

Passion as Method: Subjectivity in Video Games Criticism

Stephanie C. Jennings

Abstract

Responding to a longstanding wariness of the subjectivity of the critic—both within game studies and humanities disciplines more broadly—this essay proposes an approach to games criticism in which the subjectivity of the critic is accepted as central, unavoidable, and necessary. It is built upon textual analysis as a method, but would complicate certain taken-for-granted concepts of text in analyses of video games. While acknowledging that textual “readings” occur during playthroughs of games, I attempt to destabilize this concept by highlighting its incompleteness and radical variability.

Moreover, to contend with the uncertainty of the playthrough, I suggest a distinction between potential textualities (domains of possible texts) and actualized textualities (the texts that a player experiences across moments of play) for readings of game texts. This differentiation calls attention to the inclusion of the player as a part of the text, and thus incorporates the critic-as-player and the critic’s experiences into the text(s) under analysis. I conclude that this method also provides sources for political intervention in games criticism as a part of struggles over meaning making. A greater understanding of and acceptance for the subjectivity of the critic would therefore also serve to further amplify marginalized voices in studies of video games.

Author Biography

Stephanie Jennings is a graduate student in the Department of Communication and Media at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She maintains a blog about video games at ludogabble.wordpress.com and has contributed to higherlevelgamer.org. Stephanie can be reached on Twitter @stephaniejngs.

Introduction

The methodology section in the foreword of Brendan Keogh's *Killing is Harmless* (2013) made clear that his analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* was very much a personal account. Denying an *objective* understanding of the game's meaning(s), he instead acknowledged that his interpretation of the game was informed by his experiences with it. As he explained:

Ultimately, this is an act of interpretation. Like any reading of any text, it is necessarily a selective reading. The meanings I get out of it are unlikely to be precisely the same as those that you get out of it, or precisely the same as those that the developers intended to put into it. I'm not trying to claim that I know, objectively, exactly what *The Line* is 'about'. I am simply trying to understand my own experience with this game. (p. 9)

His reading of the game is colored by a sense of respect for what *Spec Ops: The Line* accomplished. Keogh noted that he was "powerfully affected" by the game and that his examination of it was an effort to understand how it impacted him in the way that it did, how it raised questions that he felt compelled to ask of himself (p. 10). The process of interpreting *Spec Ops: The Line* was thus also Keogh's endeavor to understand himself and his experience. As he concluded this section, he invited his readers to engage in the same: "So let's enter the storm and see what we learn about shooters, and what we learn about ourselves" (p. 10).

Keogh's method professes and incorporates his subjectivity in the act of playing, reading, and interpreting *Spec Ops: The Line*. Yet his approach is an uncommon one. As Keogh commented, his analysis in *Killing is Harmless* is a kind of criticism he had "never attempted before" (p. 10). Methods sections of the kind that he presents are rare in academic criticism of video games; and open admission of the critic's subjectivity in the interpretation of video games is a phenomenon that occurs almost exclusively in some realms of games blogging and journalism. However unusual this approach may apparently be, it has come under widespread scrutiny and condemnation of late. In addition, it may appear to undermine efforts to achieve the critical distance and scientific objectivity long held sacrosanct in many, though certainly not all, academic disciplines.

In fact, in "Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games," Keogh (2014) observed a widespread "suspicion in game studies to subjective critical analyses of games that do not contribute to some formal, universal understanding of what games are." But how could the critic's subjectivity be completely avoided in criticism of video games, a medium (or, perhaps, various media) frequently defined as uniquely experiential in ways that other media may not be? Can it be at all? *Should* it be?

Responding to the longstanding wariness of the subjectivity of the critic—both within game studies and humanities disciplines more broadly—I posit an approach to games criticism in which the subjectivity of the critic is accepted as central, unavoidable, and necessary. Such an approach is built upon textual analysis as a method of criticism, but would complicate cer-

tain taken-for-granted concepts of *text* in analyses of video games. While acknowledging that textual “readings” occur during *playthroughs* of games, I attempt to destabilize this concept by highlighting its incompleteness and radical variability.

The method I seek to advance is primarily concerned with academic writing, but certainly not limited to it. It is relevant and entirely applicable to games criticism more broadly, including in games journalism and blogging. Through the establishment of this framework, I hope to develop a method in which the critic’s subjectivity, experiences of playing a game, and even personal identity are accepted as part of the game text under analysis. As Mattie Brice (2013) remarked, “it’s actually the radical subjectivity of perspective that makes games criticism shine right now. The self as lens, the self as design, this is our current paradigm.” I argue that the “self as lens” in a method of critical subjectivity also provides routes for political intervention in games criticism. A greater understanding of and acceptance for the subjectivity of the critic would, therefore, also serve to further open and amplify marginalized voices in studies of video games.

From Objectivity to Subjectivity: Textual Analysis and the Act of Interpretation

Whether quantitative or qualitative in approach, a great deal of scholarly research and methodology across a myriad of academic disciplines understand themselves as objective, scientific endeavors. The aspiration for objectivity “implicitly claims in principle (if not in practice) to be able to produce total knowledge, to reveal the full and objective ‘truth’” about the object of study (Ang, 2006, p. 181). Similarly, journalism has traditionally been ruled by principles of objectivity, “whereby trained professionals develop ‘neutral’ news values so that accounts of public affairs are the same regardless of who the reporter is, or which medium carries the report” (McChesney, 1997, p. 13).

