

The Reviewer and The Critic

Opinion

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by [Eron Rauch](#)

'Art criticism' didn't just pop out of the ether fully formed. It's the product of literal centuries of discussion -- a discussion that now includes games.



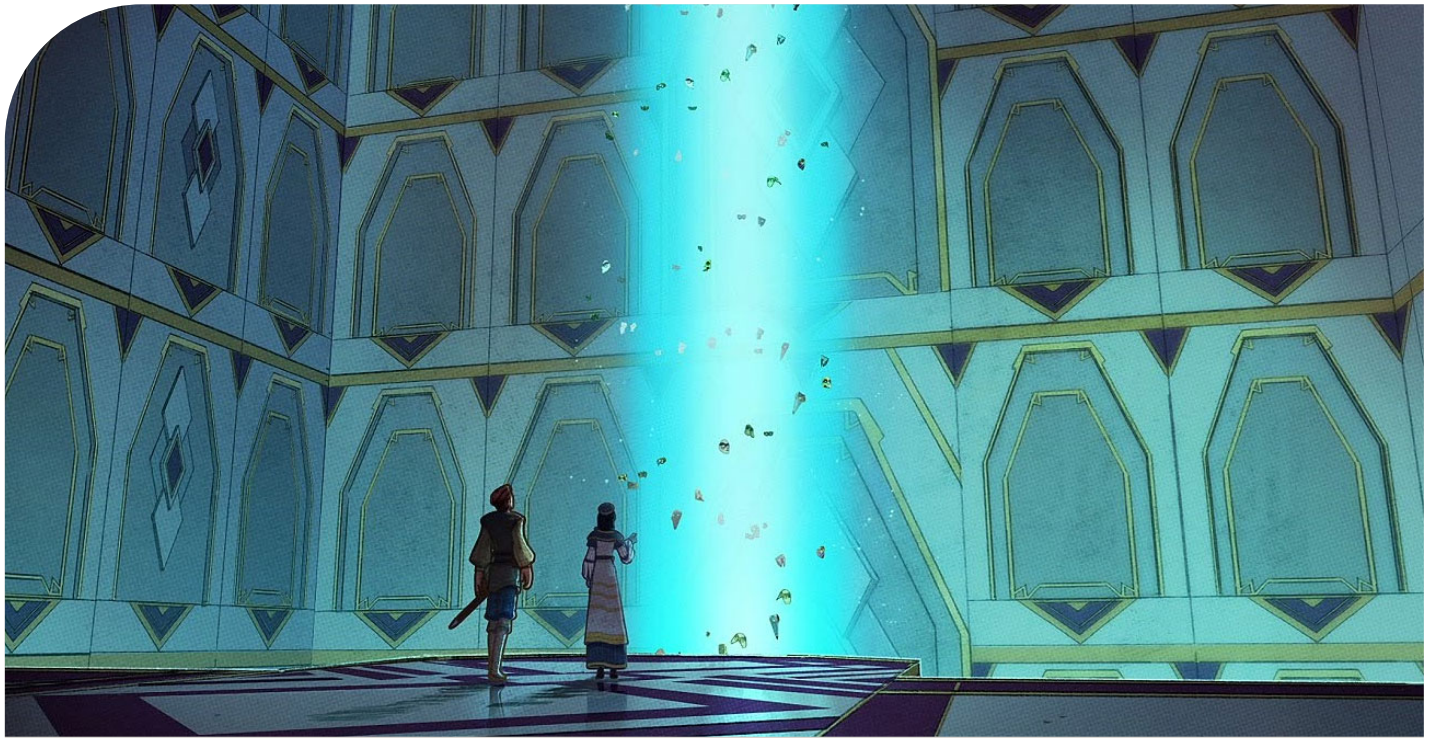
Of late, I've been fascinated with understanding the distinction between two infamous professions: Why do videogames have "reviewers" but almost every other cultural industry has "critics"?

Say the phrase "art reviewer" out loud. Doesn't that sound odd? Now say "literary reviewer" or "food reviewer." That sounds strange too. In American English, we typically use the term "critic" to describe these professions. We know an art critic will probably review things, but we just intuit that reviewing is only one subsection of being a critic. A book or food *reviewer* is just someone who leaves snarky comments on *Amazon* or *Yelp*.

Now say "I'm a videogame critic!" That's equally odd, right? No doubt more than a few readers are already typing comments pointing out said profession is well, actually, a "videogame reviewer."

Despite having an M.F.A., and professionally writing about videogames and art, I realized I can't explain what a critic is. Maybe you're like me, and the best you can do is conjure caricatured stereotypes of petty, usually ugly, men, such as *The Critic's Jay* "It stinks!" Sherman, or *Ratatouille's* Anton "We thrive on negative criticism" Ego.

