

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

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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

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Conclusion: Mainstream Is a Verb

Let us return to the questions with which we began this book: Do games need to be mainstream? Are they already? Industry professionals, journalists, critics, scholars, and others with vested interests unequivocally answer the first question “yes!” They substantiate our view that only through being mainstream can the culturally constructed constitutive ambivalences marking game culture be resolved. We disagree, however, with the notion that mainstreaming solely hinges on broader cultural acceptance, a logic that many peers and interviewees seem to internalize. For others, it is satisfactory for games to remain a niche interest for select communities to have a somewhat common framework and vocabulary to discuss and critique them. Mainstreaming should neither sacrifice ubiquity nor stifle journalists’ efforts to help explain why play is meaningful and legitimate.

Regarding the second question, for some it is redundant: games are already mainstream. As part of an industry panel, game journalist Dean Takahashi argued that

games “of course, are already mainstream, with titles like *Grand Theft Auto V* selling 90 million units and generating \$6 billion in revenue.”¹ Takahashi, in step with many colleagues, invoked the game industry’s profound economic impact. Along with games’ increased visibility in everyday life, this offers compelling evidence. Billions of dollars may signal ubiquity, even maturity, but economics do not paint the full picture. Are games akin to watching movies, or closer to gambling and adult entertainment? We cannot deny the significant financial footprint of the last two industries, but rarely do they receive consistent and meaningful mainstream coverage on their own terms. And it is not too much of a stretch to argue that porn, gambling, and games are all still perceived as deviant compared to other entertainment formats. The media scholar Ian Bogost, ever the provocateur, insists that “games are still a niche tricked by the echo chamber of internal success into thinking that they are approaching mainstream.”²

Bogost’s assertion coincides with our findings. In this book, we identified the widespread and deep influence of the game industry, essential for access, mediation, and a source of funding via advertisement. Historically, publishers shaped the nature of game coverage, and their impact remains largely unchanged in today’s journalism landscape. If anything, the rise of streamers, creators, and entertainers, and their reliance on game makers and subcultural norms for success, perpetuates the insulation of public communication about games.

Twitch entertainers, for instance, even though they are not traditional reporters or even members of the enthusiast press, deal with many toxic issues ingrained in video game media while at the same time perpetuating the insular language surrounding gameplay.³

We also identified the enduring, critical role of journalists as cultural intermediaries who articulate mainstream appeal. That said, game publishers, the public, and even writers themselves remain ambivalent about the profession's role. Games may be played more than ever, but they are still treated as foreign entities without a common vocabulary, and coverage lacks consistent institutional support, even among well-funded enthusiast outlets. This presents a true conundrum: journalists take their work—the dissemination of news—seriously, and that attitude often seems incompatible with or antithetical to the frivolity and fun that are associated with digital play. Games simply seem to be too trite for the occupational ideology of traditional journalists, whose writing tends to be anything but playful.

In fact, other scholars have also observed the incompatibility between games and newsmakers.⁴ In her critique of using “games” as a metaphor to describe interactive journalistic formats, the communications professor Sybil Nolan states that for skeptics, “news packaged like a game distracts the audience and keeps them away from more real communication with journalists.”⁵ It is precisely the intrinsic malleability and ambiguity of play that inhibit reporters' efforts to strive

toward a more universal and objective “truth.” Inherent issues such as these can only cause journalists further doubt as they dive into a subject that resists the very values that sustain their professional identities. Unfortunately, our results do not resolve these dilemmas. Instead, we find that game journalists sometimes meet and sometimes fall short of the challenges associated with advancing the standards for discourse about the medium. In many ways, our ambivalent position aligns with game journalists themselves, who occupy a professional field typified by occupational uncertainty, different vested interests, and fractured communities, all of which make it difficult to arrive at any easy or clear-cut conclusions.

We still want to offer at least a few pragmatic prescriptions for mainstreaming games in this chapter. To do so, we first provide some grounded yet aspirational solutions to the endemic problems presented in the book. Second, we confront our own sense of skepticism to imagine a future of game journalism in which, despite their ubiquity and economic might, games do not “grow up” or reach the mainstream. When we turn to the implications of our findings, this deviation from the mainstream hardly seems abnormal. Instead, the story of game journalism—particularly in the context of North American reportage—can be instructive for understanding and combating broader trends in a fragmented and niche media environment.

