



Lessons for Journalists from Virtual Worlds

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people figured out how to work and live in isolation, they turned to various virtual worlds and spaces for comfort. From games like *Animal Crossing* to Zoom, the popularity of communing and communicating both virtually and synchronously skyrocketed and persists in “post pandemic” life. Everything from conferences to

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decades. Almost twenty years earlier, news outlets like CNN and Reuters set up bureaus in *Second Life* and experimented with virtual-reality (VR) content. While concepts like the metaverse are positioned as future technology, virtual worlds are already widely available. Given this reality, how should journalists write about them, or even use them, in the present?

This report takes a first step in answering this question. After providing a brief history, it defines virtual worlds as online and digital spaces of implied vast size in which users congregate, mostly synchronously. Approximations of virtual worlds can be found in online gaming, VR, and livestreaming platforms like Twitch, all of which cater to hundreds of thousands of concurrent users, if not more, at any given time.

Using the pandemic as the launching point for research, the report then analyzes 379 articles that reflect journalists' current and shifting views about virtual worlds. *Animal Crossing*, Twitch, and VR technology represent three archetypal cases. An inductive analysis of key themes is followed by semistructured interviews with twenty-one journalists who wrote about the subject. These interviews support specific lessons writers can take in how to approach virtual worlds from a journalistic viewpoint, as well as the opportunities and drawbacks of using them as tools.

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Key Findings

From the analysis of articles, three major themes arose:

- Games, the prototypical home for virtual worlds, are becoming ubiquitous in everyday life and influencing business, technology, and (digital) culture. This has resulted in increased appearances of the medium in news coverage.
- Virtual worlds are often seen as future technologies, with a lack of recognition for their importance in the present. The persistence of this framing suggests rethinking about both virtual worlds and the communities who use them.

- A diverse set of communities are already the subject of virtual-world coverage, from drag queens using Twitch to celebrities gravitating to *Animal Crossing*. Virtual spaces clearly offer a wide appeal for journalists and the public at large.

Lessons for covering virtual worlds include:

- Specific games and platforms should not be the main focus of coverage, since everyone has some familiarity with virtual spaces and affiliated genres. Journalists need not be experts to write adeptly about them.
- People and communities should drive stories over innovations, technology, and novelty. They can inspire stories that capitalize on existing journalistic skills and are more interesting than any specific piece of software.
- Journalists working in gaming and tech outlets (referred to in this report as the “endemic” press) are necessary partners for those new to virtual worlds because they do spend time investigating specific titles. A more symbiotic relationship with more institutional outlets will help signal important stories to pursue.
- Major news outlets need to add “game” beats to ensure institutional knowledge is not lost and to avoid the occupational precarity that often comes with covering them, as well as to become more acquainted with these communities and environments.
- Avoiding the hype cycle—whether VR, the metaverse, or anything in between—allows for insightful investigative and human-interest pieces that can exist long after enthusiasm cools. It also averts focus on platforms and prognostications of the future potential of virtual-world technologies.

Lessons for using virtual worlds include:

- Avoid being an entertainer and performing in virtual worlds, because the efforts to cultivate and maintain audiences fall well outside regular reporters’ expertise.
- Be at home with games and virtual worlds by spending at least minimal time with them. Even an hour or two a week can provide enough familiarity to preclude parachuting into these spaces and appearing like an outsider.
- Virtual worlds can provide access to unique sources and communities that might not be found as easily in other journalistic settings, but also require reporters to take on more ethnographic approaches.

- Platforms are still influential in virtual worlds, especially because games have long operated via platform models. This affects how they are used and reinforces the need for publications to put more resources into analyzing how these platforms and their affiliated communities work sooner rather than later to avoid being beholden to providers.

This report is meant to provoke and instigate deeper scrutiny by providing a brief and informative snapshot of virtual worlds during and after the pandemic. It emphasizes not only how the building blocks for the next generation of communications technologies are already being haphazardly developed and used, but also the vital need for reporters and writers in these early and formative stages to serve as gatekeepers and practitioners. Finally, it shows that the core journalistic skills associated with the field, from cultivating sources to investigating communities, will continue to be valuable in understanding virtual spaces.

INTRODUCTION – NEW HORIZONS IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

In the spring of 2020, amid the despair and panic that came from unprecedented quarantining and social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a small oasis of hope sprang up: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.¹ The video game, released for the Nintendo Switch in the first weeks of national shutdowns, granted each player a virtual island replete with cuddly customizable avatars, buildings, and furnishings to create a tiny village. Friends could visit each other's domains with a few clicks and then chat, trade gifts, and partake in mundane yet comforting tasks like shopping for clothes, listening to music, or tending gardens, all of which had halted in "real" life. Both the mainstream and endemic game press hyped *Animal Crossing*'s ability to impart a feeling of escape (Khan, 2020) and create opportunities for people to socialize online (Basu, 2020)—a far cry from the usual disparagement that games were addictive, or instigated youth violence.²

It is not unusual for a game franchise to capture the public's imagination. Only a few years earlier, when Nintendo and mobile powerhouse Niantic released *Pokémon Go*, the news was rife with tales of fans swarming public spaces and causing traffic jams as they chased down virtual creatures that were geolocated throughout the world. However, coverage during COVID-19 took a decidedly different tone. Business meetings were held in the shoot-'em-up action game *Grand Theft Auto V* (Segal, 2020); weddings (Garst, 2020), graduations (Anderson, 2020), and concerts transpired in sandbox games like *Minecraft* and *Roblox*; the shuttering of professional sports allowed for think pieces on the rise of competitive gaming ("The Hybrid Reality of No-Sports Sports TV," 2020); and politicians like Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar found their way onto the livestreaming platform Twitch to play *Among Us* (Rivera, 2020).

For the first six months of the pandemic, articles like these proliferated. Even though the fervor of coverage subsided, the stories have not. Post-lockdown, accounts about the rebranding of Facebook as Meta and its pivot to the metaverse (Newton, 2021) and the popularity of gaming communication tools like Discord (Browning, 2021) abound, while the suspension of in-person teaching has led to endless debates about online alternatives. Virtual spaces lie at the margins of daily life and conversation.

Unexpectedly, and even as we rush back to in-person events, the COVID crisis has indelibly marked the public's perception of digital games and virtual worlds. With game companies' profits soaring (Palumbo, 2021), they are being hailed by news organizations as a vital industry and a force for communication. This is no quarantine-induced change of heart, but part of broader trends: Media companies like *Vox* and the *Washington Post* have created game-related verticals (e.g., WashPostPR, 2018), while newsrooms have experimented with games and virtual/augmented-reality tools for at least a decade. The coronavirus only deepened mainstream acceptance. Even Democratic National Convention organizers toyed with virtual conferences and campaign stops in games like *Fortnite* (Krawczyk, 2020).

The boundaries between such spaces and widely used platforms like Zoom, livestreaming services like YouTube Live and Twitch, and even audio programs like Clubhouse and Twitter Spaces are imprecise; aren't all of these "virtual worlds" in one way or another? Further, companies like Facebook (now Meta) and Amazon are vying for entry into a game market already dominated by tech brands like Microsoft and Sony, while Epic, the maker of *Fortnite*, is embroiled in lawsuits with the world's largest company, Apple, arguing its game was a [ubiquitous social space](#). Put simply, it's increasingly difficult to draw the lines where games and virtual worlds end, and other modes of sociality begin.

Therefore, this report considers the COVID-19 pandemic as an inflection point in the interrogation of virtual worlds, their coverage, and value to journalists in general. These digital realms dominate contemporary discussions around technology, and many unanswered questions persist about what we will do in them in our post-pandemic lives.

Specifically, the report addresses:

- What are virtual worlds? What is their larger history, and how have journalists deployed them?
- How has coverage of virtual worlds changed since the COVID-19 pandemic? While media coverage has existed for many years, what novel themes and frames have emerged since the virus appeared in the US?
- What are the best practices for covering virtual worlds? Much press surrounding virtual

worlds is found in lifestyle or tech sections rather than on the front pages of news sites.

However, as these spaces increasingly relate to mainstream commerce and culture, what is the best way to report about them?

- What are the possibilities of using virtual worlds in future journalism? Journalists may turn to virtual worlds—as they have turned to many other digital platforms—for content distribution. While such spaces are still in a relatively formative stage, the next generation of reporters can benefit from learning how best to use them as tools.

The report is structured to tackle each major question. The introduction lays out a brief history of virtual worlds, their coverage, and their relationship to game journalism, which has been the locus for most reportage. It also details the report's methods and data collection. The second chapter presents the results from a six-month study of virtual worlds' coverage in the earliest months of the pandemic in the US, finding that even though virtual worlds are portrayed as future-forward technology, most articles shed light on how they and the communities that surround them are omnipresent in everyday life. However, this analysis is mainly used to introduce themes that are taken up in the next chapters, together with lessons garnered from interviews with the twenty-one journalists who wrote or were associated with those articles, and set forth their best practices on coverage of virtual worlds. The final question on the possibilities of virtual worlds as journalistic tools is explored in the fourth chapter. Finally, a short conclusion speculates on the future of virtual worlds and journalism.

What are virtual worlds?

For some readers, “virtual worlds” are old news. Wasn't this topic popular in the early 2000s? Those readers are not completely wrong. They might be thinking of the hype around the expansive 2003 “game” *Second Life*[mfn] [https://secondlife.com/\[mfn\]](https://secondlife.com/[mfn]) that fascinated journalists and academics alike because it allowed the user to embody an avatar—from mirror images of themselves to anthropomorphized creatures—and fly through virtual lands constructed by players, as well as congregate with others and exchange funds for virtual objects. Media outlets like Reuters and CNN set up bureaus in the game, reporting not only on its currency's exchange rate, but also on how real activities reflected those in the virtual world (Brennen & de la Cerna, 2010). Additionally, an outpouring of articles and books described how in-game newspapers like the *Alphaville Herald* issued daily PDF exposés on the robbery and death of players, virtual commerce, and online mafias and cyber-prostitution (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007). Many of the early tactics mentioned in this journalism, especially embedding oneself deep within virtual communities, were echoed in my interviews almost two decades later.

Also present were the hallmarks and effects found with many emerging technologies, from telepresence

(or collocating in virtual spaces)—e.g., [Jin and Bolebruch, 2009](#)—to a virtual currency that portended contemporary cryptocurrencies (e.g., Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009). As a consequence, *Second Life* communications and communities underwent intense academic scrutiny (e.g., Boellstorff, 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Bowers et al., 2010; Johnson, 2010; Milburn, 2015). Scholars particularly noted how much of the game’s daily media activity approximated that of the real world, with fashion and lifestyle columns and—most relevant—coverage of current events in the virtual space. Altogether, a robust media ecosystem contributed to residents’ well-being and growth (Johnson, 2010).

Researchers were intrigued by the differentiation between “virtual” and “material” worlds (York, 2009). They found that there was a quasi-adversarial relationship between traditional and virtual journalism in *Second Life*, with real-world outlets tending to treat these spaces as mutually exclusive (Brennen & de la Cerna, 2010). However, as Tom Boellstorff (2015) observes in his [seminal book](#) on the *Second Life* community: “It is in being virtual that we are humans: since it is human nature to experience life through the prism of culture” (p. 4). In other words, the virtual itself is not so much separate from the “real” world as the actual (p. 21), representing individual (and even humanity’s) potential. Put more plainly, interactions and communication in virtual spaces are just as real as any material activity.

Furthermore, as implied in the opening, such distinctions seem to be crumbling in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Boundaries between virtual and “actual” worlds meld with the institution of government-mandated quarantines and lockdowns. More important, many of us seamlessly slip between virtual meetings, games, and other online activities.

For another group of readers, the term “virtual world” may provoke the question of what exactly qualifies as virtual. Wasn’t it just a few years ago that most major newsrooms dabbled with virtual reality (VR), and even the staid *New York Times* sent cardboard headsets to its subscribers (Wohlsen, 2015)? The Tow Center sponsored some vital research into this phenomenon, finding that while VR technology represented new modes of storytelling, it required reconfiguring news production and engendered significant burdens on crews who had to learn to operate 360-degree cameras and affiliated equipment (Aronson-Rath et al., 2015). Subsequent studies on VR and similar forms of immersive journalism³ identified numerous key features and benefits, such as the ability to make one feel telepresence, or be transported to situations and places that would be inaccessible to the average viewer.⁴ VR headsets themselves have gone through a hype cycle of popularity as curiosity peaked and fell, while use cases are still being figured out. However, the idea that virtual tools and worlds provide new means of storytelling is worth underlining, even if newsrooms have moved away from heavy investment in the technology.

