

Critical Games: Critical Design in Independent Games

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ABSTRACT

As a sign of the maturing game medium, critical games have grown to provide meaningful critique. Where once a critic might write an article, some have taken to making critical games. These games critique the conventions of digital experience to provide social commentary, examination of gameplay assumptions or simply create playful design. This paper provides a simple topographical view of critical games, proposing formal attributes for analyzing games made through critical design practices. The result is a formal two axes description. The first spectrum is the dichotomy between social critique and game mechanics critique, described as reflective and recursive respectively. The mechanics of these play experiences are further explained as either continuous or discontinuous, as executed through the rhythmic structure of the game. From this perspective, any critical game can be described by the apex between mechanic and social critique, continuous and discontinuous delivery. The result is a useful framing for game designers and game researchers.

Keywords

Critical games, critical design, critical gameplay

INTRODUCTION

As mediums mature, their critics multiply. While digital games have experienced a significant integration into the daily experience of modern society, they have also fostered a critical audience. This critical audience extends beyond content complaints and naysayers who question the value of such prevalent play. Its growth has also fostered the development of critical designers. These designers are not only critiquing the status quo of digital play, they are developing games that demonstrate their critiques. As a result, game critique is no longer solely expressed through journalistic writing, it is contained in the explicit design decisions of critical game makers.

It is a significant marker of the game medium's maturity when, as the modern digital game has done, there is a growing and significant body of work that responds to its canon. Critical games are created as a critique of the medium. Critical games use the medium to critique the medium. This is one of their most interesting characteristics, as it represents a complete feedback loop where criticism and conversation occur within the medium through the medium's terms.

Critical games critique conventions of gameplay, player expectations, and the myriad of entities and relationships that define digital games. This includes their relationship to the

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societies in which they exist. They do so by providing new game experiences that question the status quo or emphasize the assumptions in it. They remind players that every alien may not be a threat, that stopping to smell the flowers is a valid way to play (Critical Gameplay 2009) or that pitting one faith's deity against another is an absurd experience (Molleindustria 2008). They also remind players of potential tradeoffs in game-playing (Gage 2009) or of the many abstract game verbs we have yet to explore.

Critical games may also invert the relationship of games to life. They aim to remind us that our daily lives may be better understood as games (Molleindustria 2008) or that some political systems are in themselves absurdist games with no winners (Pope 2012). Critical games use critique as their game design premise. They have one goal – critical commentary through gameplay. These games have also been described by the terms critical gameplay, critical design games, and critical play.

Exemplary game designers in the critical games space include (in alphabetical order): Mary Flanagan, Zach Gauge, Paulo Pedercini, and the author, Lindsay Grace. Each of these individuals has created several games that employ critical design methodologies.

OVERVIEW OF CRITICAL GAMES:

With so many digital critical games now in existence it is unrealistic to describe them all in a single paper. Instead a series of emblematic games are provided as reference.

Few designers have been as resonant and as radical as Paulo Pedercini. His Molleindustria work resonates internationally as a source for sometimes discomfiting, always eye-opening work. While not all of the games in the collection are critical designs, several are. Most notably, Molleindustria's Phone Story (2011) is a game about the dark side of smart phone production, designed for play on smart phones. The game critiques the modes of production via the produced object. The game functions as guilty pleasure, painting a more uncomfortable picture as players continue to play. The critique, like many of the Molleindustria games, is direct, blunt and critical. The player must harvest precious minerals in slave-like conditions, catch factory workers as they attempt suicide under miserable work conditions, target hungry consumers and deconstruct electronic waste. Once each of these levels is complete, the cycle starts over again with the next generation of smart phone device. The critique is not simply of games, but of the systems on which they are played. The game attempts to bring to the forefront the generally obscured origin story of electronic entertainment devices.

There are several critical games that rely on a tension between explicit goals and player values. These games typically provide the player with a common or easily understood goal and then change the player's relationship to that goal. James Cox's Don't Kill the Cow (Cox 2012), for example, provides one goal – do not kill the cow. Each level of game play is punctuated with an emphatic cry for food from the non-player character who one presumes to be the player character's wife. In each level she becomes hungrier and hungrier, requesting that the player kill the cow for food. If the player fails to kill the cow, she dies. If the player kills the cow, they lose. The player must decide which is more important, their own goals or the life of a non-player character.