Regardless of the object of study or the source(s) of data—again, whether quantitative or qualitative—or the method of research being conducted, the researcher (or critic, journalist, blogger) will necessarily commence a process of interpretation in pursuit of those presumed objective truths. But the act of interpretation is far from purely objective, no matter how “scientific” the researcher may strive to be. Interpretations are constructed, dependent upon the subjectivity of the researcher. So, too, are the conclusions drawn from them. As a result, “the subjectivity of the researcher is not separated from the ‘object’ s/he is studying. The interpretations that are produced in the process can never claim to be definitive: on the contrary, they are necessarily incomplete (for they always involve simplification, selection and exclusion) and temporary” (Ang, 2006, p. 184).

Yet the subjectivity of the researcher is seldom recognized or admitted in most methods of scholarship. Many such acknowledgments—of the few that exist, that is—have appeared in accounts of ethnographic methodology. These have sought to call attention to the power positioning of the researcher and the political implications of interpretation. Clifford (1986), for instance, chronicled the tension between objectivity and subjectivity in ethnographic meth-

ods: from classic ethnography in which “the voice of the author was always manifest, but the conventions of textual presentation and reading forbade too close a connection between authorial style and the reality represented” (p. 13) to later self-reflexive approaches that necessitate that researchers “find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent” (p. 15). Focusing on empirical studies of television audiences, Ang (2006) called attention to the politics and power relations implicated in the act of conducting ethnographic research, noting in no uncertain terms that “it is, of course, important for us to recognize the inherent symbolic violence of doing any kind of research” (p. 189). What this means is that researchers occupy positions of power in the very act of performing research and must, therefore, be aware of this positioning in the conduct of their study.

Other accounts of researcher subjectivity emerged out of poststructuralism. As Fürsich (2009) wrote, the influences of poststructuralism had the effect that “not only written material but every cultural practice or product can be analyzed as text. Analyzing media content was no longer understood as objectively examining or collecting data but as a ‘reading.’ This term highlighted the interpretive position of the researchers” (p. 240). It is from this understanding that textual analysis emerged as a method of research.

Conducting a textual analysis means performing such a reading. The text may be an actual written text, or a media artifact, a practice, an action, an object, a video game—whatever can be read and analyzed as *text* in the poststructuralist understanding of the term. A textual analysis looks “beyond the manifest content of media” and “focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text...Textual analysis allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions, and omissions of a text” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240–241). It is this approach that many critics use when analyzing video games: reading games as texts, uncovering possible meanings lurking below the surface, and using the text(s) at hand as evidence for an overall argument.

This process is far from objective, just as Keogh remarked of his own method in *Killing is Harmless*, “like any reading of any text, it is necessarily a selective reading” (p. 9). Textual analysis is a selective, interpretive method. The critic selects a text, a critical lens, an argument, pieces of evidence that support that argument and that are chosen on the basis of the critical lens. The critic determines what those “underlying ideological and cultural assumptions” (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240) of the text may be, what power relations may be at work, what may be unspoken in the text or excluded from it entirely. Thus, though often unacknowledged, the subjectivity of the critic is already at the heart of this method of criticism.

Game Text and Methods of Analysis

What of the game text? What makes game texts and their interpretation different from studies of other kinds of texts? What specific challenges might game texts pose for textual analysis and criticism more generally?

By asking these questions, I do not mean to pursue some definition that would clarify what is a game and what is not. I do not wish to search for a “purity of form” to characterize game texts or “some formal, universal understanding of what games are” that have preoccupied so many game critics (Keogh, 2014). In fact, it is my contention that there can be no pure, *universal understanding* of what games are. If there is any notion of “what games are,” it is that they are *not* universal or pure of form. And it is for this reason that I ask and hope to answer these questions of game texts.

First, a quick step back to pre-game studies—to Roland Barthes and the general concept of text. Of course, Barthes’s (1977) “Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text” are both foundational pieces for the development of textual analysis that detach critical interpretation from authorial intent and underscore a text’s potential for pluralities of meaning. Significantly for our consideration of game texts, though, is Barthes’s use of *play* to describe the process of interpreting a text. According to Barthes, to interpret a text is to play with it. Barthes explained that “‘playing’ must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself *plays* ... and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game” (p. 162).

Playing the video game(s) being studied and interpreted has repeatedly—and unsurprisingly—been included as a necessary methodological component for performing a critical reading of a game text (unless one is doing something like a study of players, which is a different methodological approach and, thus, presents a different text for analysis). To read a game as text is not only to play through interpretation as Barthes describes—it requires a player in order for the text to be actualized. While it is certainly possible to perform a reading of a game text by not playing it—for example, by watching someone else play (a point to which we will return later)—this type of textual reading for video games is often regarded with some measure of skepticism. Aarseth (2003) claimed as much when pointing out that “any theoretical approach to game aesthetics implies a methodology of play, which, if not declared, becomes suspect” (p. 1). He further warned that not actually playing the game being studied could result in dire misunderstandings. Moreover, “unlike studies of film and literature, merely observing the action will not put us in the role of the audience. When others play, what takes place on the screen is only partly representative of what the player experiences” (p. 3).

