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Moving Away from the Mainstream

In the spring of 2018, the release of the first footage from the blockbuster game *Battlefield V* made quite a splash. Established in 2002 by the game studio EA DICE, the *Battlefield* series allows players to take on the role of a soldier in wars past, present, and future. The “official reveal trailer” released on YouTube (figure 2.1) offered fans and critics a first chance to see what the developers had been up to since the release of *Battlefield 1* in 2016.¹ The beginning of the clip had no taglines, or any text for that matter. Instead, it opened with a female soldier jumping off a tank, running into a house, and shooting the first moving person. Within seconds, she is killed in turn, and what follows is pure pandemonium. Set in World War II, we see an open, brightly lit battlefield where a chaotic firefight ensues; bridges collapse, a jeep falls from the sky and flattens a soldier, and a German V-1 flying bomb explodes in front of the camera. Much of the trailer contains surprisingly photorealistic visuals and, by all accounts, exhibits a massive feat of software engineering. The collective attention of fans, however, wandered elsewhere.

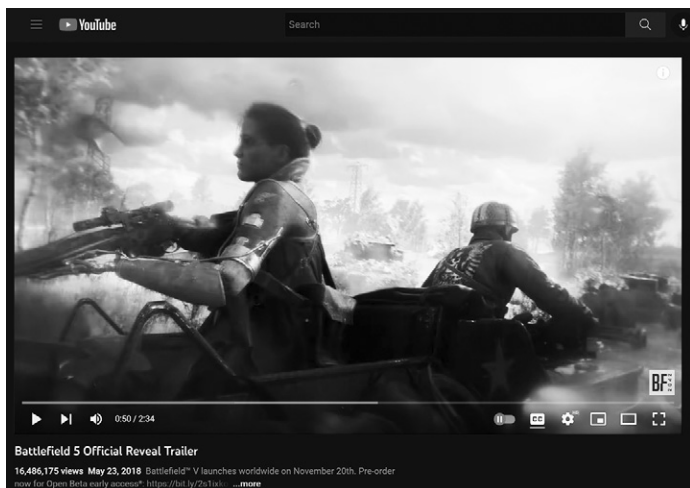


Figure 2.1

Battlefield V's release trailer on YouTube with over 16 million views as of late 2022. Source: Battlefield YouTube channel, "Battlefield 5 Official Reveal Trailer," uploaded May 23, 2018, <https://youtu.be/fb1MR85XF0c>.

In less than two weeks after its release, the clip attracted over ten million views, 200,000 comments, and dozens of reaction videos critiquing the game's direction, each with hundreds of thousands of views and comments of their own. Those who responded directly to the original trailer were unhappy, to put it mildly. The inclusion of a female protagonist upset lots of fans. One commenter echoed the sentiments of many when they argued that "this is what happens when a company tries to force a political ideology through players' throat[s], instead [of] just making a good game." Others

implied that a “good” World War II game would not include women in a fighting role because *that* would be “historically inaccurate:” “So progressive. I forgot that women with mechanical arms won WW2, thanks for reminding me. #Failure.”

What to make of these emotions that oscillated between anger and betrayal? Why should one care about fans who felt that the developer abandoned “historical accuracy” in favor of “political correctness?” For outsiders such as parents, critics, and institutional journalists, these kinds of statements are so preposterous it is hard to take them seriously. This toxic cocktail of reactionary conservatism and outright misogyny among fans makes it apparent that best-selling games are not part of mainstream culture. For insiders who are familiar with this style of war game, the blatant hypocrisy of invoking historical accuracy in a genre known for its revisionist history—and incredibly limited portrayal of mechanized warfare’s horrific consequences—is equally disheartening.² What self-respecting institutional journalistic organization would find this instance of adolescent indignation newsworthy?

