JOURNAL OF GAMES CRITICISM

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: GAMES COVERAGE AND ITS NETWORK OF AMBIVALENCES

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Abstract

It's as tough a time as ever for game critics, who seem to be stuck between a rock and a hard place —an industry that acts as gatekeepers to most of the information they cover and an increasingly combative readership. Because of these tensions, an exploratory study was conducted first of the emergence of game criticism and the historical role of critics in creating the conception of gamer identity and, second, the effect of that identity on critics' self-perception of their profession. We find that throughout the late 1980s and the end of the 20th century the game press was complicit in reinforcing the notion of the hardcore, primarily male "gamer," while at the same time wrestling with their role as mediators between the industry and audience to which they were beholden. Through a subsequent study of articles and public meta-criticism by prominent figures in the field, we describe a network of ambivalences

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over the basic elements of their practice—particularly style, content, and format—as well as what motivates their daily work. In order to cope with these ambivalences, game critics, in recommending changes to their craft, rely not on the occupational ideology—or a common set of shared professional values—but instead their personal background and ancillary careers. Finally, after reviewing this network of ambivalences and its effect on games writing, we suggest critics make efforts toward establishing a common critical authority for their field, particularly as their occupation enters the mainstream.

Introduction

Game critics seem increasingly stuck between a rock and a hard place—that is, between a well-funded and highly effective public relations machine and an outspoken, highly vocal audience that has a very clear sense of what it means to be a "gamer." In a series of reflections on her craft, game critic Leigh Alexander (2011) noted: "The thing game writing needs most is a much clearer definition of roles and audiences besides the broad division of 'industry' and 'consumer,'" adding, "tasking ourselves with serving our own more nuanced individual roles in the media landscape rather than competing for the same nebulous audiences: 'gamers' versus 'non-gamers' or 'business stuff' versus 'gamer stuff' will keep us from having the same stupid arguments about what a review is supposed to look like, or why the audience isn't getting what it needs from what it's reading."

Alexander (2011) touches upon several key issues that, taken together, mark a persistent sense of ambiguity among game critics. Contradictory perspectives appear to be held by game critics on

social media, and most recently the news. Before beginning his PhD, Foxman spent five years in secondary school education, where he founded an independent study program, which, among other things, helped students design their own video games.

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their own profession that together make up, shape, and structure their work. Through an analysis of the theoretical and historical development of gamer identity, as well as more recent discussions concerning game criticism, we aim to highlight how this ambivalence over a shared professional identity manifests in the meta-criticism of games critics. To do so, we start by discussing what Kirkpatrick (2013) calls the "constitutive ambivalences" within game culture: for decades, digital game culture has been fluctuating between calls for normalcy and exceptionalism, between seriousness versus youthfulness, and between mainstream acceptance among diverse audiences and the promotion instead of a dominant white, male, heterosexual subculture, or "hegemonic masculinity." This dissension has been brought about as well as sustained by game critics, the industry, and self-proclaimed gamers, and we theorize that these ambivalences together with dominant notions of the gamer identity affect game coverage and critics' professional identity, and thus their practices and coverage. More recently the exclusionary attitude inherent to the gamer identity was made tangible because of toxic actions by a militant group of mostly anonymous gamers rallying behind the Gamergate hashtag.

We illustrate, through a historical and textual analysis not only how game critics have helped shape the modern conception of games but also how they see their role in that process. Because individuals in the games press, similar to music journalists (Forde, 2003), have such a mutable understanding of the alleged differences between game criticism and game journalism, throughout this article we adhere to the notion of game critics and criticism, unless authors refer to

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Published January 2016

themselves otherwise. Similar to other forms of art criticism and newer forms of journalistic practices such as blogging, the decision to label oneself either as a critic or journalist has less to do with their occupational ethos or practices than with the institutional affiliation of authors. While doing similar work, as Fulton (2015) explained, those who work in "traditional media" were more prone to labeling themselves as journalists compared to those who "came to online publishing via other paths" (p. 364). Therefore, for the purpose of this article we understand game criticism as a specialized subset of journalism that is closely related to other forms of art and entertainment criticism. Game critics are platform agnostic and their work appears online, in academic venues such as this journal, as well as in traditional outlets such as magazines and newspapers. In the end, what binds game critics is a professional preoccupation with game coverage and critique. In the second part of this article we will offer a more in-depth discussion of how game criticism is related to the wider field of journalism and to what extent game criticism is similar to other forms of art criticism.