Before we even try to untangle the reasons these two related professions get different titles it seems important that we should at least try to understand the origin story of these twin misunderstood professions, the critic and the reviewer.



Masquerada: Songs and Shadows (2016).

Let There Be Fans

It's common to note sites like *Metacritic* and *Rotten Tomatoes* have thrown criticism into tumult. Yet, despite being solid party trivia itself, the origins of critics and criticism are barely known. It is only because I stumbled across an explanation in an [obscure art history tome](#) by the German scholar Arnold Hauser that I can share with you that this curious story starts in the canals and palaces of Italy in the 1400s.

Hauser's version cuts through the generic pageantry and points out that much of the public obsession with the arts in the Renaissance was probably because it was the first time aristocrats had enough spare cash and free time to be obsessive dilettantes. That is, they could become fans... and what do fans have? Opinions!

More-so, what uber-fan doesn't want to splatter their opinions all over their friends and foes? Hauser recounts how particularly obsessive nobles published volumes of their amateur musings on the arts. These handmade books were similar to those 1997 HTML websites about *Elder Scrolls: Daggerfall* that were seen by like 3 people, then linked together in a circle with those other three people's equally obsessive fan sites.

Even in the 1400s, this proto-criticism was highly social (a theme I'll return to later), but these handwritten hot takes only really circulated in a tiny circle of merchant-aristocrats like one of those snide drawings passed between students in junior high classrooms.

From Scribbles to Zines

For the next link in the evolution of Western criticism, we have to jump forward a few centuries and skip over a few countries.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Jürgen Habermas uncovers that Jay Sherman and Anton Ego are a byproduct of parties-cum-lectures called salons. These salons were small private gatherings mostly run by powerful aristocratic and merchant women in cities like London, Paris, and Vienna. Amidst gilt snuff boxes and horned taxidermy, a melange of nobles, top merchants, and the cultural and scientific elite ate, drank, and argued. Poems were read, paintings shown, inventions tested, and opinions aired.

But unless you were titled, rich, or famous your chances of getting an invite to a major salon were even less than getting into that trendy bar-arcade in a gentrified neighborhood on a Saturday night. Even if you were invited, you might have prior obligations. Hell, maybe you were there but drank too much and couldn't quite remember why that [Humboldt guy](#) was rambling about the Amazon river.

These were some of the most prestigious people of their era, talking about the hottest topics in culture. People wanted to know what was said. So some salons started taking minutes. Who might be good at this job? The attending writers (otherwise occupied with free booze), of course! Unlike our fanboy-scribbles from the Italian Renaissance, in 16th and 17th century Europe, printing presses had become quite common. It only made sense that prestigious salons published their notes as mini-newspapers—basically zines—to share.

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Along the way, as writers are wont to do, they started adding their opinions to the salon notes, or even writing original essays to go in these salon-zines. Eventually this combination reportage-and-opining merged into bigger journals that would eventually evolve into newspapers. Thus the professional critic was born.

It is really important to emphasize that critics and criticism didn't start out as lone-wolf adjudicators of taste. Criticism was conversation. It was a collaborative process of documenting, sharing, and contributing ideas about an important topic (albeit with the major caveat that however progressive for its era, was still constrained by a highly classist, sexist, and racist society.)

Why, then, does the critic have this aura of being a terror to creators and fans alike? After only a decade of social media, we're already starting to forget what it felt like to live in a world with incredibly centralized media like Dickens or Austen did. In the past, critics were basically the face of their form, if simply because their writing was the only way most people could find out about anything new. I mean, think about *Nintendo Power* circa 1993. Was the monolithic power they wielded over our young minds really much less?



Proteus (2013).

Back from The Wilderness

These centuries of the increasing isolation of criticism from society reached its peak in the art world in the 1950s with the all-powerful critic Clement Greenberg, who championed macho painters such as Jackson Pollock. Instead of adding to the mountain of books about him, let's look at Greenberg's greatest pupil—who, in a fit of rage, turned against her aging master—and in the process all but started the rift between the critic and reviewer: Rosalind Krauss.

Krauss' break with Greenberg was simple: she liked art that he hated. Not an uncommon occurrence, but it got her thinking. As she explained [in an interview](#), "the problem the critic has is how to convince the viewer who's saying 'phony, fake, inauthentic' that the work is authentic, that this *is* the real thing."

As a best student of the greatest living art critic she was torn: she saw artworks by young "Minimalists" like Richard Serra and Donald Judd which she deeply felt were the 'real thing.' But the person she most respected, Greenberg, dismissed them as 'phony.' Instead of taking to the papers to verbally joust with Greenberg over opinions or taste, she instead argued a much bigger point: That art criticism had grown to be too much about passing judgement based on personal whims and isolated fancies.