Regardless, *Battlefield V* was not a small release, nor were these toxic conversations reserved for the dark corners of the internet. Instead, they represented *Battlefield’s* loyal, vocal, and financially lucrative consumer base. This episode is therefore relevant to our understanding of mainstreaming because these kinds of “technomasculine” conversations have been the rule,

not the exception.³ Analyzing contemporary game culture and its constitutive ambivalences inevitably brings us to the *subcultural* roots of *core* game culture. “Subcultural,” as argued by Mikolaj Dymek, refers to the understanding of games as a niche medium “differentiated from the majority culture.”⁴ Likewise, core gamers (as opposed to casual or “noncore”) represent the most dedicated parts of a community for whom being a *gamer* is a cultural identity.⁵ As succinctly put by Emma Vossen: “While all players are gamers, not all players are Gamers.”⁶ Therefore, when using the label of “gamer” in this book, we refer to those players who embraced this inherently exclusionary subject position. To be clear, we are not implying that *all* gamers are misogynists, or that *all* gamers act in bad faith when engaging in heated online debates. Rather, we simply observe that for decades gamers have inhabited virtual worlds largely impenetrable to outsiders, thereby preventing greater ubiquity and literacy and ultimately thwarting cultural legitimacy—as exemplified by the *Battlefield V* trailer reactions.

In this chapter, we argue that games have become more subcultural over the years, a development perpetuated by a triad of gamers, game journalists, and the game industry. We start off by providing a brief history of gaming’s subcultural era. Then, we reflect on the role of the enthusiast press during this time, after which we survey the historical rise of the core game industry and its responsibility in shaping the subcultural imaginary

of games. We argue that together with critics, the industry largely sets the norms for what it has meant, and continues to mean, to be a “real” gamer playing “real” games.⁷ We close the chapter by discussing how institutional journalists writing for newspapers and magazines have attempted to make sense of games, gamers, and the industry. Faced with strife and uncertainty, journalists have wobbled between aspirational coverage framing games as exciting novelties and falling back on deep-seated moral panics such as addiction, displacement, and the notion that games are inherently infantile. For decades, journalists have reified games and gamers’ subcultural—and ultimately extremist—tendencies, thereby thwarting the mainstreaming of the medium.

Throughout this chapter, we will theorize this decades-long historical development of self-inflicted alienation through the lens of capital: economic capital (money) and forms of game capital (expert knowledge and status). On the one hand, developing and publishing blockbuster games has been—and remains—a risky business proposition that requires massive economic investment to pull off.⁸ Hundreds of developers in Sweden and around the world crafted and honed *Battlefield V* until the moment it was released at the cost of tens of millions of dollars. Additionally, players and journalists require some serious ludic literacy to critique *Battlefield V*’s trailer. Thus, beyond the game’s price tag, players must know about *Battlefield*’s franchise history, genre conventions, and game discourse, which game scholar

Mia Consalvo has collectively theorized as “game capital.”⁹ We demonstrate that the capital requirements to productively engage with game culture have only increased over time.

Shaping a Subculture

After switching from analog to digital, a rough periodization of the evolution of the game industry would be: arcade, subcultural, casual, and postcasual. Each period overlaps, and technologies and practices dominant in earlier periods never disappear completely; for instance, analog games, or board and card games, are currently going through an extended revival of their own. Here, we focus on the early part of this history—the arcade and subcultural eras—when game culture failed to gain mainstream status.

Inspired by Graeme Kirkpatrick’s scholarship, we want to emphasize that this historical trajectory should not be considered natural, inevitable, or predetermined.¹⁰ Unlike today’s bracketed understanding of digital play, being playful is not inherently exclusionary: “Play is something that all humans do and it has been present in all cultures.”¹¹ Industrial capitalism, however, did prompt a change in the perception of play. For centuries, it operated largely outside the confines of commodity culture; nobody owns the rules or intellectual property of analog games such as go, chess, poker,

or spades. In North America, the rise of mass consumer culture and semipublic places featuring analog play changed this dynamic, from penny arcades and family fun centers to the introduction of video game arcades in the early 1970s. Coin-operated game machines like *Pong* (1972) and *Pac-Man* (1980) introduced millions of North Americans to a new form of digital play and laid the foundation for a multibillion-dollar industry. Unlike most contemporary forms of play, however, playing in arcades was a *public* consumer practice, which goes to show the crucial role of industry in setting the socio-cultural and economic parameters of player behavior, game formats, and business models.¹²

