Review bombing is a dirty practice, but research shows games do benefit from online feedback

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Online user reviews have come to [play a crucial role](#) in our decisions about which products to buy, what TV to watch, and what games to play.

But after initial enthusiasm, many platforms have pushed back against them. Netflix's star ratings and written user reviews are a distant memory, and even YouTube no longer shows the number of "dislikes" a video receives.

Negativity in particular is a no-no. Instagram and Facebook will let you "like" a post, but if you dislike it they don't want to know. Steam, the world's largest distributor of PC games, has also struggled with negative reviews—in particular, co-ordinated negative campaigns known as "review bombing".

However, in recent research published in The Internet and Higher Education we put a video game up for community review. After thousands of players and hundreds of written reviews we found that user feedback, properly managed, can lead to significant improvements.

Review bombing

One reason community reviews have become less popular is the rise of "review bombing", the co-ordinated practice of leaving large numbers of negative user reviews on a game or product in order to reduce its aggregate review score.

Most review-bombing incidents appear to stem from more than just not enjoying a game. They may be driven by ideological disagreement with the content of the game or dislike of the actions of a developer.

Other times this activity is automated by bots to suppress media or send a warning to companies. To take one example, a gaming review YouTube channel called Gamer's Nexus recently reported that one of its videos exposing a scam had received an attack of co-ordinated "dislikes".

Is removing reviews the answer?

When community reviews work, the consumer benefits by getting real-world information from the users of a product.

On YouTube, for example, the removal of dislike counts makes it hard to quickly assess the quality of a video. This is particularly important information for DIY or crafting videos.

The removal of dislikes also makes it more likely that a viewer will be caught out by clickbait, or tricked into watching a video that does not host the content promised.

When the system works

Our new study shows the advantages of community reviews. It demonstrates how, when handled carefully and objectively, community feedback can go a long way towards helping a game develop.

We made an educational game called The King's Request for use in a medical and health sciences program. The aim was to crowdsource more feedback than we could get from students in our classes, so we released the game for free on Steam.

Of the 16,000 players, 150 provided written reviews. We analyzed this feedback, which in many cases provided ideas and methods, to improve the game.

This is one example of where feedback from the gaming community, although opinionated in many cases, can genuinely help the development process, benefiting all stakeholders involved. This is particularly important as "serious" or educational games are a growing component of modern curriculums.

Censoring community reviews, even if the aim is to prevent misinformation, does make it harder for developers and [educational designers](#) to receive feedback, for viewers to receive quick information, and for paying customers to have their voice.

What is the future for community reviews?

The trend has been to remove negative community ratings. YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki [defended](#) the removal of dislike counts earlier this year, and Netflix appears to have no interest in [bringing back](#) its five-star rating system.

However, not all outlets are following this trend. TikTok has been testing a dislike button for [written contributions](#) in a way that enables the community to filter out unhelpful posts.

TikTok argues that, once released, this will foster [authentic engagement](#) in the comment sections.

And the Epic Games Store, a competitor of Steam, recently implemented [a system of random user surveys](#) to keep community [feedback](#) while avoiding review bombing. Google has also been trying new things, finding some success in tackling [review](#) bombing through [artificial intelligence](#).

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