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# Mainstreaming and Game Journalism

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# The Many Streams of Game Journalism

“The most interesting things about games, to general readers, are often not the things we fixate on in video-game world, for better and for worse,” concluded Keza MacDonald in a public confession on Twitter announcing her move from game website *Kotaku* to UK-based newspaper the *Guardian*.<sup>1</sup> After a decade of professional experience, MacDonald reflected animatedly about the transition to a traditional newspaper where there was less “uniformly positive” industry coverage. Her work now catered to less informed audiences who had no idea what modern games were like and did not care about technical features, like graphic fidelity or smooth controls. Casting herself as a diplomat, MacDonald’s tweets indicate that, for the “average” reader, games remain mysterious, unappealing, and maybe even harmful.

Many of our interviewees concurred with MacDonald’s outlook. As discussed in the introduction, we had twenty conversations with writers and editors from both enthusiast and institutional outlets to better understand the landscape of contemporary game

journalism. We asked them a variety of questions, ranging from their perceived roles as game journalists to the stylistic choices they made in writing stories to their thoughts about the mainstreaming of games. Respondents believed that games were “growing up” and that in the next decade they might even warrant “serious” coverage and critique. “Games are really young. They are still maturing. I think the most prominent games that people see and what they see about them are [not displayed] in the best light,” said former *Kill Screen* editor and writer Clayton Purdom. With this potential looming, those whom we interviewed felt that in the interim they must take on the conciliatory role that MacDonald suggested.

Then again, should we consider a fifty-year-old medium to still be in its infancy? And why do we require emissaries from virtual worlds in the first place? Some of the answers to these questions can be traced to the media ecosystem that MacDonald and her peers inhabit. The days of finding out about the latest releases from *GamePro* or *Nintendo Power* are long gone, as are those magazines. Instead, algorithmically curated evaluations from YouTube, TikTok, or Twitch creators may be the first piece of gameplay audiences encounter before anything appears in enthusiast publications, let alone institutional news outlets. As a result, instead of diplomats, this fractured environment produces occupational nomads. To establish themselves, some game journalists still lean heavily into the subcultural norms

we discussed in earlier chapters. Others are slowly adapting their work around the professional boundaries and ideologies we discussed in chapter 1.

To account for the different roles game journalists occupy, in this chapter we introduce four occupational archetypes: 1) entertainers, 2) enthusiast critics, 3) game beat reporters, and 4) institutional journalists. We situate each within the contemporary media landscape and reflect on how they exploit the industry-supported sub-cultural capital discussed in earlier chapters. Crucially, we emphasize that each type simultaneously expands *and* constricts the legitimacy, literacy, and ubiquity of games in the public imagination in different ways. Because of that, we further the argument that, combined, these four types challenge the effectiveness of game journalists as mainstream cultural intermediaries altogether.

To better understand how these four types fit into a shattered contemporary information ecosystem, we start by describing how the growth of digital platforms has challenged journalistic standards and created a precarious situation for practitioners. Writers must compete in a wide variety of arenas where they bank on knowledge of games for reviewing and reporting. The ongoing process of “platformization”—during which news production becomes “platform-dependent”—unfolds alongside the industry-wide practice of freelancing.<sup>2</sup> This way of working, where writers rely on their own ability to find and pitch story ideas to different platforms, and

are often paid by the word in the process, provides the economic foundation for most outlets to persist, particularly as they downsize their staff. Freelancing also reverberated in our interviews as being instrumental to the way reporters approach and produce content.

## Playing with Platforms

The metamorphosis of game journalism, as well as events like Gamergate, did not occur in a vacuum. They are both a source and symptom of an ongoing “crisis” that mainstream publications find themselves in. Due in part to the 2008 financial recession and to revenue losses as print newspapers moved online, the number of US newsrooms has steadily declined, shedding over half of their employees between 2008 and 2019 while other news-producing industries, such as television and radio, saw a modest rise.<sup>3</sup>

Because a majority of Americans get their news digitally, countless publications are subject to the economic, infrastructural, and governmental whims of digital platforms, Facebook and Google in particular, typically without necessarily reaping proportional rewards.<sup>4</sup> Scholars suggest that such instances of platform dependency have precipitated a reassessment of the audience–publisher relationship, journalistic independence, and the very value of news coverage itself.<sup>5</sup> Reporting is less valuable when breaking news can be gleaned from

social media, and journalists' freelancing careers may be measured through Twitter posts as much as bylines.