So how exactly can “virtual worlds” be construed? One definition, born from early-2000s research, zeroes in on “a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by

networked computers” (Bell, 2008, p. 2). However, as Carina Girvan (2018) asserts, virtual worlds represent a wide variety of environments and lack coherent classification. By stressing their permanence, we can conceive of virtual worlds as any given space online where we congregate, mostly synchronously. Because these spaces remain persistent, we can return to them again and again, which evokes a real sense of “world.” Additionally, scale is a factor: “virtual worlds” or the “metaverse” imply vast expanses, endless interconnected digital space in which to navigate, as well as being (ideally) technically interoperable and standardized (Ratan and Lei, 2021). However, as those who profess that the metaverse is already here are quick to remind us (e.g., Kessler, 2021; Macias et al., 2021), virtual worlds are not experienced as such, but are as regional as the material world, with their own topographies, geographies, neighborhoods, and cul-de-sacs. In practice, virtual worlds are a patchwork of diverse media.

This report concentrates on some of the larger sectors: **Online gaming**, from massive multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*⁵ to competitive gaming (e-sports) like *League of Legends*,⁶ may host hundreds of thousands of players at a time. The majority of Meta’s “**metaverse**” or **virtual reality**–based spaces are currently relegated to co-presenting business meetings; a closer approximation to the company’s sweeping rhetoric may be found in competitive programs like *Second Life*, its more modern incarnation *Sansar*,⁷ or the application VRChat.⁸ Outside of computer-generated images and avatars, Zoom and other virtual-meeting software and **livestreaming platforms** like Twitch provide spaces for groups to communicate synchronously. Games, virtual reality, and livestreaming are not only tangible ways to grasp what virtual worlds are, but also act as case studies in the next chapter. Each provides spaces for the experience of synchronous presence and socialization, colocation in an immersive environment, and, to some degree, the ability to modify one’s appearance or embody an avatar.⁹

Importantly for journalists, people congregate, discuss, and make news in these virtual worlds, which have become as indispensable as taverns and coffee shops, especially at a time when physical gatherings are more difficult and/or dangerous. But such spaces have their own history, practices, economies, and customs that make simply parachuting into them hazardous for gathering the best information. Newsmakers need to acquaint themselves with platforms and services hosting virtual worlds, and spend time in them, to render meaningful work. They also require new skills and tools to navigate, and suggest potential new modalities for reportage. The *Alphaville Herald* or *Second Life Gazette*, delivered digitally to residents daily, point to novel means of news engagement in contemporary corollaries like Twitch and Discord,¹⁰ which will only continue to normalize as they are adopted by the broader public.

A brief note on game journalism

While virtual worlds may be a curiosity for most reporters, they are part of everyday life for game

journalists. Along with reviewers and critics, what my interviewees called the endemic press—or outlets whose focus is gaming and tech—has been at the forefront of covering the nitty-gritty of digital spaces for years. I found these writers had the strongest opinions about virtual worlds and how they should be covered. In fact, they not only wrote most of the articles analyzed in this report but also responded to requests for interviews. This makes intuitive sense: As in other forms of lifestyle (not to mention technology) journalism, game writers not only follow virtual spaces more closely than their hard-news peers but also must be at the forefront of industry advances, products, and intrigue. When a new game or update is released, an e-sports tournament occurs, or something dramatic happens to a player, it is precisely this group that is tasked with informing fans.

However, some key points of tension are unique to the game beat. Above all, the industry is incredibly tight-lipped, often controlling the arteries of access to a degree that far outpaces other entertainment formats. This often means that game writers are heavily reliant on their connections, which can affect their writing and livelihood. Historically, gaming publications were primarily promotional, and are partly responsible for creating an insular language and perception of the medium.¹¹ While this has changed significantly over the past decade, sustaining staff is difficult, and many outlets count on eager freelancers to produce much of what is printed. The result is occupational precarity; writers must swing constantly between publications, and many interviewees have left journalism altogether since the pandemic began, sometimes for positions within the industry itself. Even when virtual worlds are covered correctly, writers simply may lack the career stability to continue doing meaningful work, and their circumstances breed a singular form of skepticism that shades perceptions about virtual worlds—which are difficult to apprehend, either because mainstream outlets have not invested in coverage, or because endemic websites are too engrossed in the minutiae of specific games. In other words, the occupational and structural norms of game journalism, while to a degree outside of the scope of this specific report, color much of the commentary and perspective of the findings.

Methodology

In order to better comprehend how journalists investigated virtual worlds in the midst of the pandemic, we adopted a case study approach. This “qualitative inquiry” is used for “explanatory, interpretive, or descriptive aims” (Harrison et al., 2017) to produce a contextual narrative. Following similar studies (e.g., Xie et al., 2021), we analyzed three disciplined configurative cases that explicitly revolved around my definition of virtual worlds. Case studies can be considered “data outcroppings” (Luker, 2009, p. 103) that may indeed represent broader “social phenomen[a] of interest” (Petre et al., 2019), but also are particularly useful for looking into “neglected areas” (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 74) of theory and scholarship such as this one.

We chose three cases for a variety of reasons. First, having spent more than five years studying the

intersections of games and journalism, I was well versed in the issues surrounding virtual worlds, akin to what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1998) described as “deep hanging out.” Each, furthermore, represented broader phenomena in virtual worlds. Therefore, the team settled on games, virtual reality, and the livestreaming service Twitch as the center of our studies and, following similar work (e.g., Petre et al., 2019), constructed our narratives through reportage on each subject.

To collect data, the research team used Google News as an archival site to search for appropriate terms for each case. Specifically, we searched the keywords “video games,” “board games,” “augmented reality,” “virtual reality,” and “Twitch,” along with key pandemic terms “COVID-19” and “coronavirus.” Each was searched in tandem (e.g., “coronavirus” and “video games”) to produce our sample. We supplemented our initial database with targeted searches on key game journalism websites including *The Verge*, *Kotaku*, IGN, and *Polygon*. While these sites are indexed by Google, we recognized their prominence in reporting on these subjects and thus looked beyond our initial terms for any relevant media on some specific titles (e.g., *Animal Crossing*) and platforms (e.g., Twitch), as well as a number of articles discovered through our own media consumption during the time period.

Our research period extended from April 1 to September 1, 2020. Research assistants went through each article and removed any deemed irrelevant or lacking significant relevance for the case study topics. This resulted in a final sample of 379 articles. We concede that not every article we collected was focused on the pandemic, and that this is not an exhaustive list, but believe it produced a suitable sample to identify common themes and discourses surrounding the subject matter, and, more important, a sample that is trustworthy, which is the goal of such qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

During and after data collection, at least one researcher reviewed each article and qualitatively coded it for relevant themes (e.g., “Twitch as opportunity,” “social connection”) using an inductive approach that generated specific themes through a close reading of each text. The team met and communicated regularly to discuss themes, as is common with the approach (Nowell et al., 2017). Ultimately, subthemes were organized into key findings. These themes were meant, to a degree, to be introductory, providing a map of the current state of virtual-worlds coverage and acting as a foundation for interview recruitment and question generation.

Based on the articles, I assembled a core list of interviewees for the next phase of research: semistructured interviews to better glean how and why journalists approach their coverage of virtual worlds. From this list, I requested meetings with those journalists who had written most in the data set (ten articles at most) and those who wrote least (one article). I then used snowball sampling to finalize a list of interviewees. In total, I interviewed twenty-one journalists, from more endemic e-sports sites (Dexerto) to institutional mainstream newspapers (the *Washington Post*), alongside freelancers and former journalists. In the end, the selection represented a broad swath of outlets, with roughly 20

percent from game publications (e.g., *Polygon*, *Dot Esports*), 20 percent from new media outlets (e.g., *Inc*, *Vox*), around 25 percent from legacy media (e.g., the *Washington Post*), 10 percent from “tech” outlets (e.g., *TechCrunch*, CNET), and approximately 25 percent independent or former journalists. Just one third of the writers were female and about 75 percent were white, following the uneven level of representation in this mode of reporting.¹² Participants were given the option of anonymity, and are only identified with their consent and/or request to remain on the record.

Interviews lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. Following transcription, they were coded for common themes, a convention of grounded theory. Data was retheorized during the interview process as I amended questions, originally derived in part from themes arising from the articles, and based on previous answers. This second set of research produced a robust data set showcasing not just common themes on how best to cover virtual worlds, but opinions about the game and tech industries and the business of journalism.

For the sake of clarity, quotes in this report were condensed where necessary; ellipses were only included if there is significant distance between statements. In total, the report offers a vital picture of virtual-worlds coverage and how it has changed, as many interviewees have switched positions and occupations since they wrote the original articles in the data set. The next chapter will focus on the themes derived from those original stories.

COVID-19 AND VIRTUAL-WORLDS COVERAGE

In the first days of pandemic lockdowns, a spotlight momentarily shone on games and virtual worlds. “I think people were inside, and everyone started playing video games,” mused independent journalist Bijan Stephen. “It’s funny, because I think it put us all sort of closer in time to Gen Z than people necessarily realized. Because for them, games are just part of culture.” Journalists jumped at the opportunity to grasp how people were staying happy and sane at home. Whether it was highlighting politicians playing *Among Us* on Twitch or concerts given in *Fortnite*, the stories of communal diversion were obvious and simple to tell. As Stephen suggests, the effect on popular culture has endured. Platforms like Twitch have only grown in popularity, with influencers streaming activities from political commentary (e.g., Hasan Piker) to chess matches (D’Anastasio, 2020). So what themes germinated in this moment of intense media scrutiny that can inform future coverage?

Case Studies

This chapter presents three case studies: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as an emblematic video game/virtual world of the pandemic moment; the uptick of Twitch usage during quarantine; and views of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). Each consists of a short anecdote describing the

case—be it a specific title, platform, or technology—and summarizing journalistic activity during the first months of the pandemic.

Three key themes also emerged from the entirety of coverage and are explained after the case study descriptions: a focus on the ubiquity of gaming; the framing of virtual worlds as futuristic technology; and the emphasis on online communities. These findings mark the state of virtual worlds as we enter a more endemic phase of COVID-19 amid shifting patterns of online engagement. While the report's findings provide a useful snapshot of trends in coverage, including how users and anticipation of the technology's future drive stories, they also demonstrate how reportage is still very much nascent, necessitating the more expansive lessons that are derived from the interviews and presented in subsequent chapters.

Case Study 1: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

The serendipity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* amid the COVID-19 pandemic was not touted in much of the coverage surrounding the game. Part of the long-established *Animal Crossing* series inaugurated for the Nintendo 64 console twenty years earlier, the fifth installment had been in the works since at least 2012. While the game was initially slated for a 2019 release, delays moved distribution in the US to March 20, 2020, just as states began to enforce lockdowns. *New Horizons* was even marketed as a way to find escape as the pandemic ripped through the populace (Webster, 2020).

The actual game activities are fairly mundane. As with many of its social-simulation competitors, *Animal Crossing's* primary mission is to provide players with tools to build and tend to their small village. This was hardly a new conceit; institutional outlets like the *New York Times* dubbed it “the game for the coronavirus moment,” paraphrasing one fan who said it offered “a haven and can give players a feeling of empowerment and community, particularly at a moment when many are being told to stay home” (Khan, 2020). While the *Times* stressed the game's positive message and aesthetic, numerous newsmakers looked into how “ordinary” activities in the real world moved into *Animal Crossing*. The *Washington Post's* Launcher vertical recounted weddings that occurred in the game (Garst, 2020); academic uses (Leporati, 2020); economics (Tan & Fox, 2020); election-year civic activities like Representative Ocasio-Cortez's virtual meetings with constituents (Park, 2020); and celebrity culture, with a series of “visits” to popular musicians' and entertainers' islands (e.g., Sommerfeld, 2020). The *Post* wasn't alone in this coverage. *The Guardian* featured a piece on dating and romance in the game (Paul, 2020); *The Verge* noted how the Detroit Lions used it to publish their schedule (Lyles, 2020); and others reviewed its fashions (Trebay, 2020).

For a few months, seemingly the whole world had set up shop in *Animal Crossing*. And while focus on the specific title hit a fever pitch, it was part of a larger constellation of coverage that examined attempts

to perform everyday activities in other games like *Minecraft* (e.g., BBC News, 2020).