Many of contemporary game culture's constitutive ambivalences mentioned in the previous chapter can be traced back to these formative decades. In the 1970s United States, the introduction of video games to coin-op arcades paralleled the introduction of dedicated home game consoles. At this point, their meaning as technological novelties, the identities of their players, and their associated business models were hardly set in stone. Science and technology studies scholars remind us that technological innovations go through a phase of "interpretive flexibility" and are subsequently socially shaped.¹³ For example, dedicated home consoles—such as the 1977 Atari Video Computer System (VCS)—emerged along with the social and technological evolution of the television set.¹⁴ Thus, their introduction built on historical traces of cultural anxiety and friction,

as watching excessive amounts of television in the 1960s and 1970s was considered wasteful, disreputable, and a passive experience.¹⁵

It took a decade of negotiations over meanings and values among industry professionals, players, politicians, institutional journalists, and cultural critics for games to arrive at their subcultural position. Initially, dedicated console manufacturers did cast a wide net as demonstrated by print advertising that depicted families playing together in front of their TV sets. Yet, this changed in the late 1970s when the first megahits—in particular, the Atari VCS version of *Space Invaders* (1980)—redirected the industry's course. Rather than engage in the discursive battle for cultural legitimacy, industry leaders moved away from the mainstream and advertised heavily to a narrower demographic. Video game technology that initially brought families together morphed into escapist fare for boys.¹⁶ Starting in the late 1970s, dedicated game consoles began to be associated with youthful, masculine, and middle-class players.¹⁷

No history of the subcultural era would be complete without mentioning the infamous gaming console industry crash that unfolded over the course of 1983 to 1985 in North America. A glut of low-quality titles for consoles such as the Atari VCS made many players reconsider their investments in time and money. To benefit from this lull in demand, the Japanese console manufacturer Nintendo entered the US market and

introduced the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) just before the 1985 holiday season. In his canonical study *Diffusion of Innovations*, communication theorist Everett Rogers explains how Nintendo regained consumer confidence and turned the NES into a best-seller.¹⁸ For instance, Nintendo aimed its advertising at children, who reportedly begged their parents for the new machine. To further broaden the device's appeal, Nintendo's marketing department positioned the NES as a toy rather than a computer. This repositioning not only improved the console's reputation as a family-friendly device but also established Nintendo as being invested in players' game literacy. The company opened call centers to help consumers troubleshoot problems and began publishing a magazine, *Nintendo Power*, which offered tips and tricks for players.¹⁹ Although the company took a different approach from its competitors, whether Nintendo's efforts have contributed to the mainstreaming of games in the long run is still up for debate. Rogers observed that over the course of 1986, "young boys became addicted to the Nintendo games, particularly those featuring Mario the plumber."²⁰ As we will see later in this chapter, the NES may have rekindled a broken industry, but Nintendo's focus on those boys, coupled with the way *Nintendo Power* brought in players, did not alter gaming's subcultural spiral as the company failed to broaden beyond the console's implied adolescent male audience.

The First Decades of the Enthusiast Press

During the subcultural era, as the industry increasingly catered to a niche cohort, dedicated game publications emerged “to cash in on the craze for video games by selling magazines and books to mostly young male video game enthusiasts.”²¹ As Kirkpatrick observes, it is at this very moment that game magazines helped create the conditions for digital play to “become sexist” and thus to occupy and subsequently normalize its subcultural position.²² Before we address the everyday (work) life of game journalists in the next chapter, let us provide historical context on how game magazine culture evolved during the 1980s and 1990s.

If, as the saying goes, journalists write the first draft of history, what would the first draft of game history look like through the eyes of game critics and reviewers? When we surveyed game and journalism studies, research into this question is conspicuously absent. Although scholars frequently seek out game magazines as source material for their analyses, historical accounts of the industry rarely offer insight into the work and position of critics and reviewers.²³

Since an in-depth analysis of decades of US game magazine culture lies outside of the scope of this book, we turn to those partial views and historical snippets. For example, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Culture, Technology, and Marketing*—Stephen Kline and colleagues’ influential scholarly review of the game industry’s history

