

**Editorial**

# Standing on the Horizon of the Second Generation

Nicholas Hanford, editor-in-chief

On behalf of the editorial board of the Journal of Games Criticism, I would like to welcome you to the inaugural issue of this new peer-reviewed, open-access journal. This academic journal was born from a game studies reading group that took place over the summer of 2013, where the ideals of feed-forward and middle-state publishing (Wilcox, 2013; Hawreliak, 2013a) came to challenge the disciplinary approaches we had taken for granted. With this journal, it is our aim to create a space for all members of the game studies, game journalism, and game development communities to publish criticism that influences both the making of games and betters our understanding of games as cultural artifacts.

We have an incredibly exciting group of articles to usher this journal into the world. Invited author Brendan Keogh described games criticism's theoretical legacies and has laid the groundwork for years to come with methodological suggestions for criticism. Similarly invited, Aaron Trammell and Aram Sinnreich visualized game studies with a particular emphasis on classifying the material and social aspects of games.

Our inaugural set of articles includes a range of authors and topics. Amanda Lange presented us with a wealth of knowledge from a large study she conducted on the moral choice behavior of gamers. Kent Aardse discussed the importance of the uncanny valley and how it allows for any masochistic action by the player. David Heineman provided us with a digest of retrogaming and its impact on gaming's public memory. Lastly, in our review section, Qihao Ji reviewed Jane McGonigal's *Reality is Broken* to help us understand where this intersection of games and psychology fits into games criticism.

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## Author Biography

Nicholas Hanford is a graduate student in the Department of Communication and Media at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He holds a B.A. in Media and Communication Studies and a B.S. in Biology from Ursinus College. His work focuses primarily on games criticism and theories of audience and identity. He has previously contributed to Higher Level Gamer and operates the blog The Man of Many Frowns. He can be reached on Twitter @ManofManyFrowns.

The past several years have seen a slow but steady increase in the output of games criticism from dozens upon dozens of outlets. *Five Out of Ten* to *Unwinnable*, *Radiator* to *The Border House* have all been established with different values in mind, but with the constant of being established on ideals and not wishes. This might also be the reason why many of these outlets have come and gone. Kenneth Burke wrote that an ideal is “by definition something that is beyond attainment” while a wish is “a state of affairs that is at least beyond attainment at the time” (373). It has always struck me that games criticism doesn’t offer wishes to its readers, but always returns to ideals. It’s not that critics don’t understand the certain level of impossibility in working with ideals—it’s that they thrive within it. It is the assumption that we are dealing with ideals that is possibly most central to this venture.

In gathering ideas for writing this piece, I tried to trawl the editorials of past game journals’ inaugural issues for possible topics. James Paul Gee (2006) wrote *Games and Culture’s* “Why Game Studies Now?” that discussed the important place games have in everyday culture. Espen Aarseth’s opener for *Game Studies* (2001), “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” brought the social aspects of gaming to the fore and established the importance of a discipline that treated games as unique objects. These are fantastic pieces that should be praised for their forward thinking and valuable guiding words.

But, I arrived at the question: What is the role of criticism for videogames? This was the question that constantly came into my mind during the summer reading group that preceded this journal, and with it comes its own set of assumptions. With this question, we ascertain a heading that veers away from previous games journals into the realm of criticism.

While this is most likely the ‘black hole’ question of the journal, gravitationally impacting each text, it is not one that every article or issue will necessarily discuss explicitly. However, asking the role of criticism is the heart and soul of our endeavor, both because of the possible answers we will receive and also due to the assumptions of the question, namely the possibility of intervention and the nature of criticism as process itself.

Steve Wilcox’s (2013) article on feed-forward publishing has been a guiding text for this journal, but we are looking to open up his argument even further. At the center of feed-forward is the promise of reciprocation, the ideal that videogame criticism will affect those creating games. This would allow for criticism to drive the principles of games development and the principles of the medium itself. However, this is a unidirectional view of intervention that we need only look to the history of game studies to debunk. Literary, film, art and other avenues of criticism were not able to fully deal with the unique aspects of games for much of their existence. It has only been recently that games writers have been able to fully intervene in criticism with games, making sure that appropriate values are being brought into the new context and new values are being established along with the cultural objects they are interrogating.

