I have been on the receiving end of the title quote. Often, I receive it verbatim. Other times, I receive it in spirit. As games researchers, we walk a fine line between art and science. In my short academic career, I have found that justifying our work to scholars of the arts and the humanities is not as difficult as justifying our work to scholars in the sciences; not for lack of scholarly rigor in the arts and humanities, but rather because artists and humanists already know that it is important to look at games for what they represent, as well as their ubiquity and communicative power. Our peers in the sciences, it seems, need a little more goading. However, it is not their fault. It is ours.

I admit, on the surface, it is difficult to imagine how the scientific process fits inside the machinery of video games. Games are primarily known for entertainment, and so, what possible science could there be? What compounds the problem is that it is very easy to imagine that video games are a waste of a person’s time. My anecdotal experience is very telling of this:

Exhibit A: at a conference that was not focused on games, I had the very challenging experience of explaining my research to a community of scientists and non-scientists. I had the opportunity to engage with some of the brightest minds the world has to offer...who (without fail) asked of my research: “where is the science?” I smiled every time, and tried as best I could to explain the complexity and the implications of my work. Some got it (and were genuinely excited), others didn’t (and diplomatically dismissed the work). Those who didn’t are especially memorable, for reasons I won’t go into here.

Exhibit B: when I applied for the Graduate fellowship from the National Science Foundation, I received praise for the general quality of my application. However, I got one specific bit of feedback that I will never forget:

“his proposed research topic - digital games - may be less critical for the society.”

My gut reaction to these experiences is always the same: diplomatic anger, followed by personal disappointment. It is not easy to get a Ph.D. in the first place, and it becomes more difficult to justify its worth when a community of scholars cannot see why games research is real science. My mentors have often said that it is important to have thick skin and mental toughness for getting a Ph.D. However, nothing really quite prepares you for a scientific community that routinely reminds you that “your problem is not worth solving.”
It’s easy to say: "The scientists are bound by the shackles of the old guard. They’re old, and close-minded. They have lost touch with what is really important. They don’t realize that games are a multi-billion dollar industry, eclipsing Hollywood and providing a pillar for the U.S. rebound economy." All these comments and many more are whispered in the halls of game research centers, and screamed in the heads of the scientists that study games. However, I do not fault scientists for being skeptical; a healthy dose of skepticism is necessary for science. It is our own fault. I blame ourselves for not knowing enough marketing. And I don’t mean marketing in terms of buzzwords (adding the terms “crowdsourcing” or “metaspectral” add fluff and will only impress marketers by trade), I mean marketing as in “communicating science.” We are not the only ones under this pressure; the government funding agencies have recently come under fire for funding basic science research that has no apparent immediate benefit or application. This cascades into making video game funding especially hard to come by (who wants to fund a bunch of graduate students to make games?)

We games researchers are not doing enough to communicate the importance of our science, both to our scientific peers and the (much greater) non-scientific community. And who could blame us? We already know that it sucks to talk to scientists that look down upon your work. As junior scientists, we seek experiences that help us grow professionally. Pungent criticism stunts growth if you’re not prepared to handle it (and junior scientists, myself included, often aren’t). This leads us to become a recluse of the general community - we prefer hanging out with our own crowd; publishing in blogs, conferences and journals devoted to games research, preparing posters that other games researchers will appreciate, and eventually establishing a network of games researchers. This has to stop.

Rather than making the critical feedback personal and seeking the relative security of the games research community, I have set myself the goal of improving my science communication, actively seeking ways to engage and publish in other communities and I urge all games scientists to do the same. The mindset of “they don’t understand and therefore they are close-minded” is not helpful nor productive. Instead, ask yourself what I ask myself every time I encounter someone critical of my work: “what am I not communicating that makes my audience think this is trivial or not worth doing?” This becomes an issue of developing a deep understanding of your work, as well as anticipating potential criticisms, and knowing your audience, challenging aspects of research that are nonetheless do-able. When someone tells you that you are just developing games, the correct response is: “It may seem like it, but this is why it’s so much more than that: ...”