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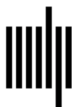

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1 Introduction: “Shall I Explain the Game?”

Whether or not you were following game-related news, early 2018 was all about *Fortnite Battle Royale*, a free-to-play shooter described as *Minecraft* (the popular open-world building game) meets *The Hunger Games* (the dystopian book and movie series). Taking inspiration from the 2017 hit game *PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds*, developer Epic Games added the last-shooter-standing mechanic to its existing title *Fortnite*, which attracted tens of millions of players and dollars in a matter of months.[1] There is a lot to say about *Fortnite*’s instant success and how its stratospheric rise relates to the state of contemporary gaming. What interests us is the widespread coverage the game received in institutional media outlets, such as newspapers and magazines, which touched upon all the tropes typically used to discuss games and game culture. There were articles pointing towards *Fortnite*’s innovative business model and how developer Epic used “seasons” to keep players interested (and paying). Journalists pointed to not only the hundreds of thousands who watched others play

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on streaming platforms, the $100 million prize pool for *Fortnite*'s esports competition, and the game's cross-platform functionality, but also its ability to attract "new" groups of players, from teenagers to highly visible members of professional sports teams. A long-form article discussing many of these themes appeared in the *New Yorker*, the weekly magazine and journalistic institution (figure 1.1). In May 2018, staff writer Nick Paumgarten took an almost ethnographic approach in his attempt to make sense of how *Fortnite* "captured teens' hearts and minds."[2] His 3,680-word essay paints a comprehensive picture of both the game and contemporary game culture, attempting to contextualize *Fortnite* and make sense of its success.

What emerges from the article is an amused bewilderment matched by intense ambivalence. On the one hand, the author clearly tries to take playing *Fortnite* seriously as a meaningful cultural practice and phenomenon, given that it had already earned a spot in the pantheon of "game fads." *Fortnite*, Paumgarten observes, even offers something new: "a kind of mass social gathering, open to a much wider array of people than the games that came before." To be able to describe the game to its readers, assumed to be an audience of non-players, he explicitly confronts an issue that has vexed mainstream authors writing about games for decades: "Shall I explain the game? I have to, I'm afraid, even though describing video games is a little like recounting dreams." His reticence is understandable; describing

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ANNALS OF GAMING MAY 21, 2018 ISSUE

HOW FORTNITE CAPTURED TEENS' HEARTS AND MINDS

The craze for the third-person shooter game has elements of Beatlemania, the opioid crisis, and eating Tide Pods.

By Nick Paumgarten
May 14, 2018

The craze has elements of Beatlemania, the opioid crisis, and eating Tide Pods. Illustration by Ryan Johnson

Figure 1.1

Screenshot of the online version of Paumgarten's feature article on *Fortnite* for the *New Yorker*. Source: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/21/how-fortnite-captured-teens-hearts-and-minds.

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the actual practice of playing is a thorny task. Where to begin? From what vocabulary should he draw? To grasp the game's significance, Paumgarten then engages in something akin to travel journalism, taking the reader through the rules constituting this new virtual world.

On the other hand, the author juggles the game's undeniable appeal with its inherent "wickedness." Paumgarten employs two of the oldest and most common frames used by institutional journalists covering games: characterizing play as both youthful and addictive.[3] The online version of the article's subtitle reads: "The craze for the third-person shooter game has elements of Beatlemania, the opioid crisis, and eating Tide Pods."[4] Although meant as tongue-in-cheek, it seems like the *New Yorker* editor who wrote the subtitle could not do without acknowledging the well-known "Think of the children!" rhetoric associated with game culture. It is through reputable cultural critics such as Paumgarten that those who are "not a teenager or a parent or educator of teens"—think opinion leaders, policy makers, and politicians—are introduced to a game that has "addictive power" and yet simultaneously engenders a "spirit of collaboration" and brings out "something approaching gentleness" in its players.[5]

Beyond the overnight success of another hit game, in this book we are interested in how authors—from newspaper and magazine contributors to those who see themselves as game critics and game reviewers—discuss, critique, and analyze games at a moment when they

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increasingly become a *mainstream* cultural phenomenon. Paumgarten's public effort to make sense of a supposedly novel phenomenon demonstrates the challenges of taking games seriously. How can authors speak to a readership that skews older and upper middle class and is unlikely to ever play anything even remotely resembling *Fortnite*?