As much as *Animal Crossing* seemed a haven for everyday pursuits, there was surprisingly little negative coverage. Even Gita Jackson's (2020) criticism zeroed in on players' attitudes toward the game, rather than the content itself. Yes, concerns were voiced, especially about playing the virtual stock market, but characterized as "dark(ish)" (Morris, 2020). Where objections may previously have extended to somewhat standard dystopian frames about the medium, like excessive screen time, addiction, or violence (Williams, 2003), the coverage was decidedly positive. Similarly, while the game's history was recognized (the *Times* article briefly mentions that this is the game's first console release in nineteen years), little was written of its connection to a longer tradition, characters, or norms. Simply, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was positioned as a game of the day, rather than the latest iteration in a long stream of hits by parent company Nintendo.

Case Study 2: Twitch

Interest in the livestreaming platform Twitch in many ways parallels the story of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Founded in 2011, the service caught the eye of newsmakers after its acquisition by tech behemoth Amazon in 2014. Twitch shares some commonalities with its livestreaming counterparts—live video feeds accompanied by a "Chat" of viewer commentary—but particularly differs in terms of economics (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019) and target audience. While it hosts IRL channels,¹³ the majority of Twitch's content consists of influencers and streamers playing through digital games while commenting and responding to their audiences in real time.

Perhaps because of this backdrop, coverage of the platform centered on the media professionals and figures who flocked to it. Many articles discussed, for instance, musicians performing live concerts on Twitch, hoping to connect with fans while entertainment venues went dark (Coates, 2020). Professional athletes and teams also used it to, among other things, play simulation versions of their sport of choice. The National Hockey League started conducting games in *NHL 20* and broadcasting them through Twitch, which was credited as a "lifeline" (Wyshynski, 2020) to the industry. To some degree, these groups congregating on the platform, along with more esoteric games like chess (D'Anastasio, 2020), highlight the pressure on arts and entertainment to find new modalities to cope with the effects of the pandemic. Twitch was just one of many services to which these groups resorted in order to stay afloat and remain in the public eye. *Variety* featured a story of drag queens' move from traditional shows to online performances, with queer businesses featured during ad breaks. The drag queens enthused about the benefits of the new format, specifically room for more video art (Framke, 2020). Twitch's unique opportunities and features were emblematic of a general warming by entertainment industries to livestreaming.

Shortly after this initial spurt of enthusiasm, mainstream media coverage began to more closely scrutinize the platform. Much analysis revolved around Twitch's function as a fundraising tool: comedians (CBS Los Angeles, 2020) and even middle schools (Lubrano, 2020) made appeals on it for emergency relief, or donations to medical staff. A handful of articles delved into monetization and legal issues: Dani Deahl (2020a, 2020b) published a few articles about musicians receiving affiliate status to more easily monetize their performances. Similarly, Shawn Reynaldo (2020) disclosed DJs' difficulties with copyright laws during streams. Other stories explored the communities forming on Twitch, ranging from athletes, musicians, and drag queens to local zoos (Nelson, 2020), bar trivia enthusiasts (Beckman, 2020), and Black Lives Matter protesters (Browning, 2020a). Unreported in these articles were long-standing cultural issues like harassment or trolling, which certainly received coverage according to my interviewees, but were at odds with concerns provoked by the pandemic. For instance, only a couple of corpus articles discussed far-right groups gathering on Twitch (e.g., Bergengruen, 2020). As with *Animal Crossing*, there was less institutional knowledge about the service's history, with journalists instead preferring to dwell on current opportunities.

Case Study 3: Virtual and Augmented Reality

While specific platforms like Twitch and games like *Animal Crossing* seemed to fit well within the purview of a feature-length article, VR and AR were too large in scope or too far removed from easy use for significant coverage. There were a handful of think pieces about VR's potential. One from *Forbes India* described how the technology will give customers the ability to "experience products before they buy [them] and in large part will replace the need for traditional retail stores and showrooms" (Kishore, 2020). This type of article was incongruous in our corpus. While enthusiast outlets like *Road to VR* and *UploadVR* continued to cover the nuts and bolts of the technology and the endemic press wrote about minor instances of VR use by the military (Sprigg, 2020) or photographers (Taylor, 2020), mainstream outlets eschewed such stories.

The one area in which VR technology popped up with any frequency involved investment. Such news emanated primarily from press releases or reports, pointing to market growth in the midst of the pandemic. A few remarked that funding had returned to some of the highest numbers since before VR's commercial release (Merel, 2020) or that it was seeing strong capitalization generally. All point to the technology's potential future benefits, not current ones.

However, the subject of virtual spaces and the metaverse outside of VR/AR head-mounted displays (HMDs) was more robust. Although Facebook would commit heavily to the concept of the metaverse a year later, at this time Epic was invoking the term in relation to its game *Fortnite*. There was a disconnect between the use of headsets and these debates. This is particularly ironic, given the outlays major newsrooms had made in VR a few years earlier. Beyond a number of commendable experiments

primarily for the smartphone, for instance the *New York Times*' simulation of COVID-19 droplet spread (Parshina-Kottas et al., 2020), the technology sat very much on a back burner, while interest in games surged. One notable exception was an in-depth piece by the *Washington Post*'s Gene Park (2020b), who in the Launcher vertical not only detailed investment in VR technology, but addressed advances propelled by the pandemic and how such work was building toward metaverses.

Discussion of Case Studies

Three key themes emerged from these cases: the ubiquity of games in everyday life, their frame as future technology, and a distinct focus on communities using specific virtual worlds and affiliated platforms during the pandemic. Most coverage, to varying degrees, demonstrated how virtual worlds were havens for everyday activities. It is unsurprising that such stories mushroomed as journalists themselves were forced to move their lives and professional practices online. At the same time, the ease with which so many types of digital spaces were embraced speaks to the relevance and longevity of the topic. COVID-19 provided a scenario for stories already being told, from reframing the importance of games to adopting immersive technologies. The following themes, therefore, should not merely be seen as responses to coronavirus panic, but rather as steady steps in the progression of virtual-world and tech coverage.

Theme 1: The Ubiquity of Games in Everyday Life

One major theme to emerge in our study centered on the pervasiveness of games. They became a hub for socializing in part because of their accessibility; most homes already contained a console or computer. The pandemic was portrayed as a boon for producers and users because gaming offered established spaces to comfortably and safely communicate. One article from *USA Today* highlighted not only the benefits of connecting “socially with friends and family while at home,” but also reiterated that most devices and smartphones have no shortage of multiplayer modes of engaging online (Snider, 2020). Producers (studios and publishers) were described as growing and resistant to the period's economic turmoil; for instance, a *New York Post* article highlighted how sports gambling moved to simulation titles like *FIFA* and *NBA2K* (Vega, 2020). Despite disputed drawbacks like addiction, games were repeatedly portrayed as a solid means for finding solace. In the same paragraph, an article in *Time* warned that “Playing in moderation is key,” citing the WHO's classification of “gaming disorder,” then reassured that “[r]ather than rue this pandemic-driven video game and screen time boom, research suggests we should be cheering it” (Gregory, 2020).

Twitch, not quite as ubiquitous but equally accessible, attracted novel communities. The results are humanizing stories of finding and adapting to virtual environments. A *Chicago Tribune* article on the growth of livestreaming music quoted one converted naysayer that when casting on Twitch is “done

right, it actually keeps the community together. ... It can actually be an extension of the authentic community experience we want here” (Lukach, 2020). In contrast, virtual and augmented reality devices may have inhibited these feelings because of a lack of access and difficulty of use. While there was reporting on the increased financial backing of the technology, the same type of personal stories associated with the other cases were hardly present. The difference is instructive, particularly when considering emergent concepts like the metaverse: options proposed by companies like Meta without the same level of accessibility will not generate the sizable participation, or enthusiasm, of a popular game, which lessened anxiety and provided (much needed) escape from the pandemic.

Theme 2: Framing the Future

The attention to potential investment in VR/AR indicates another theme: Virtual worlds will be lucrative and vital in the near future. Not only were there deep investigative pieces like the one written by Park, but even a trade source predicted immersive technologies would be a “critical factor” in reimagining the “retail experience” (Browne, 2020). Articles discuss the use of video games such as *Animal Crossing* and future tools and tech like the metaverse as alternatives to the humdrum routines conducted on Zoom for work. Virtual worlds were viewed as more entertaining accessories that would proliferate and connect socially distanced individuals. This frame counterbalances the singularity of the moment: The once-in-a-century pandemic necessitated innovations in how we convene and communicate, but there is a sense of inevitability that tinges the coverage. Taylor Hatmaker (2020) of TechCrunch asserted that the pandemic led people to think of games as social platforms, an idea that “seems to be resonating right now, even among the kinds of people who wouldn’t identify as gamers. That last bit is important.” In affirmation, Twitch’s growth skyrocketed, with reports of 10 and 20 percent increases in viewership each week (e.g., Shaw and Kharif, 2020; Stephen, 2020). Virtual worlds contained tools to help surmount issues stemming from the pandemic, like how to achieve social or professional cohesion outside institutional congregate physical settings. Business reporter David Segal (2020) recounted that executives sought to avoid Zoom fatigue even back in July 2020 by meeting and bonding in games: “The goal is to break up a day that is crammed with get-togethers that generally look, sound, and feel identical.” Such concerns (and experiments) have only escalated in the years since, particularly as students, offices, and government agencies wrestle with sporadic closures and reopenings. There is certainly a need for technological improvement, with games and other modes of entertainment as potential remedies.

Theme 3: Community Focus.

Another theme revolves around those who inhabit virtual worlds. In *Animal Crossing*, a wide variety of communities came together to socialize and partake in everyday activities online. Kari Paul (2020) drafted a fantastic set of human-interest stories about the limits of these communities, including a

dominatrix adapting and replicating their in-person work to the game, and an ad-hoc talk show set up and streamed through Twitch. Beyond this, stories included the construction of a virtual university campus (Shaw, 2020) and LGBT+ gamers in Mexico participating in a virtual soccer tournament (Lopez, 2020).

Twitch also contributed to community formation. That so many diverse groups thrived on the platform attested to its ability to provide comfort and support. One article from the first days of the pandemic quotes a Twitch content creator: “I feel my job ... right now is to help facilitate digital friend groups, look after my community, and make sure people know they aren’t alone” (Wilde, 2020). Another attributes the service’s popularity to the “sense of community and personal connection these lo-fi videos create” (Berman, 2020). Additionally, the platform itself was credited for supportive features: an endemic outlet, IGN, discussing how athletes and fans adopted Twitch, called it an expression of empathy: “[W]e watch our favorite streamers out of strange, tender solidarity; the feeling that you would’ve connected with them in any other context — co-workers, schoolmates, or just a brief conversation in line for the bathroom” (Winkie, 2020). Articles also addressed the cultural, economic, and occupational impact (Ingham, 2020; Muldofsky et al., 2020). Fundraising was a popular topic early in the pandemic (e.g., Haasch, 2020), but copyright and content distribution concerns (e.g., Suciu, 2020; Warren, 2020b) were voiced along with a steady hum about platform growth and underwriting (e.g., Perez, 2020). In fact, compared to the other case studies, it is interesting that scrutiny of Twitch’s attributes deepened throughout the months we assessed.

Community focus was less apparent in the virtual and augmented reality content we collected, which is understandable given the technology’s comparative lack of accessibility. A few related stories appeared. The Minnesota *Star Tribune* profiled digital artists and their exhibits and galleries, quoting a virtual-museum organizer: “We’re bringing people together spatially. ... Not like on Zoom, when you are looking through a screen and still alone in your space” (Eler, 2020). However, examples like these were few and far between compared to games and livestreaming.

At the same time, we noted several absent themes across all case studies. Much of the coverage was positive; there were simply fewer articles about the negative impact of virtual worlds. We expected to find stories regarding personal struggles, infrastructure, infringement of privacy, and the escalating cost or labor in maintaining such spaces, but such issues did not feature prominently in our corpus. Notably, even while games and VR seemed to avoid these topics of conversations, they were being levied elsewhere. For instance, such concerns were expressed about Zoom because of its widespread usage (Lima, 2020; Warren, 2020a). It is ironic that this startup, which was thrust into the public spotlight due to COVID, was put under a microscope while longstanding publishers like Activision-Blizzard, which needed to deal with similar criticisms for its massive multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, received

comparatively little examination.

