
The French cultural magazine Chronic'art interviewed me for the supplementary web portion of their review of Capcom's 2005 release *Killer7*. The reviewer (Cyril Lener) and I had corresponded for a while after he had contacted me regarding my Plot Analysis document.

Cyril presented the interview questions in English. I answered in English, and he subsequently translated my answers into French for its actual publication. You may access the published French version here: [Chronic'art : Le Mag.](#)

You may access Cyril's review of *Killer7* (also in French) here: [Chronic'art : Cyber - Jeux](#)

Some of my opinions stated in the interview have changed as time has passed, of course. However, I still hold many of the opinions therein stated. For the benefit of English readers, I present my English language answers on this web page.

Chronic'art : What did make you want to analyse *Killer7* in the first place? Did you analyse other games or other pieces of work (movie, music, painting, etc . . .) before?

James Clinton Howell : As everyone else was, I think, I was very confused by the ending of *Killer7*. Most people were concerned about what happened in the game's story. My confusion was different, though. I was very affected, emotionally, by a particular scene in the game that involves the complete annihilation of a man's family. I had to take a break from the game, because of how stressful that scene was. As I took a break from it, I thought about whether or not I would continue playing. I did not want to play a game that introduced me to emotionally stressful scenes, if that emotional stress was not redeemed somehow.

In life, we can't be sure of having emotional stress redeemed; in media, though, we should expect creators to have enough artistic and psychological compassion to turn the emotions created by a stressful experience into a more profound emotional response.

I do not want to spoil the game, so I will simply say that I did not think that the ending (as it first came across to me) gave enough justification for the emotional stress that I felt. I took a break from the game for a week. Part of my personal character, though, does not like to ignore unresolved tension. I went onto a few online message boards to discuss the game, in order to make some more sense out of my own confusion.

I saw that most of the conversations on the game had reached dead-ends. Some people provided unique perspectives on the game, but I mostly saw the same ideas coming out of different people. None of these ideas explained the entire game; each idea only explained a certain part of the game, and ignored the rest.

Here, my experience with artistic interpretation became useful. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature, and I have won important awards for my poems and photographs. Naturally, because of my interests, I cultivated relationships with professors who shared my interests. One of my most influential professors of poetry, Doctor Stephen Gardner, once told his poetry class that he believed that all writing was communication, and that all communication has meaning. He said that he believed that serious writers write to communicate a meaning, and that when we read a poem we are trying to understand the meaning that exists within the writing.

With this background, I have written many papers analysing poems and novels. I find that I particularly enjoy analyzing poems, because I enjoy the intuition required to understand the meaning behind images, as well as the relationships between images. These methods of reading are useful with respect to film criticism, because film offers a visual embodiment of images, as language offers an imagined embodiment. Consequently, these methods are also useful with respect to video games, since they are so close to film in many of their story-telling techniques.

With this history in mind, I would like return attention to the beginnings of my analysis. When I conversed online with people about the game, I used the methods of understanding that I used in literature. I discovered a great deal of antagonism toward my methods, and I quickly found that I spent more time defending my methods instead of writing about the game! I do not entirely understand the reasons behind the gainsayers' aggression, but I became frustrated nonetheless.

As a gamer, I enjoy games with detailed plots; consequently, I have enjoyed good writing on those games, like the *Silent Hill* series, the *Resident Evil* series, and the *Metal Gear Solid* series. I remember many happy hours reading the Plot Analysis documents for games in those series, by Dan Birlew and Thomas Wilde. I knew that many players would have questions about *Killer7*, when they finished the game. I wanted to write a plot analysis that would justify both the emotional stress created by certain scenes within the game, as well as give one single unified understanding to the events of the game.

Chronic'art : What kind of obstacles did you meet before getting 'the big picture' behind Killer7?

James Clinton Howell : The three main obstacles that I met were antagonism from other players who disagreed with me, my own lack of knowledge regarding Japanese political history, and access to information within the game.

As I wrote in my response to the first question, I received a lot of antagonism from some people because of my ideas. I do not understand the source of the antagonism, other than some people saying that I thought I was smarter than them, or saying that I made things up. I became sidetracked dealing with the intellectual content of their criticisms: I had to formulate a critical philosophy that explained why I used the history of Japanese-American relations as a relevant tool, and that also explained why I believed that certain images and ideas in the game could be interpreted as symbols. Forming a philosophy of criticism was the single largest obstacle, to prevent myself from wasting time answering responses from angry people.