What does all of this mean for mainstreaming? Journalists and cultural critics have often played a vital role in deciding what is mainstream. Yet, because even the most entrenched institutions are dependent on platforms, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish "mainstream" journalism from more niche outlets, or even from the "vernacular amateurs" who replicate the work of professional reporters in their reviews.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the media landscape is much more atomized; there are only a handful of national outlets in the United States that garner massive audiences, and the remaining news content emanates from a hodgepodge of sources. Game journalism resides in this increasingly blurred platform-dependent environment that neither needs nor is inherently inclined to support traditional coverage. At the same time, like many of their institutional counterparts, game publications and writers increasingly rely on platforms and niche audiences to remain viable. These circumstances create opportunities for enthusiast game outlets to advance more serious reportage.

## The Game Publishing Landscape

The economic and occupational challenges rising from a changing media landscape altered the occupation and output of contemporary game journalists. Platforms

broke simple binaries between the enthusiast press and institutional organizations and the way each report about games. National newspapers no longer write solely about video game addiction and violence; enthusiast sites now include multiyear investigative pieces; and social media platforms have created a bottomless reservoir of both reviewers and critics. The democratization of news production and distribution upends the traditional role of game journalists as cultural intermediaries; they are no longer the only, let alone the primary, arbiters of taste. Indeed, written content in general has been superseded by other formats, in particular the explosion of videos on YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitch.<sup>7</sup> Scholars Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock categorized live streaming as “a new form of game reviewing” that disrupts the critical role of the reviewer in favor of being able to speak directly to audiences and showcase more gameplay.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to cultural criticism, video streaming and game reviews are perceived to be a perfect match.

That said, despite being most affected by new modes of coverage, enthusiast online outlets like *GameSpot* and *IGN* still rank among the top-visited websites in the world.<sup>9</sup> They retain many of the traditional enthusiast press’s trappings we described earlier, including the preview and review formats. The continued relevance of enthusiast sites, Johnson and Woodcock argue, does not mean that consumers are fixated on one type of content over the other. Instead, each serves a different purpose:

audiences rely on reviewers' expertise whereas they self-identify with streamers. Put differently, the former is about taste formation and legitimation; the latter serves as entertainment.

Along with streaming platforms, a bumper crop of novel online news organizations has risen to challenge the dominance of incumbent game magazines. One could consider them niche sites. *Inverse*, for instance, covers "geek" culture and reports on a wide variety of entertainment including comics, computer tech, and games (along with such topics as science and innovation). Others are decidedly game focused, such as *Kotaku*, *Polygon*, and the *Verge*, all of which also happen to be verticals of larger news media groups: *Kotaku* was part of Gawker Media during its heyday (and now exists under the G/O Media umbrella), and the others are owned by Vox Media. Propagated by websites such as *Critical Distance*, these newcomers claim to assess games with more "incisive, thought-provoking, and remarkable" coverage compared to incumbent enthusiast outlets.<sup>10</sup> Niche reporting also counterbalances the more indiscriminate coverage spawned by mainstream institutions. Some legacy publications, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, have long covered the business of games, and others, such as the *Guardian*, have a dedicated game section. The *Washington Post* notably introduced an entire vertical, Launcher, devoted to games and esports in 2019, and there is no shortage of permutations in between. Other mainstream outlets expect their science



or technology columnists to include this topic in their bailiwicks.

In summary, tectonic shifts in the media industries and the rise of platforms disrupted the traditional publishing ecosystem while blurring and displacing the roles held by both enthusiast and institutional news sites. Game information, ranging from serious reporting to entertaining playthroughs, can be garnered from a diffuse set of authorities. Although this profusion of outlets may allow audiences easier access to a wider variety of content, it complicates the role and self-perception of journalists, especially freelancers.<sup>11</sup> The latter category of occupational wanderers has become among some of the most impassioned voices of coverage and criticism. Therefore, before discussing the four archetypes of game journalists below, we first survey the role of freelancers—an occupational meta-category in which each of the four archetypes may fall.

