

# A Tale of Two Scores: Video Game Reviews and Their Conflicting Metamessages

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In this special we'll be investigating video game review metamessages and the often conflicting review scores associated with review text. Blind trials are performed to determine whether actual scores fit perceived scores in reviews, conclusions are drawn, and solutions are examined.

There's no denying the ever-expanding popularity of video games. Labeled "the fastest growing sector of the entire entertainment industry" by Douglas Lowenstein, President of the Entertainment Software Association, the global revenue of the field has ballooned from \$10 to \$25 billion dollars in the past ten years.[1] Likewise, the realm of video game journalism is one that symbiotically grows in popularity with each passing year. Across a variety of mediums, including magazines, newspaper, radio, television and online websites, the latest coverage of the video game industry is relayed to the gaming community.

This coverage can generally be split into three distinct chunks: news, previews, and reviews. Ideally, news articles are relatively free of editorialization, focusing on the facts of a recent event, such as the announcement of a title in development or the shipping of a game to retail stores, with little room for judgment. Typically, articles of this nature are based off the press releases provided by a company.

Previews, which provide an advance look at upcoming games, are a little more subjective. The content of a preview is generally a mix of facts provided by a company, known as a Fact Sheet, and the author's impressions of their experience with a game thus far. As previews tend to be written after only a few hours of time with a game, often when the title has yet to be completed, these articles tend to express an open-minded sentiment, the harsh, stinging criticism reserved for the judgmental review.

Of the three article types, reviews are the most subjective. After spending a substantial amount of time with a "Review Build" or "Review Copy" -- a copy of a game the company feels is indicative of the finished product -- the author then types up an analysis of their thoughts regarding said game. Though there is no set formula for the whole of game reviews (as proven by outlandish examples such as a comic strip and a faux-blog), reviews typically include a comprehensive examination of the various aspects of a game, including presentation, gameplay, and length. A score is assigned alongside the text, ranking the game on a relative scale. Different publications use different scales, some using a numerical score, ranging anywhere from 1 - 5 to 1 - 100, some using an alphabetical scoring system, ranking the game on a scale of A - F. {mospagebreak title= What is a Metamessage, Anyways?}

Together, the review text and score are meant to provide an indication of the quality of a given game. This is accomplished through the use of metamessages, the underlying implications of a statement, defined by Dr. Deborah Tannen as, "the meaning gleaned from how something is said, or from the fact that it is said at all." [2] The text and score of a review are intrinsically tied, their individual metamessages meant to justify one another. The text is the reasoning behind the score; meanwhile, the score provides a quick summary of the text. In this regard, the composition of reviews is unique in that, by design, they carry two metamessages.

But just as the metamessages of scores and text can work together, they can also work against one another. If the two metamessages were to disagree, this would damage the overall metamessage of a review. A disparity between the metamessage of a review text and a review score would leave the reader confused, questioning both the credibility of a piece and their own interpretation of the piece's metamessages.

This concept is nothing new for those who spend their time reading game reviews and participating in the online discussion thereof. However, the very nature of internet discussion makes using these discussions as proof of conflicting metamessages problematic. Various participants in online discussion have their own agendas which can potentially discredit their contributions. Inexplicably, some users have a bias against certain publications, and will go to amazing lengths in their attempts to discredit the claims of that publication. Other users show a loyalty to a franchise or system, and will likewise employ numerous methods to ensure their favored product appears favorably.

{mospagebreak title=Conflicting Metamessages: The Proof}

As the internet discussion boards couldn't be trusted to prove or disprove the existence of mixed metamessages in game reviews, an experiment was conducted using a group unfamiliar with the field of gaming journalism. The concluding paragraphs of two contrasting reviews were stripped of their scores and supplied to a small group of participants, along with a copy of each publication's respective review guidelines.