Building on recent historical research we argue that the entrenchment of critics within the established games culture is bound with that of the gamer. This overtly masculine, exclusionist identity has been discursively constructed, in part, through what Carlson (2009) called the "enthusiast press": a subset of journalism that "produces consumer-oriented publications that focus on publicizing specific categories of goods, often high-end technological products" (§4.10). In other words, this niche press has aided, through their published work, in the construction of the modern gamer identity in the wider cultural

conscience. By writing toward this specific audience, critics helped calcify this identity at the exclusion of others. In the UK this process took place throughout the second half of the 1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2015). At that point games began to make their way into more mainstream coverage and game critics began to develop their occupational ideology: the shared beliefs about the appropriate purposes and practices of the profession. Together with industry professionals and mainstream journalists covering games, the enthusiast press is therefore fully implicated in the constant reinforcement of gaming's constitutive ambivalences—or inherent contradictions—and the othering of the gamer identity.

Through close readings of meta-critical texts covering an eight year period and three major flashpoints in the appraisal of video game criticism, we first uncover the perpetual feeling of mental duress suffered by game critics, and, second, the means by which they seek to resolve this ambivalence over their identity through conflicting proposals on altering the style, content, and ultimately the format of articles. Uncertainty, conflict, and anxiety seem to be a staple among art and entertainment (i.e. film, television, theatre) critics in general as they deal with the challenges that come from their position within both the newsroom and the wider field of journalism (Jaakkola, 2015), where they must defend and champion their object of criticism.

However, we find that the degree of uncertainty about the professional role of the games critic is unique in both its complexity and degree of skepticism. Authors tended to adhere to neither a professional, nor gamer identity, instead using their own personal backgrounds to critically

reflect on their craft. The result of this orientation is what we term a "network of ambivalences," for games critics. Within this network issues such as identity, motivation, style, content, and format are intrinsically enmeshed and responsive to one another, and ultimately dominate the meta-discourse of games critics rather than any promotion of professional, or even personal standards.

In our final section, we discuss our findings and offer suggestions for further research. Drawing on examinations of the development of other arts and culture criticism, we suggest that critics make efforts toward establishing a common critical authority for their field particularly as the subject of games and its coverage enters mainstream newsrooms and the public consciousness.

Game Culture's Constitutive Ambivalences

From the 1980s onwards, both mainstream publications and specialist game magazines have been crucial in the social construction of the gamer identity. Critics are particularly relevant to the understanding of this identity because game culture is so heavily influenced by the ongoing interaction with a game's multitude of "paratextual" elements (Consalvo, 2007). These elements are not produced by the authors of the game, but are texts, promotional work, and other materials produced about it, which may in fact reveal more about the industry and culture surrounding the game than the game itself (Mäyrä, 2010). When it comes to understanding the fundamental role of game publications, we are much indebted to the work of Graeme Kirkpatrick (2013; 2014; 2015), a British sociologist who offers an in-depth account of how gamer and game critic identities originated,

to what extent they are intertwined, and how they were subsequently shaped in the early 1980s via UK gaming magazines. And while the UK may have progressed along a slightly different trajectory than other local game cultures in Europe and North America, we think that countries in these regions followed a similar path. (***1***) In the first part of this paper we will build on Kirkpatrick's historical work to contextualize the contemporary struggles of game critics over their professional identities.

It is important to contextualize the historical origins and subsequent development of a distinctive game culture as it is marked by "a series of constitutive ambivalences" (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 6): a number of inherent contradictions shared by gamers and game critics that have shaped and still shape the cultural perception and position of their beloved medium. These constitutive ambivalences are fluid and manifold, and touch upon the societal and cultural perception of both play and games. Kirkpatrick, (2013) in his work on the "gaming imaginary," remarks that playing games is generally considered pleasurable, harmless, and fun, while at the same time, there have been widespread concerns of addiction, aggression, and that play is a wasteful activity. Both overly positive and overly negative frames coexist and often cater to different audiences.

Video games are entangled with a sense of aspiration and progress beyond their non-digital counterparts. For instance, the twenty-first century, while just underway, has already been deemed to be one best handled by those who understand game design and play logic, or "ludic" (Zimmerman, 2014). Games are considered to be particularly exceptional because

the global industry has grown faster than other segments of the cultural industries; game technology is developing rapidly; and because games are interactive, they can offer unique experiences. Paradoxically, popular discussion also highlights "a recurrent concern with the normalcy of gaming practice and testifies to an enduring lack of self-confidence" (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 94). The game industry may be growing and technology may be advancing, but it seems that the perception of games as a cultural form continues having trouble "growing up" to the extent of being deemed "art."

