots for human players. Part of the point of *League of Legends* is that it is a game that

happens when people get together and play it. This makes it difficult to write about, as the

compelling aspects are often the **metagame** or particular games, and these are both moving

targets.

To set up the discussion of community-oriented criticism, it is important to outline the

basics of team composition and metagame. For many players, the champion they select must

help the team. At a basic level, there are certain prescribed roles that each team ought to have. To

what extent the players fulfill these roles is up to them, but the cultural expectations do exist;

these cultural expectations evolve as the game ages. In terms of the first and primary game mode,

the 5v5 "Classic" game type played on "Summoner's Rift", there are 5 positions: top-lane, jungle,

mid-lane, and carry and support teaming up in the bottom-lane. There are expectations for the

kinds of champions you play in each of the lanes or the jungle, and this set of positions creates a

well-balanced team that is hard to shut down based on champion selection alone. If, on the other

hand, your entire team were to go support, or any other type, it might cause unbalanced

gameplay from the outset. The point is to pick a team that will do well, but also one that you will

enjoy playing. *League of Legends* is a team game, first and foremost. It does not always get

played like that, especially in solo queue or duo queue, and in non-tournament or non-

competitive play, but the game is structured to work well and to be fun in teams.

The persistent problem with this design goal is the difficulty of creating good teams

between strangers who play only one game together. Riot Games has an entire division devoted

to creating a better, more sportsmanlike, community: the "Player Behavior" division, comprised

of designers, producers, social scientists, etc. As outlined in a talk given at MIT on 20 March 2013, the members of this team seek to create this community not by punishing destructive members, but by helping positive players of *League of Legends* set good standards for the community and shielding them from the impact of toxic players. This team operates from the assumption that players are fundamentally good, and will normalize certain "good" cultural expectations if given the tools to do so.

In what seems like a direct contrast, critical discourse around the *League of Legends* community focuses instead on the persistence and seeming inevitability of its toxic behavior.

Vernacular Theory

Though *League of Legends*, as seen above, does not appear very often in the mainstream critical discourse, the large community of players, fans, and spectators has other venues for discussing the game. Sites like LeagueCraft[131] and News of Legends[132] position themselves as central resources for serious players interested in theorycrafting and gameplay. Riot Games' own community forums are a space for players to communicate with developers and for developers to open up about their process of balancing, champion design, and community building. Reddit's various *League of Legends* forums are another space for interaction between the player base and Riot Games, but mostly a space for interaction between players and prominent streamers and professional players.

Game/Metagame

With that flourishing player discourse in mind, let's look at how the player community defines "metagame" and "game" with respect to *League of Legends*, and how these two terms work together to make *League of Legends* what it is, halfway between classic video and computer

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[131] http://leaguecraft.com/
[132] http://www.newsoflegends.com/

games, and sports. In this way, *League of Legends* offers an example of how eSports are constructed by viewers and gamers alike.

Game refers to the mechanics of the game within the client, what you're allowed to do by the game rules itself, the original product of the designers. The game includes stats, and is balanced based on the state of competitive play, both professional and advanced amateur level. Riot Games tunes *League of Legends* biweekly during the "season" when competitive play is happening, and makes bigger adjustments between "seasons".

The **metagame** is set of rules and expectations for how the game should be played, built on top of the restrictions of the game mechanics[133]. It is similar to emergent play in a way, except if emergent play describes the moment of surprise and unpredictability, **metagame** refers to when that previously-surprising action becomes standard. High-level players try out certain modes of play, which eventually settle into what gets known as the "metagame", which affects what Riot rolls out in their biweekly balance patches.

This distinction between "game" and "metagame" highlights some of the difficulties in ascribing essentialist, objectivist qualities to what is at heart a negotiation between players and systems and designers.