## **Freelancing and Professional Insecurity**

Like many innovations at the heart of the gig economy, social media platforms left writers unmoored, jockeying between publishers for jobs. To be sure, Facebook, Google, and Apple did not start the casualization of work—freelancers have long been part and parcel of news production—but platformization certainly increased the ranks of those without full-time positions.<sup>12</sup> To

survive, freelancing game journalists don many hats, fighting for the medium's relevance at one organization while articulating game minutiae for another. They must modulate their authorial voices for distinctly different readers based on the frame and format in which they are writing. We discuss the economic precarity of freelancers in greater depth in chapter 5, but here we stress that they remain the economic backbone of game coverage. The hiring of full-time game writers would do much to legitimize the mainstream acceptance of the genre. Instead, prominent publications have dabbled with but ultimately retreated from funding permanent positions.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to having widely different orientations, abilities, and backgrounds, all of which directly color their writing, a lack of job security means freelancers are also destined to be inconsistently trained in professional norms and ethics. We have written elsewhere about the ongoing ambivalence among game writers about their vocation, which raises the persistent question of what type of writer they should be: a critic, a journalist, or a game reviewer?<sup>14</sup> Their indecision can be attributed to the occupational precarity that comes from instability; rather than finding cohesive benchmarks by which to practice their craft, writers remain in stylistic limbo, adjusting to contradictory demands and bouncing between regional, niche, and mainstream publications, all the while trying to build a portfolio that they can leverage for future employment. Because they hop from

gig to gig, the length and depth of work varies; some freelancers toil for months on a longstanding exposé while others scratch out a living from a steady stream of reviews and other forms of commentary, such as calling esports tournaments. Thus, freelancers fuel the ubiquity of game coverage even as their precarity strains the legitimacy of the medium and literacy among its audiences.

If such frustrations preoccupied authors, the editors we talked to affirmed freelancers' value. Former *Kotaku* writer Harper Jay MacIntyre observed, "What you see on smaller sites where budgets are actually very limited is an outsourcing to freelancers because they have particular areas of interest and very particular pitches that can be used for future articles." Freelancers' passion is a boon to publications because they can be assigned work that will "occupy the majority of their attention," MacIntyre added. Journalist and professor Evan Narcisse disclosed the specialized knowledge necessary for such a writer. He asked us to name five people who might know the "general design direction" of a game franchise, similar to the directors of major motion pictures, and added, "Unless you follow video game journalism and critique and conversations on a day-to-day basis, most people can't do that." Editors stated, however, that since they tend to hire freelancers on a "rotational basis," long-standing relationships are tenuous at best. This further damages how institutional reporters perceive game journalists, the latter of whom do not necessarily develop

connections, skills, and occupational ideologies through daily newsroom work. Thus, they cannot do the boundary work described in chapter 1. Instead, under the guise of alleged autonomy, freelancers spend hours hustling, networking, pitching, and relying on various platforms for exposure.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, they cannot afford to have defined boundaries if their livelihood is contingent on being hired on a job-by-job basis.

### Four Types of Contemporary Game Journalists

Contemporary game journalists' work falls along a broad spectrum of writing styles, genres, institutional affiliations, and occupational ideologies. Based primarily on the interviews conducted, we distinguish four types of game journalists: *entertainers*, who leverage sub-cultural game capital that historically has been accrued and disseminated via the enthusiast press; *enthusiast critics*, who have grown into their role as cultural intermediaries; *game beat reporters*, who employ institutional practices to cover game content; and *institutional journalists*, who work within the confines of legacy news organizations. These categories are ideal types that allow us to have a more granular conversation about the opportunities and challenges to the mainstreaming of games and their coverage. Since they are derived from journalists' observations, they may not reflect how audiences perceive writers.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, our

categorization provides a roadmap for how game journalists tend to traverse a tangled media ecosystem.