Along with public discourse wavering between normalcy and exceptionalism, there is the persistent frame that games are child's play and, thus, should not be taken seriously. The implication of gaming's youthful (self) image is that gamers, critics, and game developers are continuously dismissive of their own relevance. It is this lack of faith—by those who consider themselves gamers and game critics—in one's object of adulation that runs throughout the history of game culture and game criticism. Both groups continually wrestle with being positioned outside the mainstream, while those on the inside seem to crave legitimacy and long for a cultural stamp of approval. Ironically, as we illustrate below, the process of othering games and the gamer identity is as much a result of those working in mainstream criticism as it is rooted in the exclusionary discursive practices of game critics and gamers themselves; game criticism at once helps define who is and isn't a gamer both within the industry and outside it in the mainstream.

In sum, game culture is immersed in a number of dominant dichotomies that are familiar to

gamers, players, and non-players: young versus old, capital versus creativity, hardcore versus casual, hardcore games for guys versus casual games for girls, "real" or authentic games versus the rest, and games being pathological versus educational. Many of these oppositions break down rather quickly or are so generic that they stop making sense when used to understand games and players. Also, a number of these dichotomies are constitutive of other media forms, such as graphic novels, but, grouped together, they are unique to game culture.

The Gamer Identity

Game culture's constitutive ambivalences are considered "normal in their abnormalcy" (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 2) and as a result many of those who consider themselves "gamers" spread a rather divisive rhetoric that can be understood as "you're either with us or against us." Most prominently, there is little disagreement among scholars that being a gamer (Fox & Tang, 2014), a game developer (Johnson, 2014), or a game critic (Fisher, 2012) is tied to a specific understanding of masculinity. Similarly, other important identity markers such as race, education, sexuality, and age seem to be implicitly assumed (Shaw, 2012); gamers, game developers, and critics are perceived to be predominantly white, young, and heterosexual (Fisher, 2015). Before exploring how the gamer identity became a lightning rod for the position of gamers versus game critics, let us first trace the origins of the cultural construction of the gamer identity, and briefly reflect on the effects of this identity in terms of audience diversity and its representation in games, magazines, and wider game culture. How did we arrive at this current state of a predominantly masculine-centered

view of the gamer?

Kirkpatrick (2014; 2015), in his study of UK game magazines in the 1980s, observes that a number of dedicated publications, such as *Computer and Video Games*, *Commodore User*, *Zzap!*, and *Crash*, helped construct a discourse that aimed to set itself apart from computer users and technology hobbyists. Historically, game critics have always been in direct contact with their readers, arguably more so than mainstream critics. For example, early game magazines in the US, such as *Nintendo Power*, offered extensive sections with reader-submitted letters filled with questions, praise, and biting sarcasm (Consalvo, 2007). UK magazines used op-eds, reviews, and letters pages to make sense of digital play and normalize gaming's constitutive ambivalences, while concurrently furthering the gendered construction of a gamer identity (Kirkpatrick, 2015). In the early 1980s, the readers of computer and game magazines were positioned as "tech-heads", "gamesters," or "games players," and were part of a discourse that was relatively gender neutral. However, by the second half of the 1980s "gaming culture became sexist" (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 103). Critics started to fulfill a didactic—or educational—role by separating game culture from that of tinkerers and hobbyists who inhabited the British "home computer" scene.

It bears repeating that, contrary to popular belief, it is not so much game technology, the content of games, nor digital gaming's history or familiarity with other domains, such as the British computer hobbyist culture, that exclusively shaped the gamer identity. Rather, it is through a number of discursive strategies, such as the implicit positioning of the reader as a man, or outright

sexist statements published in letters segments, that magazines started to promote an "aggressive masculinity." As Kirkpatrick (2014) put it: "The authentic gamer is produced through a subtle interweaving of negative stereotypes with assertions of validity" (p. 14); he is defined and validated by his opposition to other groups. This view is echoed by Taylor (2008), who noted that rather than games or game mechanics being decidedly masculine, it is this exclusionary induction process of "becoming a gamer" that is fully geared towards (young) men. Female and transgender gamers play under continuous threat of harassment to the point where they devise strategies to deal with the off-putting social environment to which they remain outsiders (Cote, 2015). Consequently, rather than taking an emancipatory or inclusive approach to writing in order to push games into the mainstream, specialist game magazines played a vital role in demarcating rigid boundaries of a game identity proper.

A Hardcore Revolution

What emerges from our brief overview of the development of contemporary games culture is a historically contingent and discursively constructed identity of video games and gamers. Despite the exclusionary practices that have been part of making the gamer identity, over the last decade games have slowly and steadily been incorporated into mass culture. This evolution coincides with massive growth in the scale and scope of the game industry and a diversification of audiences, game genres, and platforms—a transformation that Juul (2010) dubbed the "casual revolution." However, rather than ushering in a golden age of game criticism, for many industry professionals the last years have

been anything but casual. As with many other revolutions, the mainstreaming of games and game culture has involved its own moments of friction, and sometimes even outright violence. While this struggle affects the work of game developers, game scholars, and players, game critics have been at the forefront of this ongoing clash of cultures. We argue that the root of many of these conflicts, and what has made the job of the game critic increasingly frustrating, can be traced back to both the strong and close bonds of critics with their audience through a shared understanding of the gamer identity discussed previously, and the uneven relationship of critics vis-à-vis the game industry. Let us focus on the latter.