—only mentions game magazines in passing through a discussion of *Nintendo Power*.²⁴ Founded in 1988 by a member of Nintendo of America's marketing team, the periodical (figure 2.2) became one of the best-selling game magazines in the United States.²⁵ With Nintendo as its financier, the outlet was the domain of the game reviewer rather than the game critic. One would be hard pressed to find investigations or essays that "aim to question, contest" and "evaluate" among its pages.²⁶ Instead, the magazine focused on formulaic previews and reviews, which have obvious evaluative aims: to find out "whether something is good or bad in its category," or to discover a game's "possible worth or value."²⁷ Crucially, *Nintendo Power* played an important role in terms of boosting game literacy, one of our three conditions to mainstreaming. The magazine offered tips, tricks, guides, and cheat codes—key pieces of "game capital"—as well as answers to reader-submitted questions.²⁸

Subscribers paid fifteen dollars per year (by the 1990s) for the privilege to read what amounted to sanctioned propaganda.²⁹ Billing itself as "The Source for NES Players Straight from the Pros," the publication calcified the relationship between game reviewers, the industry, and fans.³⁰ Whereas maintaining a strict boundary between editorial content and marketing material may be sacrosanct for institutional journalists, any such divide was obviously absent in Nintendo's magazine. As such, *Nintendo Power* became a catalyst for the enthusiast press by



Figure 2.2

A page from *Nintendo Power*. Source: Brian Hoss, “R.I.P. Nintendo Power,” *The Bonus View* (blog), August 23, 2012, <https://www.highdefdigest.com/blog/nintendo-power-canceled/>.

providing a template of what a game magazine could look like: “[Its] popularity helped to establish a format for game content and news—glossy spreads and high-profile, in-depth coverage of forthcoming games, very similar to the content found in video game magazines and Web sites today.”³¹ Despite its fame and didactic efforts, the magazine’s contributions toward mainstreaming belied its squandered potential for broad market appeal. *Nintendo Power* was purposely targeted at the predictable demographic of young male consumers. Its authors were largely male, players presented in the magazine were overwhelmingly male, and female characters were sexualized.³² Any emancipatory movements and efforts, therefore, were unable to combat these structural inequities and failed to gain traction in its influential pages and other similar publications.

One of the most comprehensive studies of early instances of game journalism outside of North America has been conducted by Graeme Kirkpatrick, whom we introduced in the previous chapter. His books provide an in-depth look at how UK game magazines discursively shaped concepts, tastes, and dispositions from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s.³³ Initially, players were hailed as exactly that—players rather than gamers. There was no predetermined way to talk about the medium, to evaluate products, or to assume who its audience could (or should) be. Like the game reviews, articles, and letters to the editor that would appear in *Nintendo Power*, the authors of 1980s British game magazines slowly but

steadily started to deploy rhetorical strategies that were increasingly exclusionary to women, older players, and even such enthusiasts as computer tinkerers and hobbyists. “Good” games went from typically describing well-programmed software to instead referring to content that required adequate “gameplay.” This amorphous concept could only be understood by a “real” gamer, which had become a fixed, gendered identity. “Computer games did not inherit their masculine symbolism from anywhere else: it was produced as part of the process whereby digital gaming established itself as a cultural practice in the second half of the 1980s.”³⁴ That is to say, digital play came into its own, discursively, technologically, and economically, through the process of othering, and game reviewers played a vital role in doing so.

Toward New Games Journalism

US game magazines evolved in parallel to their UK counterparts. The independently published *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (EGM) was founded around the same time as *Nintendo Power*, but its autonomy should be taken with a grain of salt. As Dominic Arsenault argues, it was hard for “editors to do anything more than relay, almost verbatim, the inflected descriptions they received from hardware manufacturers.”³⁵ Although it was not solely dedicated to one platform, the magazine

featured article types like those found in *Nintendo Power*: reader letters, strategy sections, cheats and tricks, and the magazine's bread-and-butter, previews and reviews. By following these formats—and in line with Kirkpatrick's analysis—*EGM* “taught players how to play generally, what to expect from a game, and how to evaluate games.”³⁶ This is something scholars studying the sub-cultural era widely agree on: enthusiast magazines set and shaped expectations on how to play well, how to talk about games, what counted as game journalism, what to value in a game, and the implied audience for both hardware and software. After *EGM*, many new magazines—*GamePro* (1989), *Game Informer* (1991), *PC Gamer* (1993), and *Edge* (1993)—continued in this mold, with some titles attracting hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Decades later, a handful of magazines sustain an immense subscriber base; with over 2 million subscribers, *Game Informer*—published monthly by the retail chain GameStop—ranks in the global top 5 of magazine circulation.

