

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/13837.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13837.001.0001)

# Mainstreaming and Game Journalism

By: David B. Nieborg, Maxwell Foxman

## Citation:

*Mainstreaming and Game Journalism*

By: David B. Nieborg, Maxwell Foxman

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/13837.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/13837.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262375504

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023



The MIT Press

### 3

## Passionate Experts

What are the job requirements to be a game journalist? Historically, most have been autodidacts who rose through the ranks. Critics and reviewers commonly gained a track record by starting as unpaid volunteers for small fanzines and magazines, or more recently by writing for websites and blogs. Those with institutional aspirations may start by writing for the culture section of their local newspaper and, with some luck, eventually become a dedicated game reporter. Although rare, job postings occasionally arise for this niche position. In 2017, Vox Media—the parent company of the game website *Polygon*—was recruiting a “Games Reporter” for their New York office.<sup>1</sup> The job requirements were noticeably generic. They included the “ability to write quickly, clearly and accurately” and to have “familiarity with online publishing tools.” Of course, the ideal candidate would have an “interest in pursuing gaming news from a variety of sources” and should “[like] video games, but also other stuff too.” Curiosity and originality were deemed important, but the requirement to play games well was conspicuously absent.

Do game journalists even have to be good at playing games? It is better not to ask Dean Takahashi this question.<sup>2</sup> The veteran reporter is one of the few people who has occupied all three occupational roles we delineated in chapter 1—institutional journalist, game critic, and game reviewer. Takahashi has written two deeply researched books about the development of the Xbox and Xbox 360.<sup>3</sup> He worked for newspapers including the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *Los Angeles Times*, then moved on to write for technology blog *VentureBeat*, where he contributed more than 15,000 posts over the span of a decade. Most of his articles cover the business and technology side of the game industry, but occasionally he writes a game preview or review. In August 2017, at the German trade show Gamescom, Takahashi decided to record his first time playing *Cuphead*, a successful retro “run and gun” indie game in which the player—alone or in cooperative mode—progresses through a level by shooting everything that moves until they reach the inevitable and challenging boss fight.

In an astute piece of academic game criticism, David McGowan points to *Cuphead's* “intense difficulty,” which forces players “to continually replay and master each level in order to progress, an act which itself elicits the almost-ritualized repeat viewings of VHS tapes.”<sup>4</sup> Standing on the showroom floor of a hectic game convention, however, meant Takahashi unfortunately did not have that luxury. Instead, he played *Cuphead* for 26 minutes, during which he, in his own words, “sucked.”<sup>5</sup>

**VB** NEWS ▾ EVENTS ▾ RESEARCH ▾ f t in Search

**GAMES**

## The DeanBeat: Our Cuphead runneth over

DEAN TAKAHASHI @DEANTAK SEPTEMBER 8, 2017 8:00 AM

Cuphead Gamescom Demo: Dean's Shameful 26 Minutes Of Gameplay

Let's start with an understatement. You may have heard that I failed miserably in playing a demo of *Cuphead*, and the video I posted mocking myself has gone viral on the internet. My game crime: I was so bad at playing I was deemed unfit to be a game journalist. My *Cuphead* gameplay video from Gamescom blew up, inspired rage, and spurred discussions about the death of game journalism across Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter. I unintentionally created my own tweet storm. If you are angry about this video, I apologize to you.

**GB Latest News**

- PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds hits 1 million concurrent Steam players
- Openi Look: Fractured Space developed in broad daylight

**Figure 3.1**

Dean Takahashi responds to his play of *Cuphead* with the statement that he “failed miserably.” He ends the first paragraph apologizing to his readers. Source: Dean Takahashi, “Our Cuphead Runneth Over,” *VentureBeat* (blog), September 8, 2017, <https://venturebeat.com/2017/09/08/the-deanbeat-our-cuphead-runneth-over>.

Upon his return to the United States, he shared the footage with his editors, who uploaded it to YouTube. The clip initially received a thousand views, but when a reactionary game journalist with a large following called attention to the video, the counter quickly rose to 1.6 million views. Avid players watching Takahashi’s

gameplay will undoubtedly yearn to reach through the screen, wrest the controller from him, and push the correct combination of buttons. Takahashi was fully aware of this fact and admitted in his comments on the *VentureBeat* blog that his performance was “shameful” (figure 3.1). Those who commented on the clip did not seem to put much stock in his tongue-in-cheek self-flagellation, however; the comments quickly devolved into insults about his mental abilities and worse.