This effort to make sense of *Fortnite*, to explain the game, its context of use, and its players, can be seen as part of a broader cultural process. For us, the constant need to explain why games are worthy of attention and how they work implies that games are in a constant state of *becoming* more mainstream. Yet, to be very explicit about this, we do not consider games to be mainstream at this moment in time. As such, our perspective deviates from those who are convinced that games are already mainstream. While rarely explaining exactly what they mean by it, the journalists we interviewed—whom we will introduce in the second half of this book—routinely suggested that games such as *Fortnite*, *Minecraft*, *Candy Crush Saga*, and *Roblox* have been mainstream for a while now. After all, these titles' successes are indicative of the massive sociocultural and -economic pull of digital games and their ability to be part of conversations across the pages of national newspapers, listicles on news apps, and "longreads" in well-respected monthly magazines. By all accounts, most mainstream coverage acknowledges games as an economic and, at times, creative powerhouse. But—and

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this is one of the key questions we will explore—does widespread coverage equal cultural acceptance? Does a front-page feature result in a deeper understanding of why games are meaningful? Or are games increasingly visible while remaining widely vilified and misunderstood? Ask yourself: Is *Fortnite*'s coverage qualitatively like that of popular phenomena such as the FIFA World Cup, a bingeable Netflix series, or the latest Ed Sheeran single? From where we are sitting, it certainly does not feel like it.

We are deeply curious about the answer to these questions ourselves. In the first half of the book, we historicize and theorize the mainstreaming of games by accounting for the deep-rooted ambivalence that permeates game culture, player discourse, and coverage. This persistent state of uncertainty, we argue, is one of the reasons games have not been considered part of the mainstream for decades. Therefore, the source of this ambivalence warrants a survey of the game industry's and game journalism's history (chapter 2) and the evolving role of game journalists as "cultural intermediaries" or, as we call them, "passionate experts" (chapter 3). Surveying these histories sets up the book's second half, which brings us to the present. In chapter 4, we describe different kinds of game journalists and ask whether certain types allow for more meaningful game criticism. In chapter 5, we ask about the contemporary occupational and social barriers that challenge game journalists' craft. Unpacking these questions forces us to

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engage with the boundaries of cultural critique, journalism, and journalistic practices. This, in turn, helps us to better understand the fraught relationship between mainstreaming and game journalism. Like the opening example of *Fortnite*, in the concluding pages we argue that the challenges faced by cultural critics who want to take games seriously are manifold. Our conclusion (chapter 6) ponders potential futures: we veer between a pessimistic perspective about game journalism never reaching a more mature status and one scenario in which journalists are key contributors to the mainstreaming of games.

To work toward the second, more optimistic point, at the very end of the book we propose six rather aspirational solutions. We are under no illusion about our ability to change the current course of game coverage, whether found in mainstream outlets, among streamers, or in niche publications. Critics such as Paumgarten, who thread the needle between serious cultural critique and deep-rooted self-deprecation, are likely to remain the norm. Rather, our review of past and present modes of game reportage is meant to offer fertile ground for future conversations. For those who have made attempts to write about games in a meaningful way, or for those who might, we aim to offer insight into decades-long struggles and present preoccupations among game critics. Just as the game industry seems to lack an institutional memory, we have seen the same conversations, themes, and frustrations voiced by game

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journalists time and again.[6] Documenting some of these themes and tropes may help us to advance collective discussions about the mainstreaming of games vis-à-vis game journalism.

Before we revisit the past in the next chapter, however, let us spend a bit more time fleshing out the two main conceptual parts of our argument: First, the deep sense of ambivalence underlying game culture, criticism, and coverage, along with a reflection on key terms and concepts related to game journalism and its boundaries; and second—the linchpin of our argument—the notion of mainstreaming itself.