Just as game magazines culturally shaped a clearly defined gamer identity, it is in the mid-1980s in the UK that games became, first and foremost, cultural commodities (or products). The audience for games was as much an industry construction as it was discursively shaped by the early generations of game critics. A small set of publishers changed their merchandise to fit a targeted demographic, resulting in "a discernible narrowing of the content of games around a set of preferences and tastes that are held to be those of the authentic gamer" (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p, 104). As a consequence, game magazines served a crucial role within the wider web of sometimes highly intricate information concerning what and how to play, but did so in an increasingly subordinate position to the game industry (Carlson, 2009; Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009).

What sets game critics apart from their readers is not only their knowledge, dedication, writing proficiency, and playing skills, but also their ability to gain access to the *inner sanctum* of the

industry. For decades a select group of game critics have been allowed, or in many cases even expected by gamers, to interact directly with an industry that is, as O'Donnell (2014) described, notoriously secretive and opaque. The chosen few are granted access to early game builds and expensive machines on which to play them, as well as press events and lavish press trips to studios all over the world. Because of this close relationship, and a reliance on industry access and information, game critics were quickly co-opted by the industry; add to that another significant source of codependency in that for many dedicated game publications the main source of advertising revenue originates from the game industry (Ribbens & Steegen, 2012).(**2**) This is not to say that game critics do not have their own voice or that they are industry lapdogs. Rather, it remains a rather unattainable position to maintain a distance from an industry that is essentially the alpha and omega of generating editorial content.

While there have been critical rumblings for years, the strong bond between game critics and the industry was brought to light by the recent debate over "ethics in game journalism." During the summer of 2014 many of the ambivalences inherent to games culture and criticism reached a boiling point, turning the casual revolution into a rather hardcore affair. By then, a largely anonymous group of online individuals, loosely aligned under the moniker of #Gamergate and congregating on platforms such as Reddit, "chan" message boards, social media, and blogs, began openly questioning the intimate relationship between journalists and the industry.(**3**) While a subset of Gamergate proponents do seem sincere in their motivation to debate alleged cases of "collusion" between

critics and the industry, recent academic studies on Gamergate suggest that those who align themselves with the movement are mostly concerned with two very different issues: a particular belief of the "proper" place of what Gamergate proponents specifically consider non-traditional, mostly female gamers, within game culture, and a fear of changes to what "real" games are (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2015).

Tellingly, the initial targets of online agitators were a small group of women who very much do not self-identify as games critics. Game scholar Sam Srauy noted that "the vitriol hurled overwhelmingly at women throughout the #Gamer[g]ate ordeal seems to me evidence that hate may be power politics" (Shepherd, Harvey, Jordan, Srauy, & Miltner, 2015, p. 4). Seen this way, Gamergaters prove to be highly protective of their current status as the keepers of all things gaming and many of their hostile actions are directed at those who they perceive as threats to the status quo by calling for a more diverse understanding of the gamer identity. In later rounds of harassment, Gamergate supporters went after anyone who dared to question its conspiratorial ideology of preserving the predominantly male gamer as archetype of the games industry, saving, again, their harshest tactics for attacks against women and game critics. These supposed "enemies of games and gamers" are labeled as "Social Justice Warriors," who want to change gaming forever. Gamergate, then, Massanari (2015) argued, was indicative of "an ongoing backlash against women and their use of technology and participation in public life" (p. 2).

If Gamergate proponents would truly be

interested in debating "ethics in game journalism," one would assume that they would at least acknowledge its problematic political economy (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009); a game publication's viability is often dependent on gaining industry access, which promotes certain tropes of games, the people who play them, and the way about which they should be written. Yet another one of the many ironies of the mixed bag of Gamergate ideology is that the game industry —the hand that so eagerly fed critics editorial content and advertising dollars for decades—has received remarkably little scrutiny. Then again, to engage directly with the industry may lead to a severe case of cognitive dissonance, because, as Fron, Fullerton, Ford Morie, and Pearce (2007) noted, "far from counter-culture Geekdom, the 'gamer' is a self-fulfilling prophecy, a highly commoditized market demographic that follows precisely the pattern dictated by the industry by which it has been constructed" (p. 7). To confront the game industry would mean to confront the very core of what it means to be a gamer. Ultimately, the Gamergate movement heralds as much the end of an era of a game culture dominated by a particular identity, as it is a continuation of a decade long string of seemingly isolated cases of hostility towards outsiders, particularly women, that together form a "pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position" (Consalvo, 2012, p. 1). Next we will offer an overview of the literature on game criticism to see why game critics remain deeply ambivalent and conflicted about their work, particularly on how to define the values and norms—or occupational ideology—of game criticism.