Before we revisit the question of mainstreaming later in this chapter, we will first discuss the occupational norms and practices of game journalists. We begin by considering both their written and unwritten job requirements. Many norms, such as the expectation to be a skilled player, are rarely codified; they are not listed in the *Polygon* job ad. Skill requirements, however, are a fluid subcultural norm, the genesis of which we addressed in the previous chapter. They emerged from game magazines, are shaped by the boundary work performed by game journalists, are reinforced through online debates (and attacks), and are on full display at in-person gatherings such as Gamescom. Underlying these norms are a series of difficult questions: What counts as passion in gaming? Who are game experts? And what is expertise? To answer, we argue that passion and expertise have served as rocket fuel for digital play’s tendency to alienate. Drawing on personal experiences and recent scholarly work, we argue that game journalists continuously find themselves stuck between a rock

and a hard place: beholden to the industry for access to equipment and content while at the same time unsure how to determine their own occupational standards and how to effectively advocate for the medium to the wider public.<sup>6</sup>

### Game Journalists as Cultural Intermediaries

To prevent falling into the trap of ludic essentialism—the idea that games are a special form of media—we should first consider game journalism’s position within the wider domains of arts and lifestyle coverage. Game journalists share many occupational practices and norms with their peers in the film, music, food, automotive, travel, and fashion sections of news outlets. Collectively, these writers act as “cultural intermediaries”: professional experts, or “tastemakers,” in a position to generate, appropriate, and negotiate cultural *value* as they mediate between institutions and consumers.<sup>7</sup> The concept of cultural intermediaries was introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who was interested in the formation, construction, and, particularly important for our understanding of mainstreaming, the *legitimation* of taste and expertise.<sup>8</sup>

Becoming, being, and remaining an expert is a process of constant contestation. Cultural intermediaries confer ceaselessly between producers and consumers to create value and desire. Readers need to get on board,

and when writing about a fast-moving industry, so do sources and professionals. Attentiveness to this balancing act, and to the power relationships it invokes, is one of the reasons Bourdieu's work resonates so well among those who study cultural journalism. To be deemed an expert, and therefore a person worthy of attention, one must accrue social status and cultural capital: academic credentials, access to symbolic material, and cultural literacy. For Bourdieu, the ability to amass cultural capital is highly dependent on one's class position. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mia Consalvo built on these insights by demonstrating that cultural capital has its own subset in game culture: game capital.<sup>9</sup> This medium-specific compilation of knowledge, experiences, and literacy can be seen as a fluid currency that is shared among players, journalists, and the industry.

How game journalists accrue and subsequently deploy game capital is instructive for our concept of mainstreaming because it helps us to better understand why and how the enthusiast press has historically frustrated both game literacy and legitimacy among what Bourdieu dubs "the dominant class." In the world of journalism, the dominant class of media elites includes policy makers, opinion leaders, and mainstream news organizations, along with the institutional journalists they employ. Unlike film critics in the 1960s, game reviewers and critics never found sure footing within the confines of institutional outlets.<sup>10</sup> This may well be a result of their collective lack of traditional markers of

cultural capital and the low status of games in the cultural hierarchy.

Although the notion of parlaying cultural value and disseminating game capital may sound abstract, the process is rather straightforward in practice. As discussed in the previous chapter, the history of game magazine publishing demonstrates that the industry, critics, and reviewers collectively catered to an increasingly narrow audience. How did this play out in practice?

### **Straight from the Source**

In the spring of 2008, Sony needed a marketing boost. The PlayStation 3 had launched in Europe the year before, but it was clear that both Microsoft and Nintendo were giving Sony a run for its money. Sony had done incredibly well during the sixth console generation (2000–2005) with the PlayStation 2, to this day the best-selling home console ever with over 155 million units shipped. The start of the seventh console generation, however, was different. To journalists, gamers, and industry insiders' surprise, Nintendo introduced the Wii, which was a clear attempt to break with gaming's subcultural roots as it explicitly addressed a much broader audience.<sup>11</sup> Microsoft, for its part, was in a much better competitive position than years prior. It had learned from past mistakes and set a lower introductory price for the Xbox 360, resulting in improved



sales.<sup>12</sup> Since Sony had invested tens of millions of dollars in its sophisticated new machine, the company felt obliged to embark on a massive PR push to rekindle consumer demand. They picked the swanky Indigo Club, part of the O2 Arena in London, to tell the European game press why the PlayStation 3 was a superior piece of technology and, taking a cue from Nintendo's recent success, why it had the potential to "broaden the market."

