Game Criticism as Tangential Learning Facilitator: The Case of *Critical Intel*

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Abstract

Video games have enormous potential to encourage tangential learning, but there are several obstacles that mar this self-guided process. These include online misinformation, the lack of a learning structure, and a public who are poor at source criticism. Enter explanatory game criticism, a critical structure that seeks to provide a partial solution for these problems. Explanatory game criticism is a critical method that directs the critique at the game's audience rather than its creators. Rather than criticizing the game itself, its objective is to educate the audience about real-world material the game references. Using vetted information and academic models in its critique; explanatory criticism generates a springboard for tangential learners and offers them several routes to continue gathering knowledge on their own. This paper defines and outlines explanatory criticism using the author's column Critical Intel *as an example of how this type of criticism plays out on a weekly basis.*

Author Biography

Robert Rath is a freelance writer and analyst based in Hong Kong. His work has appeared at several outlets, but he is primarily known for writing the weekly column *Critical Intel* at *Escapist Magazine*, which explores how video games overlap with reality. A graduate of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, he holds BA degrees in History and Religion. While studying at Manoa, Robert conducted grant-funded research in London examining how the Georgian state exerted religious pressure on prisoners prior to execution. The resulting paper, "Launched into Eternity: The Role of Religious Ritual in Georgian Execution," won the 2007 North American Conference on British Studies Undergraduate Essay Contest. He has conducted research and analysis for law firms, private individuals and corporate clients, work that has taken him from boardrooms to archaeological digs in New Mexico. He has written two (unpublished) novels, traveled extensively in Asia, and has trekked both the Andes and the Himalayas. Robert is preparing a *Critical Intel* ebook anthology.

Critical Intel is an ongoing column series at *Escapist Magazine*. Running every week since October of 2012, the column analyzes the space where games and reality overlap. It's an intentionally broad mission, allowing me to engage in historical criticism of *Assassin's Creed* one week, discuss politics in *Call of Duty* the next, and even comment on industry issues like conflict minerals.

But there's another side to *Critical Intel*. From its inception I designed the column to facilitate tangential learning—to provide a structure where curious readers can both learn about the world through the lens of games, and also train and habituate critical thinking skills. In this paper I will explain my methods regarding this field of "explanatory criticism," suggest how this critical method can facilitate learning in a self-directed environment, and explore why games as text are uniquely suited to this role.

Games as a Starting Point for Learning

The webseries *Extra Credits* was the first to suggest games as a potential venue for "tangential learning" during a 2008 episode (Floyd & Portnow). In an accompanying article for *Edge, Extra Credits* writer and game designer James Portnow (2008) explained tangential learning as "the idea that some portion of your audience will self educate if you can facilitate their introduction to topics they might like in a context they already find exciting and engaging." Essentially, Portnow's tangential learning is related to J. Scott Armstrong's (1978) "natural learning" concept, in which the learner directs their education through setting goals, engaging in active learning tasks, obtaining feedback on performance and applying what was learned. A similar movement known as *inquiry based learning* has come into vogue in many modern classrooms (Education Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). In inquiry learning, the student starts out with a self-created question, and—along with a facilitator to guide them—gathers evidence and proposes answers that lead to further inquiry. The problem with Portnow's (2008) tangential learning model is that it lacks any way to provide feedback or direction to the learner.

Portnow's "tangential learning" concept suggests exciting opportunities, especially when one realizes that games naturally lend themselves toward inquiry learning. Games are exercises in exploration. Players dive into the world challenged with finding, collecting and discovering new elements. Often in games like the *Assassin's Creed* series and its cottage industry of kissing cousins, what players discover lead to encyclopedic database entries that flesh out the world. Finding new buildings may unlock a data card containing that structure's history, for instance, or meeting an historical character might open up a biography. When you strip away the gloss and glow of user interfaces, these are actually in-game appendices not much different than what you'd find in an academic text. Some games, with the ability to snap straight to an entry the moment the player encounters that game element, even function like footnotes. So games don't just have the power to facilitate tangential learning, they also habituate players to searching for and collecting information. This ability to habituate behavior through game systems has even been suggested by Schrier (2014) as a method for teaching ethics,

since they give the student a process for thinking in ethical systems. Given this, I suggest that games may habituate educational inquiry as well.

