

Why don't we complete games?

Opinion

September 14, 2017

by [Eron Rauch](#)

We talk a lot in terms of "beating" games, but most players will never actually get that far.



I hate achievements. Except for right after I've finished a videogame. At that moment, I'm sucker for peeking at my pixelated Steam trophy case to see what was added. I don't even glance at common achievements—I'm only interested in seeing what rare glories I was awarded. Then, after a few moments of basking, my pride rapidly fades to a mild shame and I hurry to try to decide what game to play next.

Having just finished the highly anticipated *Torment: Tides of Numenera*, I couldn't help but notice something a bit disconcerting. In the last 30 hours I had battled immortal pan-dimensional guardians, chased an absentee god who leapt between bodies, hacked the memory of some of the universe's greatest warriors, and wrestled with byzantine but unimaginably lethal alien technology. Yet amongst the most rarified accomplishments now memorialized on my mantel was one shared only by a paltry 14.9% of other players: The achievement for... finishing the game?

Incredulously scrolling up the list: only 30% of players finished the first city? Wait, what? 25% of players didn't even finish the first 15-minute encounter that starts the game!



It's not just this esoteric isometric throwback that droves of players are failing to finish. Picking through a few of [Metacritic's top games for 2016](#): *Witcher III: Wild Hunt* has a 27.4% completion rate; *Dark Souls III* 26.2%; *Ori and the Blind Forest: Definitive Edition* had 27.2%. *XCOM 2* had a surprising 34.4% of players finish. Indie darling *Inside* only had 14.7% completion rate. 2015's sleeper hit, *Darkest Dungeon*, has a daunting 1.9%.

If you're curious, the range can be pretty wide: Classics like *Final Fantasy VII* came in at 7.4% while *Firewatch* has a 59.4% completion rate. You might ascribe that variance to *FFVII* being a 50-hour game, and *Firewatch* taking three, but *Dark Souls III* and *Inside* are (respectively) about the same length as those two, so there seem to be other variables at play.

Many paths don't lead to the end

There are assuredly a multitude of reasons that people don't finish games. I, too, bounced off *Darkest Dungeon* because it made me feel so stressed that I would lay in bed afterward, eyes peeled wide. Which, I know, was sort of the point. So I felt like even the few hours I did play were potent enough that I felt like I was able to understand most of the core artistic ideas that the game was playing with.

For another example of how Steam achievements might not be entirely representative, my *Pillars of Eternity* (10.1%) game had the common glitch that caused a particular door to remain stuck even if you solved the mystery to open it. After trying every trick beyond driving to the Obsidian Entertainment's offices, I used a console command to bypass it. That, of course, caused Steam to think I was cheating, and thus it refused to track any further achievements.

Let's not forget that these numbers are also probably skewed by Humble-bloat. So often, it's cheaper to buy a Bundle than the single videogame in it that we want. Similarly, Steam sales let us get around the contemporary problem of trying before we buy, by discounting them up 90%. Why wouldn't a smart consumer spend \$2 to try something out they've absently heard about? But that means for every game we really wanted, we probably have a dozen we tried for two minutes and uninstalled.



 ZOOM

Even the assumption that developers care most about completion is inaccurate. When Rob Zacny [talked with the designers](#) of *Civilization IV* and *V* (22.4%) on Three Moves Ahead, they admitted that they tuned the game to accommodate the way most players lavished in the swords and sails of the first half of a game but were very likely to start up a new game rather than move deep into the modern age.

If you're curious how videogames compare to other media, when *Slate* writer Farad Manjoo [asked](#) analytics firm Chartbeat to look at articles on their site, they found that only 25% of folks made past 1700 pixels. Pixels, mind you, not words. Which is to say, just a bit past about the initial content that loads in your browser window. 38% of folks didn't spend any time on any given article, bouncing immediately.

For comparably long-form narrative media, novels are a passable comparison. For instance, something like *The Time Traveler's Wife* would take [about 9 hours to read](#). While public data is scarce, British ebook site Kobo published a large data set in 2015, which amongst other things showed that less than [50% of ebooks even get opened](#). Once opened, pulp/genre [novels had about](#) a 60% average completion rate, while well-known literary novels fared less well, with only about 40% of readers finishing them. Since only half of the books get opened, that would mean a real completion rate around 20%, which is only a bit better than *Torment*.