Game Culture's Constitutive Ambivalences

Game culture has always been—and remains, we believe—one of stark divisions: you are either an outspoken supporter of gaming or vehemently against it. If you are a parent, you may be constantly worried: "Should my child play so much *Fortnite*?" If you are a US politician or TV host, you may forgo sensible gun laws and instead be tempted to blame "violent games" after yet another school shooting. On the other side of the spectrum, we see self-proclaimed gamers who are sick and tired of all those who constantly express unfounded negative opinions. "They"—parents, pundits, and politicians—just do not "get it." So frustrating! Do they even play games? Probably not. The psychologists

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Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein found that negative opinions about games and their theoretical connection to violence are most prominent among those who have "little direct exposure to electronic gaming contexts."[7]

There are several historical, social, and cultural reasons at the heart of these baked-in tensions. One particularly persistent frame popped up in our *Fortnite* example: games are perceived as child's play. Even though many games are marketed to adults, as a cultural practice, digital play has a very hard time shaking its youthful image. The second dominant frame is that games are always meant to be "fun" or entertaining. Because they are explicitly hailed as for-profit products, makers face forceful pushback when they want to engage with meaningful themes or controversial issues. For many, it still is difficult to imagine a blockbuster game centered on immigration, the Holocaust, or cancer. As many players and game critics will be eager to tell you, a handful of games with such themes do exist, but do we consider them part of mainstream game culture?[8] Developers of such "controversial" games go out of their way to stress that they "don't necessarily see entertainment as their objective—the point is to give people something to think about, maybe even educate them."[9] Framing games as educational gives developers a bit more leeway, but only so much. Despite such efforts, digital play still "subsists in a culture that fundamentally disapproves of it."[10]

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Thus, to understand contemporary game culture is to come to terms with a great many "unresolved contradictions."[11] In a series of books and articles, the sociologist Graeme Kirkpatrick analyzes these tensions, noting that game culture is marked by a series of "constitutive ambivalences." He contends that "computer games are more than just games, but they do not become art; gaming is pleasurable and harmless yet also 'addictive' and, on occasion, 'not normal,' and, finally, games are not suitable for children, yet they continue to be fundamentally childish."[12] In the United States, mainstream conversations about gaming are marked by constant concerns about addiction and play being a wasteful activity.[13] At the same time, however, there is an acute awareness of the game industry's vitality. This back-and-forth, often within the same article or even paragraph, is an ongoing discursive battle among worried parents, policy makers, players, journalists, game critics, and dedicated fans that has persisted for decades. From the 1980s onwards, magazines, newspapers, and specialist game outlets all have been foundational in the social construction of digital games and players. Therefore, we are particularly interested in both the role that game journalists play in creating and sustaining these contradictions, and in their apparent inability to move beyond them.

As with so many issues and questions we explore in the book, this deep sense of ambivalence is not unique to games. In their ethnographic account of "collective

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online spaces," such as Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan, the digital culture scholars Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner point toward these places as "simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed."[14] Driven by the popularity principle, advertising-driven platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok tend to favor memetic, affective content over deliberation and reflection, thereby sharpening existing divides rather than bringing (sub) cultures together.[15] The same could be said of game culture. To some this might be utterly unsurprising. There is a clear overlap between game spaces and online platforms, their inhabitants, and their practices because players use these platforms to watch, critique, and debate games. The most dedicated parts of game culture thrive in broader online communities that are clearly playful and creative while simultaneously displaying a decidedly nihilistic, sometimes outright violent streak.[16]

Collectively, the "constitutive ambivalences" highlighted by Kirkpatrick involve a wide range of actors, each with different motivations and agendas. We have been mindful of this plurality of voices when we question how game coverage interacts with the perennial clash between digital play's outspoken proponents, many of whom invest substantial time and money in their favorite pastime, and opponents who are forever fearful of addiction, aggression, displacement, and other harmful effects ascribed to excessive gameplay.