Player experience is crucial to game text. As others writing on video games have observed, without a player there is no game. Thus, efforts to explain game texts have frequently taken into account the role of the player and the significance of player experience. Keogh (2014) asserted that “we need a conception of the videogame text as a hybrid of semiotics, actions, and systems—one that can account for both the player’s active and embodied engagement with material form and the player’s sense of presence in the virtual world as integral textual components.” He went on to say that “to analyse a text that is player-and-game is to no longer analyse the player as distinct from the videogame but, instead, as a component of the videogame text” (Keogh, 2014). Related to this, Clara Fernández-Vara (2014) made the claim that “the player is a necessary part of the text...the game is not really a complete text without a player that interprets its rules and interacts with it” (p. 7). As players are parts of the text,

so too are their experiences, their interpretations.

Because there is no game without a player, the player is a part of the text, and the text is incomplete without a player; readings and interpretations of game texts confront critics with challenges and considerations that differ from those of many other media. Unlike many other textual forms, “games are a participatory medium and a performance activity; therefore players are going to transform the text” (Fernández-Vara, 2014, p. 26). However, if a player is necessary for the actualization and completion of the text but then transforms the text by becoming a part of it, we are left with some troublesome questions: What exactly is the text being read? And is the text of a video game ever the same from one reading to the next, from one critic to the next?

Game texts are dramatically unstable. First of all, they are wildly tangled amalgamations of features that appear (or not) in varying degrees: code, software, hardware, rules, visuals, sound, narrative, gameplay mechanics, player activity (both physical and in-game), and experience and interpretation. They are “not best understood as a purity of form but a bastardization of forms” and as a “messy, hybrid assemblage of play” (Keogh, 2014). Certainly, there are countless different potential ways to read game texts by narrowing down a study to certain elements—though this would necessarily mean excluding others and thus obtaining only a limited and incomplete understanding of the text as a comprehensive whole. But can the game text ever be read as a single, comprehensive whole?

Quite simply, no. And that is because second of all, for any given video game, there is no one game text. Important to note, though, is that this characteristic in a general sense is not exclusive to video games as a medium. For instance, Fiske (1996) wrote that “the television text, or program, is no unified whole delivering the same message in the same way to all its ‘audience’ ... There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing” (p. 537). For Fiske, there was no single television text, but rather *textuality* that emerged from diverse and variable moments of viewing. And just as player experience is central to game text, so too was the viewer’s experience critical in Fiske’s understanding of television textuality. He described television as a “semiotic experience,” that is “characterized by its openness and polysemy ... All texts are polysemic, but polysemy is absolutely central to television’s textuality” (p. 539).

Textuality provides a useful way for thinking about game text as well, for just as there is no unified whole of television text, there is no unified whole of game text. Game text is “a process rather than an object” (Aarseth, 2003, p. 2) and is realized only in moments of playing. However, video games go vastly beyond television text in their radical variability, their fragmentation, their instability. There is never only one way to play a game. There is never any one single instantiation of a video game. To be clear, this is not exclusively a matter of interpretation or polysemy. In that regard, one can always make the argument that there is no one way to read a book, no one way to regard a painting, no one way to view a film; one can play with the interpretation of these texts in the manner Barthes (1977) described. Rather, it is a

matter of transformation. As a part of the text, the player both actualizes and transforms the text in every moment of playing. The game text is only actualized within moments of play and with the experiences of the player.

Most textual readings of video games are generally understood and discussed as occurring during one or more *playthroughs* of the game(s) being studied that the critic undertakes—assuming that the critic did, in fact, play the game(s). It is during a playthrough that the critic-as-player actualizes the game text and transforms it through play and interpretation. However, the playthrough is a poorly defined, understood, and theorized concept. The very term seems to imply that the critic has played the game *through* to completion. But—as we have seen—there can be no unified, completed game text. To better understand game text, it is necessary to more closely examine, and complicate, the notion of the playthrough.

The Playthrough

Performing a textual analysis of *Persona 3*, Todd Harper (2011) described his method: “Somewhat atypically, this analysis was performed on a ‘fresh’ play of the game; that is to say, data were collected on a first run of the text, where the player has little to no foreknowledge of what will occur beyond their exposure to extratextual influences” (p. 400). Harper went on to elaborate that there was some degree of replay, specifically with regard to what choices he made that caused the ending scenario to occur differently from one playthrough to the next. What is most atypical about this is perhaps less the “fresh” playthrough itself and more the inclusion of an explanation of how the critic collected data about the text and the features that comprised the playthrough.

Clarifications of the sort that Harper (2011) provided are rare. Despite the widespread agreement that playing the game is necessary to understand and critically interpret it, detailed explanations of playthroughs and of what they consist do not appear frequently in games criticism. As Consalvo and Dutton (2006) remarked, “more qualitative studies have been less forthcoming about how games were studied; other than the assumption that they were played and carefully thought about by the author.” Such an assumption is typically sufficient for readings of many other media texts. For instance, critics generally need not specify how many times they have read a book or how many times they have viewed a television show or film. The playthrough of a video game, however, is a different matter.