The president of Sony's PlayStation division, Kazuo Hirai, took the stage at the start of the press conference, stating: "Ultimately, it's the games that define the PlayStation and games that continue to excite all PlayStation and gaming fans alike."<sup>13</sup> I (David) sat in the back of the room, taking it all in.<sup>14</sup> How did I end up there? Two weeks earlier, I received a frantic call from Sony's local PR representative: "We are organizing PlayStation Day in London. Do you want to come?" Those sorts of calls became increasingly frequent as my freelance game journalism career took off and I became a regular contributor to *Dagblad De Pers*, a Dutch daily newspaper.<sup>15</sup> The freesheet's editorial team was relatively young and eager to shake things up. Rival outlets, particularly incumbent subscription newspapers, sparsely covered games. Conversely, the industry's subcultural aura of both innovation and deviance resonated with the general attitude among *Dagblad De Pers*' editors: "If none of the other Dutch newspapers are taking games seriously, then we definitely should!"

As a result, every week I had at least half a page at my disposal. So much real estate in a print newspaper was (and still is) a rare luxury for any institutional outlet. Sony's invitation, therefore, was most welcome. It provided me with enough material for at least one full-length (i.e., roughly 1,000 words) article, along with potential future reviews. And it was an invitation that included transportation, accommodation, and refreshments, no strings attached. Since I was a freelancer, my editors were on board with this arrangement. The newspaper was distributed for free, so we all were much more comfortable with blurring the lines between editorial content and sponsored material.

In London, Hirai's presentation was utterly unremarkable. Anybody who has seen game companies do press conferences knows how these events unfold: sales figures, announcements, subtle jabs at competitors, and a not-so-subtle nod to the free booze available after the presentation. Over a decade later, this event stands out from the rest because of what happened immediately after the presentation. As hundreds of European game journalists—truly an all-dude army—streamed out of the auditorium, I spotted some Dutch colleagues. The trio were prototypical game reviewers in their early twenties who worked for popular game websites in the Netherlands. They were recording a video report with the podium in the background, the host talking enthusiastically into the camera as if it was *he* making Sony's pitch. The host restated the company's sales figures and

ended his brief story with a Dutch translation of: “Ultimately, it’s the games that define the PlayStation and games that continue to excite all PlayStation and gaming fans alike.”

After the reviewer trio wrapped up, I walked over and asked them how they felt about the event. Feeling cynical after so much empty PR, I hoped they could offer me some fresh insights. They gushed over the fancy cocktails and snacks, beautiful hostesses, and the opportunity to play a slew of unreleased titles! It was rumored that Sony executives and developers might join the press for (more) drinks later that evening. A huge chunk of game capital was about to fall into their laps. This is why they covered games (without pay) in the first place. Free games, free trips, free booze, and hanging out with buddies from across the continent. What was not to like?

Later that night, together with a dozen members of the gaming press, we stumbled to our hotel. Sony’s local PR representative did his best to keep the intoxicated Dutch mob under control. I was heading to my room, but the poor marketing manager was not done for the night. The afterparty continued in the hotel lobby, which quickly turned into a makeshift bar. “We need more beer!” one older game reviewer demanded. The PR guy obliged—anything to keep his merry band of misfits happy. After all, he would need their collective goodwill later that year for the release of the blockbuster game *Killzone 2*, which was developed in Amsterdam.

## Free as in Free Beer

What to make of the London event? For starters, its setup was far from unique, nor was the willingness of game journalists to take part. This occupational disposition was—and still is, to some extent—similar to the practices of lifestyle journalists who cover bands, visit far-flung cities, or write about fancy meals in chic restaurants.<sup>16</sup> As we noted in chapter 1, however, the code of conduct among game reviewers is quite different from those of institutional reporters. The former provides soft news meant to entertain and advise (e.g., buy a game), whereas “professional” hard news journalists are tasked with being objective and rational and abiding by a clear set of ethics.<sup>17</sup> In practice, the hard/soft news dichotomy breaks down rather quickly. Severin Poirot observes that game journalists themselves contribute to this blurriness:

The term journalist seems to be variable based on who is using and who is applying the term. Some individuals identify as a journalist . . . Others did not consider what they did as journalism or themselves as journalists. They suggested that they were “critics” and that what they did was opinion.<sup>18</sup>