**Entertainers.** For audiences of a certain age, the notorious Felix “PewDiePie” Kjellberg needs no introduction. In 2013, with 15 million subscribers, Kjellberg became the most followed YouTuber in the world. He rose to fame through his quirky “Let’s Play” videos, in which he films his playthroughs of various video games, along with (off-)color commentary and jokes, to increasing levels of infamy.<sup>17</sup> Part preview, part review, Let’s Plays are heavily imbued with the sort of subcultural game capital we discussed in chapter 2.<sup>18</sup> Players like Kjellberg must navigate skillfully through any popular genre. He must make it look easy, all while ranting, giggling, yelling, chiding others, swearing, and making fun of himself.<sup>19</sup> The genre has propelled the celebrity of countless YouTube personalities: in 2019, four of the top ten highest-earning YouTubers each made over US\$10 million a year for playing and commenting on games.<sup>20</sup>

Entertainers like Kjellberg are personality-driven content creators who are watched primarily for fun, like any other influencer or lifestyle producer on YouTube, Twitch, or TikTok. And it is specifically YouTube that has prompted changes in game journalism over the last decade, according to our interviewees. Game reporter Jason Schreier (most recently of *Bloomberg*) insisted that it was the platform’s popularity that contributed to “the rise of [game] publishers trying to control their own

messages and putting out their own video and blogs. As a result of that, you've seen a lot of game sites that didn't keep up and at times struggle." Game writer and *New Yorker* contributor Simon Parkin stated it was "incredibly useful for video game publishers because now they can use YouTubers to speak directly to audiences and mediate access to trailers and information . . ." Clearly, amateur content produced by YouTube entertainers—and often endorsed by the industry—has shaken enthusiast publications, prompting Parkin to ask, "When so much of the role that traditionally the game press, both mainstream and specialist, had is now being performed by YouTubers, what do people see as the role of video game coverage?"

One thing is certain: advertising-driven platforms like YouTube incentivize entertainers to directly connect with audiences. Akin to "relational labor" in the music industry—the continuous work of musicians to connect with their audiences—"entrepreneurial journalism" is demonstrative of how entertainers' work and living become linked to incessant self-promotion.<sup>21</sup> It is up to individuals to amass an audience and gain access to game content without the institutional backing of news organizations. First and foremost, this necessitates yoking themselves to an industry that still parsimoniously doles out favors. For entertainers, much the same as their enthusiast press predecessors, receiving promotional material or early access to a game is not only a major perk but a professional necessity; online

influencers walk a tightrope between relatability and “authentically” appraising games all while coordinating with the industries that make them.<sup>22</sup>

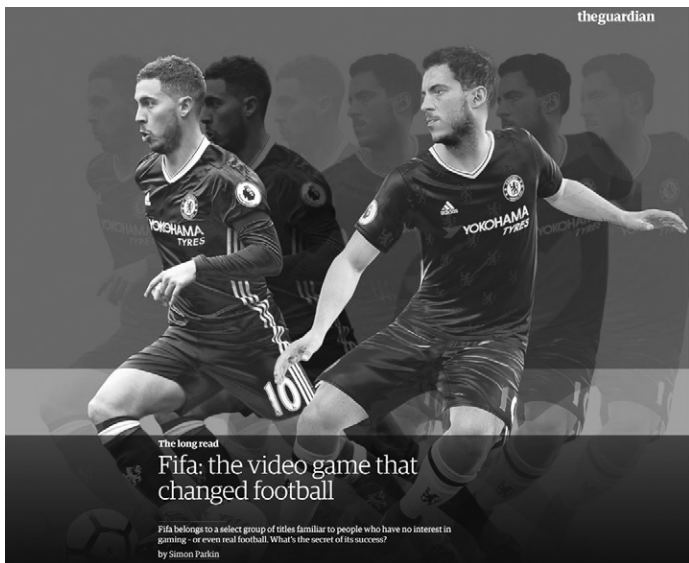
To enhance their authenticity, entertainers lean into rather than away from audiences, who socially and economically invest in them by subscribing to their channels, clicking on embedded advertisements, and so on. Entertainer commentary is consequently peppered with lingo, jokes, and memes from game culture. Games are praised or panned based on conventional rubrics of playability, and entertainers showcase their fluency with the medium by literally playing through games in response to their audiences. The growth of live streaming, helped in part by the game-focused platform Twitch, allows all of this to occur in real time alongside a barrage of criticism from vocal gamers. We saw the impact of such scrutiny on journalists such as Dean Takahashi in chapter 3, where audiences had an expectation of adequate, if not exceptional, gameplay.