Tangential Learning: An Incomplete Model

However, while games may be uniquely suited toward tangential learning, they also present difficulties. Because learning happens entirely without direction or feedback, learners may face problems with structuring and evaluating the information they find.

Information quality remains a problem. Most players go straight to Wikipedia when they want to know about something in broad strokes. In his 2008 article, Portnow even suggested games could link directly to the site as a quick and cost-effective way to add channels toward educational content. While this is an elegant solution from a design perspective, Wikipedia is not an optimal source. One factor is that outside parties have been known to manipulate its content, especially on political topics (see Davis, 2006). The second—and ultimately more important point—is that Wikipedia doesn't present information in a way that provides full context. That's bad for understanding and kills retention. Wikis are often information dumps with little organization or style. And while this can be problematic with wiki entries that lend themselves toward narrative structure—historical events or works of literature, for instance—it's devastating to entries on science, mathematics or philosophy that have no natural timeline to keep readers oriented.

While games might inspire players to seek out information and may even model doing so in gameplay, they don't teach players how to evaluate the information they find. Though common sense dictates that the amount of dubious content on the internet would sharpen our source criticism skills, many people online cannot tell a credible source from a spurious one. This is partially due to the fact that the only feedback in self-directed research comes when we post a fake article on Facebook and get forced into a sheepish retraction. It's an environment where false information can only be caught after it's broadcasted.

The final problem with tangential learning has to do with structure. Raw information can only benefit a reader so much until it's filtered through intellectual theory, such as literary and historical theories. Absent a structure to understand data, wikis provide a shallow understanding of the world, the kind of names-and-dates teaching we all hated as students. The trouble is readers will generally not apply these theories without prompting.

***Critical Intel*: Explanatory Writing as Game Criticism**

Critical Intel attempts to fill this gap in the natural/tangential learning process with a dedicated weekly space for structured inquiry. The column aims to give readers vetted information in a digestible format that will augment and facilitate their own explorations. The further hope is that regular readers will model the column, internalizing the critical tone and academic structures so that readers, themselves, improve at processing information and reading games as critical text.

This method is what, for these purposes, I'll call "explanatory game criticism," a method of writing about games that hopes to improve the audience's understanding of games and how they fit into a wider societal context. Explanatory criticism differs from most current critical theories in its focus. For example, Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark's (2014) *A Game Design Vocabulary* stated that: "What a critic does is articulate an idea that's at work in a game, puts it in a context with other games, with other schools. They help explain the work to others; they start a discussion" (p. 10). Explanatory criticism stands apart from this definition by contextualizing a game's narrative elements, presentation and mechanics against the real elements they're drawing upon rather than against other games. While this can (and does) start discussions, explanatory criticism's goal is educational rather than consumerist, communicative or even artistic. Therefore, it also does not fit the classification from Ian Bogost's (2014) "What games need?" lecture, where he proposed reading games as literary text, but suggested that critics look at each game in isolation ("specific criticisms for specific games"). Explanatory criticism instead treats games as cultural products, with the objective to get the audience to examine the culture, rather than examine the product. While most game criticism is developer-focused ("How does this game succeed and fail?"), explanatory criticism remains audience-focused ("What can we learn from this game's successes and failures?"). It assumes the reader has already played the game and maximizes their learning through analysis and vetted avenues for inquiry.