The term *playthrough* generally serves to describe play sessions of games. Just as literary critics conduct “readings” of a novel and film critics “viewings” of a film, game critics perform “playthroughs” of a video game. Playthroughs are thus where textual readings of a game occur. However, playthroughs confront critics with a vast, messy range of complications with which literary critics and film critics do not necessarily have to contend. Playthroughs of video games can vary so dramatically that two critics—or even one critic writing about multiple playthroughs—may be analyzing entirely distinct texts even as they are writing about the same game. In what follows, I consider ways in which playthroughs may vary in order

to highlight the necessity for greater attention and clarity devoted to describing how critics are reading and studying video games. I further suggest the development of a vocabulary to address the instability of playthroughs in methods of textual readings.

Although the term *playthrough* may seem to indicate playing a game in full from beginning to end, video games often have no end, no completion, and no “in full.” Eric Swain (2009) addressed this when he asked “what counts as completing a game?” He wrote that “With a movie or book, or play, completing is seeing the ending. Only with video games does this become a near philosophical question to the nature of the medium.” Swain (2009) limited his discussion to “narrative games” when presenting this question. On the surface, narrative games would appear to offer the easiest answers. After all, a narrative—assuming the narrative is a linear one—would presumably have a beginning, middle, and end. However, as Swain’s (2009) consideration of game ending suggested, narrative games are far from being so straightforward. He presented a series of additional questions:

Does epilogue DLC or extra episodes count towards the original game or do you subconsciously think of them as different games? For the actual end, if you put in the work, but couldn’t quite get to the very last spot is it enough to watch someone else play the game? If there are multiple endings, is one good enough or do you have to play it through multiple times? And now with achievements and trophies, is complete all the points or the platinum trophy? (Swain, 2009)

Swain’s discussion suggests that there may be no clear-cut way to ever complete a video game playthrough. And while the most linear narrative games may seem to offer the greatest hope for discovering evident conclusions and at least feasibly answering these questions, many other types of games preclude this effort entirely. In any case, the questions Swain (2009) offered also point to a number of often overlooked but nevertheless significant considerations for critical readings of game texts: Is the critic including downloadable content (DLC) as part of the game text under study? Has the critic played “all” or certain portions of the game, or watched them being played by someone else? What decisions has the critic made over the course of the playthrough that may have changed storylines, events, character relationships, and other outcomes? These are only a few examples that illustrate the instability of the game text, and yet these aspects of game texts are rarely addressed when critics conduct analyses of video games. These oversights are major ones.

Despite the sense of completion implied by the term *playthrough*, a critic need not—and perhaps cannot—conceptualize the playthrough as a single, unified whole. It may not be, and usually is not, a solitary period of play undertaken in one sitting. It may be a series of play sessions—fragmented, sporadic, and inconsistent engagements that take place within varying time segments. There may or may not be failures, restarts, or modifications. The critic’s performative skills may improve or worsen, influencing play experiences, the unfolding of a narrative, and access to further sections of the game. The critic may make choices that open

up certain paths through the game and close off others. And the playthrough may include extratextual information, such as reviews and walkthroughs and videos of others playing. To what extent must these elements of a playthrough be acknowledged?

There are other considerations that must be taken into account as well. There is the possibility, for example, that the original text may fundamentally change over time. DLC generates a number of particularly sticky issues when one is trying to pin down a game text for analysis and encapsulate the extent of a playthrough. Released after the original game, DLC not only adds additional content to a game text, but also has the potential to substantially, significantly alter, remove, or rewrite portions of the initial game. How does this factor into a textual reading of a game?

A further consideration is whether the video game is single- or multiplayer—or both. Notably, multiplayer games have been severely under-theorized in examinations of game texts. For the most part, methodological toolkits for multiplayer games have only been proffered for ethnographic approaches to research. Textual analyses, on the other hand, have not been as attentive in developing frameworks that bear in mind the textual influences of multiple players. In these cases, there is not only one player who is a part of the game text and that transforms it through the process of play—there can be many. Moreover, there may be elements of social interactions that impact the game experience and the content of the text. The circumstances of multiple players are not only factors in “purely” multiplayer games (such as massively multiplayer online roleplaying games that cannot be played as singleplayer experiences), but also in games that can be played as either single- or multiplayer. For example, how does the text of *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011) change if a critic is doing an offline playthrough or an online one in which messages left by other players and encounters with other players are elements of the game world? Or how might participation in the multiplayer of *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) change a critic’s narrative experiences in the single-player campaign?

In light of the performance aspects of many—though certainly not all—video games, some methods of play-as-study have also suggested that the critic’s skill be taken into account. Aarseth (2003) claimed that “while the interpretation of a literary or filmatic work will require certain analytic skills, the game requires analysis practiced as performance, with direct feedback from the system” (p. 5). He further asked whether game scholars should be expected to excel in the games that they study, comparing the performance of play to “other performing arts, where academic training is combined with training for practical performance skills” (Aarseth, 2003, p. 7). While I disagree with the idea that critics should be expected to obtain skillful mastery over the games that they choose to research, difficulty level may be yet another facet of game text. Gameplay mechanics can change significantly depending on difficulty settings and can thus influence a critic’s reception and experience of a text. These varying modes of play may create different forms of textuality that would, in turn, change details available for critical readings.