An earlier release, You Have to Burn the Rope (Bashiri 2008), frames the problem and the solution in its title. It integrates the same instructions in the start of the game. The player is able to shoot axes at a giant smiling colossus indefinitely. Gameplay ends when the player successfully burns the rope, one of the easiest tasks in the game. The payout is

a catchy musical number that sings the player's praise for accomplishing the task. The song can easily last longer than gameplay. The developer provides a strategy guide and literature about their critique. In the developer's own words – "The point was to make fun of other games that limit the player's interaction by being easy, linear, or heavily controlled" (Bashiri 2008). The game was a finalist in the Independent Game's Festival (IGF), precipitating critique about the value of such work and the merits of organizations like IGF and others that praised Bashiri's game. The game started with a critique of games, but escalated to critique the culture around it.

It is common for critical games to critique one very specific element of game design. Allen Henderson's *Steam Shovel Harry* (Projectnova 2012), for example, embraces the awkwardly and unnaturally long tutorial. Under pressure to save the Earth the player is subject to an extensively long and superfluous tutorial that extends into esoteric training and seems never to end. After clicking through linear training modules on Physics 101 and Astronomy 102 players seem perpetually on the verge of finishing their preparation, only to learn they have more to learn.

Likewise, *The Visit* (Fietzek et al. 2012), examines the common assumption that players can kill any obstacle that inconveniences them in a platform game. When the player character stomps the inconvenient crabs on their way through the level, players learn about the cruelty of such actions. First the player character is sent to court, then prison. Upon a lengthy prison stay the player character is released to a world wet with sorrow. Their home has been graffitied, the family of the player's victim's mourns at a grave. The player is given opportunities to apologize, and in so doing, may be able to repair the relationship with the friend they had planned to visit.

I Wanna be the Guy (O'Reilly 2008) takes a distinctly different tact. Instead of offering a single moment of critical distance, the game is a series of heavy handed and often unexpected alternate game experiences. The game's recipe is an equal combination of logic carried to a logical conclusion and absurd, illogical circumstances the player must endure. Logic exaggerations include the extreme danger of giant fruit or the all too obvious fact that moving the player character onto a sword is dangerous (it does not add the sword to an inventory, it kills the player character). On the other end of the spectrum, the game is littered with death traps with no hints, hidden platforms, and references to historical classics. *I Wanna Be the Guy* plays like a game written by someone who has read about platformers, but never played them. Many elements emulate convention, but they oscillate between too logical to completely illogical. The result reminds players of the wide range of assumptions they carry when playing such games.

Not all critical games provide their critique from within the confines of the digital display. Mary Flanagan's *Giant Joystick* (Flanagan 2006) is an example of a game that adjusts the scale of the input device as a point of critique. By simply enlarging the traditional Atari 2600 era joystick Flanagan's giant input device precludes a single player experience. To play the game classics, players must cooperate, issuing orders and aligning their actions to meet a common goal. The result is a critique of a game history which failed to offer cooperative play (biasing instead toward competitive play) and a reconceptualization of what it means to play together. It should also not be lost that the traditional joystick is scaled to comically large phallic proportions, offering plenty of fodder for critique of an era of male-dominated play and subsequent move toward machismo in later eras.

In compliment the authors *Big Huggin'* (Critical Gameplay 2012) aims to offer critique about both the player's relationship to their object of affection and the way that problems are solved in games. In *Big Huggin'*, players must hug a 30" stuffed bear to help an on-screen bear past his obstacles. The player is afforded approximately 12 degrees of hugging. The game offers one solution, a hug. Players can hug gently, give big hugs or something between. The scale of the hug must match the scale of the obstacle. In the end, the game critiques other more dominant input devices (e.g. toy guns, toy steering wheels and flight yolks) by providing another type of toy. This toy has little to do with aggression, and much more to do with providing support. The aim was to return to the halcyon space where hugging a toy closely is a comforting action in uncomfortable situations.

For each of the aforementioned games there are one or more similar iterations by other developers. *I Wanna be the Guy* has a newer compliment in *Default Dan* (Kikiwik Games 2014). *Don't Kill the Cow*, is structurally similar to *Every Day the Same Dream* (Molleindustria 2009), which bears clear similarities to *One Chance* (Moynihan 2010). Understanding how these games differ requires a careful understanding and analysis of critical games.