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Game Journalism: Institutional Journalists, Game Reviewers, and Critics

What, then, counts as game journalism? We will use it as an umbrella term that covers all those who engage in the professional practice of writing and publishing about games. This includes not only staff writers, editors, reporters, and freelancers, but also interns and unpaid volunteers working for for-profit outlets. Together, they draw from a range of occupational labels: journalist, critic, reviewer, streamer, or blogger. Put differently, ask ten different writers how they see themselves and you will get ten different answers.[17] Ask them what their job entails, and it gets even more complicated. Ask them what they think their colleagues do—in terms of occupational best practices—and all bets are off. The deep-rooted ambiguity and uncertainty that permeates game culture has clearly rubbed off on the self-perception of those who cover it.[18]

Game journalists' inherent introspection leads to recurring conversations about who to include and exclude in the pantheon of game journalism, thereby demarcating one's territory and legitimizing one's own role. In journalism studies, this constant process of justification and reflection is known as "boundary work," or the daily "codification and legitimation" of who is "in" and who is "out" of the professional field.[19] Performing boundary work is by no means unique to those who write about games, nor is it unique to journalism, yet it

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helps to legitimize a reporter's "gatekeeping" function—their ability to choose the content and nature of messages disseminated to the wider public.[20] It can also work the other way around. By purposely stepping outside existing institutional and occupational boundaries, game writers can act more freely—or, in some cases, abdicate responsibility for a failure or unwillingness to uphold professional values, such as objective reporting or resisting commercial influence.

Understanding boundary work allows us to distinguish between the different groups of game writers. In this book, we identify three types (table 1)—*institutional journalists*, *game reviewers*, and *game critics*—noting that our focus in the first half of the book is on the written word rather than audio (e.g., podcasting, radio), photography, or video (e.g., vlogging, streaming, or TV) coverage. In the second half of the book, we consider emerging reporting practices, particularly video and live streaming. Throughout we remain focused on professionals, meaning that we purposely left out online critics and reviewers in their role as "private citizens–customers," whom Maarit Jaakkola calls "vernacular amateurs."[21] Our typology of writers, therefore, presents ideal types to serve our analysis; members of each group largely avoid (if not openly resist) occupational categorizations.[22] We pursued this scheme to engage with the persistent ambivalence among authors themselves about their craft. As we will explain, even though each group performs boundary work differently, there

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Table 1
Types of Game Journalists

Journalist Type	Occupational Equivalents	Scholarly Classification
Institutional journalists	Beat reporters affiliated with newspapers and magazines	Journalism
Game reviewers	Travel and fashion journalists, food critics, and other forms of service journalism	Lifestyle journalism
Game critics	Art and culture critics, including film, music, and television critics	Cultural criticism

are substantial connections among them owing to their overlapping and rapidly expanding spheres of coverage. In chapter 4, we argue that this overlap is partly the result of a large pool of freelancers, who submit pieces to a variety of organizations and are therefore less bound by institutional rules and expectations.

The first group of writers engaging in game journalism are *institutional journalists*, who see journalism as their main profession and who work for incumbent news organizations and legacy institutions (e.g., the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New Yorker*) or emerging news platforms (e.g., *Vox* or *Politico*). This category consists either of writers who consider games to be their

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"beat"—their main area of expertise—or those who have a broader editorial mandate, be it technology, arts, or entertainment. Institutional journalists are typically the most active in performing boundary work because they are subject to an existing set of normative expectations. Whereas game reviewers, critics, and developers rarely talk about a shared set of ethics or occupational norms, institutional journalists tend to constantly understand their own work through a range of ideal-type standards, or "occupational ideology."[23] These standards include such slippery notions as objectivity, allegiance to their audience, and fairness. For example, most institutional journalists abide by a clear set of ethics, often codified in an outlet's editorial guidelines, and operate with a degree of removal from the industries they cover.