The working theory was simple: According to standard rhetoric, the conclusion of a piece is meant to summarize and reinforce the key themes established throughout the writing.[3] Thus, the metamessage of the review text should be made quite clear in the concluding paragraphs. After reading each sample, the participants were then asked to assign a score based off the detailed review guidelines provided by each publication. The closer their guesses to the actual score, the clearer the metamessage of the text.{mosimage= samplea.jpg}

In the first sample, only half of the group's estimates were within a point of the actual score, 7.6 out of 10. Of those that were within a point of the actual score, not one person assigned the correct score, though interestingly, no one overestimated either. Overall, the average assigned review score was 6.3, with a difference of 1.3 between the average estimated score and the actual review score.

In order to compare the results of the second samples, numerical values have been assigned to each of letter grades according to the chart below. The values for the conversion were obtained from GameRankings, a site that allows viewers to compare reviews from various outlets.{mosimage= conversionchart.jpg} {mosimage= samplebcorrig.jpg} {mosimage= samplebconvert.jpg}

Results from this sample were more in line with the actual score, an A / 9.5 out of 10, though still discouraging. As with the first sample, no one correctly estimated the proper score. The average assigned review score here was an 8.7 (roughly a B+), with a difference of 0.8 between the average estimated score and the actual review score. {mosimage =trialagraphsmall2.jpg} {mosimage =trialbgraphsmall2.jpg} [click to enlarge](#)

In analyzing the results of this survey, one could conclude that as Sample B had a smaller difference between the average estimated score and the actual score, Sample B therefore has the clearer metamessage. But this analysis is rendered moot as Sample B still has a difference of 0.8, close to one point, between its average estimated score and the actual score. Furthermore, not one participant correctly estimated the score of either sample. This proves that both samples have unclear metamessages. And if the metamessages of a two haphazardly-selected reviews don't match up with the metamessage of their review scores, that means the field of gaming journalism has a problem with conflicting metamessages.

{mospagebreak title=Potential Causes, Solutions, and the Problems Thereof }

The potential causes of these conflicting metamessages are numerous, though difficult to prove. Comparing the message capacity in the text and score, the text seemingly lends itself towards pathos, an appeal to emotion, as the text has the potential to provide further detail. Meanwhile, the score itself cannot be more detailed than either the number or letter used by that particular publication. This inability to elaborate further suggests the review score could be seen as an objective assessment based on logic, whereas the pathological implications of the review text could be a subjective assessment based on emotion. This could help to explain the reviews that negatively discuss how a title didn't live up to expectations in their text but still provide a high overall score.

Likewise, the above explanation also accounts for the differing ideologies between the professional writer, whose job it is to play and review multiple games a month, versus the casual gamer, who plays one or two games a month in their free time. The professional writer may grow tired and bored after the same gameplay feature occurs across multiple games, which would then cause them to be overtly critical of this feature in the review text. However, the score may be adjusted for this cynicism, so that the score more accurately reflects on the quality of the game instead of the author's past experience.

Another possibility could be that the conflicting metamessages are a result of unclear writing. A recent article published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* examined the problem of metamessage and egocentrism in e-mail.

Across five studies, the team discovered that readers only correctly perceived the tone of 50% of e-mails, though the readers were confident they were correct 90% of the time. The problem also extended to the authors, who felt the recipients would correctly identify the underlying tone 80% of the time.[4] If such misinterpretations are as common as this reports suggests, it's possible the conflict between metamessages in game reviews is unintended, with both the overconfidence of the writer in their ability and the overconfidence of the reader in their interpretation of the text to blame for the misunderstanding.

The conflicting metamessages could also be a result of problems with the system of assigning review scores. Though publications typically define their review scale, the provided guidelines aren't as detailed as the reviews they provide. Take IGN, which rates games on a scale of 0.0 &ndash; 10.0, and has provided a set of rating guidelines that define scores in increments of 1.0. But the site fails to make a distinction between the varying tenths of their review scores &ndash; what's the difference between a game that scores 8.4 and one that scores 8.6? And if it doesn't matter, as some have argued, then why bother to provide the tenth in the first place?