UNDERSTANDING CRITICAL DESIGN GAMES

The origin of such critical design games is a mixed confluence of streams. On the one end is the very purposeful critical design practice which champions commentary on modern society through the production of industrial design (Dunne and Raby 2001). Fiona Raby and Anthony Dunne provide a foundation that explicitly motivates the work in *Critical Gameplay* (Grace 2012) and to a lesser extent the work by *Seemingly Pointless* (Cox 2012). The human computer interaction community has very clearly adopted the design trajectory of critical design as evidenced by an increase in practice (Bardzel et al. 2014). Critical design exists as an alternate design practice. A tool and framework that sits among participatory design and other contemporary designs methodologies.

It is important to note that while particularly resonant in critical design practices within games, Mary Flanagan does not explicitly reference the work of Dunne and Raby in her seminal book, *Critical Play* (2009). Flanagan's perspective is more clearly informed by the longer trajectory of game history and art history. This perspective views the development of critical design as the reflection of social and cultural shifts. Flanagan's perspective is a socio-cultural mirror that voices itself in play and games, and less the directed process of industrial design methodologies emphasized by Dunne and Raby.

In compliment to critical design, is an acknowledgement of Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric (2007). From this stream a variety of games aim to highlight claims made by existing games and offer alternative claims. In this framing, games are ways of understanding the world. Critical games simply provide another way of understanding that same world. They serve as a type of cultural translation, providing alternative lens by responding to the emphatic claims of a mainstream cannon. Such games are the response to AAA mainstream and sometimes even the independent games of their peers. In the logical schema of these games, if all aliens are evil minions sent to destroy the earth, what does it mean to make humans the evil minions sent to destroy an alien planet? They ask questions about the procedural rhetoric inherent in common game mechanics offering alternatives that often have philosophically divergent results.

Social Critique, Mechanic Critique: Reflective and Recursive Play

The streams of design frameworks can form a spectrum between *social critique* and *mechanical critique*. *Social critique* looks outward from games toward the society and culture in which they exist. *Mechanical critique* looks inward at games from the perspective of game makers or players. Critical games exist between these two modes of critique.

As emphasized by the critical design scholars, most notably Flanagan and Dunne and Raby - design is reflective. Critical design takes as its subject the ways in which design reflects specific social characteristics. As the logic flows, a sexist society, makes sexist games. A racist culture, has racist play. From this perspective the designed object, whether game or ash tray, serves as a gauge of social anxiety, bias and value. Design provides a response to the social temperature or pressure. Critical design, is, from this perspective, a means for *social critique*. Notably, for such design to work it must create tension between social norms and its own asserted claims. A racist game in a racist culture has less chance of being critical design, because it fails to provide contrast. This is the dilemma of critical games – they must rely on reflection. Critical games, like most critique, need a subject to critique.

On the other end is design motivated by an interest in procedural rhetoric and assumptions of operational standards in games. These games are responding to an environment of mechanics. They are focused less on the social atmosphere and more on the atmosphere of doing. Such games and designed objects are focused on game mechanics. Critical mechanics are typically recursive. They begin with a contemporary standard and iterate on it. They are not focused on the social implications or context, per se, but instead on the experiential ones.

I Wanna Be the Guy is largely recursive, providing critique on conventional game mechanics in platform games. It exists as an iteration of mechanics popularized by Super Mario Brothers (Nintendo 1985). It has no social aspirations. Evidence of such is littered in it's own documentation. They are evident in screenshots that read “you jumped into a sword you retard” (O'Reily 2007). The game is a self-described “8-bit masochism” (O'Reily 2007). I Wanna Be the Guy does not exist without an 8-bit mechanics history. Once it critiques that history, it is ripe for critique by other game designers. So begins the recursive critique of game mechanics.

None of the mechanics in Phone Story are new or noteworthy. The game is a series of game mechanic affirmations (e.g. sorting, shooting). The complete value of the game is in the system it reflects. It is a *social critique*. The game mainly looks outward to the society in which it is played, providing a game as the medium to critique the non-game system.

Between these are games like Big Huggin' and Giant Joystick. Both games employ common game mechanics without critique, save for the player's interface mediated experience. The games reflect the outside social world by forcing players to resolve an in-game problem in a new way. Players, not player characters, must interact in a way that provides social critique on affection and cooperation respectively.

Don't Kill the Cow, Every Day the Same Dream, One Chance and the myriad of other critical games that reflect on the tension between player's needs and the rules of the game rest between the reflective and recursive dichotomy. They bias toward social critique, but

provide somewhat unique mechanics that employ a kind of procedural rhetoric around monotony, internal conflict and arguments for breaking free of prescribed game rules.