The second biggest obstacle was my own ignorance. Before writing this document, I knew next to nothing about Japanese political history, Japanese-American relations, or the Pacific battles during World War II. I steadily read Herbert Bix's biography, and I used my university's library services to research academic writing on the ideas that I discovered in Bix's book. After a few weeks of intense research and reading, I developed a basic understanding of the issues involved with the history; afterward, writing the plot analysis became much easier.

Finally, I became frustrated because I discovered that it was difficult to access information from the game, without playing through it all over again. For instance, if I wanted to cite a piece of dialogue from the game to give greater credibility to an idea in my plot analysis, I would have to turn on the Gamecube and play until I arrived at the specific scene. Since the parts of my mind that play games and write are different, I would have to refocus and remember my purpose in turning on the video game. So, I recorded all of the cutscenes in the game, in MP3 format, and I labeled the files according to their order in the game. I was then able to access information in the game, without becoming too distracted by playing the game.

Chronic'art : Without spoiling those who didn't finished the game, we can assume that Killer7's plot and gameplay figure a very critical, cultural, historical and passionate relationship between Japan and the U. S. A. Would you tell us more of your thought about that?

James Clinton Howell : America and Japan have a strange, complicated relationship. I think that our nations' relationship is a wonderful example of a modern exchange of culture and ideas, much like one would have seen in old Europe when a certain tribe discovered another tribe by crossing a mountain range for the first time. We meet each other; we are mystified; and we change because we know each other.

Killer7 draws attention to the ways in which our cultures have influenced each other. Japan has progressed economically as a result of America's investment, post-World War II, in rebuilding Japan; we Westernized them. Likewise, though, they Easternized us, to a certain extent. Greater scholarly access to

Eastern philosophies and religions created changes in American spiritual awareness, such as increased knowledge of Taoism and Buddhism. More recently, though, America has seen an influx of Japanese pop culture. This influx of Japanese pop culture is mainly what *Killer7* uses to communicate its message.

Even though pop culture is "lower art," it can't be denied that pop culture embodies certain values that a given culture accepts as true. Starting in the 1980's, America became fascinated with Japanese pop culture; in many ways, I think, American became fascinated with Japanese pop culture because those values are the opposite of our own culture's. I think that *Killer7* raises the question: "What happens when the young generation of American culture is raised on Japanese pop culture, which contains an implicit acceptance of Japanese cultural values?"

Chronic'art : A book called "Hands on Killer7" was released by Capcom to Japan in order to fill the blank left by the game's script. However, strangely, your plot analysis seems to offer more unified, logical, and accurate thoughts than the "official" explanation does. How do you explain that?

James Clinton Howell : Believe me, I have asked myself the same question many times.

When I learned about the existence of the book, I felt skeptical. I would love for video games to mature, as a medium of communication. When a video game is released, and then a book is released to clarify the video game, I think that this cheapens the video game. As an artist myself, I know that I would not create an imaginative work and then expect people to buy a book I later published about it, to get the "full idea." In art, I think that the questions raised by the work are just as important as the answers given; sometimes, the questions are more important. The tendency of video game companies to release a game with a difficult plot (like *Killer7* or any of the *Silent Hill* games), and then release a book explaining everything, undermines the game as a story-telling medium.

In the end, I must regard the story in the book and the story in the game as two different stories, set in the same universe. In other words, both the game and the book use the same characters, environment, and political history--yet, they tell two different stories using the same materials. I think that the book describes the original intentions of the game designers, before they were faced with financial and technological limitations. In order to bring the story to a size that would fit their resources, they needed to change it.

Ultimately, my plot analysis addresses the game, while the book addresses the designers' original intentions. Since the book records the original intentions before they were shaved to fit into the game, the book does not have a problem contradicting the game's facts. However, because my plot analysis directly addresses the game alone, without revising the contents of the game to fit my ideas, I think that it seems

more cogent.

Chronic'art : After all the work done upon the signs of the in game and in the CG of *Killer7*, what is your final opinion on the game? How do you understand its poor sales?

James Clinton Howell : I think that *Killer7*'s poor sales are a sign of the contradictions in today's gaming culture. (By "gaming culture," I mean the total combination of ideas and practices of all game players, game reviewing magazines, and even opponents to video games.)

Many of the reviews on popular web sites gave *Killer7* very low scores; and I can guarantee you that almost every single critic who disliked the game used the word "pretentious" at least once in their review. Current game culture is aware that most games today are recycled conventions, in plot, gameplay, and characterization. Because no one really likes this stagnation, we hear cries that the days of originality in video games are over.

Then, when a game like *Killer7* shows up, gamers panic. It is easier to complain about lack of originality, than to accept something original. The same thing happened with *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, another game that suffered similarly. Gamers and reviewers complained: "Its plot was confusing; it didn't deliver precisely what gamers expected; it was 'pretentious'."

