

The Mainstreaming of US Games Journalism

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While a decade ago coverage of video games in the mainstream press was hardly guaranteed, it is difficult today to find a major daily or lifestyle magazine in the United States—from *USA Today* to *The New Yorker*—that is not taking games seriously. And yet this “mainstreaming” of games coverage has hardly come easily. Aside from the struggles of game critics themselves, who have acutely pointed to their tenuous and dependent relationship on the industry (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009), perhaps the most notable portrayal of game culture over the past years has been the Gamergate scandal—one of the most vitriolic chapters in games journalism (Mortensen, 2016). As a consequence, the mainstreaming of games journalism has given rise to critical questions concerning the role of the reporter. What is his/her relationship to the games industry? And, how is she/he shaped by the traditional practices of the press?

Our paper is part of an ongoing investigation into contemporary modes of games journalism and seeks to answer these questions through an exploratory study of mainstream US games journalists’ coverage of both their beat and the wider industry. The paper draws on valuable work about the ever-changing role of arts and entertainment critics (e.g. Frey 2015). It also expands on previous analyses that uncovered a network of structural ambivalences among games critics in the enthusiast press (Foxman & Nieborg, 2016), driven in part by its dependency on, yet in a combative relationship with, the industry. In this paper we argue that mainstream writers also wrestle with the ingrained contradictions—or “constitutive ambivalences” (Kirkpatrick 2013)—that accompany wider game culture. Kirkpatrick argues that these tensions—games being considered both harmless and pleasurable, *and* detrimental and addictive—are manifold and pervasive in shaping the “gaming imaginary.” In earlier work, we found that the games press’ professional identity and practices have been shaped by this persistent ambiguity. Yet, because of strong differences in ideological, stylistic and practical traditions, we hypothesize that US mainstream journalists have to confront the tensions among gamers, the industry and press differently in their reporting.

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First, we will ground our analysis in literature on the evolving popular coverage of digital games. For example, in his study of US magazine coverage of games from 1970 to 2000, Williams (2003, 543) documents a contradictory set of utopian and dystopian frames, arguing that games subsequently “passed through marked phases of vilification followed by partial redemption.” While this and similar studies are informative in highlighting a persistent ambivalence over the role of games in society, they provide a less clear vision of how the professional practices of traditional journalists affect their coverage of games and relationship to the industry. Therefore, the second part of our paper will examine how mainstream games reporters are contending with their unique role as advocates and watchdogs for the medium.

What complicates our investigation is that while enthusiast writers have an extended tradition of meta-criticism and self-reflection in their publications, this seems mostly absent in mainstream reporting. As a consequence, we will probe the professional practices of contemporary conventional coverage by surveying the work itself. In particular, our study targets “journalistic” rather than “critical” coverage of the games industry and culture—centering on articles produced in mainstream US outlets from 2014 through 2015, covering the rise of the Gamergate movement and the development of the Oculus Rift virtual reality display. We will analyze these events through a discourse analysis of articles from the most popular US online newspaper publications, recognizing the press as an institution that produces “specific kinds of images of... gaming” (Wirman, 2016); we will supplement our qualitative findings with a quantitative content analysis of the same publications. These texts, which result from the occupational tasks of reporters, contain “standard elements” (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2011) of journalistic practice and provide insight into the mainstream perspective of the industry and game culture.

Particularly as the games industry diversifies its business models and becomes more global in scale, scope and influence, game culture is already part of ordinary life. Understanding how journalists meet the challenge of conveying its importance to the wider public is now more warranted than ever before.

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