From this framing, games with limited points of critique, are hardest to categorize because they offer so few data points. The Visit largely relies on a single moment, the moment of killing a non-player character. By definition, recursion is repeated, complicating the notion that such a game is a mechanic critique. Likewise, there is little reflection on the non-game world or the society in which it exists. Games like You Only Live Once (Raitendo 2009), in which the bulk of the game is a humorous series of snippets from after the player character has died falls in the same data limited dilemma. This is perhaps, because these games are less about repeated critique and more about humor.

Humor

It is important to acknowledge that not all critical designs are serious in their pursuits. Some exist simply as humor. Some critical games are more whimsical, aiming simply to provide humor in poignant ways. These games do not readily acknowledge any explicit philosophical or epistemological goals. They are not concerned with employing procedural rhetoric, nor are they interested in any social reflection. They are instead merely games asking the very important – what if? Such games are like riddles on candy wrappers or one-line jokes.

Humorous games commonly adopt a design mantra that takes an existing standard and carries it to its absurd end. In some cases they are satire carried to a meaningful end. In others ways they are merely absurdist humor. Humor is the result of either and both mechanical and societal response. As such, it is useful to consider humor as the product of both social and mechanical critique.

Critical design is not merely alternative play. Critical design is directed at a target. It is aimed not at some abstract alternate, it instead responds to a set of design assumptions. In this way it can also function as a sort of social barometer. The elements that designers aim to critique are likely to be the ones with which they take the most issue. It is no surprise then that many games' critical designs offer alternatives to player understanding of death, circumstance and values (e.g. the Visit and You Only Live Once). It is also not surprising that such games pursue some humorous or satirical approach to the issues.

Structural Delivery: Continuous and Discontinuous Critique

Critical designs games are often small games. They are low budget gestures that are quick to deliver their critique. Structurally there is a general dichotomy between this delivery. The structure of critical designs rests between the *continuous* and *discontinuous* poles.

Many critical games are emphatic in their structure, repeating their critique over and over through common game mechanics, a set of repeating scenarios, or explicitly delivered messages. When these games deliver their critique it is not a one-time experience, but a repetitive chorus that carries the bulk of the game experience. Games that rely on a repetitive critical design can be called *continuous critical designs*.

Once a player accepts the newly asserted foundation of a continual critical design the player can function in the game world with little if any tension. Once the player assumes the premise of the game and continues to accept it, the game becomes a smooth, rhythmic

experience of practicing the asserted critique. This does not mean that the player is without internal tension while playing, but that the experience is consistent and persistent.

On the other end of the spectrum are *discontinuous critiques*. In these games the moment of critique is a single point. It is a moment built for discordant juxtaposition. The most common structure is to lead a player down a path and then provide some pivotal moment that was designed as critique. In narrative terms these games employ red herrings or intermittent plot twists. In poetic terms, these games break meter. They are discontinuous in that play may end with a single hyphenated critical moment or the game may stack them providing a series of distinct critiques.

Discontinuous critical games commonly rely on player assumption. They prey not on the uninitiated game player who lacks the expectations and extrinsic knowledge about the way digital games are played. Instead these games work best on the initiated, on players who are so entrenched in their expectations of digital play that they fail to be aware of their expectations. Interestingly, and likely unsurprisingly, this discordant juxtaposition works best on players who are very familiar with digital play. It is those player that have the hardest time adjusting from their standard experience to the new critical one. Such games often remind players of their cultural assumptions as game players, revealing specific enculturated expectations.

Master designers of critical games know this, and employ it as mechanic. Tiltfactor's card game, Buffalo (2012), explicitly uses this type of juxtaposition to highlight cultural bias. The discordant structure is the tension players experience when they become aware of their bias.

This critical discordant juxtaposition has been described in previous writing as discomfort design (Grace 2011). In a social impact scenario this type of experience can be highly effective in forcing players to reflect on their understanding of a specific scenario. In short, the moment when player expectations are broken serves as a moment to recollect, reflect, and ask key questions like: why did I do that? why is this so hard? why did I think that was true?