Situating Approaches to *League of Legends*

Two Axes of Games Criticism

In comparing the domain spaces of mainstream games criticism and *League of Legends* player discussion, we see evolutions of the two axes of tension that arise when approaching a game. First, the issue of narrative versus rule system, the age-old narratology/ludology debate, turns rather into an issue of representation versus utility. "Games critics" discuss the representation of

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[133] Hahano, "The Meta Model," *News of Legends*, 24 March 2013, accessed 24 March 2013, http://www.newsoflegends.com/index.php/the-meta-model-5882/.

characters, worlds, behaviors, with respect to fixed assets and cultural norms. "Players", on the other hand, discuss the utility of characters, maps, items, with respect to a constantly shifting context of the balance and of professional-level play. To be perfectly clear, in calling out these two groups and the common functions of their writing, I do not classify and categorize individuals. Instead, I describe how critical writing sets itself apart from popular discourse; criticism dissects a fixed object, or at least an object that is fixed enough to establish "readings" of it.

Second, the approaches to *League of Legends* actually invert the ostensible association of critical writing with subjectivity of experience. In the writing around *Dear Esther*, we see the subjective experience of play held up as justification for critical responses to the work as a game. Not so in the critical responses to *League of Legends*, which write instead on general ideals for a good community or a good variety of representation. Even though these responses stem from personal experience, in many cases, they approach the culture of the game as something that is the same hegemonic identity for all players. In contrast, players and fans writing in the "guide" model or the theorycrafting model of explaining "good play" more often acknowledge the constant slipperiness of the game itself. Each match represents an opportunity for exploring the space of the game and of the metagame; though one can play better or worse, or make choices more in line with the meta or not, one never experiences the same thing twice, and two players never experience the same game.

Chapter 04: Conclusion

Multiplayer Games and a New Kind of Criticism

League of Legends is not a unique outlier to mainstream criticism. As discussed earlier,

eSports titles generally do not receive the same kind of critical inquiry that other games do. The

majority of critical writing featured online focuses on single-player experiences; the multi-player

aspects of competition somehow elude interpretation.

Ben Abraham, writing in 2011 about *StarCraft 2*, began an attempt to model a new kind

of games criticism, in contrast to what he sees as a perhaps exclusionary skewing towards

explanation and heavy interpretation. He sites this skewing in a history of critical engagement

that comes from literary studies, arguing that "the compulsion to *explain* so exemplarily

embodied by the critical essay and its relentless push towards the 'conclusion' is a habit from the

English department that we perhaps aught to consider jettisoning."[134] Instead, taking Latour as a

model, Abraham aims for description as a critical strategy. This description, coming "from a *very*

specific and embodied perspective – that is, from my own," offers a sort of revolutionary

criticism that does not assume a voice of authority. The difference between Abraham's attempts

and the characteristic subjectivity of New Games Journalism lies in the use of perspective to

avoid the need for high skill. With New Games Journalism, subjectivity allows for increased

participation by people historically excluded from critical writing due to lack of experience with

the established vocabulary. With what Abraham suggests, subjectivity allows for increased

participation by those excluded due to lack of in-game skill.

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[134] Ben Abraham, "Cahiers du Multijoueur," 22 February 2011, *benabraham.net*,
http://iam.benabraham.net/2011/02/cahiers-du-multijoueur/.

Games are perhaps the only medium where skill can prevent access to content. With film and literature, skill may be defined as literacy, and a lack of literacy simply locks you out from the start. With games, however, ludic literacy is distinct from in-game skill. Knowing the controls and strategies do not ensure a player's progress through a game, as increasing difficulty through the game can prevent successful play. And it is here that Abraham's vision for a description-based criticism makes the most impact, as it is a criticism that respects the possibility of failure.

More than this, however, the emphasis on description allows for a treatment of the game as performance instead of object. With multiplayer games, and especially with eSports titles, the constantly shifting nature of the game as well as the unpredictability of human play makes writing about a definitive object impossible. Instead, focusing on the experience of play captures the compelling features of such games. While New Games Journalism and the early film criticism begin with a similar focus on experience, the example of multiplayer games shows where such an approach can lead.