What this clear example shows is that the line separating political coverage—the holy grail of institutional journalism—from lifestyle journalism and cultural criticism, along with what each of these groups consider to

be ethical, is constantly shifting. Even among the different genres of lifestyle journalism (e.g., sports, travel, food, and health) there are stark differences; every type “follows its specific professional routines and economic conditions.”<sup>19</sup> For example, my own PlayStation Day story shows that even those who write for a daily newspaper—arguably the last refuge of institutional journalism—can easily cross ethical or professional boundaries deemed taboo at other publications. One such ethically fraught decision would be for a reporter to accept anything of monetary value, such as an all-expenses-paid two-day trip to downtown London.

The point here is not that game journalists are morally bankrupt, unethical individuals who, in exchange for free booze and swag, provide favorable coverage. In practice, the relationship between the industry and game journalists is much more organic. Because of their institutional proximity to the industry, game journalists aspire to be transparent about “informing their audience of what they may have received for their participation” in corporate events.<sup>20</sup> Many are well aware of their unique position as cultural intermediaries and aim to be truthful in their reporting. That said, there is an implied quid pro quo—if not a massive power imbalance—between the industry and the press.

The simple truth about game journalism in the sub-cultural era is that the relationship between the industry and journalists is symbiotic. As cultural intermediaries, what game journalists mediate

continues to be filtered by the market; their ability to sell advertising space and to produce subscribers and site visits—attracting readers with full and detailed, if not “world exclusive” coverage accompanied by large, glossy game play stills and interviews with game developers—remains dependent on the positive benefits of working closely, if not entirely ethically, with producers.<sup>21</sup>

For decades, this mutually beneficial, transactional relationship resulted in an agreed-upon equilibrium. Game journalists do not participate in some hidden, well-devised, nefarious scheme aimed at self-enrichment. Reviewers are not forced to take lavish trips around the world. If one does consider accepting nonmonetary rewards as an ethical breach—and there is absolutely something to be said for such a strict professional stance—such breaches have happened for decades, out in the open and for all to see.<sup>22</sup>

There may be those who seem to think that such ethical lapses are anomalies, but none of what we have described so far will be new or shocking to those who have read game magazines or frequented online outlets over the last three decades. In the case of the PlayStation Day, many of the Dutch writers present loudly and proudly recounted the trip in our respective publications, ranging from enthusiast magazines and websites to mainstream newspapers. So did our Spanish, Danish, and British peers. After all, industry events provide the perfect background for an entertaining blog post or video report that mixes travel journalism (we are in

London!), with useful data (PlayStation sales figures), and some mild tongue-in-cheek criticism. All this is to say, game publishers wield a weapon much more powerful than outright bribery: access to exclusive resources such as press events, unreleased games, and opportunities to meet directly with industry professionals.

We point to these fraught institutional arrangements because they are so clearly at odds with journalistic norms, from objective reporting to critical distance. What irks us are not so much these arrangements but rather the relentless vitriol from accusers (i.e., fans and core gamers) against those whose behavior is said to breach occupational norms. We are the first to welcome good-faith debates about ethics and objectivity. It is part of what motivated us to write this book. Yet, the disproportionate number of attacks on female, trans, and nonbinary game developers, journalists, pundits, and academics for their supposed ethics breaches do not square with the decades-long history of the enthusiast press we have just described. Put differently, those who are concerned about “ethics in games journalism” are awfully selective in their anger about actual ethical violations.

Apart from underscoring how the public occupational practices of game journalists are admittedly unshackled from traditional journalistic norms, we want to emphasize industry and audience complicity in setting and reifying these cultural norms and occupational expectations. Readers of the enthusiast press expect critics and

reviewers to be close with industry insiders. Throughout my decade as a game journalist, readers never questioned who paid for those lavish trips, who got access to which company, and why. On the contrary! In game websites' comments sections, fans openly applaud reviewers for their "hard work," or their willingness to fly to faraway lands, play new games quickly, and report back without breaking the unwritten rule of smothering a title's momentum before release. Add to this that members of the enthusiast press are also almost always fellow consumers. Like their audience, they are gamers who just happen to be among the lucky few allowed "in."