Conversely, a great many game journalists tend to be associated more with various forms of either "lifestyle journalism" (e.g., travel or technology journalism), or "cultural criticism" (e.g., music, film, or television journalism) than with institutional reportage.[24] The second and third categories of authors are therefore *game reviewers* and *game critics*, two categories of writers who predominantly focus directly on games.[25] The distinction between this set of journalistic practices—reviewers and critics—is subtle and fleshed out by the game scholar and critic Ian Bogost, who argues that a reviewer "speaks from a position of investment," and a critic "speaks from a position of remove."[26] That is, game reviewers tend to stay very close to their object, engaging in

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functional overviews "full of technical details and thorough testing and final, definitive scores delivered on improbably precise numerical scales."[27] Reviewers predominantly work for organizations dedicated to game coverage, such as magazines (e.g., *Edge*, *Game Informer*) or online outlets (e.g., *IGN*, *Kotaku*, *Polygon*). In past academic works, game reviewers have been categorized as the "specialist" or the "enthusiast press," deeply immersed in game fandom, discussing games as peers but not equals, and drawing on intimate knowledge of past games and events.[28]

It is because of the more explicit—and arguably stricter—occupational ideology of institutional journalists that reviewers tend to actively resist the "journalist" label. For instance, Patrick Prax and Alejandro Soler found that game reviewers would refer to their colleagues as "journalists" while "not claiming this title and the responsibility that comes with it" for themselves.[29] As such, journalism scholars understand them as "lifestyle journalists," whose practices are similar to "other forms of journalism outside the mainstream," such as travel, fashion, and food journalism.[30] Lifestyle journalists, and thus reviewers, have a "strong market-orientation" because they explicitly consider their audience as consumers to whom they offer "practical advice" in a way that is meant to be entertaining.[31]

The close relationship that game reviewers share with the industry and their particular objects of interest distinguishes them from critics and journalists. The former tend to establish their roles as mediators through an

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intimate industry relationship, leading them to act as both arbiter and promoter of content, whereas institutional journalists and game critics take a more rigorous stance in separating themselves from the subjects and industries they cover. If reviewers are the ultimate fans or insiders, then game critics are outsiders, and purposely so. Like reviewers, game critics may write for dedicated game or institutional outlets, just as Paumgarten did in the *New Yorker*. For Bogost, himself a critic par excellence, "good criticism" answers the question "What is even going on here?"[32] Critics can be scholars, students, or autodidacts who often start out reviewing games; as their careers progress, they move on to create more critical distance and broaden their purview. As such, game critics have a tendency to ask questions that fans and industry insiders deem "difficult" or "political," meaning that they clash with the general culture of positivity, anticipation, and approval that is at the heart of game fandom.[33] For a critic to write a game preview—an in-depth, descriptive analysis of an impending release—would not be an obvious choice; for reviewers, it is one of their main staples. That said, there is a fine line between being critical of a game's technical features—pointing to a low framerate, for instance—and challenging the status quo. The former you will see mentioned in enthusiast press game reviews; the latter is something that critics (should) do by alluding to broader questions of social justice, (media) history, or precarious labor practices among developers. If game reviewers practice a form of lifestyle journalism, game critics come much

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closer to "cultural journalism," which is "specialized in reporting about arts and culture and preoccupied with maintaining a distinct professional identity."[34] In this sense, they are more aligned with the occupational ideology of institutional journalists.

To some, our typology may seem artificial, or even useless. All three groups are simply game journalists (or writers), who should "objectively" review games.[35] For others, these categories are soon to be extinct; the popularity of the hyperindividualistic approach to discussing games taken by streamers such as Markiplier, Fernanfloo, and Freyline further blurs the boundaries between reviewers and critics and pushes traditional journalism's institutional norms to their breaking point.[36] Regardless, we tease out these distinctions because the blurring of these three types represents daily personal battles for game journalists of any stripe. Instead of arbitrarily delimiting content (e.g., an essay, a review, or a "hard" news article), we focus on *how* games are depicted and by *whom*, thereby emphasizing how journalists engage in boundary work, or the constant negotiation of their implied mandate, as well as the ideological and gatekeeping functions inherent to their profession.