Our emphasis on early US game magazine culture and how it shaped the occupational and discursive practices of the enthusiast press stems from how it fostered important frames and tropes; magazine genre formats emerged and writers started to cater to a clearly targeted demographic. By contrast, the World Wide Web and affordable digital publishing tools theoretically could have changed the subcultural trajectory of game coverage. Anyone with a keyboard and internet access was

suddenly able to challenge the status quo and publish industry-related information. They could also write critical essays to either legitimize games as an art form or promote a new shared vocabulary with a decidedly non-subcultural flavor. Yet this possibility did not materialize. The diffusion of “new media” technologies is often associated with utopian ideals, such as democratization of readers and publishers. This view, however, ignores the lure of commodity culture, entrenched occupational ideologies among reviewers and critics, and game journalists’ need for access to industry-supplied game capital.

In the 1990s, many US households gained internet access; technologically literate gamers were among its earliest adopters. There are few scholarly investigations of the switch from magazine publishing to online distribution in gaming. Websites from the 1990s included *Game Zero*, which “first offered video game related content that served as a supplement for print magazines.”³⁷ Over time, rather than remediating magazines, online-exclusive outfits such as *IGN* (1996) and *GameSpot* (1996), and later *Kotaku* (2004) and *Giant Bomb* (2008), became key US-based venues for video game journalism. On the heels of an industry that showed no sign of economic decline, the business of game journalism became subject to rapid consolidation. Attracted by its millions of monthly visitors, News Corporation bought *IGN* in 2005 for \$650 million, only to sell it to publisher Ziff Davis in 2013. Similar websites were either acquired

by transnational media corporations (e.g., *GameSpot's* purchase by *CNET*), merged with other outfits (e.g., *Joystiq* being absorbed by *Engadget*), or shut down (e.g., *Iup*, *UGO*, and *GameSpy*). *IGN* proved to be particularly resilient and is still going strong with 200+ employees, of which 100 are editors. Its impressive collection of 30+ regional editions draw an international audience of nearly 300 million.

In the mid-2000s, alongside the popularization of game websites, a vast online ecosystem started to proliferate that was as creatively rich as it was prolific. This dizzying array of personal game sites, blogs, wikis, and message boards provided the means for players to access the latest news, seek information and validation, and create community. The line between fans and the enthusiast press, and between game reviewers and critics, blurred even further. As Dan Golding argues, "People created semi-academic tracts, magazine-style feature articles, memoirs, beat-inspired poetry, and strident, manifesto-like sermons. By the end of the 2000s, critical videogame writing had gone well beyond 'review.'"³⁸

This moment also marked an important attempt at a shift in style. Game journalist Kieron Gillen's manifesto "The New Games Journalism" is frequently singled out as encapsulating the desire to move away from the strict confines of game reviews as buyer's guides. His "new dogma" boils down to "1) The worth of gaming lies in the gamer not the game" and "2) Write travel journalism to Imaginary Places."³⁹ Instead of focusing

on a game's aesthetics and technical prowess, journalists were encouraged to recount the highly individual experience of play. Although it never intended to steer all journalists in the same direction, Gillen's manifesto still received a fair amount of pushback at the time.

