



November 17, 2014

### Agenda:

- *How Assassin's Creed Unity weaponized review embargoes* by Ben Kuchera from Polygon
  - <http://bit.ly/1pNOSXn>
- Post-mortems
  - Example: DrinkBox Studio's *Guacamelee!* Postmortem
    - <http://ubm.io/1ET5qyw>
- Next Meeting: Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> (Final Game is due to me/final checkpoint presentation/group play testing period)
- Fall Sneak Peek Aurora Showcase: Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup> 6-8pm
- **Have a Turkey-licious Thanksgiving!!**

## **How Assassin's Creed Unity Weaponized Review Embargoes**

**By: Ben Kuchera**

There's always a meta-commentary to be had about the timing and execution of game reviews. If a review comes out a good ways before launch, such as *the new Dragon Age* game, it's usually a sign of confidence. Strong reviews that far out can help boost pre-order numbers and lead to a larger launch at retail. A good, strong early review can have an appreciable effect on the business of launching a game.

The reviews for *Assassin's Creed Unity* were held until noon, Eastern time today. The game will have been available to purchase for as long as a dozen hours before anyone could read whether it was good or bad, or if it suffers from technical problems.

"All of this adds up to a game whose technical issues often make it more difficult to play. *Assassin's Creed Unity* isn't as framerate-sensitive as a

shooter like Call of Duty, but navigating the world when the game was struggling to respond to my inputs felt like a chore," [Polygon's review states](#). The game earned a 6.5 rating.

There's no valid reason for a review embargo such as this; it's blatantly anti-consumer and likely designed to get the first rush of hardcore fans into the stores to buy their copies of the game before the reviews hit. We learned about the embargo last week.

Hell, I was going to pick up a copy of the game today until I read user reviews. I'm glad I waited, there are way too many other things to play.

This leads us into a good discussion of what embargoes are, and what they do. An embargo is an agreement between the press and the publisher about when coverage for the game can be released to the public. In exchange for early access to the game, we agree to hold content until a certain agreed-upon time.

Breaking embargoes, on the other hand, can potentially lead to a loss of access to future release games, and you have to agree to the embargo to play the game, which means by the time you realize a game is broken, it's already too late. It's a vicious loop, and making a good faith agreement and then breaking it later is bad news for a publication that wants its word to mean something.

Usually this isn't much of a problem, and it lets every review run at the same time and gives reviewers ample time to play the game. Embargoes can remove the temptation to rush through a game in order to get the first review out, which leads to better reviews for the consumer.

That's the ideal, at least.

## WHEN EMBARGOES GO BAD

When a game's embargo isn't up until the day of launch you need to be careful. If it isn't up until a few hours after the game is launched you should probably run screaming the other way. That's not a signal that the game may have middling reviews, that's a signal that the publisher is trying to sell copies before the word hits the street.

It could also mean the game is still being worked on, but any embargo past midnight the night before is sketchy as hell. It's a way to weaponize embargoes, and the best thing to do is to hold off until you can read about the

game in detail.

The press can, of course, purchase a copy of the game and run stories based on the performance of that version of the game in the first hours it has been released, but that closes the door on reviews based on completion.

The good news is that these situations are rare, and this Fall you can count *Destiny*, *DriveClub* and *Assassin's Creed Unity* as games with launch day reviews. Take from that what you will, although that also happened with *Diablo 3: Reaper of Souls*, which was great.

You should always be on the lookout for these situations. The earlier a review hits, often the more confidence the publisher has in the game.

We agree to embargoes because we need to do so in order to get early access to the game. That value is that the majority of traffic on a review comes on the first day of release, and any outlet that waits loses that traffic.

This system is actually in service of reader's interests, even if we have to play by the publisher's rules. The reality is that most readers come when the embargo is first dropped. If you agree to the embargo and then go back on the agreement in order to warn readers, you're going back on your word, which hurts your credibility in every other aspect of your business.

We're reacting to the realities of the market: You tell us via your readership, or lack thereof, that early reviews are more valuable to you. This is what it takes, and sometimes it puts us in a bind. This is one of those times.

Embargoes, on the whole, are a good thing. They help us get coverage of games without rushing through after release and it's fun when the embargo drops and you can gorge on reading all the reviews. I don't want to live in a world where everyone gets their copy of the game and rushes to write the first review; the quality of criticism would drop significantly.

The best thing to do is to inform consumers about what's happening, and you can always get some hints about the game from the timing of its embargo. In this case the embargo hinted at a game that's in no way ready for release, and the reality of the situation proves that hypothesis. *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* was not provided for pre-launch review at all.

The industry has more to gain from embargoes than to lose, however, which doesn't lessen the bullshit-factor of these situations. If you buy before you read reviews, written by the press or simply other fans, you're putting yourself at risk.

The longer you have to wait to read the review, the greater the risk. In the future we're going to work to do a better job of sharing information about embargoes and when to expect reviews.

This is a gentle reminder that waiting is **almost always best**.