When evaluating their impact on the mainstreaming of game coverage, entertainers clearly contribute to its ubiquity. Live streaming and Let’s Play videos have become a go-to form of entertainment: over 63 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds watch regularly.<sup>23</sup> With gaming being the focus of a significant amount of streaming content, these numbers suggest that entertainers are certainly contributing to games’ mainstream acceptance. It has yet to be seen, however, whether they are able to boost game literacy. Likewise, we have seen

little indication that entertainers enhance the medium's legitimacy. Much of their content is off the radar, incomprehensible, and perhaps even repugnant to older generations. Generally, entertainers show little appetite to seek out such audiences, partly because they are reliant on and crave legitimacy from their followers and subscribers—not parents, pundits, or politicians. Thus, entertainers still depend heavily on subcultural practices, language, and tropes that tend to be off-putting or impenetrable to outsiders. In other words, entertainers remain gamers par excellence.

**Enthusiast critics.** Although Simon Parkin spent most of his career as a freelancer, he is an inveterate game critic and reporter who has authored pieces for such institutions as the *New Yorker*, the *Guardian*, and *Eurogamer*. In his work, Parkin aims to bring traditional storytelling elements to broader audiences. For example, his reason to pen a longform essay (figure 4.1) about the juggernaut series *FIFA* for the *Guardian's* “Long Reads” section was: “You can catch everyone who’s interested in video game football and everyone who’s interested in football.” Expansively surveying the game’s history, Parkin’s story contains everything from a sweeping overview of the game’s impact on professional soccer to a deeply personal narrative of the franchise developer Jan Tian’s travails to get home to see his dying father. The result was a feature that “did really, really well” on a mainstream news site, timed as it was with the annual





**Figure 4.1**

Enthusiast critic Simon Parkin’s feature story on the *FIFA* soccer game series for the *Guardian* is for those with “no interest in gaming.” Source: Simon Parkin, “Fifa: The Video Game That Changed Football,” *Guardian*, December 21, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/21/fifa-video-game-changed-football>.

release of the new *FIFA* installment around Christmas 2016. What is striking about the article is how carefully and transparently Parkin moves between stories of people (developers, publishers, and players), industry, and gameplay. Being acutely aware of the *Guardian*’s potential audience, his language is evocative even when describing the technical side of the game: “Most years, [*FIFA*] swings between a more simulation-based approach—with keenly realistic physics that generally

allow for fewer goals—and a more impressionistic, playful take, in which it is easier to score screamers from 30 yards, and matches can finish with double-digit scores.”<sup>24</sup> This is not a preview for a limited gamer public but rather one directed at the masses.

The role of enthusiast critics is decidedly different from entertainers, with the former’s work significantly bolstering both the legitimacy *and* literacy of video games within public discourse. Some critics now foster increasingly inclusive language that purposely targets broader audiences. Further, they create and adhere to a set of common norms at a personal and editorial level. Unfortunately, however, these types of enthusiast critics are an elite community composed of writers possessing the occupational standing to devote their time to the long-form writing that comprises informed cultural criticism. Seen in this light, writers like Parkin are representative of the enthusiast critic’s maturation.

The growth of freelancing and independent news platforms has allowed for more meaningful takes on games because new outlets needed to distinguish their coverage from incumbent institutions. No longer forced to abide by the rubrics of game reviews, enthusiast critics are freer to pursue more diverse subject matter. At the same time, however, their target audience still tends to be players, with the most detailed essays appearing in niche rather than mainstream outlets. Only a few writers straddle both worlds. Editors and writers noted the evolution and increased independence of coverage.

“Not every outlet should cover gaming,” said one writer via email, adding hopefully, “I think it’s starting to be taken more seriously and a lot of progress has been made on that front in recent years.” They recognized that this shift meant striking a balance for their audiences and a potential for greater readership, as noted by Harper Jay MacIntyre: “You do get that tension between people who just want to sit down after a day’s work, crack open a beer, and play *Call of Duty* or whatever. Then you have people who want to see games as a cultural institution or artistic medium.”