The Promises of Games Criticism

Contemporary games criticism highlights several things about criticism at large. First, games criticism today is a medium of change. In the span of only a few years, games themselves come with new interfaces, new structures, new fads. Each of these developments invites a development in writing, such as the New Games Journalism that sought to capture play and emphasize the player as a crucial part of the whole video game. To do this, Kieron Gillen and his compatriots encouraged the growth of a writing style that took cues from the New Journalism led by Hunter

S. Thompson and from the travel narratives featured in newspapers. They advocated for analysis

and critique embedded in the player's subjective experience—from the ground up. For these

writers, the casual language and first- or second-person descriptions were necessary to engage

with video games in particular. They had to develop a language of video games, as they felt the

existing critical discourses failed to account for what they saw as the unique qualities of the

medium. This desire to produce a new critical discourse repeats itself with each new generation

of design choices and each new group of critics seeking to make a name as the intelligent writers

about games. Thus, there is no single critical mode for discussing video games today, but the

difference between this frenetic birth of styles and the established discursive frames of, say,

literary criticism lie in their newness and lack of history. On the other hand, the constant

shiftiness of games criticism means that participants in this discourse are constantly negotiating

what it means to critique games, to evaluate games, to analyze games. The chapter on *Dear*

Esther highlights a few of the debates, such as the attention to citation, that motivate critics as

members of a community of practice.

Second, the nature of games criticism makes it apparent that a critic must engage with

both representation and utility to be an effective critic. Regardless of how one defines "game,"

there is always an aspect of winning, or at least an evaluation of how successfully one navigates

the work. "Utility," then, refers to this aspect of a work. This includes statements about the

difficulty of levels, or about the expected playtime in hours. The concept of utility is not limited

to video games. For instance, a critique of a novel that rests on *utility* might discuss the

confusion of the plot that makes it difficult to keep reading to the final page. Such a critique, as

discussed in Chapter One, might more correctly be described as a review. Video games writing,

however, identifies in stark relief the dualities of representation and utility and facilitates the

categorization of works by their alignment to one or both of these signposts. In turn, the

representation/utility debate rendered visible by video game criticism shines light on the nature

of critical writing as an evaluative form.

Lastly, games criticism makes apparent the prominence of subjectivity in critical writing.

Returning to the theorists from the first chapter, Clayton and Klevan's model of

"intersubjectivity" captures the odd coincidence of subjectivity and authority, as critics write in a

universally relatable mode from a situated perspective. More important than making objectively

true statements is the ability for one's interpretation to reach the audience.

Representation and Utility

The narratology/ludology debate has been formational for years, as the guideposts of game

studies and critical engagement with games. It has given writers an easy target to oppose, as well

as an easy camp to align with, but at the cost of hindering meaningful conversation. The

ludologists sit in a corner, and the narratologists sit across the room. But neither group exists in

productive discourse as much as they do in oppositional discourse. The terms of discussion

revolve around "story" and "mechanics," though I assert that these terms are not only reductive

but misleading. Narrative and gameplay, in this dichotomy, are taken to be antagonistic forces

that act within the object of the game on the person known as the player.

The issue is not one of narrative versus mechanics, but rather of representation and

utility. Representation, as the core of metaphor, is a means by which we understand the world.

Utility, perhaps, is how we interface with that world once we know it. When critics talk about

"narrative" or "gameplay," what they are often talking about is things that are represented versus

things that are in the service of a goal, without considering that goal. The terminology of

"representation"/"utility" is loose, due to the novelty of this dichotomy. Moreover, the terms are

slippery enough that they can be used to discuss non-game objects. The kinds of concerns that are often dismissed by self-proclaimed "ludologists" are not necessarily narrative-oriented, just focused on representation.

On the other hand, by transforming the narratology/ludology debate into one of representation and utility, we can open up spaces for criticism that have historically been ignored. For example, rule systems, often associated with ludology, can be critiqued from the point of view of representation.

Subjectivity

Critics must negotiate authority and subjectivity in their writing, as they represent an expert audience member. While still acknowledging the influence of perspective, critics are asked to offer their informed opinions. Critics model interpretations for the lay reader, viewer, player; part of the task of interpretation, however, is to recognize the importance of your own situated context in your reading.

The two case studies of *Dear Esther* and *League of Legends* show the different strategies that critics use in making this negotiation. For example, the prominent figures in New Games Journalism rely on using first or second person to describe the play experience. The use of "I" or "You" in narrating actual playthroughs, as seen in the critical writing on *Dear Esther*, continues this trend of embodied perspective. Similarly, critics describe the play session, not the game as object, when attempting to hone in on the aspects of the game that are fluid and experiential. On the other hand, even when analyzing the game as object, focusing on the rule system that remains fixed allows for a triangulation of one's authorial voice in relation to existing contexts.

