

Where is all the good writing about videogames? A decade of data and the critical games writing sphere

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ABSTRACT

Videogame academia is institutionally supported, sometimes funded, and subject to the checks and balances of the norms of scholarly research. As a field of study, it has a memory of sorts, and a community (or perhaps communities) of practice where ideas are shared and developed. However, academia is not and has never been the only arena for critical thinking about videogames, for informed and reflective discourse about videogames, or even for research about videogames.

Instead, knowledge, research, and writing about videogames has been instantiated through a wide variety of online forms, some of which sit at the intersection between scholarly and non-scholarly practice, but many of which reside entirely outside of the academy and the norms and structures that exist within it. It is often accessible in the form of blog posts, tweets and other social media discussions, forum threads, YouTube videos, and it is also highly spreadable in these contexts and beyond. It is networked, decentralised, and popularised – and often liminal and precarious, as well as underacknowledged and underutilised by the academy (Parker 2014, Golding 2018).

The website *Critical Distance* (critical-distance.com) was founded in 2009 as a deliberate counter to many of these concerns, aiming ‘to capture the videogame criticism ‘zeitgeist’ and act as a ‘memory bank’ in this notoriously short-sighted and quick forgetting industry’ (Gursoy 2011), as well as an answer the cyclical question: where is all the good writing about videogames? The frequency of the appearance of this question – from mainstream journalists, commentators, even academics – spoke to both an institutional lack of awareness of such discourse, as well as its decentralization. As Keogh wrote in 2012 in response to one such instance of the well-intentioned, yet uninformed search for “good writing about videogames,” the implication that “such videogame criticism simply doesn’t exist yet ruffled a few feathers with those writers (including myself) who would like to consider ourselves as already being videogame critics. We felt slighted, ignored” (Keogh 2012).

Critical Distance has several functions, and has at times included podcasts and writing prompts for readers, as well as thematic, curated collections of writing on specific topics or games. However, *Critical Distance*’s most enduring legacy is the ‘This Week in Videogame Blogging’ programme, a weekly roundup post that simply

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collects what the website's curators, readers, and community identify as the week's most compelling or of-the-moment writing about videogames. Very occasionally, the roundup includes open access scholarly work (from publications such as *Game Studies*, the *Journal of Game Criticism* or middle state publications like *First Person Scholar*). Most often, however, the work is drawn from personal blogs, social media, and videogame culture websites ranging from the very small (individual posts to modest Tumblr, Wordpress, or Blogspot blogs) to the very large (*Kotaku* or *Polygon*). *Critical Distance* posted its first weekly roundup in April 2009, and it has continued to do so more or less without substantial breaks until today.

It is remarkable that until now, no detailed scholarly research has been performed into the body of writing mapped by *Critical Distance*. If we assume that those responsible for *Critical Distance*'s weekly roundups have even been at least halfway capable in their mapping of the world of videogame discourse – and there is no reason not to assume this – then in essence what the website's archives contain is an enormous, hand-crafted repository of knowledge, largely outside of the academy, that charts the development of thought and discourse about a medium across more than one decade.

Using this repository, then, it is possible to take an enormously broad view, and draw up a quite literal answer to the question, “Where is all the good writing about videogames?” – or at least, where it has been between April 2009 and late 2020.

For this paper, I have used data scraping tools assemble a dataset of every link ever posted by *Critical Distance* editors for their weekly roundups, organized by date, anchor text, publication name, and more, including each linked URL's title, meta description and keywords. This repository totals some 10,000 links from 2009 to late 2020, across 608 weekly entries.

In this paper I will present my preliminary findings drawn from analysing this dataset. I will not only be able to show “where all the good writing about videogames is” by using data analysis to find, for example, the most commonly-linked websites across these ten years, but I will also be able to discuss the frequency of occurrence of keywords, games discussed, and other trends, including the prominence and influence of individual publications and online platforms.

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BIO

Dr. Dan Golding is a Senior Lecturer and Deputy Department Chair of Media and Communication at Swinburne University, and the host of *Screen Sounds* on ABC Classic. He is the author of *Star Wars After Lucas* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), and he created the soundtrack for *Untitled Goose Game* (2019), which became the first ever videogame soundtrack to be nominated for an ARIA award.