The same criticism can be applied to Gaming Age Online's system of letter grades and their accompanying pluses and minuses. Their review guidelines only make a distinction between A and A-, the B, C, and D score all

carrying the same metamessage regardless of plus or minus. Again, if a D and a D- have the same metamessage, what's the real difference between the two?

One popular theory to rectify these issues is to abandon review scores altogether and let the review text speak for itself. Unfortunately, this isn't a feasible solution as the video game industry has come to the point where it depends on these review scores for advertising and promotion. Additionally, sites such as GameRankings and metacritic aggregate the review scores from various media outlets. This aggregation is important to game publishers, to the point where a title's average review percentage can not only affect a developer's royalty payments, but also their chances of working with that publisher again.[5]

Without the all-important review score, a publication would gradually lose the support of the video game industry. Likewise, its theorized readers would be turned away by the inability to grasp the quality of a game as indicated by a number or letter, the metamessage of an unusually high or low score often providing the point of interest for them to inquire further on a title. So when it comes to potentially losing support and readership or assigning a review score, it's not surprising to note all of the successful publications that provide game reviews also include an accompanying review score.

If we can't get rid of the review scores, what about a panel or committee of reviewers to provide multiple scores? Magazines such as EGM have been using this format for years, assigning three or four editors to play a game and type up their thoughts. Unfortunately, this doesn't work as well in execution. By splitting the length of the review amongst multiple editors, each writer has less space to justify or explain their review score, especially important if their score doesn't gel with the others.

Furthermore, this method is also dependent on the number of available staff. As numerous sites already struggle with getting reviews up in a timely manner, assigning additional games to the staff could prove detrimental to the quality of the reviews.

Another popular suggestion, the thumbs up / thumbs down scoring system made popular by Siskel & Ebert, is likewise flawed in the realm of game journalism. Falling victim to the above problem of aggregation, with only two possible scores, the numerical values a site such as GameRankings would assign to the scores would so heavily influence a game's average review percentage that it wouldn't be fair to factor them in. And as established above, sites that don't contribute to the aggregation of review scores shouldn't expect support from the industry.

{mospagebreak title= In Conclusion: We're All Doomed}

In conclusion, well, there really is no clear conclusion, just as there is no clear cause of conflicting metamessages and no clear solution. Thanks to their unique composition, video game reviews carry two metamessages, and for whatever reason, these metamessages don't always reinforce one another as they should. But despite a variety of available solutions, the video game industry has come to rely on these review scores, and with the industry growing more popular with each passing year, this reliance is not something that's likely to change. Ultimately, it's up to the individual author to ensure the metamessages of their score and review align, and while this may not be a comprehensive solution, it's a start. Thoughts? Comments? Suggestions? Head on over to the NeoGAF Forum.

[1] Dan Hewitt, "ESA President Douglas Lowenstein Addresses Audience At China Joy Game Show in Shanghai," ESA, 4 Oct, 2004, 2 May 2006 [http://www.theesa.com/archives/2004/10/esa\\_president\\_d.php](http://www.theesa.com/archives/2004/10/esa_president_d.php)

[2] Deborah Tannen, "You're Wearing That?" by Deborah Tannen," Random House Publishing Group, 1 Jan, 2006, 2 May 2006 <http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400062584&view=excerpt>. [3] "Introductions & Conclusions," Princeton Writing Program (2001), 2 May 2006 <http://web.princeton.edu/writing>.

[4] Justin Kruger, Nicholas Epley, Jason Parker, and Zhi-Wen Ng, "Egocentrism Over E-Mail: Can We Communicate as Well as We Think?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89 (2005): 925-936,

[5] Paul Hyman, "Warner Bros, Looks to Reviewers to Help Ensure Game Quality," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21 May 2004, 2 May 2006 [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/columns/tech\\_reporter\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1000517289](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/columns/tech_reporter_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000517289).