Sites to facilitate "ongoing conversations between developers, critics, educators and enthusiasts," such as *Critical Distance* (2009), or to engage in literary game criticism, such as *Kill Screen* (2010), emerged. These initiatives allowed for the important work of intellectualization: an attempt to pull the medium from the lower rungs of the cultural hierarchy and legitimize it. As valiant as these efforts were, democratizing the means of distribution resulted instead in further nichification, thwarting both the preservation of institutional memory and creation of shared vocabulary.⁴⁰ In the subsequent two decades of feverish debates over style, key concepts, tone, formats, content, and subjects, game journalists never seemed to reach any meaningful consensus,⁴¹ nor did a coherent occupational identity emerge as they collectively continued to wrestle with their professional status.⁴²

Perpetuating Upgrade Culture

As indicated by the popularity of *Nintendo Power*, *Game Informer*, and *IGN*, the enthusiast press evolved in discursive lockstep with the industry. Together they

internalized what James Newman dubbed “the lure of the imminent,” or the idea that there is an “irresistible sense of ‘progress’ and the new is always unproblematically ‘better’ than that which it replaces.”⁴³ Similarly, in his in-depth study of the 1987 TurboGrafx-16 home console, Carl Therrien points to the press’s focus on the platform’s supposed technological superiority by drawing on warfare rhetoric.⁴⁴ Throughout the 1990s and far beyond, game magazines, blogs, and websites all continuously hyped the idea of hardware companies waging a “personified technological conflict of cosmic proportions,” with victories meted out according to photorealism and graphical fidelity rather than exploring a game’s accessibility or encouraging cultural ubiquity.⁴⁵

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, the subcultural era “normalised a cultural imagination of the videogame as consumer software driven by innovations in processing power and graphical fidelity, an increasing amount of content and scale, and limited to a finite number of action-centric genres.”⁴⁶ Atari and Nintendo, and later Sega, Sony, and Microsoft, became the poster children of this “perpetual-innovation economy,” which is marked by short production cycles, constantly upgraded hardware and software, and the aggressive policing of intellectual property rights.⁴⁷ The moment a new console launches, manufacturers start the process of designing the next platform, which is then promised to be a significant improvement over the current cycle.

Each “generation” has a lifespan of roughly seven to ten years, introducing new controllers, more storage, faster chips, and of course, improved graphics for more “realistic” games.⁴⁸ Blockbusters, or AAA (“Triple-A”) games, would become so-called killer apps or system sellers—games that drive consumer investment in new hardware. And invest they have: The global game industry’s revenue numbers are on a seemingly never-ending upward trajectory. Players keep spending on hardware and software, prompting global game publishers and tech conglomerates to heavily invest in research, development, and marketing.

As a result of this cycle, games have become “constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism” in which corporate ownership is highly concentrated and large publishers exert outsized control over what is developed and by whom.⁴⁹ Every new console cycle requires more economic capital from all involved, increasing risk aversion in turn. Hardware developers fund more research and development, software studios expand their teams, and game publishers require bigger marketing campaigns to presell their upcoming titles. Whereas in the age of the Atari VCS, a handful of developers could code an entire hit like *Pong* by themselves, a blockbuster game such as 2018’s *Red Dead Redemption 2* requires tens of millions of dollars to develop via thousands of highly skilled workers, each of whom contributes a tiny part to designing an entire virtual world, its marketing campaign, and increasingly, its back-end

services. New platforms and tools—mobile devices, affordable game engines, and cloud computing—may have lowered production budgets, but the cycle of pent-up supply and demand has yet to stop in the console segment.

Perpetual upgrade culture is not a top-down dictate by the industry but rather one that is sustained and even encouraged by gamers and game journalists alike. The pages of game magazines in the 1980s and '90s, and blogs and websites in the 2000s, were stacked with stories about unrealized potential in new games and to-be-released devices. Constant updates and the promise of something better just around the corner provided game journalists with endless amounts of copy. Reviewers adopted a rhetoric of anticipation rather than reflection;⁵⁰ less “Do we need this machine? How will it impact gameplay? How are these games made and what is their (imagined) audience?” and more “Which company made this marvelous new device? When will it be available? And, most importantly, who is ‘winning’ this hardware cycle?” These never-ending generational “battles” (Nintendo vs. Sega, Sony vs. Microsoft, etc.) provide a particularly useful frame for writers and publishers alike.⁵¹

The effect of perpetual update culture on the mainstreaming of games is therefore manifold. First, it increases the economic and game capital requirements of gamers. With every new franchise installment, a player typically faces more complex play, which in

turn means more investment in the franchise to understand its expanded lore, narrative, or mechanics. Second, upgrade culture is at the very root of the industry's self-imposed creative conservatism. As Brendan Keogh astutely observes, blockbuster production “aggressively formalized”; for game publishers, the economic benefit to publish one more installment in a long-running series far outweighs the risks of investing in original intellectual property.⁵² For decades, those players interested in games that went beyond these narrow cultural and institutional boundaries essentially have been told to look elsewhere.