In this context, editors encourage enthusiast critics to “approach things with a sense of empathy for how games are made, how they’re played, and who plays them,” as *Polygon* cofounder Chris Plante put it, adding, “we try to create a site that . . . feels accessible, whether that is to the most hardcore game developer, or my mother trying to find out what she should get me for Christmas, or my grandmother who just likes to play video games.” Editors may make basic assumptions of readers’ game literacy, such as knowing what a first-person shooter is, but they have indicated a wish to broaden rather than shrink their readership. The wider audience was also reflected in Schreier’s perspective: “I see my role as trying to entertain people, trying to inform people, trying to get people stories they won’t be able to read otherwise.” This desire for inclusivity was not solely about the bottom line but was also a political

decision. A few interviewees confessed to amending their missions post-Gamergate. Plante discussed how he thought it was important to structurally reassess “from the ground up” game journalism’s voice and orientation. It also manifested in setting more standards and writing codes of conduct for critics, something we will touch upon in the next chapter. “When it comes to other ethical decisions,” MacIntyre attested while working at their former employer *Kotaku*, “we disclose and we are transparent about anything that might even perceptually affect how people see our coverage.”

These comments reveal the tension between functioning as a traditional cultural intermediary and applying a game critic’s subcultural norms. While couching their work in the ability to inform audiences, critics acknowledge the entertainment value of their writing to gamers. Thus, enthusiast critics are very much at the vanguard of buttressing a common literacy as well as the legitimacy of games. They crisscross gaming subcultures and the mainstream, finding individual stories, such as Parkin’s, to bring these disparate cultures together. It is precisely this fluidity, however, that causes enthusiast critics to be a hindrance to ubiquitous game coverage; as freelancers, they ultimately must attune their work for whatever platform they are writing, which makes writers like Parkin, who have the freedom and resumé to produce work for the world’s biggest mainstream news sites, even more rare.

**Game beat reporters.** In our interviews in 2017, one writer was mentioned repeatedly as an exemplar of change: Cecilia D’Anastasio.<sup>25</sup> At that time, her peers indicated that she epitomized the role of a game beat reporter—a writer who covers a single game or game subject for a long period of time, cultivating knowledge and sources with the intent of having a steady stream of articles relating to that beat. Known then as *Kotaku*’s “cyber sleuth,” she went on to cover games for *Wired* before joining *Bloomberg Technology*.<sup>26</sup> During this period, D’Anastasio was most recognized for her long-standing work on game developers. Her essay for *Kotaku* on the sexist culture at Riot Games—the developer of the popular online game *League of Legends*—shook the industry, instigating employee strikes, lawsuits, an investigation by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, and, ultimately, improvements made by the company in reaction to the stories.<sup>27</sup> Not only was the article on a notoriously closed industry well researched and reported, but D’Anastasio followed up regularly after initial publication, filing updates, checking in with anonymous sources and counterbalancing company statements with employees’ opinions and perspectives. This type of reportage has been atypical, to say the least. “The recent Riot investigation was excellent,” one interviewee noted. “That’s because [*Kotaku*] had someone who could spend six months doing it. [In] a mainstream publication, that’s never going to happen.”

Similar to enthusiast critics, *Kotaku's* investigative reporters occupy an incredibly exclusive table. Jason Schreier also sits among them; he is a former editor at the website, a journalist at *Bloomberg News*, and author of two popular books on the historically underreported subjects of game development and labor.<sup>28</sup> Game beat reporters like these follow franchises, companies, and games, particularly as the industry's business models moved from one-time purchases to ongoing services. Furthermore, they are employed by mainstream outlets and have made the medium itself a beat. We emphasize the notion of a "beat" because reporters follow the rigors of the job: garner sources, spot and break the next best story, maintain journalism's watchdog function, and hold those in power accountable.<sup>29</sup> The attitude of this category of writers is markedly closer to traditional journalists: "Journalistic integrity, that's what it comes down to," proclaimed one esports reporter. "You see a story and you need to present, even if it's not an argument, you need to balance so you're not just writing press releases." The upshot is a slew of articles not usually seen in enthusiast magazines or mainstream newspapers in terms of content and style. Rather than reviews, previews, or industry promotions, such work increasingly resembles Schreier's probes, including deep dives into the working conditions of Iranian game developers or the intrigues of the latest season of an esports competition such as the Overwatch League.<sup>30</sup>