While dealing with the question of when games are “finished,” Fernández-Vara (2014) highlighted that “as games grow in complication and content, it will become evident that we cannot play the game in all modes, and it is going to be impossible within the time allotted to write the analysis” (p. 27). Many games can be played in countless numbers of ways. For all the reasons outlined above (and more that I am sure I have missed), it may be useful to make a distinction between *potential textualities* and *actualized textualities* in considerations of video game playthroughs.

Potential textualities encompass an unbounded realm of possible factors and affordances and combinations of features, choices, and ways of playing a game. Fürsich (2009) maintained that “it is the task of the analyst to evaluate the possibilities of the text under investigation” (p. 244). Her implication was hermeneutic. She cautioned against narrowing the possibilities of meanings that a text may have by, for instance, focusing on authorial intent or seeking out evidence that would support pre-established assumptions. The video game critic must keep these admonitions of interpretive possibilities in mind; but in addition, I suggest that there is a wealth of possibilities for how a game text may be actualized that the critic must also consider. The critic will not initiate or experience many, if not most, of these possibilities; nevertheless, the critic must strive to remain aware of their prospective existence, realization, and rich potentiality. Potential textualities may be alternate playthroughs and moments of play. They are the choices that the critic may or may not make and may or may not reach, but that are available to be made and reached. They are the countless textualities that a game text offers and supports.

On the other hand, actualized textualities are the play sessions in which the critic participates and performs. They are sets of potential textualities condensed into moments of play. They are the choices that the critic makes, the outcomes they experience, the flow of playthroughs. However, to reemphasize an earlier point: an actualized textuality or series of actualized textualities is not necessarily a unified whole or a single, completed playthrough (whatever those would be). They may be scattered fragments of play gathered and assorted into patchwork textuality.

Actualized textualities do not construct the game text on their own. They and potential textualities are not mutually exclusive and do not create a dichotomous binary. Even if critics read only their collected actualized textualities, they must attempt to preserve an awareness of the potential textualities that may have come into existence during moments of play, but which they did not experience. In doing so, they acknowledge that their experiences of the game are necessarily incomplete and represent only parts of the textualities and interpretations that a single video game may support.

However, even with this general vocabulary for the textualities of playthroughs, we are still left with two lingering issues: extratextual sources and methods of not playing.

Extratextual influences may include walkthroughs, cheats, reviews, online fan websites and

forums, user-generated content, mods, other sources. These may also be incorporated into playthroughs, whether they “ruin” enjoyment as Aarseth (2003) warned or assist the critic in moving through and experiencing the game. A number of pieces on methods of video game analysis have called attention to the importance of using additional sources outside of the game in the conduct of textual readings. These sources can take innumerable forms, come from innumerable sources, and have untold impacts on game experience. While the degree to which a critic should embrace external sources will vary depending on factors such as the kind of reading, playthrough, analysis, method, and approach, critics must also maintain a critical and self-reflexive perspective on how these may influence or become a part of game texts and their experiences of them.

And what of not playing the game under analysis? As discussed earlier, playing the video game being investigated is generally assumed and expected to be a necessary part of any methodological approach. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for critics to find ways to encounter and explore game texts that do not involve actually playing them. Aarseth (2003) proposed a typology of game analysis in which “there are at least two main types of analysis: playing and not playing” (p. 5). He went on to list a number of different non-playing sources—including some of those noted as extratextual sources above—but concluded that “non-playing analysis, for whatever purpose, can only be strengthened by prior playing experience” (p. 7).

Critics can easily find videos of game playthroughs in spaces such as Youtube, Twitch, gaming journalism websites, and blogs. Or, of course, they can watch someone else play in-person. These viewings may give the critic insights into a game’s potential textualities; but they are only that—viewings. They are viewings of textualities actualized by other players, but they are not among the actualized texts of the critic. Nevertheless, they may supplement understandings of potential textualities or complement actualized textualities. For example, if a game critic is unable to reach the ending of a game due to an especially difficult boss battle, a video of the ending cutscene may give the critic access to a shard of the text that the critic could not actualize. If there are multiple endings, the critic may view further videos to witness potential textualities that would be available through other playthroughs.

Admittedly, the concepts of potential and actualized textualities do not completely cover all features that may be included in a reading of a game text. For instance, even when investigating and allowing for the potential textualities that they have not experienced, critics cannot possibly know what a subsequent DLC release might contain or how it might alter their experience of the game if played. However, the distinction between potential and actualized textualities calls attention to a crucial quality of game text that I have already mentioned: the inclusion of the player in the game text. But these textualities take this notion a step further. If the player is a part of the game text and is responsible for transforming it through play, then so too is the critic-as-player.

