

Letter to the Editor

Cyborgs and Academia

Johannes Köller

Let me start off by congratulating you on the first issue of your new journal. The launch of a new academic publication is rarely accompanied by much fanfare, so the fact that you have already started discussions in the wider game-dissecting public, or even the fact that I am aware of your existence, is a success. That discussion is also why I wanted to write you.

I have read Brendan Keogh's "Across Worlds and Bodies" with delight, or the closest thing to delight an academic text can produce. The opposing figures of the academic and the blogger might be rhetorical—the purity complex he describes is as present in the academic study of games as it is in the tirades of videogame fans descending on titles that they deem too much like a book or a film—but I appreciate his stance on formalism immensely. I like to think of it in terms the outdated prescriptivist view of linguistics: A set of rules and definitions for well-formed games or language that pays too little attention to the reality of either, and excludes that which it doesn't understand instead of making an effort to do so.

The model of player and game as a combined cyborg entity is an interesting way to make sense of play, but I am especially happy about the potential naming conventions it brings with it. If player and game are joined together as one, then the activity of playing the game becomes playing with oneself. Players are engaged in cyborg masturbation, and we in cyborg masturbation critique. At last the argument over what to call our object of study—videogames, digital games, computer games—could be resolved: We study erotica for human-machine hybrids.

To return to the main thread of the text, the call for academia to take a page from games blogging's book is another idea I support, I am just not sure it goes far enough.

In their discussion of Keogh's piece, Lana Polansky and Zolani Stewart take a very critical stance on this proposal. I was confused by this at first, because it seemed like a case of academia learning to do better and many of the problems they list, like the exclusionary models imposed by formalism, are things Keogh explicitly argues against. However, the more I thought about it, the more I started to agree with them. On a purely discursive level, this could be a simple shift in perspective, but when you keep in mind the institutional issues of academia, they are right to worry about this repeat offender trying to extend its territory.

The problem here, I think, is that it is impossible to talk about the language of academia without talking about its structures and politics. Keogh does that: He mentions how the

attempts to establish an exceptionalism of games are tied to the fight for funds. The fact that he is involved in games blogging and makes extensive reference to the work of bloggers helps his article feel respectful. You also do that: Nicholas Hanford's editorial discusses your wishes for middle-state, feed-forward publishing, but more importantly, the fact that this journal is open-access and I could read both texts without having to prove to your servers that I am part of an academic institution is a big deal.

However, that doesn't change the fact that the majority of academic work still exists behind such firewalls or paywalls, and while you might not be putting up that barrier, you are speaking the same language, which is a barrier of its own. On the flipside, it is also impossible to talk about the structures of academia without talking about its language, which often serves as little more than an intellectual power grab. If you are unwilling or unable to navigate my six-line sentence, half of it Greek or Latin, I have established intellectual dominance.

For the longest time, it was never an option for non-academics to read academic texts, so clarity was not a big concern. Opening up now will take more than just making texts available. It takes a lot of time to read such articles, especially if you have not been trained in navigating them, and this effectively excludes people who cannot afford that commitment, even in an open-access journal. I will admit that your work is already much more readable than most academic publications, but the fact that Zoya Street wrote a summary of Keogh's key points on Medium still speaks volumes about its accessibility.

This aspect of academia is especially infuriating to me because it developed, at least partly, in pursuit of objectivity, another one of its vices. To this day, large parts of academia are unwilling to admit that they are part of the world they are studying and slow to consider how they are affecting it or how they are complicit in its ills. The same ideal of detached study carries into its formal language requirements, written and unwritten, and the more training I receive in this skill, the more I wonder if it can be described as anything else than keeping up appearances.

Perhaps this all sounds very bitter, but it could be said that the greatest and entirely accidental success of studying critical theory is that I have become a critic of the institution that teaches it to me. I can appreciate the desire to change it, but I also believe it requires something beyond an incremental overhaul. This may be a strange question to bring to an academic journal, but if blogs have been doing a better job examining games than academic articles, is it really worth the trouble of bothering with the latter?

Sincerely,
Joe Köller

From the Editors: Johannes Köller is editor-in-chief of Haywire Magazine, a foreign correspondent for Critical-Distance, and a regular author at Video Game Tourism.