Are we even trying to finish?

But I'm not here to host a marketing meeting. In fact, I want to share a story that shows how trying to pin down "completion" to a binary state is a simplification of a very complex relationship to a work of art.

Once while adventuring with my family in Chicago on a sleeting winter's night, my sister revealed this curious tidbit: if she really loves a book, she will often set it aside very near the end. She explained that significantly delaying—or even refusing to finish—a beloved work seemed to be a way to keep it alive in her imagination. Finishing was an unacceptable finality for her.

Similarly, my ex-girlfriend who plays games avidly had memory cards filled with innumerable saves halfway through the last dungeon of Japanese RPGs. She never finished the games, despite the end being so near. I can hardly blame her with the genre's predilection for additional even-more-final bosses, like *Final Fantasy 9*'s infamous [Star Wars Episode 1](#) quoting Necron. But that wasn't my ex's issue: she always said that finishing was boring. It was just the time spent in that fantastical world that was important.

To riff on a classic Japanese aesthetic principle -- that the partially seen is more intriguing than that which is fully revealed -- perhaps even digital myths meticulously crafted in 3D computer graphics feel most epic when parts of it are hidden to us? Presenting Blizzard's vision for incredibly difficult *World of Warcraft* raids in 2005, spokesman Jeff Kaplan [said](#), "The world feels bigger for everyone if there is unbeaten content out there."



Yes, Blizzard has significantly changed its design philosophy since that time, opening up those hidden reaches to a much higher percentage than the [“very few”](#) players who ever got to see Sunwell. On the surface, these two philosophies of completion seem at odds. Yet, despite these schools of thought offering competing definitions of completion—one defined by the unseen, another by full disclosure—they turn out to be nothing more than two different but still valid ways to build an artistic experience. The real danger is in players treating one like the other, which will lead to inevitable disappointment.

Would achievements for art make sense?

The classic essay [“The Full Experience Points”](#) by Richard “KirbyKid” Terrell dives right into the midst of the thorny issues surrounding the diverse ways we define and value “completion.” Trying to make sense of an era swamped with DLC, achievements, side quests, skins, countless difficulty modes, new game plus, mobile tie-ins, fan wikis, let’s plays, prequels, alternate endings, Terrell comes to a conclusion: “The full experience of playing the game is very much the product of what I bring to the game, the game, and the history surrounding that game. Just like art, understanding the cultural context and the discourse around a game is important.”

We can see how imprecise and artificial a term like “completion” is when we think about our experience with a piece of art. The [average museum-goer spends less than thirty seconds](#) looking at any given work. Even with an MFA, I’m as guilty of glancing past whole centuries of work on the way to see the show upstairs. Hell, I might go two or three museum visits and not get captured by any particular piece.

Every once in a great while, there is that moment where something catches my hurried eye. And I’ll stand there, looking. Maybe I’ll stop, doodle a few notes, write down the artist and the title; turn that piece over and over in my mind while sipping a coffee in the courtyard cafe. Later, I’ll grab a book of the artist’s work; dig in and scour the internet to learn about what life was like at the time when the work was made.



Hélio Oiticica's 'Tropicalia' (photo via [Art Institute of Chicago](#))

When I'm drawn closer, inevitably by some mystery, I might even return to the work over years and thousands of miles: I recently spent three hours on the 7 train in Queens filled with drunk Mets fans in order to see Hélio Oiticica's [work at the Whitney](#). He had stuck in my mind, turning around and around even in absence, since seeing his sprawling sand-swept installation "Tropicalia" (complete with live parrots and blasting Brazilian psychedelic rock) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago almost a decade earlier. A three hour train ride was nothing in comparison.