Furthermore, few journalists in the stories we analyzed used or mingled in virtual worlds themselves. While Seth Sommerfeld visited a few celebrity islands in *Animal Crossing*, there was not a surge of mainstream writers adopting these platforms — in fact the *Washington Post* shuttered its Twitch channel prior to the pandemic, during the first impeachment of then-president Donald Trump.¹⁵ Instead, reporters focused on more classic forms of storytelling.

Final Notes of Coverage

Clearly, the case studies on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, Twitch, and VR/AR illustrate how virtual worlds grabbed the limelight as a propitious means by which to congregate and commune. While the themes that emerged from our analysis found the ubiquity of digital games in coverage, the focus on virtual worlds as a technology of the future, and the production of generally community-driven stories, a few broader generalities appeared.

Online spaces were treated as an (often welcome) novelty. Despite their ubiquity, and as many use cases revealed throughout our corpus, much of the reporting was imbued with wonder. In appraising the amount of time and money spent online, a writer for *Forbes* described the £100 spent on games per month by British citizens as “whopping” (Gardner, 2020). The author of a *MIT Technology Review* article similarly stated: “These games are more than escapist entertainment, though; they’re helping to reshape how we connect in a future where social distancing might become the norm. Video games are letting people chat, connect, and meet new people” (Basu, 2020). Virtual worlds, livestreaming, and the metaverse are hardly new, but these terms have been in the vernacular for decades. They may be framed as novel because of their complexity. With so many platforms, corporations, and communities involved, few reporters have the interest or time required to provide comprehensive coverage.

A case in point is Twitch, whose platform and business model is shaped by community-driven expectations, formal features, leading-edge technology, ethical codes, games that streamers play — which themselves can be multiplayer virtual worlds — and the aspirations of its parent company, Amazon, to gain a foothold in the gaming ecosystem (Browne, 2020). Additionally, limitations to access, including expensive and exclusive hardware and software, preclude marginalized communities, an issue that has long plagued the industry and preoccupied academics.¹⁶ However, these restrictions also hinder those writers who strive to reach the broadest possible audience.

Nevertheless, certain stories coalesced in this moment, particularly those about people. By assuming the human-interest angle, reporters circumvented some of the thornier issues surrounding games and tapped into more universal emotions during a period of great tribulation, fear, isolation, and anxiety. It also allowed journalists to evade conventional tropes surrounding gaming — such as worries about addiction

or instigating violence. Especially since these frames are perpetually debated (e.g., McKernan, 2013; Perreault and Vos, 2020; Williams, 2003), those used during the pandemic are refreshing, even if they represent only a fraction of the larger conversations surrounding virtual worlds.

At the same time, the case studies provide only a partial overview — bound by the deep worries of quarantine and the pandemic — of what writing about virtual worlds looks like. The themes discovered here may point to some norms around coverage, driven by classic frames of the profession surrounding game beats, important figures, and of course newsworthy events like COVID-19. What is missing is how this fits into both the long-term approach to reporting about virtual worlds and the (often shifting) decisions writers make about the subject over time. The next chapter presents lessons learned from the authors of these articles and probes their approaches to the subject and the broader trends in coverage they spearheaded.

LESSONS FROM JOURNALISTS ON VIRTUAL WORLDS COVERAGE

The previous section presented an overview of key themes from our sample of news coverage about virtual worlds during the onset of the pandemic. However, such reporting did not exist in a vacuum: game and tech journalism have blossomed since the early 2000s (Ananny, 2020). The next two chapters shift from text analysis of the articles to interviews with the journalists who wrote them. Through long-form interviews I was able to get a deeper understanding as to what motivated their writing and specifically how they approached coverage and use of virtual worlds and the metaverse.

This chapter looks at the present and future direction of coverage through conversations with those who wrote or were connected to the articles in the previous sections. For many, digital cultures and spaces were quotidian, but growing. Noah Smith, a regular contributor on games and esports for *The Washington Post* and other outlets, recalled how he had recently been invited to a medical conference looking at the metaverse, which he said reflected the “interdisciplinary nature of this industry and where it’s [gaming/the metaverse] going.” Another mainstream tech reporter told me: “We now fully realize that what happens on the internet spills over into whatever you want to call the real world. I think January 6 was the best example of that, in which people who clearly live their lives online almost all the time and are getting fed bad information took some very real-world action.”

This acceptance is indicative of the type of reporters interviewed. Almost all of them covered games in one way or another, either as part of a tech beat or working for a more endemic outlet. The position of game journalists is uniquely ambivalent (Foxman and Nieborg, 2016); the usual professional boundaries found in other forms of media coverage exist to a lesser degree, with many writers seamlessly moving

between reporting, reviewing, and critiquing the medium. While initially publications were owned by gaming companies (e.g., *Nintendo Power*), the industry continues to tightly control access to its products, which shapes coverage and exacerbates freelancers' stress.¹⁷ Many of those with whom I spoke moved fluidly in and out of different positions—their section was shuttered; they spent some time working within communications for a gaming or tech company; or they bolstered writing their columns with podcasting and other forms of media production. To some degree, such instability undermines the occupational viability of virtual-world journalists, and reinforces a situation where turnover is high and institutional memory is lacking. It also breeds animosity, both for the scant few who are able to report about this subject full time, and those who do not adhere to the specific type of writing deemed legitimate for this type of reportage. Endemic and tech writers claimed that their mainstream equivalents suffered from “gee whiz” attitudes to the subject, but also felt that successful niche outlets were just producing clickbait. Still, if there is a bright side to this complex situation, it is that these writers possessed vast and varied perspectives.

The following lessons span those who wrote for some of the most mainstream institutions like (but not necessarily including) *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* to outlets like Dexerto and Polygon that specialize in esports and games respectively, not to mention independent journalists aiming to build their own personal brand.

From this group, the following lessons about the state of virtual worlds and game coverage evolved:

- *Specific Games/Platforms Do Not Matter*
- *People Matter More than Platforms*
- *The Endemic Press Is a Necessary Partner*
- *Outlets Need Game Beats*
- *Avoid the (Virtual) Hype*

These points are interrelated: Game beats, for instance, are a natural fit for certain members of the endemic media. Also, each reveals the mindset of those already invested in virtual worlds coverage. However, given their backgrounds, I conclude by discussing a few concerns that were excluded from interviews but worth consideration despite their omission.

Specific Games/Platforms Do Not Matter

One problem when deciding how to write about virtual worlds is how much to actually explain what's going on. Many games are expansive; characters in major studio AAA titles like *Red Dead Redemption 2* or *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* traverse hundreds of miles of sweeping vistas. However,

there are many more nuances: How many features of gameplay in esports like *League of Legends* need to be spelled out to the newcomer? How about the thousands of outfits and skins in *Fortnite* or *Animal Crossing*? Such quandaries plague mainstream coverage of blockbuster games.

An opinion article by Peter Suderman (2018) in *The New York Times* about the blockbuster title *Red Dead Redemption 2* drew explicit connections between the budget of the game and that of cinema. Toward the middle of the piece, he surmises, “So the perception is that video games don’t really matter, because they have nothing — or at least nothing important — to say.” He then reminds readers, “But the best games reveal a mass cultural medium that has come fully into its own, artistically flourishing in ways that resemble the movie industry during its 20th-century peak and television over the past 20 years.” Statements like this assume that, especially for older players or non-gamers, such a justification is necessary for this form of entertainment.

For some mainstream outlets, however, this issue seems to be fading. “I don’t think you’re going to get as many chuckles at a pitch meeting if you bring up video games,” one reporter for a major national news outlet told me, adding later, “I definitely think you’re seeing stories that respect it as a legitimate culture and pastime that has highbrow things, lowbrow things, middlebrow things, problematic parts of the culture, good parts of the culture.”

In some ways, the pandemic freed virtual-worlds coverage by recognizing that we all participate to some degree. According to Bijan Stephen, the pandemic “was one of those things where everybody was playing” games. “It was a cultural event” that gave permission to those “who didn’t want to admit to themselves that playing games was fun” to actually embrace the pastime. This can be seen as a somewhat significant leap in the legitimization, if temporary (as explained below), of the medium due to the pandemic.¹⁸ Reporters presumed that most readers had some connection to games. If they did not play themselves, maybe they had watched their children playing online with friends during the darkest days of quarantine. This also meant writers could have less expertise and assume their audience would have about as much interest and understanding of the topic as they did.

Still, journalists had to tread a fine line. Too little familiarity raised issues of treating virtual worlds as foreign objects. Ian Sherr, technology editor at CNET, warned, “If you’re parachuting into” games and “sticking out like a sore thumb,” then if you write from that point of view “you’re probably not going to come off very well.” A games and technology investigative writer also suggested, “In the early 2000s, journalists or mainstream publications were known to parachute inside of virtual worlds, including *Second Life*, and report on scandalous goings-on inside of these games. That included everything from ERP — erotic roleplay — to child sex rings.” Consequently, frequent users of such games were “quite reticent to speak with reporters for a long time after that.”

Too much familiarity, however, entailed hours of unpaid labor playing through games. A happy medium was for writers to be well acquainted with established titles, especially as studios update successful works rather than produce sequels, and charge monthly subscriptions or for add-ons, objects, skins, and clothing (e.g., “free-to-play”)¹⁹ to make money. Thus having experience with a title like *League of Legends*, which is more than a decade old, could serve writers better in the long run compared to hunting down the next and best independently made (indie) game, which might only inspire fleeting interest.²⁰

Part of the shift in perspective was a cultural response. The gamer identity represents a narrow and somewhat exclusionary audience that does not match the mainstream public to which most of the reporters either aspired or actually wrote. For the sake of inclusivity, writers were interested in games that engaged a majority of players. However, some cases warranted more explicit coverage, such as competitive gaming or esports. Like their real-world counterparts, esports writing demands a full grasp of all facets of the game: player stats, changes to gameplay, title-specific language, and even team drama. While this type of coverage may be standard for outlets that thrive on the daily goings-on in leagues, it is anomalous in most mainstream venues: “I’m not reporting on who wins a match,” Noah Smith said, noting that he would be more likely to look at “Activision being sued in federal court or state court.” He then asked rhetorically, “What’s going on? What’s the analysis? What are publishers doing to combat racism online? I guess you could call it enterprise stories, more investigative.”

Smith went on to explain that the remit for his writing had changed. Whereas stories about investment in esports might have made the front page a few years ago, more analytical works currently occupied a lower bar. Kellen Browning of *The New York Times* said contemporary game coverage “allows you to get a little more granular because you don’t need to defend just the fact that you’re writing about this topic” — another moment of legitimization spurred by the pandemic. Other respondents suggested that general audiences attuned to popular culture would appreciate these types of stories.

Overexplaining games was also discouraged. A former journalist, who wrote mostly for trade publications, argued, “If you have 1,000 words, and you have to spend 250 of them explaining what Twitch is every single time you write about it, that’s very limiting.” He also thought “the biggest change” would be when writers could write the word Twitch and “assume the reader understands, at least generally, what that platform is and what it does. It allows you to talk more about how it’s actually being impacted and how it’s changing, which I think makes for better coverage.”

Another correspondent at a mainstream outlet attributed this to a general trend in journalism, which had tried to get away from the outsider “gawking” viewpoint: “We should have people who are a little more in the know in these communities, reporting on them, and that’s true, I think of gaming, but also race, policing, communities, things like that.” Ultimately, respondents’ assumptions about gaming knowledge

underscore a desire to discuss players and what they chose to do in virtual worlds over specific products and platforms.

People Over Platforms

In lieu of telling stories about virtual worlds themselves, journalists overwhelmingly, and in alignment with the case studies findings, advocated concentrating on who was using virtual worlds and how. As Seth Schiesel, former game writer for *The New York Times*, put it, the “software product is actually a smaller part of the experience. But so much of what actually constitutes the experience lies in the human engagement.” For him, this was unique to games coverage: “There are no stories about the [art] consumers, right? ... Classical music: there aren’t any stories about the audience hardly, right? ... There aren’t stories about people who read books, right?” He concluded, “But with gaming, it is different. You have an opportunity to tell stories that aren’t just about the product — software — itself, but also about the human stories that emerge in that context.” At the same time, Schiesel’s outlook is indicative of larger industry repositioning. Quite a few of the reporters came from or dealt with esports outlets where reportage about the inner workings of teams and fans was normal. Jacob Wolf, Dot Esports’ chief reporter and investigative lead at the time of these interviews, described his site as a “daily digest” of news: “If something happened relevant [to esports], it’s likely on our website.” But the reason for such breadth of coverage was also practical: “I think that generally people don’t read that kind of coverage as much as they do in traditional sports, and reading recaps, etc, because of the ability to access VODs [Video on Demand]. The way that streaming rights work, media rights work in esports differently from traditional sports.” Dot Esports anticipated and expanded on everything regarding competitive gaming to satisfy the consumer base.