This observation brings us to the occupational challenges faced by game journalists, which we will cover in the next two chapters. The political economy of game journalism makes the livelihood of writers inherently precarious. Sure, traveling around the world for free is fun, but out of the dozen Dutchies in London, only two or three were paid a decent salary for their efforts. The rest were freelancers, interns, or voluntary contributors. Our thin veneer of rambunctiousness hid a deep, collective sense of anxiety—not only about our (unpaid) work but also about our dependency on the industry for continued access to events, review material, and many other scraps of exclusive information constituting valuable game capital.<sup>23</sup> Adding insult to injury, many of the press outlets represented at the talk counted companies such as Sony as key advertisers. For some, the threat of major game companies declining



to purchase advertising, to prevent participation in press junkets, or to restrict access to early copies—an industry practice known as “blackballing”—served as an effective deterrent against overly critical coverage. Whenever I met fellow Dutch game journalists, we openly talked about one or two notorious PR reps who had no qualms about “pulling somebody through the phone” if they did not like their work. In many respects, game journalism remains mired in the same kinds of controversies that marked late nineteenth-century journalism, when advertisers dictated “puff” pieces and advertising “functioned essentially as a bribe.”<sup>24</sup>

In sum, the ability of game journalists to connect with an audience that appreciates their expertise has been directly tied to their ability to leverage game capital. Many core gamers do not seem to crave cultural legitimacy (i.e., mainstream acceptance) but rather desire validation and acknowledgment, however implicit, of their dedication and passion. In return, readers ask—and at times violently demand—that their favorite reviewers and critics match or exceed their level of dedication and skill.

### **Passion, Expertise, and Legitimacy**

By cultivating a very specific understanding of passion and dedication, both fans and game critics helped erect one of the three major barriers to mainstreaming.

The British scholar Jamie Woodcock explains that the “mobilization of passion” permeates game culture and is “something that begins in the consumption, rather than production of videogames.”<sup>25</sup> To an extent, the passion requirement concerns all cultural intermediaries. They all “are taste makers and legitimation authorities because of their personal investment in the work.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, arguably more so than other forms of cultural criticism, the practice of game criticism is explicitly tied to skill—or, more precisely, the expectation of hyper-literacy and possession of the “right” skills. Although movie and music critics may have expertise because of their canonical knowledge, we would typically not say that they are skillful or “good” at watching movies or listening to (or even playing) music. To be seen as a ludic expert, by contrast, one must demonstrate the ability to play “well.” As the chapter’s opening example illustrates, what playing well means is not only highly subjective but also deeply political. A game journalist publicly demonstrating an inability to play well—by not progressing in a level, for instance—instantly invalidates their legitimacy as an expert in the eyes of many core gamers.

For reviewers, a host of practical issues exacerbates the requirement to be deemed skillful. They must be able to finish a game quickly and effectively, be it a demo or the final release. Whatever medium one writes for, there still are deadlines to meet and competitors to think about. Add to this the lack of professional

credentials; there are few university degrees, certificates, or textbooks for critics. This lack of standards makes game journalism more appealing as a career option for younger players. They may consider their gaming ability to equal or even surpass that of the average reviewer. If there are no diplomas or other external validation mechanisms, skill and subcultural knowledge become vital markers of expertise.

Specific skill requirements help explain why passion frustrates game literacy. Because a game journalist's legitimacy is partly derived from attaining a high level of game literacy, there are few incentives for reviewers to critique a game's inaccessibility to outsiders. Quite the opposite, in fact—a large contingent of reviewers and critics are quick to scorn games that do not require skill or significant investment of time and effort. A “real game” is held to be “immersive, rich, and deep,” meaning that they are long (allowing for many hours of play), played on certain platforms (PC or consoles), and have a “perceived difficulty” that is “appropriate and valued.”<sup>27</sup> Even in mainstream game criticism, we rarely see open acknowledgments of how hard it is to navigate virtual worlds. For example, in his op-ed for the *New York Times*' Sunday review, Peter Suderman attempts to convince readers that the Western-themed blockbuster game *Red Dead Redemption 2* is “true art.”<sup>28</sup> He does so by appealing to all the aforementioned “real game” tropes, such as technical achievement and an unprecedented development budget. In addition, he puts the

game on the same cultural pedestal as other forms of high culture by describing it as “richly cinematic and even literary.”<sup>29</sup> What Suderman does not do, however, is acknowledge the game’s inherent inaccessibility. For recurrent players, the game may be a breeze, but newcomers who want to navigate its vast virtual world face a steep learning curve. In other words, even if one is swayed by Suderman’s sweeping praise, one must be digitally literate to play the game effectively. What he provides in cultural legitimacy by publishing in the *New York Times* comes at the expense of game literacy.