Krauss reimagined [a new kind of art criticism](#), built to be rigorous. Her new art criticism would be part of the college academy, so it could be in direct conversation with other leading intellectuals like Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan. She even started a peer-reviewed academic journal specifically for art criticism, called *October*.

It's easy to be frustrated with Krauss, since she spent the latter half of her career labeling [wide swaths contemporary art as phony](#). Even imagining the invectives you'd elicit if you asked her thoughts about videogames makes me quake in terror. But after a century of wielding the sword of judgement, her project to reattach criticism to broader intellectual life in the 1960s and '70s helped guide the critic from isolation back to its home within a conversation.

And Now the Reviewer

This might seem like a tangent, but in high school I didn't own a car. Instead I borrowed my Dad's ever-in-progress champagne gold Corvair. Other than a quirky motor nicked by Porsche's nascent 911 program, it had nothing to recommend it. It infamously had innumerable, potentially dangerous, design issues. It was, as Ralph Nader dubbed it in his landmark 1965 book, "Unsafe at any speed."

In the same era Krauss was making her split from old-world judgement, Nader published this first high-profile "consumer review" aimed at protecting people from an industry that often made crappy products. But just like we skipped Greenberg to talk about his student, I want to move past Nader and talk about his disciple, the young lawyer Robert Parker.

Have you ever wondered why all those wine bottles have scores plastered on them like graded multiple choice tests? As *Emperor of Wine* recounts, scoring wine on that 100-point scale was the direct result of Parker doubling-down on Nader's consumer activism, but instead of cars, for his favorite adult beverage.

Want me to start saying things like "ethics in wine reviewing" to help connect this with games?

Wine in late 1970s America was rife with sleaze. French importers abused the complete vacuum of knowledge to mark-up wines that were terrible, or even tainted. So Parker (pressed by his wife to either make a business out of his costly wine collecting hobby or give it up) set out to protect the consumer by reviewing wines. Starting in good critical tradition as a photocopy newsletter given out to friends, his *Wine Advocate* grew to be the flagship American wine magazine.

Emulating Nader's "unbiased" car reviews, Parker taste-tested without knowing the product names and refused free wine from producers. The now-ubiquitous scores were basically a shorthand so consumers could quickly know they were getting what they deserved and paid for. Want me to start saying things like "ethics in wine reviewing" and "bonus pay for winery workers that ship wines with high scores" to help connect this with games?



 ZOOM

Endless Space 2 (2017).

The Perfect Palate

As last year's shitstorm around *Endless Space 2*'s game-ruining glitches highlights, "consumer reviews" were an easy fit for videogames. Even iconoclastic designer Lorne Loning [quipped](#): "I've made movies, I've made television, and I've made photorealistic paintings. Games are the hardest. Games are really difficult because you're dealing with technology that the end user can break. That's not the case with any of these other mediums."

The cars we drive should be safe. Our wine, untainted. Our games, running as intended. But a wine having soft tannins is by no means the same as a car missing seatbelts. These nuances became increasingly lost on Parker and his fans. After all, his multimillion dollar brand was based on an assertion that he had a perfect palate and didn't ever make mistakes. In a way, he basically doubled down on the judgmental functions of the previous generations of Ego-esque critics, with all of the community conversation distilled away into a numeral-ized pseudo-science.

Parker's decline started when wine fans noticed only a few styles of wines from specific places regularly got really high scores. These wines were almost always massive, ultra-ripe, and "masculine" red wines from Napa and France. Some styles, especially white wines (often alluded to in feminine terms) were almost always scored lower. This led to bleak decades where producers around the world destroyed ancient heirloom grapes to plant Cabernet to emulate red-blooded American wines with names like "Screaming Eagle."

It isn't overly academic to notice that wine, like art, music, or food has a multitude of traditions, criteria, contexts, audiences, ideals, and techniques. Wine that is perfect for a January-even 1700s London salon is hardly going to be a good match for sitting in a park the following simmering Parisian summer. As I said in the beginning, a critic might do reviews, but something vital is lost if reviewing is isolated from the grander project of trying to understand the world through their chosen topic.

Now Is Food (Criticism)

Launching forward to the present across a couple decades and to G-funk-soundtracked Los Angeles, food critic Jonathan Gold has become the preeminent voice emerged from the fallout-wilderness borne of the decades-long skirmishes between reviewing and criticism. He aspires to the rigor of Krauss and the fairness of Parker, yet his work is somehow still the antithesis of both Krauss's stuffiness and Parker's homogenizing.

