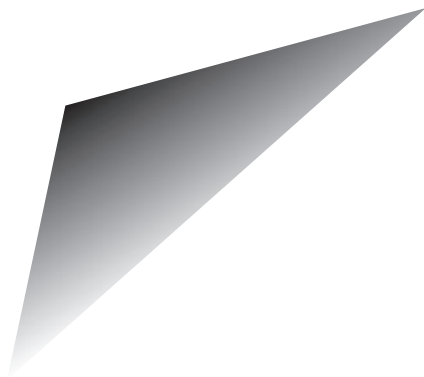


HOW
TO
TALK
ABOUT
VIDEOGAMES



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INTRODUCTION

Nobody Asked for a Toaster Critic

Doing game criticism

Imagine that your toaster has broken. Like any reasonable person, you want to replace it as quickly as possible so as to continue enjoying the delights of browned bread.

But there are so many options. Slot toaster or toaster oven? OK, that one's easy, toaster ovens are barbaric, but two-slot or four? Bagel-wide slot or a lithe, streamlined design? A chrome finish looks stylish, but you know that it will attract kitchen grease and quickly dull without constant care. An enameled, bright-hued finish might offer a pop of color, but you worry that a robin blue or canary yellow apparatus might soon wear out its welcome. So many options. Soon enough, the malaise of modern commerce overtakes you, the overwhelm that the psychologist Barry Schwartz has called the paradox of choice: as the number of possible options increases, the anguish of making a choice becomes more acute rather than less.¹

What to do? Seek out information. You might turn to a friend or a family member whom you recall having fashioned particularly cracking toast on a recent visit. You could subscribe to *Consumer Reports* to find the model with the greatest number of that publication's characteristic red doughnuts of approval. More likely, you'd fire up Amazon.com and start browsing toasters. As I write, the number one seller is a ghastly ivory pod of a thing, the Hamilton Beach 2-Slice. Pass. A more stoic, Oster 4-slice catches your eye, its sturdy-looking knobs and handles flanking an attractive, grease-resistant brushed-chrome surface.

Nearly four hundred reviews help clarify things further. A buyer from 2012 whose input is rated the “most helpful positive review” writes that the Oster is a “simple basic toaster that just works,” awarding it five stars. At this point, you might call it a day and click “Buy Now,” your angst giving way to the anticipation of fresh toast in only a day or two. Or you might continue browsing, in search of the model whose features, looks, reliability, and price match your tastes and tolerances.

What you probably wouldn't do is look for an essay on the *meaning* of the Oster 4-slice toaster. What would it mean for a toaster to mean something, anyway? A toaster doesn't exist to depict, to portray, to represent, to fashion dreams or nightmares. Nobody asked for a toaster critic. A toaster exists to caramelize bread. It's preposterous to think otherwise.

Unless it isn't.

Some of the possible meanings of toasters are obvious. A 4-slot toaster is a signal of throughput—the size of a family, the dryness of a palate. The chrome finish is a symbol of nostalgia; indeed, it seems most toasters are designed to recall a particular feeling of 1950s googie or 1930s streamline moderne design. These were moments when toast meant family and comfort (1950), and curved metal meant speed and progress (1930).

It's also why the toaster oven is so monstrous. On the one hand, it embraces the efficiencies of modern technological life, combining the necessity of bread browning with the convenience of a small, general-purpose oven. But on the other hand, it violates the concept of a toaster: a serious commitment to the caramelization of bread. To what other single-purpose appliance does the modern family devote a square foot of precious kitchen counter space? None. The toaster is not just an appliance: it is a life philosophy, one that knows that pleasure and opulence bubble out from the sugars in wheat risen to loaves. It turns out that toasters share something in common with televisions, with paintings, with furniture, with textiles—with all the other materials with which we

surround ourselves and whose form and function establish and communicate our personal and social lives.

Videogames are a lot like toasters. We think they are appliances, mere tools that exist to entertain or distract. We think that their ability to satisfy our need for leisure is their only function. And as with electronics and consumer goods of all kinds, there are *Consumer Reports*-style videogame reviews, full of technical details and thorough testing and final, definitive scores delivered on improbably precise numerical scales. In the games industry, developer bonuses are even sometimes tied to the aggregated results of such reviews as measured by aggregators like Metacritic.²

But then, we also have to admit that games are something more than just nondescript vessels that deliver varying dosages of video pleasure. They include characters and personas with whom we can identify and empathize, like we might do with a novel or a film. They are composed of forms and designs derived from whole cloth, producing visual, tactile, and locomotive appeal like fashion or painting or furniture. They insert themselves into our lives, weaving within and between our daily practices, both structuring and disrupting them. They induce feelings and emotions in us, just as art or music or fiction might do. But then, games also extend well beyond the usual payloads of those other media, into frustration, anguish, physical exhaustion, and addictive desperation. Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk-flavored chewing gum.

When it comes to the role of criticism among toasters and videogames, confusion arises because both are *operated*: they do things, and the manner by which they do them matters. The result of their having been done matters. But the process and experience of that operation also matters. If videogames were just meant to inject the greatest enjoyment at the lowest cost per unit, they would just be inefficient, unintuitive narcotics.

Whether with toasters or videogames, the difference between the critic and the reviewer is that the critic recognizes both sides of his or her Janus-faced subject: the functional, operative one

(the face that gets something done in the world) and the expressive, formal one (the face that puts that operation in context and makes the operation of the device more than just a machine spewing output onto a counter or a television display).