The growth of game beat reporting has been driven in part by the enthusiast press's post-Gamergate overhaul. One game writer for a large enthusiast outlet stated that their employer decided "to stop focusing on games as products and start writing about them as essential cultural phenomena." Now working for more institutional outlets, this individual sees their writing as an effort to "see games as part of culture and therefore see them as part of the context of what's going on in the rest of the world as well." At enthusiast outlets, MacIntyre described "embedded writers" who wrote exclusively about "the developing community" around specific games, such as *Grand Theft Auto Online*. This shift in perspective took advantage of news outlets' strengths while expanding their writers' roles. In mainstream newsrooms that boast dedicated game beat reporters, striking a balance between traditional journalistic boundaries and gamers' subcultural norms is particularly difficult. Reporters' responsibilities entailed not only empathizing "with most people who play games—that is, people who have jobs, lives, families, and [are] able to sit there and play 300 hours of games a month," but also building trust between that group and more mainstream editors. As one writer/editor professed: "My boss doesn't know anything about games." It is both noteworthy and indicative of a clear shift toward cultural legitimacy that beat game reportage turns toward (rather than away from) journalistic norms.

Whether they are developing relationships for hard-hitting investigative pieces or simply focusing on games holistically, beat reporters elevate games beyond their entertainment value. Their stories expose the chicanery of industry politics, player experiences, and even the quotidian activities that surround digital play. This is not to say that beat reporters necessarily add to a common literacy. Like many other beat writers, it is their job to know characters and particulars that other people do not—just ask a local political reporter about community board meetings and you will get an earful. Game beat reporters must discern the information most relevant to a wider audience and reveal impropriety to instigate change. As with many beats across the United States, game beat reporters are few and far between. Sustaining their work on a budget is difficult. Ultimately, only a handful of prosperous outlets can dedicate so much time to a single game or subject while also dealing with potential backlash from avid fans.

**Institutional journalists.** In March 2020, as countless families were forced to shelter at home due to COVID's global spread, institutional newsmakers noticed the success of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Released at the start of the pandemic, the game was chock full of wholesome activities, from socializing on friends' islands to maintaining a home. A mixture of glee and surprise accompanied articles, which suggested, with almost breathless



wonder, that games might be *helpful* during the pandemic, and that parents should join their children in socializing online through gameplay.<sup>31</sup> Video games, along with other screens, could take on new importance during a period of social distancing.

Such coverage is hardly unique to institutional outlets. Each year, a game or two will cause a media sensation. When a game like *Pokémon Go* becomes an overnight phenomenon with millions of players crowding spaces (or worse), its story may suddenly fall within the bounds of traditional journalism. This may also explain why new installments of evergreen franchises such as *FIFA* (est. 1993) and *Call of Duty* (est. 2003) are largely ignored by the mainstream press; what else is there to comment on besides slightly improved graphics or gameplay?

In truth, game news often lies at the fringes of many of these institutions—not the center of an exclusive beat, but either lumped in with other reporting on business, science, and technology or tied to larger societal issues. They report on games only when a study comes out about video games and mental health; the question of games inciting violence is inevitably revisited after a school shooting; or the release of a new console draws attention from the tech section of institutional news sites. Thus, there is an abundance of publishers with an interest in games, but that interest and subsequent coverage is hardly consistent from outlet to outlet.

Institutional journalists, by contrast to their niche counterparts, tend to fall back on tried-and-true utopian

and dystopian frames to characterize gameplay and ignore the cultural phenomena touted by game beat reporters, an attitude that is intimately connected to reader expectations.<sup>32</sup> “I can’t have a slant,” said one reporter. “I can’t be an advocate for games and I cannot be against them either.” They went on to describe how their reporting often had to have an angle: maybe educational benefits, or a sports association; even the World Health Organization’s classification of a gaming disorder was cited. “If it’s not hitting a mainstream audience, then I am not going to even pick up on it,” former *Daily Beast* science editor Tanya Basu offered, later on stating that, for example, “a lot of tech addiction [stories] tend to do well.” A business writer’s overall pitch was that “this is a very big business, and it is worth paying attention to,” but it was not quite as big as some other sectors that were on his plate. He added that the maturing of the industry, however, had caused a “bit of a mainstreaming effect.” Thus, for each of these reporters, the choice of games was based on the perceived impact on the broadest possible audience, and a story lacking wide appeal could just as easily be nixed for another, more prominent topic.