The industry itself is also facing increased scrutiny. During the period of my study, a number of scandals erupted, from the working conditions of employees at publishers like Activision-Blizzard (e.g., Grind et al., 2021) to Twitch closing Donald Trump’s accounts in the wake of the January 6 riots (e.g., Chalk, 2021). Reporters continue to scope out the working conditions and attitudes of those involved in games production. Schiesel, reflecting on his decades-long career covering games, stated: “There’s much more forthright coverage of how games get made. And the relationship between management and labor. And there’s definitely much more understanding of the rigors of game development, from a human perspective.” He added, “You see more coverage of the potential downsides. And potential elements of toxicity or antisocial behavior that can happen online.” Later, he reiterated that he saw this coverage broadening out “beyond just reviews of specific products. To really looking at the social, cultural aspects of gaming, which is entirely appropriate, because games are how people communicate and socialize now, and going forward.”

Given their ubiquity, it was easy to find interesting stories of the public’s involvement in virtual worlds.

Writers proudly referenced their work about specific communities and people: Wolf described his beat as “sexual abuse, fraud, and millionaires and billionaires,” citing an example of a scam artist who tried to bilk \$42 million from people through competitive gaming. Another writer mentioned interrogating the life of music makers on Twitch. Others touted stories on older streamers or celebrities who broadcast content. There were those like Willie Nelson, who reached out to *Inc* reporter Amrita Khalid to tell her that it “became a way for more artists to actually perform, and it didn’t really matter whether they were doing it for profit or not, like some of them were just doing it to work and for exposure.”

By and large, interviewees stressed that much of contemporary culture had moved into these spaces and thus deserved this type of exposure. Mike Kent, co-founder of Dexerto, concurred: “I think the general consensus about gaming has changed a lot. You’ve got people like Henry Cavill, Superman, he’s coming out and saying that PC is better than PS4 and he’s this six-foot-four jacked movie star. You’ve got all these sports stars who are now really coming into the spotlight. They’re all gamers because they’ve all grown up playing games.” He concluded that “gaming has become part of society.”

Celebrity profiles also extended to longstanding game streamers who are household names. As Blake Hester of *Game Informer* flippantly predicted: “I feel like when the history books are written, [streamers] PewDiePie and Ninja are going to have done more for the mainstreamification of video games than Shigeru Miyamoto [famed video game designer] ever did. And that’s probably not true. But you know what I’m saying?” Former *Insider* and *Newsweek* reporter Steven Asarch speculated: “The space between gamer and influencer is really, really faded and really doesn’t exist anymore. Like I wouldn’t qualify xQc²¹ as a gaming streamer, I would [qualify] him as a variety streamer who also sometimes plays games.” Most striking in these examples is the convergence of games, virtual, and other online spaces.

Cultural issues surrounding race, gender, and politics not only persist online but also seamlessly infiltrate various platforms and virtual spaces. A long-time tech journalist opined that “past coverage of MMOs and virtual worlds has focused on them being a space apart from real life, social identities, and relations, and a place that really empowers escapism.” However, there was recognition that this notion was changing: Khalid agreed with the previous reporter that people could bring their “social dynamics” to virtual spaces. As she said, “Like, if a bunch of Nazi trolls Zoom-bomb a Jewish student group meeting over Zoom, that’s not just a tech story.” Consequently, journalists felt they needed to maintain a presence on virtual worlds and affiliated communication channels to track stories that flowed across traditional social media, in chats on Twitch, Discord servers, and so on.

The result calls for a wide variety of stories about the impact of games on underrepresented groups of players. “A lot of it is just trying to see the world [as] a cultural reporter would,” said Ian Sherr, “and then trying to back that out a little bit toward what are the roots of what’s going on.” Imad Khan, who

was writing for Tom’s Guide when I interviewed him, added, “All these online spaces are only as valuable as its communities. So I think it always has to go back to the people. I mean, even if we’re all getting plugged in, kind of like in *Ready Player One* or *The Matrix*, all that underlying technology is cool, but it’s what people end up using the technology for that changes how we experience the world around us.” He praised an essay covering how the mother of a voice actor of *Red Dead Redemption 2* had played through the game (Good, 2020). Another writer appreciated NBC News’ piece on a grandmother streamer who connected with fans while playing *Call of Duty* (Marquez, 2021). For others, exposing issues like gambling or screen time were important. Even aspirationally, reporters wished to dig into community more. One writer said:

“When I hear about somebody who came out as trans after their experience in another body avatar; people who fell in love in World of Warcraft ; people who were able to assemble communities through ... Final Fantasy XIV, or even just be the first person to lead like a 60-person raid of LGBTQ Final Fantasy XIV players, those are experiences that are so unique, so powerful, it’s impossible to overstate the ways in which that impacts people and that’s been so undercovered.”

But when pressed on how to find people and communities to write about, respondents were often vague beyond describing a general sense of immersion: “I’ve been working on this stuff for so long, basically my entire career, I feel like I just sort of have a sense now,” said Bijan Stephen. “You do the slight low-key sleuthing that everyone sort of does.”²² In other words, talk to sources, get contacts from them, and find their social media feeds.

Additionally, all the writers were familiar with a number of communications platforms outside gaming and virtual worlds where much of the conversation was taking place. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were cited; more important were discussion forums like Reddit and intimate community channels like Discord. It was through these venues that contacts and stories were developed, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Ultimately, interviewees noted that monitoring such platforms and the communities that surround them became a daily chore.

Partner with the Endemic Press

Both previous lessons lay bare the complexities of covering virtual environments, which seems to require considerable time and investment to fully understand. However, many who cover virtual worlds for broader institutional outlets are not following them exclusively or even consistently, but may find that their reporting occasionally touches on the concerns and communities from these spaces. For instance, one story in our corpus on Twitch explored the connections between the platform and the

Trump campaign, particularly in terms of how streaming on behalf of the president allowed for misogynistic and racist comments (Nguyen, 2020). The article focuses on how the young, white, male user base and its unrestrained commentary clashed with the Republican National Committee's broadcast of its convention. Filled with Twitch jargon and political punditry, the investigation stands out both in its level of depth and detail. But such investigative pieces are rare because mainstream journalists are unable to cultivate the deep knowledge necessary (let alone sources or understanding of economics) to consistently publish this kind of work.

Those who hail from the endemic press and write for outlets exclusively immersed in games, like Polygon, The Verge, and Kotaku, are fonts of industry knowledge when it comes to virtual worlds. Co-founder of TMZ, Gillian Sheldon, acknowledged that "endemics can often guide traditional coverage." For Blake Hester, they were treasure troves. "Polygon has done a ton of coverage," he said, of specific longstanding virtual spaces like *GTA Online* and *Sea of Thieves*. "A lot of mainstream outlets haven't figured it out yet because they haven't had the brilliant idea to just hire a couple people that know these worlds." They were also gatekeepers for broader coverage. A mainstream tech reporter said he would routinely check those sites:

"What did Polygon write about today? Is any of this worth our coverage as well? ... A tidbit of news about a gaming world where there'd be a whole article about it in The Verge, but we might not even bother because it's going to matter to the broader gaming audience."

Legacy news organizations increasingly recognized the endemic press's deep reportage on the labor, business, culture, and complexities of the game and tech industries. Thus, reporters of all stripes would use the endemic press as a stepping stone for their own stories. Kent of Dexerto noted that he was frequently cited by many mainstream outlets. In addition, the endemic press supplied necessary language and context for events in virtual worlds because of the volume of coverage they produced. Readers could explore in-depth subjects introduced from institutional outlets. In other words, the endemic press was an incomparable foundation upon which to build articles.

Writers within the endemic press embraced their role and were the most vocal about the prerequisite of specialized knowledge about games and tech for successful coverage. Jessica Scharnagle of Dot Esports asked, "Do you do research and do you ingrain yourself in the community?" Sherr of CNET suggested virtual worlds are "so hard to fully wrap your head around. I think if you look at a lot of the coverage that's been done by people who are not as aggressively in it, it's much more surface level as a result."

However, many of the writers I interviewed worked for or came from endemic outlets. With rare

exceptions, even elite establishment tech contributors had started their careers for such sources, which likely engendered respect for these publications.

One or two interviewees expressed gratitude for the infusion of more mainstream voices into coverage of games and virtual worlds. “I think these kind of staid outlets are becoming savvier to what they’re not savvy about, if that makes sense,” said Taylor Hatmaker of TechCrunch, adding, “They’re learning to hire folks who do speak these languages and take them more seriously.” Similarly, Hester had worried about the longevity of the *Post*’s Launcher, “and they proved me wrong, because it did last beyond what I thought. So we’re seeing that change: historical institutions kind of recognize [to not] send our normal reporters to cover these things we hire and staff up to report them.”

Some interviewees thought the endemic press catered too much to an enthusiast audience, which, even so, does not preclude it as a vital resource for conventional writers to tap and expand upon. Together, endemic and mainstream reporters comprise an abundant ecosystem for information sharing.

Outlets Need Game Beats

Although the endemic press aided institutional outlets, respondents repeatedly called for the hiring of staff writers dedicated to the subject of virtual worlds and games. To some extent, that demand is natural because of who they were: journalists who already write about and are invested enough in the subject to converse with me. However, there is some evidence of growth in the vertical, including subsidizing renowned game journalists by major outlets. Megan Farokhmanesh was hired by *Wired* in 2022 after stints at Axios and The Verge, and Kotaku’s Jason Schreier joined Bloomberg in 2020 (Park, 2020a; Valentine, 2020). *The New York Times* now has a feature tech correspondent, Kellen Browning, who has investigated popular platforms like Discord (2021b), Black Lives Matters protesters meeting on Twitch (2020a), and ongoing harassment in the gaming industry (2020b). One or two publications have gone further: *The Washington Post*, for instance, staked a full staff for its Launcher games vertical.

Dedicated coverage also makes sense with changes to the business model. “The game industry certainly was more heavily weighted in the past toward a retail, single product,” Schiesel said. However, like other entertainment services (e.g., Netflix), gaming is now mostly sustained not by sequels, but subscriptions or other fees for paraphernalia and updates that aim to have players engage with games for years rather than months. Social and cultural stories make more sense in this ongoing engagement model because of “the fact that people are just more engaged with one another online, whether that’s through a standalone game, or through a live service game.” Virtual worlds reporting may need to resemble that of sports whose teams, companies, sponsors, players, and regulations are regularly followed. Dedicated game beats will be prepared to meet the evolving contours of the medium.

Avoid the (Virtual) Hype

A final lesson stems from a hot-button topic in the fall of 2021, when it became fashionable for stories around virtual worlds to invoke the “metaverse” moniker. Although the term had already been co-opted by companies like Epic Games in its suit against Apple, following a well-publicized whistleblower scandal Facebook changed its name to Meta under the aegis of investing wholeheartedly in a persistent virtual environment, “an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it. We call this the metaverse, and it will touch every product we build” (Zuckerberg, 2021). While some suspected that the name change was a distraction tactic (Swartz, 2021), virtual worlds had long fascinated founder Mark Zuckerberg and reflected his desire to have this be his company’s next step. Subsequently, no shortage of articles speculating about subjects including real estate (DiLella and Day, 2022), finance (Wiener, 2022), fashion (Friedman, 2022), and social concerns like extremism and terrorism (Doctor et al., 2022) have popped up regarding the topic.