If the enthusiast press has focused on teaching proper gameplay and fueling the anticipatory drumbeat of new technology, institutional journalists have marched in a decidedly different direction. Catering to a much broader audience—and one typically lacking in ludic literacy, at that—institutional journalists contributed to the further bifurcation of game culture by framing games as innovative and educational technology, addictive toys, or, even worse, the devil's playthings.

Constructing Fun and Fear

Although the industry may have set expectations about games through both advertising campaigns and their decisions of what to publish, institutional news outlets also recognized games' mass appeal and subsequently covered them widely throughout the subcultural era.

This raises the question: Did institutional journalists contribute to the mainstreaming of games, or to their subcultural spiral? We argue the latter. Like the *Fortnite* “craze” in the *New Yorker*, the reportage of institutional journalists oscillates between hope and fear, between appreciation and bewilderment. Rather than promoting game literacy or normalizing play, they have contributed to enduring ambivalence about game culture.

As with the enthusiast press, there is remarkably little research on institutional game journalism—that is, coverage of games and game culture in national newspapers and news magazines—during the industry’s formative decades. For example, sustained analyses of how US newspapers covered the rise of game consoles, or how institutional journalists and editors grappled with game culture, are rare. One notable exception is Dmitri Williams’s study of US news coverage during the 1970–2000 period.⁵³ Finding a contradictory set of utopian and dystopian frames, he argues that games “passed through marked phases of vilification followed by partial redemption.”⁵⁴ Initially, the media countered public fears of truancy and discussed physical skills required and the educational value of play. Later, utopian frames positioned games to be fun, social, and an important way to familiarize children with technology. Conversely, the fear of games as a new technology resonated with wider social concerns in the 1980s such as criminality and drug use, supporting the stereotype that playing games is a wasteful activity. Williams shows that an effect-based line of reasoning took hold in the United

States by the 1990s, portraying digital play as pathological and gamers as antisocial and potentially aggressive. Several flashpoints, most famously the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, cemented the latter frame of games as dangerous, even though there is no causal connection between gameplay and such tragedies.

A subsequent study of game coverage in the *New York Times*, one of the most respected newspapers in the United States, dovetails with both Williams's findings and Kirkpatrick's argument; game coverage in the publication has been dominated by a deep sense of ambivalence. In the 1980s and 1990s, the *Times* predominantly portrayed games as a "social threat," yet at the same time allowed space for counternarratives that extolled the medium's social benefits. In the 2000s, there was a marked shift in the *Times's* coverage as articles began to "praise video games for their capacity to provide players with powerful social experiences."⁵⁵ Crucially, such articles appeared in the paper's Arts section, suggesting that games had finally moved into the purview of cultural critics, who reflected on games' artistic merits.

By conscripting game journalism into the realm of arts criticism, a different bifurcation emerged—one centered around cultural legitimacy. Distinctions emerged between high culture and low culture, between "prestige" games and regular run-of-the-mill titles.⁵⁶ Institutional journalists seem to have a clear sense of which games are worthy of coverage and attention: titles such as *Fortnite*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, *BioShock*, and *Pokémon Go*

claim the spotlight because of their economic impact or artistic value, leaving out thousands of other titles. As a result of new audiences, genres, and game platforms, “there has been growing uncertainty, manifesting alternately as ambivalence and sharp disagreement, about what precisely, at this time of rapid mutation and proliferation of the form, constitutes the object of inquiry.”⁵⁷ Games such as *Hay Day*, *Game of War*, the latest *League of Legends* update, or any of the dozens of social casino apps (e.g., *Slotomania Casino* or *Big Fish Casino*) are apparently part of a different, less newsworthy category. Among these titles, noncore games in particular are rarely deemed worthy of criticism. As one institutional game journalist writing for a quality newspaper once told us when asked about his decision not to write about the then-popular social network game *FarmVille*, “We do not review romance novels, either.” Although this remark was made seemingly off the cuff, it speaks to casual games’ subcultural and gendered status. Casual games are not considered “real games.”⁵⁸ This is partially influenced by the perception that games such as *FarmVille* are associated with a “feminine leisure style.”⁵⁹