As a result of this mix of indifference and preconceptions, institutional journalists themselves are stigmatized by those working in the game industry; one writer observed, “I have found that some people don’t want to talk to me because I work for a big paper . . . Nobody thinks to give me tips.” Mainstream reporters

remain in a bubble, rehashing old arguments that much of the gaming media landscape moved on from long ago and lacking the ability to exert cultural influence in the vein of their enthusiast counterparts. For institutional reporters, professional boundaries can be surprisingly restrictive, yet their functions and impact are not minor: one of their cited goals is to introduce and show new audiences that gaming is an artistic entertainment medium. One editor at a legacy news outlet urged their game reviewers to evaluate games with respect to other media: “Is this as good as *Breaking Bad*? Should I play this game instead of going to this concert?” They added, “There’s still a lot of people who don’t know much about games . . . those people shouldn’t be scoffed at.” Such questions reinforce the traditional gatekeeping role of the journalist as a trusty intermediary to explain what makes games worthwhile to the broadest readership, thus perpetuating their public service role.

Across demographics, there is little question that institutional journalists hold the key to legitimation and being a ubiquitous source of game coverage. The imprimatur of major news outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* or *USA Today* can heavily impact how games are perceived in the public imagination.<sup>33</sup> Because they are bound within more traditional newsrooms, however, this category of writers supplies only a limited common literacy for games, relying on old frames rather than

fostering new ones. For these writers, games remain an anecdotal rather than integral part of their daily work.

## **Many Streams Flowing in a Single Direction**

Why, with such a profusion and variety of coverage, do even the most thoughtful critics consider the subject of games unsuitable for the front pages of major newspapers? For us, this chapter provides the start of an answer: despite the narrow focus of critics, game coverage is more diverse than ever before, with writers pushing the ubiquity, legitimacy, and literacy of gaming in ways that were previously inconceivable. Furthermore, editors are making efforts to both broaden and deepen coverage across a wide spectrum of outlets. At the same time, however, inherent tensions persist throughout the ecosystem in which journalists work. Most striking, writers are perpetually strapped for cash. We cannot emphasize enough the economic adversity they face as freelancers. Moreover, their precarity extends to ideology; according to our interviewees, game journalists often lack a clear path or vision as to what they are writing about. Harper Jay MacIntyre proposed that games moved from a child's toy to an "artistic medium" in the twenty-first century, and that "the tension between their role as consumer good and actual art hasn't been something that enthusiasts have really been able to reconcile yet,

which means that I think it is harder at a mainstream website to push criticism.” They echoed the ongoing discomfort game journalists feel about their position as cultural intermediaries. Other studies note game journalists’ ongoing “ideology of anxiety” about their craft, which they describe as “the softest of the soft news.”<sup>34</sup> Yet how could they have an unambiguous path when the journalistic landscape has also morphed, presenting a multitude of platforms and viewpoints that compete with their own for legitimacy?<sup>35</sup>

Institutional journalism and art criticism itself is said to be in perpetual economic crisis. There may be a few widely read national news publications, such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, but beyond these, players seem to inevitably turn to the enthusiast press or niche outlets that validate their own prerogatives, especially when the vocabulary and focus of the institutional press seems simplistic or generic by comparison. Indeed, the shifting sands of the news ecosystem is matched by the game industry’s transformation. It was only recently that game publishers “started to embrace games as living things, games as service,” according to MacIntyre, who further remarked, “but even then, that [view is] not long compared to what you get from football, right?” Another writer agreed that treating games more like “a service rather than a product just shipping out” required journalists to pay more attention than they once had. As the game industry keeps evolving, it refuses to settle upon clear norms and values, while

constantly adapting its business models, technologies, forms, and formats. This mercuriality reflects the playfulness of the medium itself, which is also subject to constant experimentation and manipulation. But a lack of standards and shared vocabulary does not at all ease journalists' professional paths. Instead, it creates the perspectives we discussed at the beginning of the chapter: no matter how old they are, games remain ripe for constant reinterpretation by the next generation.



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