In the end, I think that *Killer7* is masterful. Very few games have engaged me, as this game has.

Chronic'art : There are a lot of books based on a thematical aspect of videogames (for example, "Trigger Happy" makes an apology for virtual killing). Besides that, very few books focus on one single game. How do you explain that? What future do you figure for the essay genre focused on a particular game?

James Clinton Howell : A number of obstacles to serious writing on games exists. Mainly, I think that they are: (1) the close relationship between video games and corporate needs; (2) the generational gap between established intellectual authorities and the gaming audience; and (3) the prevalence of pseudo-intellectual responses to games. I will explain my thoughts on each of these aspects, in order.

Most imaginative creations that are the locus for critical writing bear the marks of personal vision. All drama, poetry, painting, and film that receives important critical attention are works that bear the imprint

of the creator's character. Because video games are currently very intertwined with corporate needs--mainly, the needs to make money and the ensure the future existence of a purchasing fanbase--they do not reflect as much of the creators' idiosyncrasies as they might. *Killer7* is a fine example of the difficulty that arises in this respect; because of the low reviews the game received, and because of the resulting drop in game sales, Capcom is less likely to risk the money involved to make another game with the idiosyncratic qualities of *Killer7*. If a group of independent game developers were the only people involved, then we might see more titles like this arise, since artists are more dedicated to creation and communication of ideas than corporate executives.

I bring up the point, because I think that serious writing on games can only exist if more games are published that warrant such writing. As it stands, the more games like *HALO*, *Splinter Cell*, and suchlike titles exist, the less video games will seem worth writing intelligently about.

Secondly, video games are part of what might be called "youth culture." By most adults, they are seen as little more than toys--and expensive toys, at that. Authority figures in universities and public schools regard video games with suspicion; because of their resistance to recognizing video games as legitimate subjects of critical writing, it is less likely that serious writing on games will be published for circulation.

These two points combine to create the larger obstacle. With scandals like the "Hot Coffee" mod in Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* getting publicity, authority figures are less likely to accept games as anything more than sensational pabulum. Sadly, the overwhelming bulk of video games supports the prejudices of the older generation toward the medium.

Another obstacle within the gaming culture exists: pseudo-intellectual responses to games. By "pseudo-intellectual response," I mean a piece of writing about a video game that tries more to flaunt its own vocabulary than it tries to address the ideas of the game. I should explain upfront that I tend to hold more conservative views on criticism and art than many people would agree with, so my reactions to such critics are informed by cultural ideas that not everyone will agree with.

There are two types of pseudo-intellectual responses to games: the first is the type that tries too hard to justify video games as "art," and the second is the type that pretends to "see through" an intelligent game and dismisses it as "pretentious." The second type of pseudo-intellectual response is by far the larger obstacle, though both are problematic.

In the first, many writers make the video game essay look bad because of a predisposition toward post-modern critical theories. Their writing reveals that they are preoccupied strongly with individual responses to games, rather than meaning within the game that can be perceived by multiple individuals. In my experience writing my plot analysis document for *Killer7*, in fact, I encountered these attitudes many times. The frequency of these encounters resulted in my formulation of a philosophy of criticism. In order to write effectively about any creative work--video game, poem, or painting--the essayist must communicate private experience publicly, and give public experience the dignity of private experience. My correlation between events in *Killer7* with Japanese post-World War II history was a private

experience; yet, I communicated it publicly so that it could be shared in other gamers' private experiences. (I am pleased to think that I have succeeded, considering the number of eMails I have received from readers who thank me for enhancing their playthroughs of *Killer7*, after having read my document.) Most serious writing on video games, that I have read, is too self-conscious and too aware of subjectivity to try to convey these private experiences publicly.

In the second type, a writer (most often a game reviewer) places himself intellectually above the game and describes it as "pretentious." Since these writers have a larger base of readers than the first type, they accidentally inspire self-consciousness on behalf of would-be essayists. (After all, if the subject of writing is "pretentious," does this not connote that any writing about the subject is "pretentious," too?) The result is that a potential video game essay is silenced before it can be written, because of pressure within the gaming culture to avoid intellectual hot air.

I would like very much to see the video game essay arise in popularity. I think that it will take some time, though, for current standards and practices within the gaming culture to change, before the video game essay becomes more prevalent.

Chronic'art : Is there another game you'd like to work on soon?

James Clinton Howell : I would like to devote writing to the *Metal Gear Solid* games. Their political focus intrigues me. However, I think that I would like a break from writing about video games. I have other interests that I would like to dedicate more time toward, such as genealogical research, poetry, and my application to graduate school.

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