For the journalists interviewed for this study, the idea of the metaverse, or even VR, was met with indifference and disdain. Browning warned to be “skeptical of all these new companies offering, ‘We’re the next metaverse.’ Is *Fortnite* a metaverse? You have to look at why Epic Games is saying that. Is it because they want to win their lawsuit? Or do they really believe it?” A few saw Facebook’s rebranding as little more than a PR stunt, including Asarch, who said he “never really understood the concept of the metaverse and found it to be kind of stupid,” so he had never covered it. Like other hyped topics such as NFT and crypto, “it was a trendy word that people could grasp on to that they didn’t have to be endemics to cover.” A few interviewees, such as Hatmaker, were in the camp that “the metaverse is here. It’s just fragmented. So maybe it’s not quite as meta as we aspire for it to be for better or worse.” In other words, it already existed in many games.²³ Additionally for those who had long covered virtual worlds, the interest in VR was little more than promotional. “I would say cynically the problem in this hype cycle is there’s way too much overpromise,” immersive journalist and former Tow Fellow Dan Archer said. “Like in VR, the cynics gleefully sharpen their blades when it doesn’t live up to expectations. It’s just there’s a lot of very lazy journalism out there that jumps on bandwagons and explains what it is and its promise and stuff, but then doesn’t really give much actual description.” When it came to the metaverse and virtual worlds, he thought people consequently responded “very cynically, I’d say, unless it’s the trade rags, or people in industry who tend to champion it, I would say tech [journalism] is either overexaggerating the benefits of it, or it’s gleefully pulling apart the shortcomings of it. So there isn’t usually a reasoned middle ground.”

Other journalists were wary of devoting too much time to the subject. Imad Khan described the technology as happening “tomorrow, but it’s just that tomorrow never comes,” further stating that coverage about VR devices didn’t traffic well on Tom’s Guide. A few reporters extended this critique to the study of virtual worlds in general. Asarch found the term to be too ambiguous, describing both

social media and gamelike activities at once. Others, like Hatmaker and Stephen, thought I should study less the worlds than the avatars that exist within them, with Stephen suggesting I rephrase the study around “virtual selves,” since “the unifying thing is you are a digital presence in all these places.” Unlike Zoom or even Twitch, virtual worlds are “places where you get to sort of put on a new self, and it fundamentally changes the way you interact in the world,” he said. “On Zoom, we’re interacting like we would normally.”²⁴

Underlying these views was the belief that publications should eschew prognostications on the future of technology. Instead, interviewees felt that stories should adhere to more journalistic norms: the basic who, what, where, when, why, and how of virtual worlds. As the other lessons indicate, there are an abundance of stories about those who make and, more importantly, use digital spaces that can pique readers’ interest and engage audiences. Scharnagle claimed, “It’s like you put Brad Pitt in an article that has to do with gaming and all the gaming nerds are going to click on that.” Core gaming audiences would, according to Sheldon, bring those “impressions and eyeballs” to stories, but were also “fickle” and, as Khalid described, a “vocal” and “very opinionated” group. Treading this line for authors was not easy but points to a reality: As much as future predictions of virtual worlds’ social impact may seem to provide appealing stories, there is a significant audience dedicated to the subject already, if they can be reached.

Missing Lessons and Final Considerations on Coverage

This chapter has advanced five prescriptions in covering virtual worlds derived from working journalists. These are writers who spend untold time and energy, mostly in the world of tech, games, and internet culture, to apprehend the spaces and articulate their meaning to the public. In many ways, their lessons are incredibly grounded. They steer clear of specific games, focus on the people in virtual worlds, rely on information from the endemic press, foster game beats, and avoid hype about innovations and technologies. Together, these writers illustrate that those who actively chase stories about virtual spaces eventually return to basics.

A few writers openly admitted that they relied on very traditional techniques or reportage. Sherr expressed it simply: “Talk to people as much as you can.” For him, video games were just the product, compared to broader studies of online people and cultures. A reporter who had covered mostly sports but wrote some game profiles said, “Despite it being a completely new world and me not understanding what was happening on the screen, it is sort of just like covering anything else.” Two journalists stressed the merits of writing. Scharnagle, who also teaches esports reporting at Rowan University, said she valued the basics of journalism such as the inverted pyramid and interviewing in educating her students. As virtual worlds warrant more coverage, the actual means to do so are within the grasp of most news organizations.

Even so, I propose three supplementary lessons that may fall outside the purview of the very practical guidance already presented. The first is to prioritize coverage of the actual business and production of virtual world development. Not only has the game industry famously lacked transparency and tightly controlled access (Orland, 2015; Plante, 2021; Totilo, 2015), but emerging academic and professional writers have revealed significant strains in the labor and conditions of workers.²⁵ As exemplified by the disclosure in 2021 of Activision-Blizzard's toxic workspace, the press remains a vital venue to expose the inner workings of studios and publishers. Khalid brought up that recent coverage to show the beat was maturing: "I think claims of sexual, racial, and workplace harassment at places like Activision-Blizzard, things like that. ... I don't think gaming journalists are, if they were ever, they're in league with the video game studios anymore. There's more of a need for adversarial coverage of the video game industry and how they depict women, how they treat their own employees. I think there's an acknowledgement that more people need that." It is without question that these companies should be scrutinized, especially since they often overlap, are owned by, or otherwise interact with some of the world's largest tech companies.

Secondly, expanding what can be included in "virtual worlds" is vital. While major games, innovations in technology, or even the activities of celebrities and esports athletes are potential areas of coverage, there seem to be types of content still deemed unnewsworthy. An obvious example is mobile and casual gaming. These interrelated sectors of the industry are in fact what most people around the world interact with when it comes to games, and, by extension, virtual worlds. However, much of the play involved in this type of gaming is both quotidian and repetitive. "They don't lend themselves to easily accessible narratives," Schiesel said. "I mean, how much are you going to write about a game mashing bubbles and puzzle pieces? It's not as deep a level of engagement as a sixty-hour game with deep story and voice actors and actual narrative adult storytelling with character development."

Ironically, attention to *Animal Crossing* and *Among Us* during the pandemic produced an atypical set of human-interest stories and tactics. As Blake Hester noted in the context of his own magazine's inclusion of a number of indie low-budget titles in its annual list of best games, "When the pandemic started, we had so much more time than when these weird zeitgeist games that came out, like *Among Us* is the obvious example, [and] *Fall Guys*. We kind of had a moment where these indie games could truly capture the attention of everyone because no one had anything to do." In reality, there are so many topics that entwine virtual worlds that it is impossible to capture their totality, or even to expect singular beats to follow them. At best a certain level of literacy, knowledge, and recognition by newsmakers and the public about the diversity of virtual spaces can stand in for all-inclusive explanations.

Finally, how to cover virtual worlds depends on reader engagement. Many endemic and institutional writers were constrained by what would gain the most traction with potential readership, or driven by

clicks from the “SEO [search engine optimization] world that we live in,” which frustrated reporters like Asarch. “Clicks are what drove what was published and wasn’t published,” he said about his time at *Insider* before the pandemic. “So if the story was found to get eyeballs on it, and it was about a Twitch streamer, then it was more likely to happen,” adding that one of his last stories “was probably about the Stop the Hate raids that were happening on Twitch. And that got picked up by a lot of mainstream coverage in a way that a lot of Twitch media doesn’t, because it’s a sensationalist story that capitalizes on a pitfall of a tech giant.”

Engagement affects not only the content, but who covers it. As stated, many of those who write about games and virtual worlds are freelancers. I was stunned by the number of writers who changed employers over the course of this study. When writers move on, especially to tech companies, the result is a compression of the knowledge about digital spaces. An example cited by a few interviewees was the relatively short-lived esports coverage by ESPN, which started in 2016 and was dropped during the pandemic in 2020 (Smith, 2021). Its demise was due supposedly in part to low metrics. “I think ultimately ESPN resonates primarily with an audience that’s a bit older,” one former esports reporter said. “The younger esports generation doesn’t watch *Sports Center* every night. ... The esports people weren’t going to ESPN to find [news] even if ESPN was doing the best coverage.” Without affirmative metrics, the outlet could not maintain its six-person staff. Consequently, reporters such as Jacob Wolf dispersed to other outlets; as one interviewee described, “A lot of esports writers who previously might have been searching for more of the non-endemic major publications found that the esports publications where people ‘got it’ inherently suddenly had more money, more expertise, and more just cachet in the industry than they did previously after the ESPN shutdown.” The implication of this move is that writers did not need to bring these stories to the general public. This writer said they were “done trying to explain to editors why this matters. I think the ESPN shutdown spread a lot of wealth [of knowledge] around the industry that was previously concentrated.” As long as metrics predetermine coverage, not only will such coverage still remain outside of the influence of mainstream outlets, but its future in general will be unpredictable.

Overall, the lessons learned from journalists are encouraging. With proper investment and time, stories surrounding virtual-world communities and peoples are feasible. Beyond technical details, there is much journalists can survey and use themselves, as told in the next chapter.

LESSONS FROM JOURNALISTS ON USING VIRTUAL WORLDS

While the last section offered lessons in how to write *about* virtual worlds, this chapter examines how journalists can best use them. Without doubt, the prominence of various types of virtual spaces increased during the pandemic. Many of us now congregate in Zoom almost without thinking, major

conferences are held in Gather,²⁶ and gaming continues to seemingly grow exponentially. Digital spaces and affiliated platforms are core for communing with colleagues, family, and friends. Surprisingly, journalistic practice in such spaces received little attention in our corpus of articles. Instead, within a year of the first lockdowns, articles began to appear about Zoom fatigue (Miller, 2020) and worries over excessive screen time. Reporters did not move bureaus into virtual worlds, as they had done in *Second Life* two decades earlier, and print correspondents (in particular) neither turned to nor imagined using them. As evidence, *The Washington Post* abandoned Twitch in the midst of the pandemic. Schiesel encouraged me to look at YouTube for broadcast game journalism. He and a few others noted not only the quality of prerecorded content on YouTube, but also how the searchability features were better: “No one’s going to Twitch for gaming news,” he said. “People are going there to be entertained.” At a time when many outlets were covering how artists, gamers, and others were approaching virtual spaces, journalists themselves were doing the opposite.

This is not to say that venturing into virtual worlds was nonexistent. Seth Sommerfeld’s visits to celebrity islands in *Animal Crossing*, replete with pictures and videos, have already been mentioned. More entrenched endemic websites like Dexerto told me they livestreamed before, during, and after the pandemic. These examples underscore a utilitarian view of virtual worlds. Few interviewees imagined themselves reporting from the front lines of *Fortnite* or Meta’s *Horizon Worlds*, but many were very free with advice on how best to use virtual worlds and spaces to craft print stories. They recommended:

- *Avoid Being an Entertainer*
- *Be Familiar with Games*
- *Virtual Worlds Can Provide Great Sources*
- *The Problem with Platforms Continues in Virtual Space*

Each of these lessons is detailed below, followed by considerations of how virtual worlds can be used in the future.

Avoid Being an Entertainer

When I asked Jacob Wolf why he did not want to appear in a virtual world, specifically on Twitch, he immediately responded that it wasn’t for him. “I don’t want to be an influencer,” he contended.

The influencers that use Twitch have to be entertainers. They have to be funny. They have to be engaging, kind of over the top, even if it’s just an amplification of their own personality and it is an authentic amplification. I think that there have been [and] will continue to be instances of where that conflates with journalism ethics. ... It is hard, because journalism at

its core is a very important thing. But it candidly can be quite boring. I think it's very important to a society and growth of a society and accountability and everything else, but it's not flashy. I think that with the growth of Twitch and TikTok and YouTube and Fortnite and all of these various content platforms, they reward flashy.

His comments reinforce claims I heard from numerous reporters when it came to virtual worlds, namely that they weren't necessarily advantageous places for publishing or publicizing their work. This assertion is somewhat perplexing: on the one hand, as the Tow Center reported, publications and journalists alike have been burned by emerging platforms, having devoted teams to work on apps like Snapchat or Facebook without additional material reward for their labor.²⁷ On the other hand, this did not impede growth in a wide variety of formats, including podcasting, which increased modestly during the first year of the pandemic (Quah, 2021), and experiments with platforms from Clubhouse (Radcliffe, 2021) to TikTok, especially by *The Washington Post*, which was singled out for an atypical style "that calls for investing in and trying lots of different things, even things that feel strange and don't necessarily seem adjacent to the core mission" (Meek, 2021). At least one of my interviewees has left print journalism to produce their own podcast. Therefore, the choice to not work within such applications does not imply a dismissal of all novel formats.

However, it is true that virtual worlds require some level of performance. For those who operate on platforms like Twitch (or even in Zoom conferences), there are high expectations for action and feedback. Much of Twitch's content is oriented toward direct engagement with audiences, and cultivation of a personality and brand that can sustain subscriptions. Freelance journalists may consider taking this course, but for publications it can prove difficult, as witnessed by *The Washington Post*'s Twitch experiment, which vacillated between somewhat neutral C-SPAN-like content and talk show banter. Computer-generated images in virtual worlds like *Fortnite* or even the metaverse also require significant effort in terms of representation: choosing an avatar, effectively animating them, etc. Even designing bureaus or similar offices in virtual spaces requires skill, time, and labor.