Gaming Subjectivities and the Pleasures of Play

Within this framework, player experience is crucial both to game texts and to interpretations of them. But not only player experience in a broad, general sense. Rather, the critic's experience is also acknowledged as a part of the text and a part of what is being interpreted. There are perhaps hints of this assumption in Fernández-Vara's (2014) statement that in video games "the critic also becomes a participant in the object of study" (p. 29) and Keogh's (2014) claim that "the player and game must be considered as a singular, inseparable whole." A concept of actualized textualities, though, recognizes that the critic and the critic's experiences become a part of the text under consideration. It is not, as Fernández-Vara (2014) goes on to say, a matter that "cannot be helped" (p. 29). Instead, including the critic's subjectivity goes beyond the selectivity of interpretation. Here, the critic's subjectivity takes on a number of forms. It is not only an interpretive subjectivity but also an experiential one, anchored in positioning and identity.

Yet this claim is certainly at odds with *critical distance*, a concept long revered as an unquestionable requirement in many methods of study. Critical distance recognizes that subjectivity in critical analyses is inescapable. Nonetheless, it mediates between a critic's subjectivity and the sought-after objective truths of a text. It urges critics to set aside personal feelings about the text they are studying with the goal of conducting their analysis in a methodical, critical, rigorous way—a way as objective as possible.

The effort to achieve critical distance appears throughout methods of studying video games as a part of the suggested conflict between "playing for fun" and "playing for analysis." These two approaches to play are regarded as methodologically opposed; perhaps more accurately, the former is largely considered an invalid method of critical study on its own. Analytical play, wrote Mäyrä (2008), "involves being able to communicate and critically examine one's experiences with the subject of study. Thus, analytical play as part of one's studies is different from leisurely play" (p. 165). Similarly, Fernández-Vara warned that "even if you have completed the game in the past, you should still revisit it, because playing a game for fun is different from playing it critically. Playing critically requires making a series of choices about how to play" (p. 26). The assumption, therefore, remains that playing a video game for fun is different from playing a video game critically.

Certainly, a critical analysis of a video game necessitates an analytical point of view, self-reflexivity, an awareness of one's subjectivity, and so on. Even so, I think the differentiation between critical play and leisurely play is messier than these methods suggest. The two cannot always be cleanly divorced from one another, and frequently there is strong overlap between them. Furthermore, that overlap, when accepted and allowed for, can provide informative insights into the game one seeks to analyze.

In the preservation of critical distance, the pleasures of play are often diminished and repressed. Although the experience of play is at the core of video game analyses, most forms of academic analysis appear to deny the experiences—including the pleasures—of the critic. Returning to Fiske (1996), the television viewer "becomes a producer, a producer of mean-

ings and pleasures, and at this moment stops being an ‘audience’ and becomes different materializations of the process that we call ‘viewing television’” (p. 539). Fiske (1996) suggested that the pleasures of viewing television had not been thoroughly considered, despite the fact that the “freedom of the viewer to make socially pertinent meanings and pleasures out of television is considerable” (p. 540). Much could be said of the video game player—and the video game critic. To rephrase Fiske: the player and critic-as-player become producers of meanings and pleasures and different materializations (or actualizations) of the process of playing a video game.

Pleasure is often, though not always, a part of playing video games. It can also be a part of interpretation. In fact, pleasure is one of the approaches that Barthes (1977) proposed for the reading of texts. Although this is not the one and only way to experience, appreciate, or analyze a game text, I offer the pleasure of play as one example of a critical subjectivity applied to the interpretation of video games. In this way, a critic’s enjoyment of the game becomes a component of the actualization of the text; passion becomes a method of research.

To be clear, the pleasures of play and the passion of the experience do not necessarily mean one must have fun or perceive the game as some unconditionally wonderful and flawless artifact. Passion can come in the form of respect for the game and what it accomplishes or attempts to accomplish. It can be excitement and appreciation for the experience that it provides, whether that experience is light-hearted, thought-provoking, grueling, charming, terrifying, painful, whatever it may be.

Keogh’s method in *Killing is Harmless* (2013) appears to follow this model. *Spec Ops: The Line* had become a deeply personal experience that he sought to convey. The effect it had on him and his appreciation for its significance resounds in his first-person, chapter-by-chapter retelling of the game from his interpretive positioning. One or even multiple essays would not be enough to contain what he had to say about the game, his experience with it, and how the game produced this experience; it was an account that could only be captured in a book-length project. To Keogh, “so many themes emerge gradually over the course of the game ... that a critical reading of the game in its entirety is the only way I can think to truly appreciate *The Line*” (p. 9). However, his analysis is not an uncritical, approving exaltation of the game and its virtues. He is careful to note that what he wrote “is not a defense of *The Line* nor is it a praise of *The Line*. It is simply a reading. It is an attempt to pick apart this game from start to end” (p. 10).

Pleasure is, of course, not the only way to study a game or to apply one’s positioning, experience, and identity into both the game text and as a part of interpretation. I suggest the method of passion as only one possible approach to games criticism, as one illustration of the critic’s inclusion in actualized textuality. As critics, the experiences we may have with a game text are innumerable. The methods of play that we develop are our own and will more than likely vary dramatically from one game to the next. How we analyze a game text “all depends on *who* we are, and *why* we do it” (Aarseth, 2003, p. 6). The consideration of *who* we

are should not be limited to whether we are scholars, academic, critics, casual game players, what have you. It is also a matter of our identities, the subjectivities and perceptions and positions that we carry with us into the games we play and study.