Subjectivity is not only a factor in an individual piece, but in the presentation of

publications. Writers bring in other voices as context for an interpretation, forming allied

interpretive communities. Editorial voices are prominent in particular outlets for games criticism,

notable in the mission statements of sites such as *re/Action Zine* and *Nightmare Mode*, or even

Kill Screen Daily. Moreover, curation becomes an assumed activity that compensates for

particularities of voice; a site like *Critical Distance* sets itself apart as an editorialized yet

thorough overview of the week in games writing. If criticism provides a singular perspective on a

text, sites of criticism create multifaceted approaches that become trusted.

Where does the example of this small community within games criticism take us?

Although it seems like an isolated set of writing, the issues and questions raised in games

criticism apply for other forms of critical engagement as well as other discussions around games.

With the recent academic focus on critical discourses within existing fields, looking at games

criticism offers one way of mediating these disciplinary boundaries. For example, one chapter in

Clayton and Klevan's edited volume on film criticism examines close readings of movie scenes;

similar readings of camera position in games produce useful analyses. Similarly, games critic

Lana Polansky draws on Genette's *Paratexts* to inform her reading of the 2012 *Borderlands 2*,

and the relationship of that game to the original in the series.[135] Games criticism is not isolated in

its concerns, and looking explicitly to conversations with other media is a productive way of

learning from mistakes and not reinventing the wheel when it comes to engaging with creative

works.

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[135] Lana Polansky, "Decipher the Unexpected Hurt," *Bit Creature*, 28 November 2012,
http://www.bitcreature.com/criticism/decipher-the-unexpected-hurt/.

The formative poet and critic T.S. Eliot, writing on literary criticism in 1956, struggles

with the meaning, the value, and the function of such an undertaking. Many of his questions

apply to games criticism, or to other kinds of criticism—the same anxiety about purpose compels

critics in every field to attempt to define and constrain the enterprise. Eliot himself, writing three

decades before, "asserted that the essential function of literary criticism was 'the elucidation of

works of art and the correction of taste.'"[136] The intervening three decades had apparently

changed his mind, causing him to consider "understanding" and "enjoyment" as the two central

pivots of a functional literary criticism. For Eliot, "understanding" does not refer merely to

details of biography or vocabulary, but to something deeper that harnessed one's enjoyment of

the poem in question. In fact, "understanding" specifically does not refer to "explanation" in

Eliot's model.

> "But perhaps we can do something to save ourselves from being overwhelmed by our
>
> own critical activity, by continually asking such a question as: when is criticism not
>
> literary criticism but something else?"[137]

When is criticism criticism? Perhaps it is helpful to triangulate the scope of critical

inquiry by contrasting it to another kind of negotiation with works. On this note, we can ask how

criticism is different from more conventional scholarly inquiry. True, contemporary scholarship

often overlaps heavily with criticism, and it seems like an oversight to exclude academic works

from a study of criticism. The fundamental perspectives and intentions, however, are different.

Academic scholarship depends on an ideal of reproducibility—it is essential to give

citations and invite others to examine the same set of objects and follow the same, self-evident

argument. Just as with scientific experiments, a paper must not only describe findings but leave

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[136] T.S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," *The Sewanee Journal*, 540.
[137] Ibid., 529.

enough of a trail for other readers to reach the same conclusion, despite coming from different backgrounds and disciplinary approaches. Current standards and practices of citation exist to support this goal, identifying the exact object or work in question. Minor changes to a work, such as edits to a text or differences between playthroughs of a game, throw a wrench into this ideal. Of course existing citation standards will be unable to deal with objects that are currently in a state of flux; existing scholarship standards are unable to deal with these sorts of objects except through isolating instances of the object and recording them somehow. And for games, which are more explicitly and self-consciously in flux, citations help little. Emergence is the death of citation.

Criticism, on the other hand, not necessarily bound by these standards of citation and unique objects of study, is incredibly well suited to dealing with things that are not only in flux but ephemeral, because criticism captures an experience. Criticism doesn't try to be objective and impartial, or rather, it tries to be objective and impartial about its own subject perspective. Criticism writes these subject perspectives into a pair of coin-operated binoculars, capturing a stunning vista for all those who seek to visit it.

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