Therefore, explanatory criticism has more in common with theories concerning games in the classroom. Teachers have students employ this method on a regular basis when they, for example, have students critique a game's depiction of history—a process Jeff Mummert (2014) referred to as writing a "glog" (presumably "game blog"). The objective in this process is to enhance a student's grip on classroom material rather than judge a game's overall quality. Indeed, even a game that's poor or badly researched can benefit students if they're tasked with finding the real information and critiquing the game's failures.

So in brief, what is explanatory game criticism, and what are its defining traits? Explanatory game criticism is a method written specifically to foster tangential learning. It treats games as pop-culture products, using them as a launching point to educate readers about real-world political, social, economic or scientific concepts. In doing so, it critiques games in an educational context, providing sources that let readers explore further into vetted information. It counteracts misinformation by addressing the reader directly rather than directing criticism toward the developers and the game. Far from being an info-dump, it presents knowledge using a theoretical lens that, over time, readers can learn via practice and use for future explorations. Finally, it develops an "archive" of knowledge readers can revisit either out of interest or for academic study.

I've broken this system down into four hallmarks: *fostering tangential learning*, *combating misinformation*, *engaging readers with real-world issues*, and *creating reference materials*.

Fostering Tangential Learning

First and foremost, *Critical Intel* serves as a resource for the curious player. An alternative to the kitchen-sink nature of Wikipedia, the column presents information targeted directly at the game's issues. One column focused on how *Spec Ops: The Line, Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, and *Unmanned* presented drone warfare, for instance, while another served as a turn-of-the-century primer for *BioShock Infinite* (Rath, 2012; Rath, 2013a). All information comes from trusted sources, like the BBC, *The New York Times*, nonfiction books and scholarly articles, and provides links in order to facilitate deeper levels of tangential inquiry. Whenever possible, the column links to online information rather than physical books, since readers who dig deeper are more likely to read a free article than purchase a book off Amazon.

Just as crucial to source quality, however, is how you present the material. Though some *Critical Intel* articles amount to a grab bag of interesting facts or additional information, more often than not it examines the topic through the lens of a scholarly theory. For example, an article about how *Dishonored* matches up to English honor culture used Foucauldian historiography to interpret character clashes through the lens of power relationships (Rath, 2013b). Generally these theories are not named explicitly unless teaching about them is one of the direct aims of the article—a column about the Battle of Hoth that explains the concept of military doctrine, for instance—they're only utilized in the context at hand (Rath, 2013c). This limits the academic terms and keeps the column accessible. The important thing, after all, is to get readers to think and engage with the critical structure rather than be able to name it in class. Using this tactic I've written columns incorporating social history, feminist theory, counterterrorism theory, academic interpretations of religion and folklore, and even epidemiology. This is by no means unique to *Critical Intel*. Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Videogames* examines games through the lens of feminist theory, and in doing so teaches that theory's structure to its audience.

The hope is that after engaging with these academic and rhetorical structures on a regular basis, readers will apply them to their own thought processes or find them easier to grasp when encountering them in the classroom. Even if readers strongly disagree with the criticism's approach and point out where the conceptual approach fails (and all approaches fail at one point or another), it still leads readers into engaging with a game's concepts in a critical manner.

Combating Misinformation

As discussed above, misinformation has become a major plague in the internet age, and gaming gets its fair share. From sensationalist mainstream press coverage to organized disinformation campaigns like GamerGate, the game press spends an increasing amount of time debunking bad information.

For the purposes of tangential learning though, the game press needs to confront misinfor-

mation spread through games themselves. As games increasingly depict historical periods and real-world issues, there's a greater danger of passing on counterfactual information by accident or design. *Extra Credits* explored this murky territory in their two-part video on propaganda games, with the second part focusing on how *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* misrepresents the Mexican Cartel War (Floyd & Portnow, 2011). While *Extra Credits* does seek to influence design, explanatory criticism should remain player-focused, not designer-focused. Educating players about the liberties game designers take not only corrects specific misconceptions, but it fosters healthy skepticism and a habit to check references rather than assuming games are authoritative voices. This is especially crucial when games that sell themselves on "realism" actively manipulate information. For example, one *Critical Intel* column last year critiqued Activision's *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* advertorial documentary "Superpower for Hire," a *Vice* production which misrepresented facts to make *Advanced Warfare* seem more plausible (Rath, 2014). The point here should be to develop a counter-narrative to the games themselves, not to name and shame but to educate.

