

# Do Video Game Critics Represent the Players?

Video game critics pose themselves as providing helpful advice to players considering a purchase, but do their reviews really represent the tastes and opinions of the players? Comparing average critic and player ratings from Metacritic.com, we found that player ratings tended to be lower, however, because we don't know how Metacritic.com calculates this value, we can't be sure that players are really harsher judges. To compensate, we scaled the player ratings by a small factor to align the two groups. Let's check out the visualisation below to find out how well critics and players really agree.

## Average Critic and Player Ratings for Playstation 4 Games

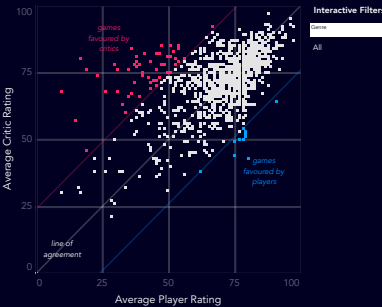


Figure 1 - Comparison of ratings (scored out of 100) for over 1000 PS4 games with EU/US release. All ratings data sourced from Metacritic.com. Metadata sourced from IGDB.com.

In reality, we see there's quite a difference of opinion. Many games lie far away from the "line of agreement" which shows where players and critics rate equally. Using the distance from this line, we've categorised the games into three classes: "general agreement" (similar player and critic ratings), **favoured by players** (players rate much higher), and **favoured by critics** (critics rate much higher). Interestingly, there are many more games in the **favoured by critics** class than in the **favoured by player** class. Let's investigate.

### Review Bombing on a Massive Scale?

Perhaps the reason why the average player rating is so much lower than the average critic rating in the **favoured by critics** class is because of review bombing (the organised act of posting negative reviews for a game en masse). A game which has been review bombed tends to have many positive ratings from reviewers who loved it, and many negative ones from the review bombers, as shown in Figure 2. Like a product on Amazon with only five-star and one-star reviews, it looks pretty suspicious!

However, when we look at an averaged view of the games in the **favoured by critic** class, the chart doesn't look anything like a review bombed-game. It looks just like a genuine low scoring game. With this in mind, there's little reason to believe that the **favoured by critic** class has been affected by review bombing. These scores appear to be a true reflection of players' opinions, thereby putting them at odds with the critics.

Now we've established there's no foul play going on with the player ratings, we can be more confident in the next part of our analysis.

### Comparison of Ratings Breakdowns

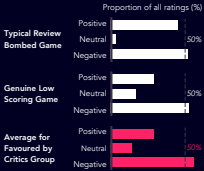


Figure 2 - Breakdown of positive, neutral and negative player ratings for a typical review-bombed game, a typical low-scoring game, and the average game in the **favoured by critics** class. Source - metacritic.com.

### Is there a Pattern to the Disagreement?

To see if there were any trends in the data that might help us understand why this disparity exists, we investigated how the composition by genre, release date, and other properties varied between **favoured by critic** class and all games in general. Interestingly, some patterns start to emerge. Let's look at the composition by genre first.

### Composition of Review Classes by Genre

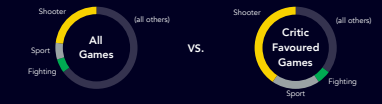


Figure 3 - Breakdown by genre of games with more than 20 reviews, for all games, and games only in the critic-favoured class.

In comparison with the entire set of games, **shooters** and **sports** games are over-represented in the **favoured by critics** class by a ratio of almost 2:1 and 3:1 respectively. **Fighting** games came out even. What could explain this result?

The growing trend of including microtransactions (payments for virtual in-game items) as a way to boost profits, has irked many players (Star Wars Battlefront II anyone?). From personal experience, it seems games in the shooter and sports genres are much more likely to have microtransactions built in than other genres. If this is really the case, it might explain the lower player ratings we see in the **favoured by critic** class, but, without knowing which games contain microtransactions, we can't say for sure.

Continuing to explore the microtransactions angle, one only has to check the annual reports of publicly traded publishers to see these companies are relying on optional paid content as a new source of revenue. To investigate any possible connection with the review scores, we analysed the mix of publishers in the **favoured by critic** class for the years following the release of the PS4, over which period microtransactions have become more prevalent.

### Critics' Favoured Publishers

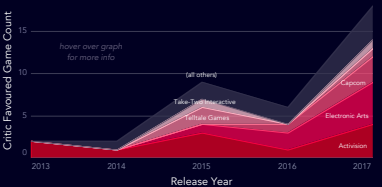


Figure 4 - Trend over time of publishers which benefit most from favourable critic ratings. Only games with 20 or more ratings were included for the sake of reliability.

Looking at Figure 4, the first thing to notice is that the number of games favoured by critics was at it's highest in 2017, suggesting players and critics are more divided than ever. Secondly, we see that the games favoured by critics aren't evenly distributed among the 500+ publishers who produce games for the PS4. Instead, just five companies (four of which are publicly traded, **Activision**, **EA**, **Capcom** and **Take-Two**) dominate.

This leads us to speculation on how much influence these companies have over the critics as they strive to grow revenues year on year. The biggest publishers spend millions of dollars a year on advertising on video game sites. Not wanting to bite the hands that feed them, it's possible that professional critics feel under pressure to give generous ratings for games, thereby putting them at odds with gamers, but again, without more data to back up the theory, it's impossible to prove.

*Did you know?* You can explore games by genre and publisher using the controls in Figure 1. You can also hover over any point in any chart to get more information.

On reflection, it really does seem for games of certain genres and publishers, that critics don't represent the opinions of players. While the evidence gathered so far is provocative, moving beyond speculation and actually proving the cause of this effect is challenging. Perhaps an analysis of the ratings given by each critic to these publishers' games might provide a smoking gun. Then again, maybe not.