For many of my writers, who were maneuvering between and around jobs, this level of investment was beyond and apart from their professional training. "I don't think the problem is always with the tech," said Dan Archer, referring to the use of virtual reality and worlds. "Sometimes it's with the way the traditional workflow works. I can think of one example of an old-school investigative reporter, who is just snowed under with deadlines and meetings — regular stuff — he doesn't have the time to put a headset on and experiment." Others, like Wolf, thought their labors would be boring to watch. He said, "A lot of my original reporting is background calls, document reading. None of that's interesting. I'm not going to throw that up on a screen."

Although journalists may not gravitate to virtual worlds for production, newsmaking happens in and around them. During the time of this research, Twitch was exploited by far-right extremists as a news production service, with groups like QAnon conspiracy theorists (Browning, 2021a) and Patriot’s Soapbox (Sommer, 2021) adopting it for an inexpensive and easy way to stream their punditry 24/7. (The platform has subsequently removed many of these streamers.) The thirteenth most popular streamer on the site is a very different kind of political commentator: Hasan Piker, formerly of *The Young Turks*. These are some of the broad types of coverage that occur beyond games and entertainment. Given the large sums of time, labor, and funds required to invest in virtual worlds, it seems incumbent upon newsrooms to consciously strategize how they can effectively enter these spaces and help shape conversation lest they find themselves decades later playing catchup.

Be Familiar with Games

Along with being able to aptly perform and manage virtual worlds, journalists, at a minimum, need to have some familiarity with them. Many of the writers understood that not every reporter had to be an expert gamer, or devote their energies to figuring out digital spaces over traditional newsmaking skills. At the same time, editors like Hester insisted writers not treat games “like an oddity. There’s an otherism almost to video game writing by some outlets. It’s like, ‘Can you believe, man, we’ve come a long way since *Pac-Man*?’ You don’t write that way about the MCU [Marvel Cinematic Universe].” As he put it, “Just cover them as realistic things that matter and are dictating a lot of pop culture and a lot of our world.”²⁸

To the same degree that the general population has some level of familiarity with myriad modes of media and entertainment, from TikTok to the movies, journalists should have more than a glancing knowledge of how to navigate games and virtual spaces as well as their broad inner workings.²⁹ This could manifest in many ways: for instance, knowing the names of a few key players in the industry, like John Hanke, the head of Niantic, or John Riccitiello, who runs Unity Technologies.³⁰ Interviewees even had a more elemental recommendation: Journalists should allocate, with their employer’s blessing, a specified amount of time — maybe an hour — each week to dabble in and play with virtual world technologies.³¹ “The great thing about gaming is that the barriers to entry are relatively low,” Schiesel said. “These are mass consumer products and technologies that anybody can sign up for and jump into. You don’t have to get on a plane. You don’t have to leave your house most of the time. Rather than approaching these things as something outside yourself from afar, it’s really easy to just try it yourself.”

This sort of training is rare in news outlets, particularly when journalists are on the clock. One writer did see some progress: “So, reviewing games means working after work, even if you’re playing video games. I see more publications becoming cognizant of that, and awarding comp days or comp time.”

These remarks also reinforce the fact that familiarity is not equivalent to expertise. Few interviewees insisted that knowledge of the ins and outs of virtual worlds was a requirement, an expectation that I found in previous research just a few years earlier.³² Instead, they argued it was required more for utility: to be able to describe a virtual space with ease, to navigate through the basics of controllers, and to find community members to interview. Taylor Hatmaker compared it to “travel French,” or knowing the equivalent of asking for directions to the bathroom. Ian Sherr expanded: “I try to play as many [games] as I can, for at least a little bit of time, so that I can get a sense of what the art is, but also what the experience is, because a lot of the conversation online flows from the memes and the kind of points of reference that come from it. If you don’t know some of the ins and outs of the storyline or the mechanics of that video game, you may not understand the cultural response to it.” Stephen made a similar point. “I think it was incredibly helpful for me to stream while I was covering Twitch, because I could understand what it was like to lose subscribers” and “to figure out how to use OBS,³³ that kind of stuff is invaluable. And you will not be able to write about it unless you understand exactly how everything works.”

Furthermore, these days it is easier to obtain familiarity with games to some degree. Not only is there a long history of new titles originating from older genres and experiences (de Vaan et al., 2015; Foxman et al., 2021), but also many virtual worlds have changed only incrementally since their inception. Although *Pokémon Go*, *League of Legends*, and even *Fortnite* have certainly evolved in gameplay, communication, and economics, their basics remain unaltered. Gaining a general proficiency in these games and platforms would prepare journalists to cover titles in more detail, or more easily hop into them if a newsworthy event with their community occurred. Thus, with the proper time and support, it is feasible for journalists to acquire a sufficient understanding to better use and navigate the virtual worlds surrounding them.

Virtual Worlds Can Provide Valuable Sources

Acquiring rudimentary skills will provide journalists with the tools to journey through virtual spaces in search of sources and inhabitants. However, to do so means co-existing and spending time in and around these worlds. As a way of staying involved, some interviewees kept Twitch or YouTube on in the background as they worked. Most respondents, however, turned to Discord and Reddit communities for much of their information and interviews. For Hatmaker, these were “the places where the conversation happens, and where the world lives when it’s not in the world.” Another reporter said, “The shout-out I’d make is Discord. I’ve seen most of my communities coalesce around Discord servers, not necessarily around specific games.” Asarch suggested, “Look on your Reddit, look on your Twitter, look at what people are talking about. Follow stories. Follow your nose, where people are talking and what they’re talking about. Follow the trending conversation.” These sites proved

particularly useful during the pandemic when the usual avenues for nurturing game-related sources, like conventions, dried up. Khan said, “It’s just really hard when everything is online at the moment. You just can’t have that eye contact,” or a drink to catch up with industry insiders.

That said, all the interviewees recognized that cultivating sources from these spaces was fraught. Blake Hester was ambivalent about Discord. While it was a “viable way to track people down,” he hesitated when it came to contacting potential sources through it: “I can’t bring myself to reach out. ... There’s a certain part of being a journalist that is behaving against social norms. You think of the journalist who shows up and knocks on someone’s [house door]. This is like the video game journalist equivalent.” However, he wondered, “Is it inappropriate for me to reach out this way, for me to be like, ‘I infiltrated your community to bother you about something’? It’s something I’m currently wrestling with.”

The messaging platforms were genuinely important for the communities themselves. As one long-time virtual worlds reporter warned, “Gamers are very precious about the spaces they spend their time in. And while it might seem like it’s not a super worthwhile use of time to read a lot about the game on the subreddit, or even talk to the game subreddit [moderators] or look at the Discord for that game, it’s not just because it’s going to make your story more accurate to the culture and community of that game, [but] if you do misinterpret something pertaining to a game, you will probably receive harassment. I think it’s just very important to take that extra time to really get to know a community and what it’s about.”

For interviewees with the most experience in virtual worlds, particularly in massive multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*, some practices evolved. One writer outlined a great set of fundamentals, advising, “I think it’s also important, if you are reporting on an online video game, to get a sense of what the community sort of wants you to report on. Reporters are doing a service.” Basically, this meant making sure not to exploit participants or even make them feel like they are being exploited, but rather earn their “time, energy, and trust.” They specified that, “The number one thing you can do to build trust is to show some investment in the game and in the community. So if you enter a game you’re going to report inside of it, create an avatar that you feel is in line with other avatars in that world; you don’t want to be wearing like a chainmail bikini.” A second major rule: “I think it’s good, whenever you can, to identify as a journalist. That can be tough in MMOs [because] you don’t have a bio line a lot of the time [in the avatar’s profile].” They added, “I think it’s good, if you are communicating with somebody or performing an action inside of the game, to publicly say that you are a journalist or tell your sources immediately.” Rule three was to “describe the reporting process and explain what it means to be on the record, off the record, on background, anonymous sources, etc. Always ask for people’s pronouns. Always ask if people are comfortable being identified.” Also, “have a conversation with your editor about the extent to which it’s important to push them [the source] on that [identification]. My own view

is that it's really okay to report on something someone's doing in a virtual world without using their real name, especially if you see it yourself personally, unless you are holding them accountable for something, in which case, it is important to at least have that information on hand." Finally, they cautioned that sources should feel "empowered in the process. Just because somebody is an avatar doesn't mean that they're not a human."

These sentiments were echoed by other interviewees. Hester advised journalists to ask themselves, "Am I being a professional? Am I putting my best foot forward as a journalist?" Seth Sommerfeld described his visits to celebrity islands in *Animal Crossing* for *The Washington Post* as being a delicate combination of "fly on the wall" reporting and making sure his subjects still felt they were having fun while they played, which required him to play the game as well.

These reporters' techniques, including announcing their occupation, crafting an image, and undergoing prolonged exposure to the community in order to build trust, sound almost ethnographic. It reflected other writers who "reconstructed" play (even before the pandemic), or stayed in the homes of players or game developers after building trust with them. Stephen, referencing the work of Jenn Frank (e.g., 2014) in *Second Life*, intimated that reporting in virtual worlds requires another ethnographic trait: reflexivity. Writers should "provide the estrangement necessary to interrogate the self." He added, "When you go into a game to report about it, are you enjoying it? Does this do something to you?" Academic literature, with its repository of studies on how to perform ethnographies of virtual spaces (Boellstorff, 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Brown, 2015; Pearce, 2011), can be a boon to journalists who are looking to uphold the best and most ethical practices. In addition, the research can offer some important lessons for representation and self-reflexivity in endeavors that require writers to make very explicit choices about their appearance, as well as interrogating the appearances and actions of others.

The benefits for writers are clear for community-driven storytelling. As Hatmaker stated, "You can only get it by spending time in the spaces in a natural, organic way. You can't come in as an outsider. You have to participate." She equated it to consuming content on YouTube: "You couldn't understand YouTube without seeing how YouTube works, searching for things and how the interface works, finding content through its algorithms. You have to immerse yourself." Spending time in and with those who occupy virtual spaces is the best way to truly spotlight what is happening in them.

The Problem with Platforms Persists in Virtual Spaces

The Tow Center consistently studies platforms and their relationship to publishers (e.g., Bell and Owen, 2017; Rashidian et al., 2019, 2020). Such research paints a frustrating, if not dire, picture of platform providers who have abdicated responsibility for their services and saddled users with the labor, efforts, and financial burden in developing news. Worse still, publishers are subject to the whims of those very

companies when they change their economic and algorithmic models for attracting customers. Further, the inflexible, black-boxed nature of platforms demands comprehension of its technical parameters, which lie outside of the domain of many newsrooms.

If any reader hopes that virtual worlds will ameliorate these conditions and afford more transparency or free social interaction and connection, my interviewees expressed the opposite. Quite a few alluded to the high barriers to entry into digital spaces, VR, and/or the metaverse. I have written separately about some of these impediments — content, affordability, supply chain, equitable design, and sociocultural drawbacks — in the context of VR adoption and the COVID-19 pandemic (Pimentel et al., 2021). Wolf also spoke to similar cultural barriers: “The gaming industry has a lot of problems it needs to deal with before it gets more eyeballs — racism, misogyny, etc., which us as an industry as a whole are doing our best to stamp out as much as humanly possible. But it’s still there, and it’s still festering, and it’s still a problem. I think it’s right to critique it, and it’s right to call it out.” He admitted that the endemic press was making attempts to do this, but “whether it’s succeeding or not is a different question.” Frankly, virtual worlds require both cultural scrutiny and simpler tools before widespread acceptance.

However, as with other platforms investigated by Tow, those already entrenched in them play leading roles in shaping the future spread of news and information. Concerning is that many of the same parties (e.g., tech giants like Meta) who engendered the pessimistic picture I described for social media are directing the course of virtual worlds. Meta’s “metaverse” exhibits all the hallmarks of a tightly controlled, siloed system. It appears to be an extension of the company’s broader prerogatives: to find ways to monetize novel forms of interactivity, connection, and communication. Therefore, the more publishers have a seat at the table as this expansion occurs, the more they may be able to influence how the next generation of platforms will operate.