Nevertheless, it is important that we keep in mind “what type of player we are, and acknowledge that our experience playing may be different from other people’s” (Fernández-Vara, 2014, p. 28). In recognizing our subjectivity, we must also recognize that our interpretations do not reveal incontestable truths, are necessarily incomplete, and do not speak for the experience that every player will have with the game. After all, to quote Mäyrä (2008):

Every player has their individual history and preferences, having roots in their personality and experiences. Learning to understand and appreciate the diversity of players, play styles, and associated experiences is crucial for developing a more encompassing and inclusive comprehension of games and their multiple roles within different game cultures. (p. 166)

Passion as method is not a matter of preference. It is not a matter of what games the critic likes and what games the critic does not like. It is not a matter of being a fan or an anti-fan. Rather, it is a method that insists upon the experiences of the critic, whether those experiences are bound in appreciation or distaste. It is an appreciation for the diversity of potential experiences and potential players within a medium in which our experiences shape and transform the text we are studying. Without these experiences, the text we are reading simply would not exist.

Subjective Critical Interventions

What we can take from a method in which the critic is a part of the text is another avenue of interpretation: subjective critical interventions. I derive this from Fiske’s (1996) section on “Critical Intervention,” in which he discussed ways by which researchers can make political interventions into popular culture. Similar to the points I raised above, Fiske (1996) argued that an effective, “if methodologically much more difficult, focus for intervention might be the diversity of sites of reception” (p. 543). The implications of his proposition are different than what I seek to advance, but what I wish to highlight is that diverse sites of reception—and thus opportunities for critical, political interventions—can be found in critics themselves (though they are, of course, not the only sites of reception).

Criticism of formulated subject positions is just one example of a site in which a critic’s subjectivity and identity as part of game text unlocks opportunities for invaluable ideological critiques. Video games have the capacity to form a number of subject positions, whether through their hardware, representations, narratives, gameplay mechanisms, so on. Of course, this is not a capability unique to video games as a medium. Still, it is important to recognize and interrogate the ways that video games and their specific qualities construct particular subjectivities.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter hinted at this in a number of ways in *Games of Empire* (2009). For instance, there is the idea that “virtual play trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun” (pp. xxix-xxx). Or there is the masculine, “hard core” subjectivity engendered with the release of the Xbox, its selection of games, and its too-large controllers intended for the hands of North American men. Or there are the ways in which *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic Studios, 2004) forms subjects “of, and for, armed surveillance” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 118). These subjectivities are produced through various means, whether through narrative (such as stories that glorify war), gameplay (such as the air strikes of *Full Spectrum Warrior*), and even hardware (such as the controller of the original Xbox).

It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that “positions inscribed in games are never necessarily replicated by players” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 116). Additionally, these positions may not be read, interpreted, and experienced in the same way by all players. Nevertheless, one possible way of conducting an ideological criticism of a game could be an investigation into the subject position that a video game supports and encourages. These positions may not necessarily be author-intended and need not always be treated as such, but such an analysis (as the one Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter [2009] performed) can illuminate a game’s political underpinnings, whether they were consciously embedded or not.

The addition of the critic and the critic’s experiences into game texts produces opportunities for particularly striking political interventions in these readings of subject formation. Samantha Allen’s “Transmovement: Freedom and Constraint in Queer and Open World Games” (2013) is an example of how this approach could work. In this piece, Allen (2013) called attention to the ways in which freedom of movement in open world games assumed subject positions of white, heterosexual, cisgendered men. She then applied her own experiences and identity as a transwoman “to point out the ways in which freedom of movement can be experienced differently by people outside the largely white, male cisgender realm of video game preview and review culture” (Allen, 2013). Allen (2013) uncovered and challenged *Skyrim*’s “implicit masculinism” by using her own subjectivity, her experience of playing the game, and her identity as lenses with which to read the game. Certainly, this approach runs up against esteemed objectivity in both academic and popular games writing; however, it provides a crucial political critique that outlines hegemonic assumptions otherwise left invisible, unspoken, and ignored.

In its mission statement, the satirical website *Objective Game Reviews* proclaims that players of video games have long desired bias-free reviews. These players, they purport, have been upset by game reviews being too high or too low—supposedly a result of reviewers bringing their opinions into their reviews. During the spring of 2014, the site briefly ran a series of interviews with a “Subjective Reviewer of the Month,” a writer responsible for subjective reviews on other outlets. One of the questions asked in each interview was “How do you think your personality influences the reviews you write?” Responding to this question during her interview, Carolyn Petit said:

The politics of most games are invisible to many players because the worldviews they endorse mesh with the worldviews of those players. It's often only when a game says something (or a critic writing about a game says something) that challenges a person's perspective that he becomes aware at all that games and critics have political perspectives. (Objective Game Reviews, 2014a)

Petit's point encapsulates what subjective critical interventions can accomplish. The "diversity of sites of reception" (Fiske, 1996, p. 543) in this framework for games criticism is located across diverse players with their diverse experiences and their diverse moments of play. And, it is when these perspectives, experiences, and subjective lenses are put to use and read as a part of a game's textuality that the game's ideological assumptions may become clearer. Thus, greater understandings of and acceptance for critical subjectivities could, thus, also serve to further amplify marginalized voices in studies and criticism of video games. The experiences of marginalized perspectives in readings of game texts can reveal power dynamics embedded in games that may otherwise go unnoticed and can suggest tactics for resistance.