Along with the possibility of intervention, there is the assumption that criticism is required to acknowledge new contexts and games are required to recognize new criticisms. The promise of intervention allows for a parallel progression of both criticism and games. Criticism is a process, and as a process, it must always be about becoming—progress. Without intervention and progress, games criticism and games are both doomed to stay in a cultural womb, protected by their originating principles, but unable to fully mature.

While there is no particular endpoint or path for criticism and gaming to take in this progression, there are some principles that we borrow from existing arenas of game criticism. Game studies has been content with being academically insular and has walled out many important members of various gaming communities. Northrop Frye (2000) wrote of the necessity to embrace the polysemous, open nature of texts for criticism to succeed. What he failed to mention is that polysemy can only be realized if the criticism community surrounding the objects is heterogeneous and extensively varied. Progress cannot be achieved with hegemonic or singular views being expressed. Instead, for both videogames and criticism to progress, a radical inclusivity is required. Developers, journalists, players, culture critics, distributors, and the numerous other positions involved in the creation of gaming's objects and procedures need to contribute if criticism's wishes are to be fully actualized.

In asking a question, we also have assumed that it was the appropriate question to ask. "What is the role of criticism?" is a common enough question that has probed plenty of contexts. However, there is the more common question, "What is the role of the critic?" which with a Google search quickly turns into a cliché. I would like to take a moment to explain why this is not the guiding query of this journal.

Asking for the role of the critic reeks of past media and the paths that they took in their quests for cultural legitimacy. It is the reason that videogames writers are told to find their own Roger Ebert (Spector, 2013) or Pauline Kael (Jeffries, 2009) or Lester Bangs (Klosterman, 2006). It is a thought process along the lines of looking for the *Citizen Kane* of videogames in that it proposes singular solutions to a problem (a problem of cultural legitimacy that might not even exist). The role of the critic is to emulate Roger Ebert—not to write or do anything in particular, but to craft a personality on the scale and in the mold of previous critics. It does not seek progression or process, continuity or contradiction. Instead the question is a safety net, a warm blanket of tradition that allows some games writers to plan out what their future might look like based on old, imperfect histories.

Game studies and game criticism have long understood the problem of following the trajectories of previous media. From the earliest, almost proto-criticism of Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, it was realized that traditional literary criticism would not simply settle neatly in the gaming context: *Tetris* could not be read like an abstract painting. With ludology, narratology, and proceduralism (along with many other phases of game studies) criticism stumbled along like the toddler that it was, finding its contextual feet for its body of critique.

Criticism teathed with every new game it encountered, finely tuning its motor skills on everything from Intellivision to the Xbox One.

And now we are at a point that some are calling the third generation of game studies. The problem with the third generation, as Cameron Kunzelman stated in his interview with Jason Hawreliak at *First Person Scholar* (Hawreliak, 2013b), is that there have been two main trajectories for criticism in this time. The first was that it continues in the same vein that it has, extending the first two generations of academia. It settles for the immersive insulation that the previous epochs have established yet is more conservative because there is no requirement to leave its rapidly solidifying habitat. The other possibility, one that Kunzelman didn't have hope in, is that this third generation can move away from that academic hegemony.

This brings me to the last group of assumptions that I want to discuss. The form and name of this establishment is that of the traditional academic journal. The traditional academic journal brings certain values and assumptions with it, assumptions and values that could very well be detrimental to games criticism itself. We share the fears that Kunzelman discussed, but we also understand that the form of the journal is one that can spawn incredible content. Just as games and criticism ideally follow parallel paths of progression, the journal is also required to progress. The academic journal, or more likely the stagnating grasp of academia on the form of the journal, must adapt to the new contexts that videogames bring forth. It cannot afford to establish a moat between the academic and the non-academic, between producer and critic.

The potential of the academic journal is an ideal for many. For us, it is a wish.

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