### Boundary Policing in a World of Extremes

Although being passionate has a positive connotation, studies of digital culture demonstrate that passion can also be harnessed or misdirected toward nefarious ends, pushing out supposed nonbelievers and measuring legitimacy based on constantly shifting metrics.<sup>30</sup> In a blogpost reflecting on the personal attacks following *Cuphead*-gate, Takahashi touts his many decades as an unwavering fan. He was credible, he assumed, because he was one of them, a dedicated expert deeply and personally invested: “In all of my 45 years or so as a gamer—yep, since the original Pong came out—nobody ever denied that I was a proper and legitimate game fan. Until now.”<sup>31</sup> He then noted that his editors never cared about him being good at playing: “They required basic

knowledge and competence, but not skill on an esports level." The *Cuphead* episode reinforces what decades of game journalism history demonstrate about how gamers and a subset of reviewers actively police both the boundaries of their subcultural domain and those who are allowed to critique it.

When considering a cultural form's accessibility, passion among its mediators is a double-edged sword directly tied to race and gender. All forms of cultural criticism come from a place of intrinsic fascination. As a reviewer, one cannot marshal passion and loyalty if one despises the very act of playing. Too much passion, however, can be more destructive; there is a fine line between enthusiasm and aggression, and a clear line between bias and bigotry. For instance, what should be a foregone conclusion is still very much an open question in practice: can women be game reviewers? As argued by Adrienne Shaw, not only is it hard for women to simply be present in male-dominated spaces, such as game studios and trade shows, they are also "flat out rejected to critique games as cultural texts."<sup>32</sup>

What does this exclusionary stance look like in practice? In his tell-all book *Sex, Drugs, and Cartoon Violence: My Decade as a Video Game Journalist*, Russ Pitts states that the game industry's gender ratio is 10:1 in "favor of men," which is one reason why "the strip club is a perennial favorite locale in the game industry. The girls are already there."<sup>33</sup> There are women who work as game developers, but they are far outnumbered by men.<sup>34</sup>

Female executives working at dominant game publishers are virtually nonexistent. This gender disparity mirrors broader trends in the media industries, as the media sociologist Brooke Erin Duffy notes: “While men dominate more prestigious creative roles as well as technical and craft fields, women are concentrated in marketing, communications, and service roles.”<sup>35</sup> We see similar gender dynamics among members of the enthusiast press. Most of the women visible to game journalists, according to Nina Huntemann, do not work in “design, development, or executive positions” but rather have promotional roles.<sup>36</sup> The fact that until very recently some members of the latter group worked as “booth babes,” who were a large presence at major industry events, should be indicative enough of the “hotbed of rampant sexism and misogyny” that Pitts describes.<sup>37</sup>

The presence of promotional models at trade events is exactly the kind of marker that depresses cultural validity. Not only does it signal that such key events are male-dominated spaces but it is also part of a deeply sub-cultural promotional strategy. Would the literary critic of a mainstream newspaper expect to encounter a “book babe” at an industry event? Pitts recounts how industry leader Sony promoted its 2007 blockbuster action game *God of War* “by throwing a party at which topless models fed grapes to visiting journalists and a live goat was slaughtered and decapitated, for fun.”<sup>38</sup> There are few things worse for granting mainstream legitimacy than mixing gratuitous sexism with animal abuse.

For whom, then, do typical game critics and reviewers write? Who is the ideal consumer of a game review or essay? The simplest answer should arguably be those who play, which would ultimately represent most socio-cultural categories—who doesn't play? Yet, in the mid-2000s, the readership of game magazines was said to have “an overwhelmingly male readership, usually in the 90 to 95 percent range.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, most game reviewers and critics are recruited from that very pool of core game consumers. These exclusionary publishing practices may profit both magazine and game publishers, but they exact a heavy toll on individual writers.