Evan Kleiman, the host of NPR's "Good Food," claims his breakthrough over past status-obsessed critics is expanding what is considered "a subject of serious inquiry" by engaging with the food (and stories) of the total plurality of Los Angeles and its immigrants from 100+ countries. As he puts it in the recent documentary *City of Gold*, "There can be 1,000 different restaurants that are amazing in 1,000 different ways."

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That generous, engaged attitude is exactly what makes him so beloved by eaters and chefs alike, and an inspiration for aspiring critics across generations and media. From Compton BBQ to hang-over curing hot pot, every piece of Gold's writing is clearly part of a vast investigation of place and community that we are invited to be part of. His version of food criticism is nothing less than trying to figure out, as *City of Gold* puts it, how "We are all citizens together, we are all strangers together."

We, as players of videogames, would all be better if we saw the 1,000 different videogames in our Steam library as potentially amazing in 1,000 different ways.



Final Fantasy XV (2016).

Criticism Is Better With Friends

As much as I idolize Jonathan Gold, he hardly represents Gen X, let alone the youth who will play *Breath of the Wild* as their first *Zelda* game. If you asked me to pick an upcoming critic who could serve as a guide for younger thinkers, I would name Teju Cole. He is a noted author, photographer, and also the *New York Times*' photography critic. His critical goal is nothing less ambitious than understanding how [\(as he quotes James Baldwin\)](#) "People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them."

The fact that Cole embodies many creative spaces at once, with the critic as but one facet, is itself an important evolution. We have come to expect that our favorite creators of art and videogames will offer their critical wisdom by participating in critical discussions and writing, and Cole seems like a good model for how to navigate that expectation. But this also means that knowledge and learning is multifaceted and ongoing, which is refreshing in our era, rife as it is with hot takes, academic ultra-specialization, and (often subcultural) hyper-tribalism.

Instead, [Cole strives to bring criticism back into the world](#), back into conversation with our bodies, anchored in the long history of how if bodies are black or brown (or female, or otherwise viewed as "other"), they are judged and used and seen without consent: "Now I realize that looking at the world, making images, writing about images, writing about things that are not images, all of it is an attempt to testify to having been here and seen certain things, having looked at the world with a kind eye but an eye that is not ignoring questions of justice and history." You can replace "images" with "videogames" and have a manifesto for games criticism in 2018 and beyond.

Beyond a single city, beyond reviews, beyond theory, Cole's model is so useful because it understands the role of the critic to be a far-reaching, self-searching process. As he says in *Known and Strange Things*, "Through the act of writing, I was able to find out what I know about these things, what I was able to know, and where the limits of my knowledge lay." Being part of criticism is an activity we are all invited to be part of—A process that helps us uncover what we don't already know about the world.

For me, this is maybe the ultimate takeaway of this extended ramble through the history of the the critic and the reviewer. We don't need help finding more good games—many of us have a virtual stack larger than we could ever play. What we do need is

help figuring out what to do with this panoply of digital delights.

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Everyone who has been moved by a game knows there is a far deeper and more intimate (and more important!) experience going on than the 800 words and two-digit number of a review. Buying and downloading a game might only take an hour, but playing, trying to understand, and finding a place in our life, for games like *Nier:Automata*, *Everything*, or even *Breath of the Wild* will take countless hundreds of hours, and many lingering conversations.

This is the part of the history of critics and criticism that I think still really matters to us in the videogame community as our scene matures: criticism is best done together. For both fans and professionals, this entails the challenge of going outside of our comfort zones, learning to converse about videogames outside of our preferred genres, and even expanding our knowledge beyond videogames altogether. Criticism is a conversation with a diverse group of people (hopefully far more diverse than the original salons!) each of whom brings different ideas, interests, professions, and talents. In a world overflowing with aggregators, algorithms, and agitators, it is more important than ever that we have passionate, empathetic, insightful, curious, and maybe even a bit entertaining, companions on our long trek toward finding meaning. If we wish for the conversation around videogames to flourish, it is time to move past fetishizing the isolated reviewer and time to learn to be a community of engaged critics.

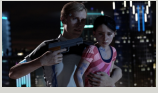
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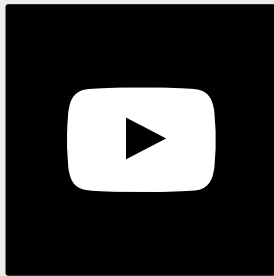
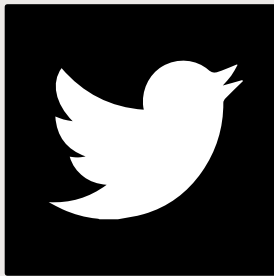
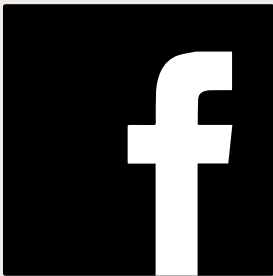
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