

Playtime Shouldn't Be a Numbers Game



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I was never passionate about maths. Don't get me wrong, I had my moments here and there. Quadratic equations? Sure. Statistical models? Excellent. Trigonometry? Now we're talking. Alas, my enthusiasm for calculations had its limits. I'll never forget sitting the AS-level calculator exam; my brain burning at the prospect of deciphering the volume of a funnel. All I wanted to do was go home and play video games. Throw all my mental capacities into a riveting narrative instead of curvatures on line graphs. This was the dream. So how is it now that gaming more closely resembles my secondary school maths lesson than the joyous escapism I remember? The dream is growing grotesque.



Not found

This is a screenshot from *Marvel's Avengers*, the latest video game to ask the age-old question: what if all superheroes had to earn economic degrees

before embarking on crime-fighting ventures? Taking a page out of Bungie's enormously successful live-service shooter *Destiny*, Earth's Mightiest Heroes can now be equipped with tiered loot and mods (as if they weren't 'super' enough already). There's cosmetic upgrades that evoke the endearing suit unlocks of its single-player cousin *Spider-Man*; only slightly less harmful in that they involve colours instead of digits. Finally, there's the dreaded word. The one mechanic that instantaneously sends shivers down my spine: gear.

Gear perks, gear mods, gear scores. My eyes have practically conditioned themselves at this point to roll right past these things. On paper, Gear resembles a late-capitalist nightmare evolution of the distinct unlocks and upgrades of old: arbitrary clutter that begs to be dropped, destroyed, decompressed. What are modern inventories if not glossy scrapyards? This cyclical design inhibits the awe of discovery that flows throughout the medium's greatest titles. Imagine if Gordon Freeman was inundated with fifteen different crowbars over the course of *Half-Life 2*. Would Mario be better off with modifiable jump heights and damage numbers? FLUDD is the only gear for his heart.



Blizzard's *Overwatch* made loot crates and drop rates mainstays of gaming lexicon.

What about role-playing games? Since the first utterance of 'dungeon master', RPGs have been placing emphasis on character statistics and constant character changes. I'm not going to pretend like my *Skyrim*

inventory wasn't crammed with baskets and a dozen axes I never planned on using. Here's the thing: these role-playing games existed before the explosion of e-sports. Whilst the ripple effects of the competitive multiplayer boom on the gaming industry is a discussion for another time, there's little doubt that publishers have not ignored the immense success of games like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* and *League of Legends*. These titles rely on healthy economies and daily player engagement to survive, as evident with other recent innovations like 'seasons' and 'battle passes'. As patches alter game balance, the so-called 'meta' changes. As players win or lose matches, their ELO score drops as does their rank. These games amount to enormous leaderboards with new competitors and rulesets consistently shifting paradigms — an immeasurable threat to other titles begging for your attention.

If you can't beat them, join them. Role-playing elements or competitive metagames are no longer features, but universal tenets of the mainstream gaming industry. The *Assassin's Creed* franchise has undergone a reinvention of late, introducing aggressive monetisation tactics and our best friend Gear. Damage numbers — a concept born from the D&D roleplaying scene — fly off enemies pierced by your blades. Who needs visual feedback when we have *higher* numbers? Whilst WB Montreal's *Gotham Knights* certainly has my interest, I was dismayed to watch those very same numbers swarm around enemies in the gameplay demo. It's true that these features can be turned off or ignored in some cases, but their mere presence as the 'default' mode of play is far more difficult to gloss over.



Embarking on an infinite quest of liberation.

The inspiration for writing this piece was born from playing Ubisoft's *The Division 2* with a longtime co-op friend. By all accounts, this is as cookie-cutter a live-service shooter as they come, a smorgasboard of legendary loot and skill paths that look more like rhizomes than trees. Yet, for all of its UI flaws and suffocating presentation, *The Division 2* succeeds in one area: it's fun. The gunplay is tight, the open world of Washington is gorgeously recreated and the core gameplay loop is rewarding. Missions take you on a whistlestop tour of the state's finest historical museums and landmarks, like a Lonely Planet travel guide featuring grenades and public executions. For its 20-hour campaign, it is by all accounts a serviceable experience only enhanced with friends. Then the final mission happens.

The 'end' of *The Division 2* represents the perfect storm of all the misjudged design choices and overzealous publisher oversight coining into AAA video

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spanner in the works. Meet Black Tusk. This technologically advanced, blindingly efficient fourth faction apparatus into existence the moment the credits roll, subsequently recapturing every point and effectively restarting the game from scratch. Swathed in red, the world map menacingly invites

the player to devote more time, more energy, more bullets towards achieving identical goals. That's before the countless pop-up tutorial screens assaulting players with a textbook of abstract jargon: World Tiers, Specialisation Trees, even Gear Scores. These features unanimously treat the notion of 'linear progression' as ludicrous. Even if you defeat the Black Tusk, there's still more Exotic Gear to loot, more enemy types to soak your ammunition and more patches introducing new tiers that will either rattle or appease a demanding audience. We uninstalled the game.

Video games are allowed to be whatever they want to be. Any creative medium is blessed with the ability to reinvent and redefine itself within its shifting boundaries. I have no issue with the concept of long-life titles nor do I detest RPGs for introducing percentage chances into combat. The underlying concern of this piece is for precisely the opposite reason: games are becoming too homogenous. Returning to the *Avengers* tweet, I am simply becoming tired of high-budget modern video games. When every game wants to be the one game you play for eternity, that one game is all that exists on the shelf. If that one title is focused on rising numbers, optimal builds and damage calculations? I'd rather take the maths exam.

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