For myriad reasons, which we will discuss more in depth in the following chapters, national US newspapers and magazines have been reluctant to structurally invest in dedicated game editors. In an overview for *The Ringer*, Ben Lindbergh describes the ways in which the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have thus far resisted accepting games in the pantheon of

arts criticism that includes theater, film, and music.⁶⁰ Lindbergh notes that the tension between catering to “mainstream” newspaper audiences versus those who are more game literate is a key issue in game journalism gaining mainstream status: “The challenge is providing a blend of accessibility and credibility.” In chapters 4 and 5, we will draw on conversations with newspaper and magazine reporters to dig deeper into contemporary modes of national newspaper coverage and discuss the many challenges game journalists face when attempting to cater to broader audiences.

Playing the Boundary Police

To better understand the past, present, and potential future of digital play, imagine the field as a world of extremes permeated by a deep sense of doubt. From our bird’s-eye overview of the history of the enthusiast press, the industry, and institutional journalism, we observed that all involved erected barriers and demarcated boundaries to police who is “in” and who is “out.” Three pivotal barriers ultimately hinder the mainstreaming of games. First, there is a widespread literacy barrier. No one reporter will ever comprehend such a heterogeneous industry that includes simple apps, sprawling virtual worlds, and intricate franchises with histories that span decades. There are numerous systemic inequalities that make it incredibly hard, if not impossible, for many

individuals to access these heavily curated communities and “level up” within them.⁶¹ In fact, the exclusionary atmosphere constituting the subcultural era is sustained rather than resolved by the enthusiast press. Second, game journalists are forever unsure about digital play’s legitimacy.⁶² Reflecting on game coverage in the *New York Times*, Lindbergh notes that while the industry gets its fair share of attention, “the medium’s demotion from the culture section reflects a curious, continuing lack of mainstream coverage, which persists 40 years after *Asteroids* despite steadily swelling revenue figures, ever-more-realistic visuals, increasingly sophisticated storytelling, and Ellen normalizing [*Fortnite* streamer] Ninja.”⁶³

Last, increased capital requirements hamper game technology’s ubiquity. Critics, reviewers, editors, and publishers of journalism outlets—not to mention gamers, game developers, and publishers—collectively legitimized and normalized the continuous increase in money and game capital. To protect these investments, all parties have deployed a variety of risk-reduction strategies. For example, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, game console manufacturers and leading game publishers “deliberately” suppressed any form of informal or amateur game development.⁶⁴ Over the course of several console cycles, the game industry set the pace of innovation and shaped player discourse and expectations through mass-marketing campaigns. Rather than offering games that were cheaper, simpler, more accessible, and more adaptable, the industry purposely opted for a

capital-intensive mode of development. Consequently, the increasing popularity of games has also made them more subcultural.

Game journalists, magazines, and websites have played a key role in normalizing, legitimizing, and marketing the industry's subcultural offerings. Critics and reviewers crafted and later maintained a culturally and historically specific idea of what digital games and play should look and feel like.⁶⁵ The resulting subculture repels "the majority of society" because it excludes "women, senior gamers and emerging markets."⁶⁶ Brendan Keogh makes a similar point as he argues that the subcultural era spawned a "conservative consumer culture of distribution platforms and enthusiast discourse that are used to videogames being a specific, homogenised practice."⁶⁷ Our opening vignette of the reception of *Battlefield V*'s reveal trailer demonstrates how dominant some of these exclusionary, toxic traits continue to be. During the industry's formative decades, it has been the enthusiast press that gestured, guided, and sometimes even contributed to game culture's subcultural spiral—or, to put it more generously, they did little to prevent its slide into the misogynistic abyss.

Having placed gaming's subcultural roots into historical context, we switch perspectives in the next chapter, discussing how game journalists as both cultural intermediaries and passionate experts have contributed to and frustrated the mainstreaming of games.

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