Practical Solutions for Game Journalism's Future

At the most elemental level, the way games are covered in terms of factors such as style and story assignments must advance along with the industry. As the industry continues to diversify the content it creates, game journalists should do the same with their reporting. Coverage will vary, sometimes resembling sports reportage and other times film criticism, and this inconsistent approach will continue to fuel game journalists' ambivalence about their jobs. They find themselves in an inscrutable situation: do they fall back on the sub-cultural norms of yesteryear, or forge ahead into the unknown? At the extremes, we find reporters who choose the former: entertainers, who tailor their work to gamers, and institutional journalists, who draw and observe strict ideological and occupational boundaries around the field. It is in the middle of the spectrum, however, where we find more nuanced and provocative forms of writing that unfortunately have neither the visibility nor the financial or occupational support to set the norms or define the genre that is game journalism.

Consequently, many avenues for game reporting appear paradoxical. The medium creeps into all forms of writing, from deep and personal reviews to hard hitting exposés to binge-worthy live streams and YouTube videos—all without a cohesive viewpoint. Dan Golding points to the murky gray areas that persist in the

contemporary game writing environment as the driving factor behind this “decentralised and de-institutionalised” profession and its “poor levels of knowledge transference between established and emerging writers.”⁶ There may very well be areas of growth, maturity, and occupational diversity—we all frequently stumble upon thoughtful game stories from our most trusted news source—but the field lacks a solid, long-term foundation for coverage, thereby relegating the subject of games to the periphery of mainstream media. So, what are the potential solutions to smooth out this volatile situation? We offer six broad directives for writers and editors to consider.

First, game journalists should stop vacillating and instead steer themselves away from the position of the passionate expert and toward becoming a “journalist.” The role of expert, which is so convenient to the industry, has use for entertainment purposes. There is little doubt that live streamers and content creators reinforce the former position. By doing so, entertainers directly challenge traditional publications and their place within the industry. Although they may cater to fans, antagonists such as PewDiePie are deemed problematic because they embrace their subcultural status. Conversely, game writers can tap into time-honored journalistic and critical traditions—from beat reporting, which thrives in traditional papers, to arts critics who still exert influence in magazines—by undertaking serious investigations into and interrogations of the

industry, especially with regard to business models and labor abuses.

What particularly heartens us is mainstream and enthusiast outlets' growing focus on play and virtual communities. When considering how game coverage has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began, we found that writers were concentrating less on specific platforms and more on the people that use them, an approach that often requires deep embedding.⁷ When games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Minecraft*, and *Roblox* service hundreds of thousands of players daily and provide a bevy of tasks to complete and ways to play, it makes sense to emulate the style of on-the-street reporting. Crucially, this method of reporting can extend beyond individual titles.

Subtle shifts in professional orientation coincide with an equally challenging and ambitious second recommendation—in addition to taking a firm position on the spectrum between entertainer and journalist, we recommend that writers utilize the strengths of their profession to tell stories about games instead of seizing on meaningless buzzwords or minutiae such as graphic fidelity and distracting “technobabble,” all of which typified writing by the early enthusiast press.⁸ Whether a simple puzzle game or an intricate open-world RPG, games vary so wildly that concerns about the intricacies of specific franchises are frankly unimportant. Journalists should instead write about all facets of play. In a person-centered profession that cultivates sources,

elicits quotes, and so on, individual titles may be less materially important for mainstreaming than a focus on the messiness of meaning making.⁹ We ultimately think audiences can learn to (and often already do) read between the lines of gameplay to reach deeper meaning.

A move toward play-centered writing in practice means a further codification and communication of ethical and occupational norms by publications themselves, which brings us to our third and perhaps most practical recommendation: clearly broadcasting journalistic standards. We and other scholars have remarked how this sort of ethical transparency is assumed and internalized by many writers.¹⁰ Editors' and writers' understanding of these rules, however, will always differ from one publication to another. As outlets expand their ethical guidelines, it is vital that they communicate requirements to writers, and that includes incorporating them into the onboarding and management of freelance staff. Closing the gap between editorial and freelance assumptions about ethics is a necessary step for building a bulwark against industry influence. It is publications with deeper pockets who can lead the way in standardizing such norms across game coverage.