Defining my relationship with Oiticicia's work in a rigid way like an achievement for completion is ridiculous. Just because I stood in the sand for a longer time than the person next to me doesn't mean I paid more attention to it. Can you imagine if someone was keeping, and publicly displaying, data about every piece of art you wandered past in a museum? That would be so awkward and nerve wracking—it would be impossible to experience the art for what it is with that sort of one-size-fits all checklist mindset.

Fan favorite *Skyrim* (15.1%) is another perfect example how a simple definition of "finishing the game" doesn't really say much about a player's experience of the game. Probably like you, I have legions of friends who are still sojourning to the further frozen peaks, exploring [ever-weirder, more-modded](#), paths of adventure, years after completing the relatively short main story. To those dedicated fans, that very vastness which defies "completion" is as paramount to understanding that specific game experience as the nerve-wracking nigh-impossibility of finishing *Darkest Dungeon* is to experiencing its horrors.

Far reacher than completion

After this litany of caveats and complexities, you might think that I'm advocating for a free-for-all, where anyone can say anything about any game. But I don't. Instead, I want to return to Terrell's statement about the parts of the Triforce that collaborate to build the complex experience we call completion: the game, the self, and the world.

Achievements, binary analytics, and progress bars are just simplistic abstractions that workers can easily plug into corporate Powerpoint presentations. Completion be damned, having a meaningful experience with a game is learning to pay closer attention to the specifics of each of Terrell's three elements and becoming more aware of the ways they interact with each other. Sometimes that will mean struggling to finish a game that challenges our skills or preconceptions; other times that might lead us to challenge the game's assumptions. But that relationship is forged from looking deeper than what any achievement could ask of us.



The reason I suspect that *Torment: Tides of Numenera* made me especially aware of the how completion is such a slippery concept is because the game is pretty straight-forward. Like most genre fantasy, it follows a linear path forward and builds to a

momentous end. But the dialog trees are lavish and novelistic in scope, and the world rife with mysteries, sly humor, and subtle drama. I mean, I spent over an hour just helping out some aged warriors put their past to rest in a dilapidated bar.

If your focus was simply on cruising through the arc toward the final achievement, it would be simple to charge through *Torment* with nary a bored warrior's grunt, and in the process ignore a vast majority of the interesting parts that the achievements have no power to judge.

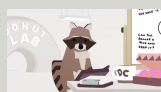
We know illuminating some icon on a digital player profile isn't what makes a game interesting or meaningful. Maybe 20 years ago, when I owned like 10 games total, it was easier to give the games the space they asked for. But with the cornucopia of videogames that now relentlessly jostle for our attention, I so often need a gentle reminder to slow down and remember that having meaningful experiences with videogames means paying closer attention to what they ask of us, what we bring to that conversation, and how that ties into the expansive tapestry of history, society, and culture. Passing beyond a simplistic definition of completion is the very trailhead for building the complex, contradictory, and ultimately nourishing relationships to the art and videogames that so beguile us.

#	WORLD OF WARCRAFT
#	THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM
#	CIVILIZATION (SERIES)
#	TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA

RELATED READING



Best Game Soundtracks of August 2018



5 games you missed in August



Battle for Azeroth: What to know if you're getting back into World of Warcraft



Opinion: Against games using dead kids as plot devices



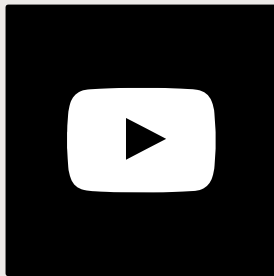
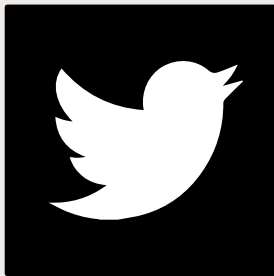
5 characters we still really want to see in Super Smash Bros.

[READ MORE OPINION](#)

[Report Ad](#)

ZAM

[SIGN UP NOW](#)



Featured Sites

Wowhead
Lolking
TF2Outpost
DayZDB
Hearthhead

Database Sites

[Wowhead](#)

[Lolking](#)

Addon Sites

[MMOUI](#)

[WowInterface](#)

[ESOUI](#)

About

[About ZAM](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of service](#)