The Occupational Ideology of Game Criticism

Since game critics themselves traditionally have been fans, enthusiasts, and super-players, it remains unanswered how they perceive themselves and their work within the larger sphere of journalism and media criticism. A starting point to discern how critics give meaning to their work is Deuze's (2005) operationalization of the "occupational ideology" of mainstream journalists, which denoted a specific "collection of values, strategies and formal codes" among practitioners (p. 446). In the case of journalists, this collection breaks down into five values—public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics—categories that are constantly contested because of changing cultural and technological developments (Deuze, 2005, p. 447). A review of the literature on various sub-genres of art and media criticism suggests that media critics subscribe to a similar but different set of values and formal codes. Like mainstream journalists, the media critic's autonomy is considered an "ideal-type" that is perpetually challenged by a plethora of institutional, commercial and political pressures (Debenedetti, 2006). Yet, given how closely related mainstream journalism and media criticism are, there is a widespread sense of confusion and contention among both practitioners and scholars about the differences between being considered a media or game critic, or a game journalist.

The fluidity that accompanies the occupational ideology of mainstream journalists translates into an unstable understanding of the roles and self-definition of the game press. Jaakkola (2015) proposed the umbrella term of "cultural journalism" as a "distinct subfield of journalism" that is "pertinent to the journalistic ideology and its practices but differentiated from them

through specialization" (p. 541). In their examination of the self-image of "arts journalists," Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen (2007), come to a similar conclusion: They considered arts journalists as a subset of news journalists, who at the same time are more "qualified" and "qualitatively different" from news journalists and should follow a promotional mission about the transformative nature of the arts (p. 620). These authors focus their analysis on those working for established news organizations, which explains the implied hierarchy in their operationalization of cultural or art journalism. In his work on the music press in the UK, Forde (2003) also underscored how music journalists exist "both inside and outside the traditional journalistic sphere," noting that those who engage in music criticism label themselves in various ways, ranging from music journalist to critic. Forde's (2003) work was particularly instructive because his in-depth comparison between "hard" news journalism and music journalism is strikingly congruent with games criticism. In his work he connected music journalism to a particular political economy and reflected on writers' self-perception. Moreover, he highlights how these elements, along with implied target audiences, shaped both the editorial content and practices of music journalists. Following Forde (2003), we also understand games critics as being different from traditional journalists "most notably in terms of qualifications and entry routes, their position (in the main) as critics rather than reporters or correspondents and their self-evaluation of their socio-cultural function" (p. 120).

Given the vital role of game critics in the maintenance and legitimization of game culture (Newman, 2008), there is surprisingly little

research on the historical and contemporary role, position, and work practices of game critics. Within the small body of work on game journalism, there is a consensus that the occupational values associated with journalism, such as the ones listed by Deuze (2005), as well as the media critic's autonomy are severely compromised. Game criticism can be considered as a form of "lifestyle journalism" (Ribbens & Steegen, 2012) or "entertainment journalism" (Fisher, 2012), and is an occupation that is rife with tension. Based on interviews with Belgian game critics, Ribbens and Steegen (2012) singled out three points of friction, which together form the basis of the game critic's occupational ideology.

First, as previously noted, because of its evaluative nature, game criticism is an inherently subjective practice (Jennings, 2015; Karhulahti, 2015). Critics, however, often invoke the notion of objectivity as an ideal-type. Challenging their own autonomy, reviewers try to mitigate the uncertainty they experience by pursuing agreement strategies in which they compare and adjust review copy and scores based on the opinion of their peers (Ribbens & Steegan, 2012). Second, there are the overarching constitutive ambivalences that shape game culture and gamer identity, with which game critics also have to grapple on a daily basis. "The identity 'gamer,'" Kirkpatrick (2013) argued, "is one that few people wear in complete seriousness" (p. 96). The same can be said of the notion of "game *journalism*," as the frivolous connotation of play makes the idea of hard-hitting investigative game journalism sound grotesque, even to the ears of dedicated game critics, particularly when comparing their beat to politics, crime, or foreign affairs (Fisher, 2012).