Transparency in standardization can extend to occupational norms as well, which brings us to our fourth recommendation. Having more permanent and structured employment can only benefit game coverage as the medium's popularity expands. One of the most persistent concerns among our interviewees was the

precarity of freelancing, which, as we wrote in chapters 4 and 5, was often a source of frustration. How can writers hone their craft and proceed with their jobs when they must constantly hustle for their next paycheck? This economic instability has often restricted game journalism to the domain of die-hard fans who were already obsessed with games; alternatively, it was viewed simply as a young person's job, something they could do before starting a family and pursuing a "real," sustainable career. This situation is endemic to what the game researcher Ergin Bulut describes as the "ludopolitics" of the industry, which fosters an expectation that those involved will devote time to their work solely on the basis of their passion for gaming.¹¹

However rare, the hiring of full-time reporters to exclusively follow games, as organizations such as the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* have done, fulfills deep-rooted desires for labor security. Ludopolitics led to calls for unionization by developers, and similar collective action needs to be taken by game journalists. Whether it is instigated by a freelancers' union or the staff union at a particular publication, or by a professional cohort similar to the Television Critics Association mentioned in the previous chapter, the fight for occupational norms in addition to standardized pay and benefits will ideally pave the way for consistent coverage. We realize that this solution is a tall order in the current journalistic environment of consolidation and downsizing. It arguably even necessitates a

reconceptualization of newsrooms, an issue beyond the purview of this book. There are, however, minor victories worth noting, including the unionization of workers at G/O Media (owner of *Kotaku*), who went on strike to fight for salary minimums, parental leave, and annual raises, among other benefits.¹² Hard-won accomplishments may not solve industry-wide problems, as game reporter Jason Schreier acknowledged in his departure from *Kotaku* for *Bloomberg News*,¹³ but it would be irresponsible of us to not endorse this slow and steady change, however aspirational it may be.

Fifth, we recommend not pigeonholing those who cover games. Fears about institutional journalists parachuting into stories are certainly understandable, but we view the continued cross-pollination as beneficial. For instance, Kellen Browning—a moderate outsider to the enthusiast press—has leveraged the *New York Times*'s financial support and reputation for high-quality reporting to produce deep investigative pieces on Twitch, Discord, and specific game franchises for the paper. Likewise, the hiring of former ESPN reporter Jacob Wolf (among others) expanded the scope of *DotEsports*'s coverage, making it a regular source for happenings in competitive gaming even as ESPN's esports division shuttered.

Finally, along with rethinking who should cover games, game journalists need to reconsider what qualifies as a “real” game or “legitimate” play. Rather than a topic relegated solely to arts or entertainment, writers can mimic the practices and ideologies of their lifestyle and sports counterparts. Ideally, this means that writers

would not separate content from issues of labor and industry, but would also take care not to treat gamers as an exceptional culture. Breaking down the boundaries between various modes of play is increasingly necessary to illustrate how our relationship to games is changing. Big-budget games such as *Elden Ring* and solo experimental endeavors such as the puzzle game *Wordle* can both be blockbuster hits and therefore warrant significant coverage. In practice, these two types of games—not to mention those described as mobile or casual—tend to be artificially segregated from each other. Ultimately, it should be recognized that the avid *Pokémon Go* fan, the hardcore *Call of Duty* enthusiast, and the board game player excited over an expansion of *Wingspan*, all occupy similar rather than rarefied terrain.

In the end, these recommendations promote more diverse coverage and emphasize the ubiquity, legitimacy, and literacy of games in everyday life. It is a sentiment that many stalwarts in the profession seem to share. What, then, are the consequences of these proposed changes, and what might the future of game journalism look like?

Unhappily Ever After? Games Are “All Grown Up,” but Forever Niche

When we began this research in earnest over five years ago, our conversation quickly turned to what game

journalism might look like in the years ahead. With Gamergate and similar events still fresh in the rearview mirror, we, much the same as our interviewees, wrestled with the profession's destiny: luminaries we deeply respected were abandoning the industry even as games were receiving more coverage than ever before.

As our research came to an end, the horizon of serious game journalism started to crystallize into two distinct trajectories. On the optimistic side, we glimpsed the possibility of a future where game journalism had, in fact, "grown up." Another generation of players is coming of age. The industry continues to increase in size and prosperity. The platform-dependent and fractured journalistic environment described in chapter 4 has, in its own way, fueled the growth of serious game coverage. From this optimistic viewpoint, game journalism's prospects are seemingly bright, boasting more legitimate content, writers, and professional standards. The medium could find some sense of normalcy as it resides within the boundaries of institutional journalism, either in lifestyle sections or at the core of the newsroom.