Future Gazing: The Virtual World of Tomorrow

In recounting results from interviews with contemporary reporters covering virtual worlds, this chapter serves dual purposes. On the one hand, it portends a future imagined since the days of *Second Life* and carried on in Meta’s *Horizon Worlds* (Zwiezen, 2022) and similar projects, where everyday activities move into a fantastical and fully embodied digital space. It is at once an equally utopian and dystopian fantasy of an infinite space of possibilities, where people effortlessly switch between wondrous environments and can instantly and intimately connect with friends and family. Ultimately, the vision is a tantalizing dream of our lives extending in meaningful ways.

On the other hand, the chapter’s four lessons relay a somewhat different story. First, the future is in some ways already here. Even if they are imperfect, or focused more toward entertainment, the tools for expansive, persistent, and widely networked virtual worlds exist today, and journalists should learn to

use them. More importantly, they should deploy virtual worlds as a resource based on journalistic norms. My interviewees consistently advocated for understanding these worlds as integral to our real ones. “More and more things are happening online,” said one mainstream writer, adding that outlets “need people to look at them and be able to communicate to people what is happening online. When I first started, there was definitely a lot of skepticism that the internet, it’s not real life.” Recognizing that this was no longer the case, particularly after the January 6 Capitol riots, he added, “I think the digital space and the gaming worlds are places where I really hope young journalists try to commit themselves.”

Worries about a world apart underlie the other findings of this chapter. The most dystopian future is one where virtual worlds are closed off and separate from everyday life. In contrast to the nightmarish scenarios of *The Matrix* or *Ready Player One*, we should not consider virtual worlds as either an escape or different from our “reality.”

Journalists have the potential to act as gatekeepers of virtual spaces. They can serve as watchdogs over platforms that tightly control users’ activities. Just as news publications painstakingly uncover reprehensible dealings of social media giants, these writers have the ability to promote, explore, and expose both those who are intimately involved with these spaces and their benefactors. This reality undergirds my concluding thoughts, which summarize the report and suggest future areas for journalists and researchers to pursue.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the COVID-19 pandemic as a backdrop, this report explored what journalists are doing with and can learn from virtual worlds. Unprecedented restrictions and quarantines exposed how games, livestreaming and meeting services, and even future-forward concepts like virtual reality and the metaverse can serve as crucial and indispensable tools for daily communing and communication. A growing body of literature documents the positive role games played during the early stages of the pandemic in 2020, whether it was players filling the voids left from the cancellation of traditional sports (Ke and Wagner, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2021), or to cope with stress and social isolation (Barr and Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Pearce et al., 2021), even while potentially exacerbating issues surrounding online toxicity (Emmerich et al., 2020; Orlando, 2020; Perks, 2021). Games aside, it is abundantly clear that virtual spaces are here to stay, along with related mechanisms that allow for telepresence, immersion, and other means that simulate being “there,” whether for diversion, education, commerce, or business.

The pandemic merely accelerated a simmering trend: The report began by tying the current state of

virtual worlds to a lengthier history of online and digital journalism, started at least two decades earlier through PDFs like the *Second Life Herald* and continued in experiments by publications like *The Washington Post*'s Twitch page or Kotaku's reporting on sex workers in games ranging from *Animal Crossing* to *Final Fantasy XIV*. As much as the pandemic may have exposed the vitality of virtual worlds for much of the public and journalists alike, their importance superseded the coronavirus and requires careful consideration of their implications.

Rather than testing or evaluating the potential of these tools and spaces, the report focused on those already steeped in virtual worlds, who write about them from distinct angles like gaming and tech, and publish exhaustive investigative pieces for endemic and institutional outlets, as well as forward-thinking editors and freelancers. My goal was to discover and derive actionable lessons from these writers. The lessons are not just to inform the next generation, but to outline preliminary steps for today's journalists to deal with complicated, nuanced, and interconnected topics. Therefore, I will briefly summarize these lessons, then speculate on a few outstanding measures that may be taken by future news organizations and researchers.

Recommendations

From a methodical examination of coverage at the onset of the pandemic, a few distinct themes emerged:

- **The Ubiquity of Games in Everyday Life.** Games bubbled up as a serious area of interest for major news outlets around the country. The influx of articles underscores the dearth of and need for consistent coverage, especially as the influence of games grows in business, technology, and (digital) culture.
- **Framing the Future.** The long-held frame of virtual worlds as futuristic technologies did not change and was often imbued with a sense of inevitability. The persistence of this frame suggests that the time has come to rethink prevailing contentions about virtual worlds and the communities who use them.
- **Community Focus.** Much of the coverage in the midst of the pandemic homed in on diverse communities gravitating to or already entwined in virtual worlds. This not only points to the wide appeal of virtual spaces, but also illuminates how celebrities, the public, and even journalists employ them.

From interviews with journalists, five lessons in covering virtual worlds were distilled:

- **Specific Games/Platforms Do Not Matter.** As many of the most persistent and established virtual spaces are currently in or derived from gaming, interviewees emphasized that

reporters need not be game experts to write adeptly about them. However, both audiences and reporters are expected to have some working knowledge of game genres and conventions.

- **People Over Platforms.** Specific games matter less than those who use them. Respondents were adamant that it was people and communities that drove stories and should be the coverage's primary theme over innovations, technology, and novelty.
- **Partner with the Endemic Press.** If a majority of journalists concentrate on communities and possess only a working knowledge of virtual worlds, the endemic games and tech press can fill in gaps and provide nuance. Interviewees described a symbiotic relationship of work and information exchange between the two coteries of reporters.
- **Outlets Need Game Beats.** The exponential growth of virtual worlds and their consistent entanglement with contemporary tech businesses should convince mainstream outlets to devote writers to game beats, which would help combat current occupational precarity and institutional memory loss.
- **Avoid the (Virtual) Hype.** Reporters stressed that despite the significant hype around the potential of virtual worlds and related technologies, the abundance of human-interest and investigative stories today makes such prognosticating irrelevant.

Finally, because virtual worlds themselves are communication sites, journalists offered some overarching lessons for how they could be used.

- **Avoid Being an Entertainer.** Most virtual spaces are still entertainment hubs, whether people are playing games or streaming on Twitch. Interviewees, however, discouraged approaching them as a means of broadcast or engagement. Many felt that the burden of performing was too onerous for publications or writers to invest the time and energy to cultivate.
- **Be Familiar with Games.** Only a basic knowledge of games is necessary for most writers. Even devoting an hour per week to familiarize themselves with major titles can preclude writers from parachuting into a virtual world without necessary bearings.
- **Virtual Worlds Can Provide Valuable Sources.** Concurrent with a community focus, virtual worlds are very effective as avenues for sourcing. While this requires some reappraisal of journalistic methods, a generally more ethnographic approach can build trust in engaging with most users.

- **The Problem with Platforms Persists.** Unlike other networked technologies like the Web and even the Internet, most virtual worlds are closed environments that are currently being propped up by companies with track records of abdicating their responsibilities as gatekeepers. Therefore, it is incumbent upon journalists to start investing sooner, rather than later, into these spaces to foster productive public discourse about virtual worlds' future.

While these are only some of the lessons journalists derived from virtual worlds, they represent an agenda by which newsrooms and writers can address the subject and shape of their next decade of growth.

Final Considerations

These lessons provide an important overview for how journalists can begin to operate within virtual worlds. As they proliferate in size and scope, virtual worlds carry great potential areas for coverage, connections to sources, and windows into contemporary cultural and business issues. At the same time, it is difficult to discern exactly how impactful virtual worlds may be, and how the very practical lessons delineated above will fit into future digital journalistic practices. Print publications are still struggling with problems beset by social media platforms a decade earlier; the industry appears to be in upheaval, and much of what occurs in virtual and digital spaces comes to news organizations only when it breaks into “real” life, ranging from harassment campaigns like Gamergate (Nieborg and Foxman, 2018) to Microsoft’s acquisition of a game studio for \$68.7 billion (Warren, 2022). As my sources often repeated, there seems to be a perennial disconnect between some of the hallmarks of virtual worlds, particularly entertainment and gaming, and the everyday practice of many (if not most) journalists.³⁴

How can this discrepancy be bridged? As a start, I append three additional short observations. They stem not only from interviews, but from practitioners whose working lives are formed by their unique place within the larger media ecosystem, and who cover a subject that may not often be found on the splash pages of websites. These can be thought of as launch points for future research and practical concerns with which, hopefully, institutions will begin to wrestle in daily reporting.

The first is not to think about virtual worlds as a piece of future technology, but a current presence. “I think gaming started becoming entwined with almost every aspect of online life,” Hatmaker said. When it comes to the metaverse, “gaming almost is an invisible layer in the background that’s facilitating the social experience.” Companies like Meta, according to her, were building a gaming experience onto their social platforms. Virtual spaces are everywhere in society, with a variety of ancillary tools and deep ties to specific communities. Acknowledging the need to understand this pervasive digital environment should be an aim for many reporters. In the same way that their job, to a degree, requires literacy across many types of platforms, knowing how to navigate and talk about virtual worlds will

become an increasingly important part of daily communication. Further, it is within these spaces where many aspects of online culture, innovations, technology, and other modes of coverage are already occurring. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine how newsrooms of the future will be able to avoid such coverage.

This leads to my second observation: The status quo of virtual worlds coverage is haphazard and will remain so without investment. While neither I nor my respondents suggest that every news organization shift their entire focus to game or virtual world reporting, it is difficult to sustain meaningful coverage and institutional memory of these digital spaces due to the current precarious career conditions of games and tech writers. For many, this beat is an ongoing hustle to produce and justify coverage that can quickly cause burnout. Shortly after leaving his job, Asarch stated, “The advice I would honestly give to aspirational writers is that this world will beat the shit out of you. And unless you have a righteous vigor to really feel that you are making an impact in the world, there’s no reason to do it. Because if you talk to any writer in the space, my age or older, they will talk about burnout [and] disrespect.” Stephen saw job precarity as an industry-wide problem: “The bottom dropped out. ... Every journalist has accepted when they take a job, it’s like, ‘Yah, I’ll probably get laid off in six months, but I’m gonna take the salary and these benefits for now.’” It seems essential to find ways to scaffold and support this writing, whether through changes to occupational standards, hiring full-time writers, or finding partnerships between endemic and institutional press. And the consequences of these absences are clear. “I still don’t think that people fully respect or understand how big of a deal a lot of this stuff is, and the role even right now that playing in society from a cultural standpoint,” Noah Smith said. “Dances that were done in *Fortnite* are being done on the [football] field, or how people are meeting and making meaning and friends online, I think that that’s still not really connecting with a lot of older segments of society. And the people who are enjoying this now, if history is any judge, will continue to enjoy it as they get older.”

In other words, virtual worlds are often the breeding grounds of serious cultural concerns that will eventually explode into public view. Browning observed, “Gaming intersects with the real world. And we’re seeing that more and more: the Capitol riot, some of that was organized or livestreamed on DLive,³⁵ like a gaming site; and there’s all sorts of QAnon people streaming on Twitch.³⁶ There’s always overlap in terms of social media and gaming in real life.” Having reporters dedicated to investigating these earlier rather than later seems advisable.

As a final observation, this report is introductory. There are many practical and immediate ways to approach the coverage of virtual worlds. Given their ubiquity, legions of fans and users, and import, this study is intended as a conversation opener that hopefully will stimulate more lessons and greater wisdom. As these spaces normalize, continued reflexivity and reconsideration of their use and, most

importantly, early intervention by journalists to assure that information spreads equitably and meaningfully throughout virtual worlds is imperative. Reporters must summon their courage, grab a video game controller or a VR headset, and take the plunge.

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Maxwell Foxman is an assistant professor of media studies and game studies at the University of Oregon’s School of Journalism and Communication. His research focuses on the influences of games and the game industry in non-game contexts, including politics, technology innovation and journalism. Foxman is currently working on two book-length manuscripts: one on the mainstreaming of game journalism and another on early adopters of commercial immersive technologies (VR/AR) in New York City. Along with publishing for research institutions like the Tow Center for Digital Journalism and Data & Society, Foxman’s work can be found in *Convergence*, *Social Media + Society*, *First Monday*, and *Games and Culture*, among other outlets.

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Maxwell Foxman

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Shira Zilberstein

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 19TH, 2022

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Sara Rafsky

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Predictive journalism: On the role of computational prospection in news media

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Assisting court reporters with AI-enabled heuristics: What data journalists should know about building custom AI models

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