The third source of ambivalence stems from the symbiotic relationship between critics and the game industry. The professional identity of critics is fully enmeshed within the consumerist identity of gamers and the continuous celebration of rampant consumerism. Carlson (2009) remarks that critics have positioned themselves to be mediators of value, or more precisely "game capital" (Consalvo, 2007)—the prized set of skills, experience and knowledge that helps define a common gaming culture (Mäyrä, 2010)—between the industry and the public. Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) suggested that "the occupational ideology of the modern day game journalist is therefore based on a new conception of journalism: journalists do not aim to work as watchdogs of the establishment, but rather as mediators of the value statements that deliver game capital" (p. 6). Game critics are not at all comfortable with the industry's eternal *quid pro quo*. Instead, Fisher (2012) argued, there is an "ideology of anxiety" that is rooted in the industry's ability to "blackball" critics, holding them accountable for deviating review scores or threatening their publications with pulling advertising and denying access to future events and material. As a result, Fisher suggests that this culture of fear has led to a pervasive sense of resignation among journalists, and is used to justify self-censorship and self-imposed limits.

Taken together, the three components that constitute the occupational ideology of game critics are embedded in the constitutive ambivalences of gamer identity and the political economy of game criticism. As public servants, game critics have a very narrow view of who their public is. In his interviews with US game critics and journalists, Fisher (2012) commented that critics rarely acknowledge their own

complicity in the position and portrayal of women (p. 215). That is to say, insensitivity towards the position of women is accepted, however implicitly, among game critics, as game reviews tend to structurally under-represent or even totally ignore women or position them as sex objects (Ivory, 2006; Miller & Summers, 2007). And because of their dependency on the industry, critics struggle with autonomy, objectivity, and above all, ethics. If Fisher's (2012) work is any indication, critics would readily agree with the observation that "[o]verall the journalists portrayed videogame journalism as an industry that is young, naive, and quite enthusiastic - but with few of the skills necessary to properly critique or evaluate the industry on which they report" (p. 174).

However, as illustrated by Fisher's (2012) critique, games critics do seem aware of the compromised identity and space they occupy. In fact, many prominent critics have written biting critiques and reflections on both their profession and the larger games industry. These pieces act as a manifestation of the ambivalence and anxiety experienced by game critics. In the following section, we will analyze and describe some of this meta-criticism of game criticism, in order to better understand how conflicts in the critic's identity manifest in his or her daily work and in their occupational ideology.

The Manifestation of Critical Ambivalence

To gain a deeper insight into the ways in which the ambivalences of games culture are exhibited in the considerations and practices of game critics, we performed an exploratory study of the self-perception of game critics that is integral to the construction of their occupational ideology—or a common set of shared professional values. It

builds off of similar studies of arts and popular culture meta-criticism within the journalistic field (Forde, 2003; Frey, 2015; Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Jaakkola, 2015; Rixon 2013). We understand meta-criticism in this context as a form of "public reflexivity" (Jaakkola, 2015, p. 539), or instances of communal self-examination that are common in arts communication and discuss the "principles, methods and terms of criticism" (p. 539). Jaakkola (2015) noted the potency of meta-criticism, particularly as a means of comprehending long-term changes in the concept of the work and role of critics (p. 549).

Studies in meta-criticism throughout the arts emphasize two key contested themes that shape the role of critics over time. The first of these relates to the role the industry plays in shaping both the publications and journalistic identity of media critics. For instance, not only were music journalists' professional self-perception and practices within the newsroom driven by market forces (Forde, 2003), but also television critics were increasingly pressured to preview rather than review upcoming shows as an economic boon to newspapers in the 1980s (Rixon, 2013, p. 392). Additionally, the role of the arts and culture critic itself is often contested ground. Frey (2015) revealed a "crisis of authority" (p. 26) being a consistent and recurrent theme in film criticism from its inception at the turn of the 20th century in which critics consistently forewarn of their waning ability to speak to and have impact on the public (p. 8). This is echoed in Jaakkola's (2015) study of cultural journalists, who held simultaneous and often conflicting fears of an imminent crisis due to the elitization, popularization, commercialization, "journalistification" and general apathy toward

their occupation. Despite concerns by critics over their own impact and authority, they tend to define their practice around having specialized knowledge of their subject matter (Forde, 2003; Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Jaakkola, 2015) and a different kind of authority from their journalistic counterparts, which doesn't necessarily adhere to notions of objectivity.

For our analysis, we scrutinized the published statements and work of English-speaking game critics—including, among others, Stephen Totilo, Kieron Gillen, Leigh Alexander, and Cara Ellison. These authors were selected because of their prominence within conversations about the quality and standards of game criticism, particularly by the online enthusiast game press. (**4**) We take inspiration from the work of Martin and Deuze (2009) who used prominent voices in online communities and journals to highlight the construction of the "indie professional identity in gamework" (p. 279). Our study focuses primarily on the rhetorical construction of that identity by the professionals themselves, which has been found to be "instrumental in asserting a critical authority…" (Frey, 2015, p. 26). While a majority of articles come from the enthusiast press or personal sites, mainstream articles have also been included. A collection of sixty articles was amassed, focusing on the subjects of self-reflection, contentions within and critiques of game criticism and its practices over the past eight years. It should be noted that our analysis is also informed by the second author's decade-long work as a freelance game critic working for several Dutch publications, chief among which was the daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. Through close readings of these texts we first uncover the perpetual feeling of mental duress suffered by game critics, and second, the means

by which these critics seek to resolve their ambivalence over their identity through conflicting proposals on altering the style, content, and, ultimately, format of articles.