CATEGORIZING SPECIFIC CRITICAL GAMES

It is important to understand that critical design is not bad design. It is more than glitch, as it is purposeful design. To understand the work as bad design is to fail to understand its point. While The Daily Show may be lousy reporting, it can also be understood as excellent satire (Baym 2005). Not all critical designs are satirical, but they are by definition critiquing another. Accordingly they are often dependent on their game history and the existence of a mainstream games. Like satire they do not work without the thing they are critiquing. Like political satire and religious satire the one does not exist without its reference.

Like other critical approaches, this co-dependence between critical design and its subject of critique does provide an opportunity for classification. It is reasonable to classify critical designs based on the thing to which they are critiquing. Games that critique first person shooter (FPS) mechanics, could for example, be defined as FPS-critical games.

However, like many classification scheme this is immediately frustrated by the myriad of hybridized critique. If a game does more than critique the mechanics of first person shooters, is it appropriate to merely label it as an FPS-critical game? Likewise, where

does a game that critiques social problems (e.g. sexism and racism) from within a critique of standardized game mechanics rest?

It is also frustrated by the many unanswered questions that plague the science and art of classifying games. For this reason it seems useful to consider the subject of classification as a secondary attribute from which structural elements of the game's critique are parent.

To understand critical design, it is then perhaps more useful to examine their structural rhythm of delivery (discontinuous or continuous), and their design motivations (reflective or recursive). Design motivation provides the context of critique. Framing games via rhythms and motivations is not far from the previously published work on the analogy between game design and poetry (Grace 2011). From this perspective critical designs can be described in a four quadrant grid as shown in figure 1. The X axis describes how much the game structure is either *continuous* or *discontinuous*. The Y axis describes how much the game is either *social critique* or *mechanics critique*.

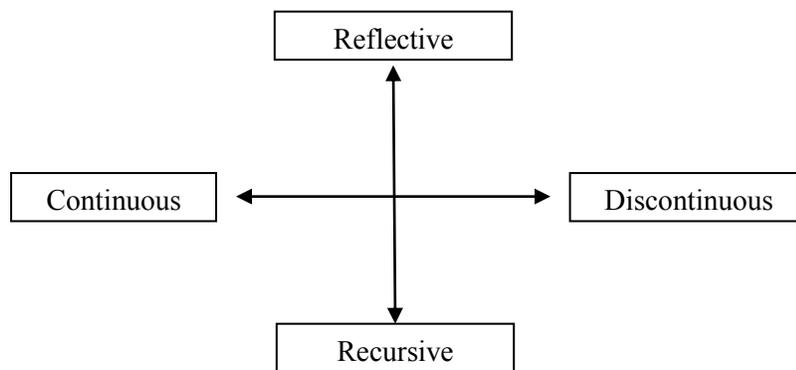


Figure 1: The spectrums of critical games

Plotting a game's key aspects in this way allows for a quick understanding of the critique. Games that are continuous, for example, are likely to translate to emphatic critique. Games that are very discontinuous, perhaps offering only 1 key moment of critique, are likely to use that moment to shock the player. Recursive games are likely to be less political, simply because they focus their critique narrowly. Highly reflective games may be more explicitly about social critique, but may also offer little in the way of new mechanics.

As with any system there are loopholes and caveats. This paper does not mean to argue that a game cannot be engaged in both social critique and mechanics critique. Instead, this framing is designed to help illuminate the ways in which these games work. It is more of a rule of thumb from which analysis can begin and design initiates.

CONCLUSION

This paper does not endeavor to provide a definitive analysis of critical games. Instead it provides an overview of them, providing a topographical view of their characteristics as a first pass on mapping the landscape. This is, to emphasize the analogy, a new world in the universe of digital play. It is a world for which some characteristics are known but many spaces remain unexplored. This fairly young design approach is not unique to games, but it is uniquely apt to games. It shares several characteristic with other design areas,

particularly industrial design, but departs from them in its heavy reliance on the enculturated game conventions.

The ability for such games to break, or at least highlight enculturated assumptions resonates clearly as a methodology for social impact play. Yet to master the techniques of critical games, the games must be more clearly understood. This research aims simply to demystify the design practice by providing a means for both describing and dissecting their structural and philosophical elements. The understanding of critical designs between reflective and recursive helps define the design philosophy, while the spectrum between continuous and discontinuous describes the game's rhythm and mechanics.

This framing can be applied to both digital and analog games. Digital games in particular offer unique opportunities for critical game design. Digital games are less bound by the physical realities of analog play, although they are potentially less effective than analog play at social experimentation. It is hoped that such design analysis as presented here, furthers the development and exploration in critical games.

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