The Mainstreaming of Games

Apart from discussing the everyday work and self-perceptions of practitioners, we are interested in how

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they contribute to the broader acceptance and understanding of games. As more and more journalists and outlets incorporate games into their beat, we have witnessed a qualitative change in articles' structure, tone, and subject matter. These changes in coverage are largely prompted by the undeniable quantitative shift in the authors' implied audience (i.e., those who play or watch others play), which has grown bigger and continues to become more and more diverse. Bigger, however, does not necessarily infer mainstream. So, what does it mean when we invoke the "mainstreaming" label? Scholarly definitions of what constitutes "the mainstream media," mainstream coverage, or mainstream media practices tend to be one-dimensional, using notions such as "commercially dominant" or "corporate," thereby assuming broad commercial and public appeal to a wide audience.[37] For us, these definitions are too narrow. We are wary of commercial viability as the sole marker of success. Many profitable media forms and genres are hardly considered to be mainstream in terms of their visibility—comic books and pornography immediately come to mind.

More so, digital play is too meaningful to be measured solely by how well it performs in the market. Other quantitative indicators, such as the number of downloads or players, are also too limiting as benchmarks; mainstream acceptance would mean not mass appeal but broad appeal—popularity among not merely one large homogenous group (e.g., young people) but rather

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widespread adoption across regions and intersectional categories (i.e., gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, age, etc.). Last, rather than using binary terms—games are either mainstream or not—we aim to identify a less static set of markers. Because of these limitations, we seek a set of variables—heuristics, if you will—against which we can track whether games are becoming more (or less) mainstream.

The media scholar Jason Toynbee provides a helpful definition based on his historical study of popular music: "the mainstream brings together large numbers of people from diverse social groups in common affiliation to a musical style."[38] He notes that mainstreaming should be considered "an ambivalent social process" that oscillates between broader acceptance and acknowledgment of differences from nonmainstream styles.[39] For our purposes, the strength of Toynbee's analysis—its focus on music—is also its weakness. Mainstreaming does have a quantitative dimension ("large numbers of people") and it is an ambivalent process, not unlike the ambiguity observed by Kirkpatrick. Importantly, Toynbee points to acceptance ("common affiliation") of musical styles as a prerequisite to being mainstream; jazz was a mainstream music style by the 1930s, and rock by the 1960s.

Yet, this argument implies the broader acceptance of listening to music as a cultural practice in and of itself. It is telling that Toynbee talks about certain musical *styles* being mainstream but not so much about the

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act of listening to music. Making music and publicly or privately listening to music is typically not considered deviant, let alone addictive. Similarly, although "cult movies" are understood to be alternatives to mainstream, commercial cinema, the practice of watching Hollywood movies became a mainstream pastime as early as the 1960s.[40] This is to say that the notion of "the mainstream" in media scholarship is always relative and implies *intra-media* popularity among genres, publishers, or auteurs. In this case, boundaries are drawn by scholars and industry actors among mainstream movies, songs, comics, or games versus alternative or independently created ("indie") content.[41]

In this book we take an *inter-media* perspective, contending that games as a media form and gameplay as a practice have not been mainstream since they reached commercial success in the 1980s. Rather than using economic impact as the only metric of acceptance, we posit that for games to be considered a mainstream cultural practice, they require access (ubiquity), a shared understanding (literacy), and a modicum of acceptance (legitimacy). As long as one of these is lacking, we do not consider games to be "mainstream." Let us examine these three variables and how they relate to each other.

The *Fortnite* article at the start of this introduction serves as an example of games becoming more ubiquitous. Similarly, because of widespread access to mobile phones and the burgeoning app economy, billions of users have access to digital games, which points to

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their greater cultural visibility. Games have moved from a niche—or, as we will discuss in the next chapter, "subcultural"—interest toward more general diffusion and adoption. At the same time, however, the *Fortnite* example also demonstrates the limits of considering ubiquity as the sole marker of mainstreaming. Access does not equal understanding.