### **A Culture of Anxiety**

A growing body of scholarship points to a perplexing professional conundrum. Game journalists lack confidence in their occupational role (are they even journalists?) and in the longevity of their jobs because they face an enduring deficit of legitimacy as long as they are shackled to subcultural outlets. In some ways, such concerns are not unusual for those at the “margins of the journalistic field,” such as music writers, who also have deep industry ties.<sup>40</sup> In game journalism, however, the absolute dependence on publishers and fellow gamers has resulted in the institutional press considering it “a lower, marginal form” with core tenets that lie at the fringes of what is deemed proper journalism.<sup>41</sup>

Howard Fisher and Sufyan Mohammed-Baksh characterize this constant strain and resultant occupational ambivalence as an “ideology of anxiety.”<sup>42</sup> Game journalists have collectively internalized concerns over their professional standing. This not only takes a mental toll but also influences their writing, which is characterized as “preemptively obedient” and is used “as a way of denying responsibility for some of the things they write and for their role in maintaining the status quo.”<sup>43</sup> Seen in this light, anxiety, a mass inferiority complex, and an abdication of responsibility on the part of writers, industry, and gamers all contributed to the debacle that came to be known as Gamergate.

Because of our distaste for the events themselves, not to mention the surfeit of media coverage and research, we prefer not to linger over the events as they unfolded in 2014 and 2015. Essentially, under the aegis of combating issues of “ethics in games journalism,” an ad hoc group of mostly anonymous self-identified gamers intimidated those whom they judged to be endangering “real” games, particularly nonmale developers and scholars. From the insularity of media platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, and 4chan, loosely formed online groups initiated actions that have become sadly commonplace in political life, beginning with online attacks such as “doxxing” and moving rapidly to more serious forms of harassment such as “SWATing” and bomb threats.<sup>44</sup> Despite Gamergate’s outsized media coverage, many of the issues surrounding the 2014 summer of



hate were unexceptional in game culture. Other “-gates” had come before, and more followed. As media studies scholar Amanda C. Cote points out, the events were “a symptom of deeper structures of sexism and backlash in gaming.”<sup>45</sup> Add to that the pervasive racist undercurrent that permeates online game communities, which was present long before 2014.<sup>46</sup>

It is the journalistic response to Gamergate and its manifestation of the endemic problems of game journalism that we want to highlight.<sup>47</sup> Gamergate’s impact was expansive: many quit the industry rather than face further assaults. Others deeply reflected on the toxicity of game culture more broadly. Scholars Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw advocated that academics rethink how they communicate these issues to the public.<sup>48</sup> Torill Mortensen focused on the embedded problems of “geek masculinity” to which most aggressors adhered.<sup>49</sup> If this abasement seems eerily familiar to the uninitiated, it is because as much as Gamergate might have been inevitable, it is also widely considered to be a testing ground for many of the misogynistic tactics of the extreme right in North America and of other bad-faith actors across the globe. That is, Gamergate was emblematic not only of structural social inequities but also of the failure of social media platforms, journalists, politicians, and others to effectively counter toxic cultural sects.

Immediately following the summer of 2014, game journalists were conflicted about how to cover Gamergate. They tried to tread a cautious line between explaining

the movement to their core audience while also adopting what the journalism professors Gregory Perrault and Tim Vos regard as “the role of traditional journalist[s], linking themselves with established journalistic entities and practices.”<sup>50</sup> Journalists struggled to hold those in power accountable while also maintaining their sub-cultural positions as passionate experts. Gamergate proponents collectively sensed this contradiction, forcing game journalists and publishers to take an explicit stand. Ironically, when they did so, the brunt of the subsequent harassment was faced by individual developers and reporters, not the industry.

In the end, the trolls driving Gamergate were quite successful in their efforts to exploit the professional weaknesses of game journalists in a broader attempt to demean underrepresented communities in the field, including women, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Because of the subcultural status of games and the industry’s strict supervision of their occupational boundaries, journalists could neither fully fulfill their role as a bulwark nor check this phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> Although Gamergate as an active community became less effective in the ensuing years, it impelled game publications to reexamine their function in a rapidly changing media landscape. As editors reviewed their newsroom tactics and policies, new modes of game journalism emerged, which we will address in greater detail in the next chapter.



© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in ITC Stone Serif Std and ITC Stone Sans Std by New Best-set Typesetters Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nieborg, David B., author. | Foxman, Maxwell, author.

Title: Mainstreaming and game journalism / David B. Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman.

Description: Cambridge : The MIT Press, [2023] | Series: Playful thinking | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022042982 (print) | LCCN 2022042983 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262546287 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262375511 (epub) | ISBN 9780262375504 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Video games—Press coverage. | Video games—Social aspects.

Classification: LCC GV1469.34.P74 N54 2023 (print) | LCC GV1469.34.P74 (ebook) | DDC 794.8—dc23/eng/20220908

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022042982>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022042983>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1