The implication of this glass-half-full line of thinking is that if game journalists just keep their heads down and ply their craft, writers will slowly and surely develop a more common literacy and, by virtue of their coverage, legitimacy. This rosier picture also suggests that audiences will come to appreciate traditional cultural intermediaries and their form of criticism over—or at least in addition to—the entertainment promoted

by creators on YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok. Coupling criticism and entertainment would provide fans with a holistic understanding of meaningful play. Even more important, game publishers would be more respectful of and responsive to journalists by appealing to them as a vital force in the legitimation of the medium. Much as movie critics did with cinema, game journalists could then alter gaming's cultural hierarchy, leaving its sub-cultural roots behind to engage in the fraught work of advancing games as a legitimate form of art. Taking a cue from Hollywood's successful move toward the mainstream, the game industry could strengthen its ties with academia beyond game design programs; encourage various forms of "extracommercial" assessment, such as industry-independent festivals and awards; or fund more "prestige productions," which may not be financially lucrative in the short term but could broaden the potential pool of players in the long run.¹⁴

As we finished our first draft of the manuscript, however, we found ourselves gravitating to the other, less auspicious ending: one in which games never reach mainstream acceptance. They may be (or already are) ubiquitous, but literacy and legitimacy remain elusive. In fact, games' ambiguities—their complexity, myriad types of play, genres, cultures, and even methods of monetization—are difficult to articulate to the public. And if there is no common literacy for gameplay, why would there be for game journalism? Further, the niche status of games continues to work to the advantage of

publishers and platform providers who reap the lucrative rewards of a core audience that sustains them. Game developers and readers also do not uniformly value those cultural intermediaries who are explicit about their progressive politics.

This less promising future suggests that game journalists must simply accept the medium's subcultural status. Enduring as "niche" would hardly be strange. We already mentioned adult entertainment and gambling, but we could include comic books, toys, or even YouTube streaming, none of which are deemed fully legitimate forms of entertainment. Nor do they have (for journalists, at least) a common literacy despite their ubiquity and economic success.

Even if we embrace games' subcultural status, we cannot deny the size and scope of the game industry. Its economic dimension alone deserves "mainstream" treatment, even if only to hold powerful actors accountable the way we would any other corporate behemoth. Similarly, the industry is well connected, if not fully integrated, with some of the most prominent companies and ventures in the world, including tech giants such as Apple, Microsoft, and Sony.¹⁵ Games lead the media industries in terms of exploring novel business models, production tools, and techniques.¹⁶ Production software, such as the game engine Unity, is increasingly used for other purposes, from auto design to virtual reality, implanting game ideologies and practices into a diverse array of industries.¹⁷ These connections, however, come

with their own set of problems. Blockbuster publishers have a contentious history of violating labor rights, particularly in their normalization of “crunch” time, which demands that employees work well beyond regular business hours to bring a product to market by the deadline, and similar forms of ludopolitics mentioned previously.¹⁸ Topics such as these are worthy of scrutiny by journalistic institutions. It is up to reporters and critics of all stripes to fight for cultural relevance and acceptance, as has happened with television and film.

And there lies the predicament in our more pessimistic outlook. Without journalistic investment or fan and industry buy-in, the possibility of games “growing up” seems incredibly difficult to achieve, despite the aspirations of our interviewees. The mainstreaming of games is frustratingly contradictory for several reasons. Some are cultural; the history and industry that exist around games and their exclusionary tactics simply cannot be erased. In the same way that US filmmaking is inextricably linked with Hollywood, or that high art is associated with Picasso and Monet, games have developed within a very specific set of norms and ideologies, which are likely to persist over time. In other words, after decades of moving toward more niche audiences and specific types of gameplay, there is a deep bed of cultural knowledge about games that will continue to impact their literacy and legitimacy. Another problem concerns play, which is exclusive, contingent, and messy. Almost any game—even analog classics, such as

chess or poker—demands specialized knowledge and is dependent on cultural norms that create a steep learning curve for outsiders. We might even posit that it is precisely the complications of play that make it difficult for any writer to explain the nuances between different titles and genres, even when ignoring their cultural, political, and economic trappings. Ultimately, this speaks to the idea that games and play tend toward smaller groups and don't have the "mainstream" appeal of other forms of mass media.

Is Anything Mainstream?

We just gloomily surmised why games will never be mainstream. Yet, how unusual is their coverage in our increasingly polarized media environment? The journalistic landscape we described in chapter 4 is hardly unique to gaming; in general, newsmakers vie with entertainers, social media, streamers, and niche sites for clicks and dollars. Game studies scholars have acknowledged that historically they have tended to cordon off their subject matter as exceptional.¹⁹ Our media and entertainment, however, are increasingly reliant on games and their narrower approach to culture, audience, and economy, which leads to ever fewer forms of media being treated as mainstream phenomena.