Unlike the reviewer, the critic of functional gizmos like games and toasters decouples himself or herself from the proverbial toast that the object of criticism fashions. If the reviewer speaks from a position of investment, the critic speaks from a position of remove. Not just remove from the work, but also at a remove from oneself. Unlike the artist or the designer or even the writer, the critic's work is oriented not around the self but around the other.

This means that being a critic is not an enjoyable job. I mean that in the most practical, ordinary sense of the word: criticism is not pleasurable. It's not as bad as being a coal miner or an actuary, although at least miners and actuaries get paid for their efforts. But just as it is hard to do criticism for pay, so it is harder to do for gratification. The critic speaks in his or her own voice not primarily to give voice to that voice but to speak through it, to catalog and to clarify the world.

Good criticism tends to do this by answering the question "What is even going on here?" This is the question that audiences don't even know they want answered. They don't know what to ask. They are awash in a barrage of noise that only the critic can tune into signal. What is my kid doing all the time in *Minecraft*? Why can't I stop playing *Flappy Bird* even though I hate it? Do I even hate it, or is this sensation I am naming "hate" something else entirely? Why is everyone talking about *Titanfall*? And later, why did they suddenly stop talking about it?

Unlike the artist, the critic makes no appeal to something that "had to come out." The critic answers questions, starting with the most fundamental question: what *is* this thing? Why does it exist? And then the critic answers questions that offer relief: What do I do with it? What am I not seeing that I don't know I'm missing? What will cure the sickness that I don't even know I have?

You can see it in toasters as much as in videogames. A 2013

review of our unlikely hero, the Oster 4-slice, offers only two stars beside the melancholy title “What happened to toasters?” Sure, some *Consumer Reports*-type analysis comes along for the ride. The toaster’s outside surface becomes unreasonably hot, according to this critic. He theorizes that poor insulation leads to unexpected heat transfer (he doesn’t use these words) yielding inconsistent results. But it’s that opening question—*what happened to toasters?*—that carries the day. “I am living with this one for now,” the critic writes, “and trying to master its idiosyncrasies.” It’s the ultimate truth about toast, isn’t it? Somehow, somewhere inside that magic box, bread becomes toast. Seemingly so simple, yet even in mere caramelization the universe admits enough entropy to produce chaos. (Technically, the delight of toast is caused by the *Maillard reaction*, named for the early twentieth-century French chemist who described the interaction between amino acids and sugars in browned foods like toast, seared steak, roasted coffee, and fried potatoes.)

This is just an Amazon review, of course, and it doesn’t match the existential angst and absurdity one finds in the most creative critiques hosted by our amiable online retailer overlord—those for Uranium Ore, for example, or the more than fifteen hundred legendary reviews for Tuscan Whole Milk, 1 Gallon, 128 fl oz.³ The latter includes everything from rhyming couplets to meta-commentary on the product review process itself to pop culture reference to performative wordplay that reframes this ordinary commodity as a luxury potation. This last variety is my favorite, perhaps: “I find Venetian whole milk far superior,” it begins, before ruminating, “Provençal is even better. It has hints of lavender. But it’s a rare vintage.”

And with a toaster or a gallon of mail-order milk, there is something preposterous about writing criticism—particularly criticism of objects we use as much as experience. This is probably why whenever I write criticism of videogames, someone strongly invested in games as a hobby always asks the question “is this parody?” as if only a miscreant or a comedian or a psychopath would

bother to invest the time and deliberateness in even *thinking*, let alone writing about videogames with the seriousness that random, anonymous Internet users have already used to write about toasters, let alone deliberate intellectuals about film or literature! It's an annoying, dumbfounding question, of course, an insult that betrays the very same individual's likely demand that games be treated as seriously as other cultural forms, "as art," even, to use a cliché that's gone stale.

Like a toaster, a game is both appliance and hearth, both instrument and aesthetic, both gadget and fetish. It's preposterous to do game criticism, like it's preposterous to do toaster criticism. But that preposterousness also points to why and how criticism exists. Criticism is not conducted to improve the work or the medium, or to win over those who otherwise would turn up their noses at it. Nor is it conducted as flash-in-the-pan buying advice, doled out on release day to reverie or disdain, only to be immediately forgotten. Rather, it is conducted to get to the bottom of something, to grasp its form, context, function, meaning, and capacities. To venture so far from the ordinariness of a subject that the terrain underfoot gives way from manicured path to wilderness, so far that the words that we would spin touse the hair of madness. And then, to preserve that wilderness and its madness, such that both the works and our reflections on them become imbricated with one another and carried forward into the future where others might find them anew.

Really, nothing was ever immune to the preposterousness of committed attention that criticism entails. Not literature, not film, nor theater, art, food, wine. We just stopped noticing that the criticism of forms like these are just as bonkers as critiques of toasters or milk or videogames. Just as bonkers only because we unwittingly collapsed the functional and expressive sides of an HBO show or a Spanish Tempranillo into the silly, false dream of mere artfulness. That lost memory is no worse than treating games just as gadgets to be reviewed instrumentally, as

commodities rated on scales of ten—and no worse than treating them as just expressions of poignant emotion, either.

How to talk about videogames? Like a critic, not a reviewer, for one, but also: like a toaster critic, not just a film critic. To do game criticism is to take this common-born subject as toaster and as savior, as milk and as wine, as idiocy and as culture.

This is a book full of such specimens—attempts to take games so seriously as to risk the descent into self-parody. Or even, to embrace that descent, since caricature is another means to truth. For there, far, far away from ordinary life and ordinary pleasure, familiar devices become unfamiliar, such that we can appreciate them for what they are rather than what we wish them to be.