Our period of analysis covers three particular flashpoints related to the role and position of game critics, which seem to occur every few years within the profession (Gursoy, 2013). One of the first major scandals that made the contentious relationship between game publishers and game critics very explicit was the firing of Jeff Gerstmann from GameSpot's editorial team. In 2007 Gerstmann wrote an unfavorable review of *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* as the game's publisher heavily advertised the game on GameSpot's website. While, as Fisher (2012) noted, a direct link between the review score and Gerstmann's dismissal has never been openly confirmed by either party, the game critics interviewed for his research "looked at that incident as having a chilling effect on the articles they wrote and on the reviews they posted" (p. 189).

The second flashpoint was the "Doritogate" controversy in 2012, in which the relationship between critics and the industry was again exposed through the caustic censure of Geoff Keighley, a leading voice whose image next to a bag of Doritos chips and soft drinks became a meme for the overly intimate relationship between critics and the public relations industry (Gursoy, 2013, p. 32). The final flashpoint concerns the aforementioned rise of the Gamergate movement, which drew biting criticism and introspection about the game industry and its culture, including its coverage, by both the game press and mainstream outlets (Chess & Shaw, 2015).

The goal of this study is to explore the public statements and writing of game critics about their profession, which we established earlier, helped construct gamer culture and identity. One of the overarching issues we noticed has been described by Fisher (2012) as a persistent anxiety by game critics "toward their jobs, their daily work routines, and the companies they are supposed to be investigating, writing about, and judging for their readers" (p. 207). This apprehension stems partly from the aforementioned "ideology of anxiety" that originates from external pressures. A picture emerges of critics mired in, yet aware of, circumstances that they tacitly accept.

In the following sections we will examine the constitutive elements of this ambivalence. We identified a set of four common subjects in our texts. First, game critics explicated their motivations for not only entering, but also continuing within and even exiting their chosen profession. In many cases, critics had origin stories and assumptions about what game criticism should be, which did not cohere with their reality. This often caused anxiety and even frustration over how to work within the industry, and ultimately led to contradictory eulogies concerning exits of prominent writers from the workplace. Second, critics tended to reflect on and critique their craft. Style and tone —particularly the use of objective and subjective voices—remained a constant and often unresolved debate. Critics took positions based on authorial mindset, perspective, and oeuvre, rather than on any clearly articulated external criteria. A third element that emerges concerned content. We find that self-identification frequently drove content choices. Authors used critiques of content as platforms to inaugurate

their own subjects for consideration within game criticism. We also briefly observe that the issue of gender was part of the conversation, and was a topic that authors in their advocacy for wider coverage invoke in tandem with other groups that were traditionally marginalized. Rather than calls for inclusivity, format of articles, be they reviews, previews, features, or something else entirely, becomes the fourth and final area of significant criticism. No current structure or format best represents game criticism. Instead, writers pointed to this and sometimes offered solutions, again primarily based on their professional intent and identity.

From our analysis a "network of ambivalences" surfaces, in which identity, motivation, style, content, and format are intrinsically enmeshed and responsive to one another. Studies of art criticism highlight that it isn't wholly uncommon for writers to have contradictory or even ambiguous understanding of their craft. Arts writing is often considered a subculture (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Jaakola, 2015) within the larger newsroom, fighting to establish and protect its identity against other cultures. Nor is it unusual for style and tone of media critics to change along with the medium (Frey, 2015; Rixon, 2013). Still, the complexity, contestation and doubt that emerge from the network of ambivalences in games criticism are particularly pronounced. For instance, we find that critics assumed opposing stances not only to other writers, but also within their own texts—contradicting or obfuscating one side with another—producing even more ambivalence about the purpose of game criticism altogether.

Origins, Obstacles, and Futures

In the critique of the state of game criticism, our

analysis uncovers a somewhat consistent tale relayed by numerous authors concerning motivation and identity, which breaks down into three sub-themes. For starters critics recalled preconceived notions about game criticism that attracted them to the profession in the first place. This reverie, however, was at odds with their current status. The second theme is a set of external and particularly industry-related obstacles for which they blamed their disillusionment. Finally, they use these obstacles as a launching pad to either depart from the industry or advocate for change. Of significance throughout their explanations is a lingering tone of anxiety, and even frustration over their identity as critics.