From a journalistic perspective, perceptions of audience and the occupation itself deepen divides. After all,

since the popularization of the World Wide Web, there have been over two decades of debate around the erosion of the public sphere into multiple conflicting publics.²⁰ Atomization is not always negative; it can give rise to diasporic and marginalized voices. It can also cause users to “take sides” when it comes to their media consumption. Increasingly, platforms seem to cater to this reality; apps such as Twitch serve individual streamers and their followers, thereby playing host to niche news producers located at the extreme political right and left, among other polarizing online figures.²¹ From “filter bubbles” and echo chambers to modes of distribution, platform dependency tends to push audiences to the margins.

Newsmakers likewise concede that the readership for whom they write is shifting. Journalism scholar Jacob Nelson has observed the changes in how audiences are imagined in the contemporary moment, not as faceless masses but as customers whose wants must be satisfied. His work highlights the often combative, untrusting relationship that now exists between providers and consumers.²² Ironically, the United States is experiencing both the collapse of regional and local reporting and rising distrust in national outlets. Consequently, the process of mainstreaming is more questionable than ever.

A better understanding of game journalism can offer answers. If we are living at a time when nothing seems to be mainstream, then games fit right in! They function as a template for understanding not only how

mass media and affiliated audiences persist outside of the mainstream but also how such a situation can come to pass in the first place. As discussed in the first half of the book, the foundations of game journalism originate from the industry's specific intention to stray from broad appeal and instead cultivate an exclusive community around their emerging medium. This move toward exclusivity seems to resonate in the current media environment, where advertising dollars are targeted to ever smaller groups; the scandals surrounding Facebook's parent company Meta and how they grow, protect, and manipulate specific cohorts of users to retain that user-base on affiliated platforms eerily echo these choices.²³

Games are also paradigmatic for comprehending the key role that a specific brand of journalism practiced in North America plays in either limiting or fostering the process of mainstreaming.²⁴ It is important to remember that institutional publications helped give rise to the enthusiast press by treating games as mere child's play, whether rewarding or deviant, and it helps explain why magazines like the *New Yorker* still struggle with how to explain games. As we have suggested, the traditional "serious" nature of (US) journalism, with its focus on "objective" reporting and the profession's constant need to self-promote to remain viable, clashes with the medium's subjective and frivolous nature.²⁵ Thus, game journalism can help us see through the cracks in what bubbles up into mainstream status on the front pages of major news sites, especially when considering that such

topics as social media platforms and cryptocurrency may not adhere to the ideological bounds of the field.

Mainstream as a Verb, Not a Noun

To make sure we leave with a ray of hope, we can appreciate that even though game journalism may never be “ordinary,” very little is. In fact, as described in chapter 4, we live in a world of many streams. We can think of “mainstream” less as a noun and more as a verb—an action to be reckoned with and a force that journalists play a key part in directing. They can push for the ubiquity, literacy, and legitimacy of gaming and reroute the flow of media coverage, moving away from its more harmful elements and industry ties toward more unifying, diverse, and meaningful interpretations of play in contemporary society. Together with our colleagues, we recognize, however, that there are ongoing concerns about what qualifies as “mainstream” in a culture dominated by oligopolistic actors, hegemonic norms, and cultures built around the privileged few at the expense of marginalized others.²⁶ But journalists’ long-standing role as cultural intermediaries can connect games to diverse publics and show how they are played around the globe and for wildly different reasons. There may never be a day when games are a “mainstream” phenomenon, but as with so many components of our lives, it is writers who can communicate their everyday vitality.

Journalism is only half the story; the other half is to reconceive our perceptions of games and play. The days of denigrating digital gaming as abnormal, abhorrent, or child's play are antiquated and long gone. We all engage with digital gaming and have been doing so for decades. Truthfully, and hopefully, game journalism is realizing this, albeit slowly and haphazardly. Conversely, collectively overcompensating by tooting the ahistorical horn of techno-solutionism—how “games will change the world”—is equally unproductive. They never have, they never will, and that is *fine*. The best way writers can approach this already ubiquitous medium is to reemphasize the subjects and principles that matter to all journalists: draw upon connections between institutions, one's professional identity, and industry to succeed. Until then, and despite the medium's incessant evolution, when it comes to public acceptance, games and journalism will remain at odds.

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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