Engage Readers with Real World Issues

Critical Intel examines how games interact with the world, and in doing so hopes to expand readers' knowledge about the world and games' place in it. This might mean showing readers applied technology programs or discussions about how games are changing everything from medical treatment to museum displays. It can also use the pseudo-realism and reality-inspired material of the AAA space as a jumping off point to educate readers about politics, history or science. Games deal with a fairly wide range of issues when you consider it—2014's release calendar alone brought us topics like the French Revolution, civilians in warfare, private military contractors, information security, terraforming, Nazi atrocities, and border controls among others. Once one sees games as a starting point for discussion rather than the last word, it's clear that they hold enormous opportunities to facilitate engagement and foster learning with real-world topics. For example, when *Watch Dogs* came out, *Polygon* produced a documentary feature on Chicago's citywide camera system that inspired the game's own surveillance network (Hall, 2013).

Another opportunity is to dive into the economics and political policy inherent in the game industry itself. Now a global industry, game manufacturing and sales have turned into a force in politics and business, affecting both economic policy and the market. Examining the business side can not only give readers a better look at the industry as a whole, but it also schools them in basic economics and international politics. Articles detailing Chinese game policies teach about censorship and trade protection. Stock-watching and reporting on company operations, as *Gamasutra* does, can show how the retail market and corporate structures function. And, of course, the criminally underreported problem of conflict minerals shows how first-world consumer culture fuels conflicts in the developing world.

Creating Reference Materials

Finally, we need to preserve all of these discussions in a format that's easy to reference years into the future. As academic studies related to games move forward, we will need to start creating forms of game criticism that do not disappear from public view with a server crash or site bankruptcy. It's important to keep the most vital materials available so that discussion can continue.

This runs counter to the recent philosophy of game journalism/criticism, which privileges viral success over building a body of work. Short-term projects keep the lights on, true, but they have little value over time. I doubt anyone today is particularly interested in seeing a gallery of *Halo 2* preview images, but you could certainly find students eager to read an essay on the game's subtext.

A popular solution is to create game writing ebook anthologies. This distribution method gains more traction in game writing every year, prompted by early pioneers like Brendan Keogh's (2013) *Killing is Harmless*, a book-length critique of *Spec Ops: The Line*, and the free Game Journalism Prize anthologies. I'm currently pursuing this option for *Critical Intel* so that the work itself stays in print, and is easier to assign as reading in an academic environment.

Conclusion

While games have great potential in tangential learning, we need to prepare a landing place for inquiry that's more suitable than raw information. Explanatory criticism can fill this gap by providing vetted information in a structure that gives the learner a basis to start his or her learning. Hopefully, after a habituation period they may even benefit from unconscious modeling that influences their own outlook and future inquires.

Of course, explanatory criticism isn't a panacea, and there are several areas where the approach runs into difficulty. First, it's an approach where the dedicated audience is fairly small, and in a writing market that chases page views, it may not be economically viable in the long term. Second, it works best in text format where there are citations readers can click, meaning it will have to evolve as criticism increasingly shifts to video (though web series like *Extra Credits* and *Tropes vs. Women* manage to pack much educational content into the format). And of course it's possible that most readers don't follow the citation links at all, and their learning stops at the end of the article—though in that case, they at least know more than when they started.

Though formats may evolve and markets may shift, human curiosity remains constant. And as long as players want to know more about the real events, people and ideas that inspired their game worlds, there will always be a space for someone to explain it to them—and an opportunity to educate them when they put the controller down.

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