Title: And the Band Played On: The Case for Critical Dissonance in Video Games

First definition
Criticism. The realm of those who can't, those who talk, those with an agenda, those obsessed with identity politics -- dare we say, at times, those social justice warriors? so say the critics of the critics. But just what is criticism?

Second definition: This second look, the more formal, even academic angle on criticism, is more in line with what is performed by industry professionals, scholars, and freelancers everywhere. Criticism is performed on small-time blogs, mainstream gaming sites, and in academic journals, but just outlining and defining criticism, and the ways the word is used and interpreted doesn't really get us very far. In order to unpack what criticism is, what it can do, and why it sometimes creates such a visceral response, we have to look at the performance of criticism, and its reception, from a variety of angles.

IB MONTAGE INTO TITLE CARD
In this episode of Invisibility Blues, we look at the wide-ranging discussions around games criticism, games critics, and responses from player communities.

Let us start by saying that many of the people who write about games do so for no or very little money and most of the money that they do get goes toward buying games, gaming hardware, and the like. We do the work that we do out of our passion for games and a love for the games community. We could not put in this kind of work long term if it were not for our love of the games. Many of us have histories with games that span decades. Our work in games criticism is definitely of the sort that seeks to carefully discuss games and the games community to not only judge and explain them, but in an attempt to make the medium better. Unfortunately, we find ourselves under attack more and more by people who read games criticism not as a labor of love, but as one that seeks to denigrate and destroy.

The critical purpose of engagement -- that careful discussion, that excavation of meaning -- can help reveal the details and impacts that game makers, marketers, and players may not see, or that they may see differently, particularly in terms of racist and culturally insensitive moves like the recent example of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* with Augs Lives Matter. If discovered and discussed early in the development process, these things can be changed (either early in the game to make it more of the cultural critique that it may have been intended to be, which doesn't seem to be the case in *Deus Ex*, but may be the case in *Mafia 3* or late in the game it gives them enough time to change the art assets). What criticism can't change is the technologically impossible. You can't always make a game engine and gaming hardware do exactly what you want them to do. What criticism also can't do is change everything, nor would we want it to. We want media to express a variety of viewpoints and ideas and to be open to critique and conversation building. & what criticism ultimately can not change is the mind that is closed, the ear that is deaf, the eye that is blind.

Tauriq Moosa: So when people complain about this idea of 'you're inserting an agenda' or 'inserting politics' or rather they assert 'this is an unnecessary criticism, I don't want

to hear this,' what ever the case may be, they are forcing their priorities on you. Their priorities are not mine, my priorities for my writing are political and it will always be political and I am very proud of any agenda that I will push. My agendas are to do with greater representation and inclusion and dealing with ... positions, story positions that I think are servile or fantastic whatever the case may be; so it's not I'm not just interested in graphics and sound I'm interested in story and character development and the way that ... people of color are represented, the way that women are represented, whether trans people are included, these are issues that mean a lot to me-- not just in gaming but in the world itself. I don't separate my writing in games from what my interests are socially because the two are intertwined, because games are made by humans and what humans think and believe matters. So I tackle that, and I tackle it proudly. I don't hide my agenda I stand by it.

Not only can we not separate those intertwined interests, we shouldn't -- because when we attempt one person's idea of "objectivity," or attempt to separate the personally political from the fictional world, we cannot speak to the vast sprawl of gaming's wider audience; instead, we speak only to the limited audience that holds those same opinions, that wishes to view games in the same way. But gaming isn't a tunnel or linear path; the wider games audience is a vast ecosystem of its own: colorful, shifting, diverse, dynamic. Never stagnant. Because who wants a stagnant industry?

In that way, criticism is a little like QA testing -- it just unfortunately often happens after the fact. But writers, developers, and whole teams can be insular; we know that the industry tends to be more homogenous, and if there isn't a voice to speak up, to say, hey, let's not appropriate BlackLivesMatter, or maybe we should do something about our all-white world, then after the fact is all we have. Because those homogenous teams aren't as likely to notice. Paul Tassi, writing for Forbes, said something similar in response to Tauriq Moosa's piece on the *Witcher*, admitting that he simply did not notice that the game's wider human cast consisted solely of white people. Critics can be, and are, the people who notice. And maybe that QA testing of criticism happens after one game hits the shelves, but in time for the development team to consider the next, and the next, until we see games moving closer to wider representation.

The purpose of criticism is to shine a light on things that had not been in the light before. Criticism, however, is not received as a light erasing the shadows, but as an attack, not only on those narratives, on the heroes and heroines gamers have come to love, but on the players themselves.

Tauriq Moosa: None of this is to do with video games in fact what it is, at least for me is that we are tackling an issue that most people would rather not think about what most people, rather should say that white people, that white dudes, would rather not think about, who would very often very calmly say that they are completely not racist at all, but they still benefit from white privilege. And one of those aspects of white privilege is seeing yourself represented, and it not being an issue-- you never need to worry about yourself being represented.

Rather than facing these complex issues, the response from affected players is often one of violence, from deliberate misreading to vehement anger to threats, and the sheer volume of these reactions can drown out critical conversations.

Tauriq Moosa: One of the worst things that has happened in the fantasy sphere was labeling other sentient species races. It's probably one the silliest, most pernicious, awful things that's happened and like … most examples I think lately in terms of [unconscious] racist dynamics it was never intentional. It was never meant to be about … anybody that isn't a white person is probably a different species, and is probably either a brute or whatever the case may be. It was never … the intent but that's what … ends up happening and it ends up happening because humans are portrayed as their own species. But then there's this idea of a default human, and the default human is usually a white guy, and that's been unquestioned until recently when some of us who aren't white people have started writing and getting our voices heard and publishing in places where we were never heard from. And that is changing that perspective and pointing out how pernicious it is. It also doesn't allow for actual discussions of representations because as ridiculous as it is one of the most common responses I got was "of course they're different races, in the regions just look at the elves and the dwarves." Which is not of course not the issue at all, and again I pointed out that they saw no problem with the fact that humans equals white humans. So the fact that in fantasy spheres race has been used to mean different species, has kind of been pernicious [in a way] that I don't think … was thought of when it was used, I have very little doubt that it was, I don't think it was used with malicious intent, as I don't think most instances of unconscious racism are malicious at all. I just think that's the out pouring of privilege, and again when you point out privilege it's viewed as an attack rather than a reason to rethink how you portray your work and portray your writing and portray your views.

But these reactions do not stop critical conversations; at worst, it acts as noise in the conversation, sometimes bringing it to a temporary halt, but these are conversations that are necessary if not essential to understanding how all gamers understand and interact with games.

Recently, Austin Walker of Vice Gaming spent some time with the *Mafia 3* demo and wrote about the experience of playing the game and talking with lead writer, Bill Harms. In his article "Why *Mafia 3* should tackle race head on," Walker uses his personal experience as a Black man watching the action unfold as a lens through which to view his impressions of the game play.

These kinds of conversations, developers and critics, particularly critics with perspectives and personal experiences that may be different from those of the teams building the games, are vitally important to creating more realistic, inclusive, and visceral gaming experiences. These conversations may seem to some to be on a permanent loop of social justice dissonance, but the fact of the matter is that what we recognize in this tune is not the same notes, but are rather other melodic voices that play upon the patterns of oppression that we see when we are talking about the representation (or lack thereof) of underrepresented groups.

And that's it for our criticism episode. Join us next time when we talk about the intersectional identities of women of color in games on Invisibility Blues.