Ludic literacy—the embodied comprehension of a game's procedural logic (an understanding of its rules and mechanics) and its operation (which buttons to push or how to boot up a game in the first place)—is far from universal.[42] An additional complicating factor is the medium's "cultural inaccessibility," described by the game scholar and critic Emma Vossen as "various cultural barriers that either deliberately or unconsciously exclude people" and may potentially cause them to feel unwelcome and unsafe "because of their identities."[43] As we will see, the high literacy requirements in addition to the rampant, ongoing gatekeeping by insiders are frustrating to newcomers who want to learn how to play, let alone those who aim to engage in any form of game critique.

This second prerequisite of having a shared understanding presents a wealth of challenges to critics. Recall Paumgarten's rhetorical question: "Shall I explain the game?" His query underscores that the ruleset for every single game is unique, often complex, and contingent. Conversely, the rules for listening to almost any rock song are rather straightforward, singular, relatively

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set, and uniform. The genre is "extremely coherent" as a musical style; songs often share a 4/4 time signature as well as similar themes, melodies, and patterns.[44] Games, on the other hand, typically merit video tutorials to explain each unique set of rules. Moreover, to be able to play an advanced game like *Fortnite*, one also needs to have some rudimentary understanding of the game platform. When playing on a PC, for example, a player moves their mouse to point at an enemy and shoots by clicking a mouse button. But to arrive at that point, one must first install the game and ideally be somewhat familiar with the genre traits of "shooter" games. Thus, digital games may be economically vibrant, played more than ever before in their history, and within the purview of major news outlets, but the medium's inherent complexities present an enduring limitation to it becoming a mainstream, widely understood activity in the vein of listening to music or reading a novel.

Third, meeting the thresholds of ubiquity and universal comprehension does not necessarily guarantee cultural legitimacy. For example, watching television has become a pervasive practice that does not require instructions and has risen on the cultural ladder to the rung of a respectable pastime. But television's cultural acceptance is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s when "highbrow publications began to treat upscale television shows in terms once reserved for more established arts."[45] To be fair, games may be nearing a similar inflection point in some parts

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of the world. In South Korea, for instance, games and competitive play hold cultural standing similar to that of physical sports in North America.[46] Likewise, across the globe we are increasingly seeing some cultural markers being met: games have museums dedicated to them (such as the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York) and are integrated into university curricula. Reputable news outlets also cover games, and even take them seriously at times. Still, we can only conclude that digital play continues to encounter rampant antagonism, bewilderment, and ambivalence. Here we see marked differences compared to other cultural forms. Popular musical taste is negotiated and must be constructed, Toynbee reminds us, but this happens on the level of styles, not music as a whole. Conversely, *every* game genre has its detractors. Politicians abhor violent video games, whereas gamers, critics, and journalists seem to look down on casual games. Many if not all of us routinely partake in the vilification of digital play as if to say: we can play, but whatever we do, we cannot take it *too* seriously.

These negative outbursts come to the fore in the long-running debate over whether games are art. Detractors argue that they are not and cannot be art because they are products—nonlinear, frivolous forms of commodified entertainment aimed at children.[47] As a result, numerous cultural critics find game journalism in any form to be a preposterous notion.[48] Suffice to say, we feel otherwise. For us, mainstreaming is not necessarily

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a qualitative label; it does not mean elitist or progressive, nor populist or conservative. Instead, we theorize it as a medium-specific indicator of ubiquity, comprehension, *and* normalization. This approach ties into the crucial "so what?" question underlying our argument: What are the political stakes of mainstreaming?

The short answer: because play matters.[49] We consider play to be meaningful and that increased ludic literacy—a broader understanding of digital play—allows for more productive critiques that should result in more meaningful games that provide an ever-wider array of experiences and cater to more diverse audiences. To achieve this admittedly aspirational goal, game journalism has a vital role to play. By virtue of their coverage, game journalists increase visibility and comprehension and, in doing so, legitimize play in the process.