At the same time, it is important for any critic to maintain critical reflexivity and self-awareness in the process of evaluating, describing, and reading their experiences. We must take care to recognize and acknowledge our own positions of power and our privileged subjectivities. In the process of analyzing our experiences, we must not take them, our identities, or our subjectivities for granted.

Conclusion

What I have provided here is in many ways a defense of and support for what is already occurring in some areas of games blogging and journalism, but that, I think, has yet to catch on or be deemed acceptable in academic research. It is, of course, only one way of approaching games criticism—I am by no means asserting that it is the one and only way to conceptualize game texts. With this proposed approach, I have sought to raise a number of considerations regarding the way that game texts are considered and defined in analyses of video games. I have also attempted to provide a set of tools with which to incorporate the critic's subjectivity and experiences into these analyses. However, there are a few remaining issues that I wish to (try to) make clear.

In another "Subjective Reviewer of the Month" interview, Aevee Bee cautioned against criticism "that tends to focus a lot on personal reactions and conclusions that we're drawing from the game without talking too much in depth about why *that* game caused *that* specific experience" (Objective Game Reviews, 2014b). My own warning is along the same lines. Application of this method does not support a reading of a video game that is based purely on the critic's reactions at the exclusion of the video game itself. The critic is a *part* of game text, but is certainly not the only facet of that text. An analysis of the type I have outlined necessitates depth of reasoning and explication on—as Aevee Bee indicated—"why *that* game

caused *that* specific experience” (Objective Game Reviews, 2014b).

To echo an earlier point, the method of subjectivity that I have addressed is not a matter of a critic’s preferences. Nevertheless, this absolutely does not exclude the critic’s emotional responses as a part of the analysis. As I hope to have shown through the example of the pleasures of play, emotional effects are a powerful component of the experiences of playing a video game. These effects are not just a matter of whether or not a video game is fun, for as Allen (2013) noted, to “regard ‘fun’ as the ultimate litmus test for the success of a video game is to sell short the emotive capacity of the medium itself.” An inclusion of these experiences can cast light on diversities of experiences and diversities of players. They can challenge a game’s ideological assumptions and can intervene as sites of resistance in struggles over meaning.

References

- Aarseth, E. (2003). Playing research: Methodological approaches to game analysis. In *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*.
- Allen, S. (2013). TransMovement: Freedom and constraint in queer and open world games. *The Border House*. Retrieved from <http://borderhouseblog.com/?p=10113>
- Ang, I. (2006). On the politics of empirical audience research. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies* (2nd ed.; pp. 174–194). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. (S. Heath, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- BioWare. (2012). *Mass Effect 3*. Multi-platform: Electronic Arts.
- Brice, M. (2013). Iz gamez criticizm art?? [Web log]. *Mattie Brice: Alternate ending*. Retrieved from <http://www.mattiebrice.com/iz-gamez-criticizm-art/>
- Consalvo, M. & Dutton, N. (2006). Game analysis: Developing a toolkit for the qualitative study of games. *Game Studies*, 6(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton
- Clifford, J. (1986). Introduction: partial truths. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (pp. 1–26). University of California Press.
- Dyer-Witheford, N. & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fernández-Vara, C. (2014). *Introduction to game analysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Fiske, J. (1996). Moments of television: Neither the text nor the audience. In P. Marris & S. Thornham (Eds.), *Media studies: A reader* (2nd ed.; pp. 536–546). New York, NY: NYU Press.

From Software. (2011). *Dark Souls*. PlayStation 3 & Xbox 360: Namco Bandai Games.

Fürsich, E. (2009). In defense of textual analysis: Restoring a challenged method for journalism and media studies. *Journalism Studies*, 10(2), pp. 238–252.

Harper, T. (2011). Rules, rhetoric, and genre: Procedural rhetoric in *Persona 3*. *Games and Culture*, 6(5), 395–415.

Keogh, B. (2013). *Killing is Harmless*. Stolen Projects.

Keogh, B. (2014). Across worlds and bodies: Criticism in the age of video games. *Journal of Games Criticism*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1>

Mäyrä, F. (2008). *An introduction to game studies*. SAGE Publications.

McChesney, R. (1997). *Corporate media and the threat to democracy*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Objective Game Reviews. Retrieved from <http://www.objectivegamereviews.com/>.

Objective Game Reviews. (2014a, March 24). Carolyn Petit: Subjective reviewer of the month, March 2014 [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://www.objectivegamereviews.com/carolyn-petit-subjective-reviewer-month-march-2014/>

Objective Game Reviews. (2014b, May 1). Aevee Bee: Subjective reviewer of the month, May 2014 [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://www.objectivegamereviews.com/aevee-bee-subjective-reviewer-month-may-2014/>

Pandemic Studios. (2004). *Full Spectrum Warrior*. Xbox & PC: THQ.

Swain, E. (2009). What is video game completion? [Web log]. *The Game Critique*. Retrieved from <http://www.thegamecritique.com/recent-posts/what-is-video-game-completion/170/>