The Rules of the Road

Before diving into the historical and institutional context that frustrated the process of mainstreaming for decades, here is a brief note on our goals, scope, sources, and methods. This book is meant to be provocative but not polemic, and signals an effort to make a concise argument on the mainstreaming of games vis-à-vis game journalism.[50] Therefore, we have set some limitations, one of which is geographical. We have limited our purview mainly to the United States and sparingly

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include a handful of European and English-speaking countries and outlets for two main reasons. First, the short span of this book means that we are unable to provide a comparative case—for example, Czech or Finnish game journalism. Second, we faced some practical challenges, such as lacking the necessary cultural background and language skills to expand our geographical scope. That said, we are acutely aware of scholarship on the regional variations in newsroom cultures, the role of public broadcasting systems (or lack thereof), and many other determinants that impact local instances of news production and consumption.[51]

Because of our regional focus on the United States, many of our observations, conclusions, and proposed solutions may not be universally applicable. We return to this issue in the book's conclusion by reflecting on what we can take away from studying English-speaking game journalists and US instances of game journalism. Ultimately, we do hope that our work inspires similar regional studies of both game journalism and mainstreaming. We are not currently aware of such studies other than the ones we cited, or they exist in languages we unfortunately do not speak.

For academically inclined readers, our argument is situated in the broader fields of media and journalism studies. We consider games to be different from other media forms, but certainly not special. For those less familiar with game research, throughout the book we will also draw from a significant body of scholarship

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considered game studies. Such work tends to focus on the effects of games on users or broader culture. Research on the game industry is far less common than one might expect, and research on game journalism, broadly conceived, is so rare that "journalism" and "criticism" are not mentioned once in review articles surveying the state of the field.[52] Certainly, there is a small body of empirical work featuring the voices of game journalists that has proven invaluable for this project.[53] Even so, we decided to conduct twenty additional semistructured interviews with game journalists roughly between 2017 and 2020 to fill the gaps in past work and get a better sense of how practitioners perform boundary work, how they grapple with game culture's persistent ambivalence, and, most of all, how they conceive of mainstreaming.[54]

Last, we feel it is pertinent to briefly introduce ourselves. Who are "we?" David is a Professor of Media Studies at the University of Toronto and had a second career as a game journalist in the Netherlands for over a decade (2006–2016). He wrote over one hundred columns, feature articles, and essays for leading Dutch daily newspapers, game magazines, and blogs. Much of this book is informed by his experiences dealing with public relations teams, visiting game studios, going to press junkets, covering events, and so on. Maxwell is a Professor of Media Studies and Game Studies at the University of Oregon. His research explores the intersections of games, play, interactive and immersive media,

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and journalism, where he has focused both on how newsmakers cover these topics and on how they incorporate them into their own work and practice. As we fit the stereotype of prototypical gamers (i.e., we are both white dudes), we want to recognize that we enjoyed ready access to many key employees, events, games, and places, both virtual and physical to which others may not be privy. Throughout this book we want to leverage these unique insights and opportunities to tell a story about the mainstreaming of game journalism.

Additionally, introducing ourselves offers an occasion to be explicit about our politics. Over the last few decades, journalists, critics, and academics have been under attack—ranging from mild verbal abuse to serious assault—for their journalistic work, advocacy efforts, or affiliation with research associations.[55] It is worth emphasizing that those facing such attacks are predominantly women, people of color, LGBTQ+, and other members of marginalized groups.[56] Even though these attempts are ultimately self-defeating, they have had—and still have—a chilling effect. For example, the already small number of high-profile women engaging in various forms of game journalism started to dwindle in the mid-2010s, after reactionary sexism from Gamergate (discussed later) left them open to incessant attacks that were not merely symbolic but had significant real-life consequences.[57] Sadly, they also prove the point made by many of our colleagues about the relatively small but toxic game and fan communities.[58] In more

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ways than one, bad-faith actors—from anonymous trolls to visible haters—have claimed ownership over what qualifies as “good” game journalism, muddying the waters and thereby obfuscating issues that deserve scholarly and societal attention. This book is a modest, good-faith attempt to make the conversation about game journalism slightly less cloudy.

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