Origins. In his scathing rebuke of the game press, Christian Nutt (2011) recounted his progress in the industry. He began by describing an idyllic past: writing on games "naturally, effortlessly, daily," before becoming "an enthusiastic paid amateur trying to tell others, in the cleverest and most beautiful way I knew." However, after years of toil, he was only left with a "feeling of obligation" in part because game publishers "manipulated the editors to the point where good work became impossible, or at least irrelevant." Ambivalences are prevalent throughout Nutt's brief personal history. The very youthful enthusiasm as a gamer that drove him to begin writing contained the very failings that ultimately forced him to eventually check out as a writer. Nutt's resentment supports Fisher's (2012) notions of anxiety within the game criticism community.

Many a game critic started working for free and through luck or talent rose through the ranks to become a professional—making a living out of

playing and writing about games. Here we see a fascinating parallel between critics and game developers. Both are, "gamers par excellence," who spend their days deconstructing game mechanics and gameplay (O'Donnell, 2014). Another relevant parallel between developers and critics is high staff turnover. The average age of game developers remains surprisingly low (O'Donnell, 2014), and the same is true for critics (Fisher, 2012). For decades the game industry has been, in many ways, a young industry, especially when it concerns the rank-and-file.

Obstacles. Along with their origin stories, we identify a number of external obstacles—namely the audience of readers, the critical community itself, and finally the most oft-cited deterrence, the games industry at large—which appear to be intrinsically linked to game critics' identities. The role of the audience in thwarting progress in game criticism elicited conflicting responses. On the one hand, readers' disinterest in anything but the most banal criticism was seen as an impediment (Alexander, 2011; Maresca, 2013; Yin-Poole, 2014). On the other hand, writers advocated for their viewpoint to be detached from the desires of their readers (Tassi, 2012; Young, 2014). Similarly, the game criticism community was cited as another major obstacle. A number of authors underscored how significant space in game criticism is devoted to showcasing its defects (Alexander, 2011; Rayfield, 2012; Totilo, 2012). Tension and recurrent debates on the death of a medium are common in art and popular culture criticism (Frey, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015). Regardless, one music journalist-turned games writer analogized, "But in over five years, not once did I hear anyone take issue with the state of music journalism as a concept. Not another writer,

editor, musician, publicist, event coordinator either here or overseas ever said to me that they believed music journalism was 'broken'" (Rayfield, 2012).

However, the most often invoked impediment to changes in game criticism was the industry (Alexander, 2011; Brice, 2014; Cifaldi, 2011; Gwaltney, 2014; Maresca, 2013; Totilo, 2012; Walker, 2012). Writers readily accept that there existed an environment where there was a "blurring of lines between PR and games journalism" (Gwaltney, 2014), but also an overly-intimate space where "writers face a steep uphill battle against an ingrained system if they ever want to do any kind of work that isn't just more complicity in the AAA sales machine" (Alexander, 2011). Game critics recognize their own collusion within the very system they disparage, but seem unable to fundamentally change. As with their explanation of what motivated them to seek a career in game criticism, these authors reveal their own accountability in what, at first glance, seems to be external handicaps.

Futures. Critics also reflect on their motives as they advanced in their careers. In these statements, once again, our analysis is filled with contradictions. A common trope emerges when authors contemplated leaving the industry, or eulogized those who had (Ellison, 2015; Rose, 2014). Cara Ellison (2015) invoked and praised others who had left the industry in her own farewell, but concluded by simultaneously lauding game criticism, while faulting the occupation: "But the reason other games critics have gone on to amazing things before me is that they were just good writers. They were just passionate creative people… I have marginalised

myself in a wide world of criticism and writing." In recounting the limits of game criticism that were driving her away, Ellison claimed only a few sentences later that "... there's so much passion put into different ways to express how games touch us..." Exhibited is ambivalence between ability and occupation. While Ellison clearly wanted to cease identifying as a game critic, her precise reasons for doing so are complicated and unclear. Throughout these instances of meta-criticism, the industry's immutability is reflected in critics' writing: "Nothing will change unless people want it to. We can do a bit of convincing, but we can't force people to want more" (Sheffield, 2011b). Next, we will explore the meta-criticism of practice, where self-doubt also prompt concerns about style, content, and structure.

Style and Tone

Throughout our texts we discern a link between the ambivalence of a critic's identity and stylistic choices. These choices generally surround the tone of a piece and align with how critics self-identify. Those critics who cited origins in music criticism, for instance, would advocate for a more subjective writing style for games. When critics were ambivalent about their professional role, they conveyed that ambivalence in their critique of style, often contradicting themselves in terms of how tone should be used. Unlike previous studies of arts and culture criticism, which show either calls for a particular tone or style to add gravitas to a medium (Frey, 2015), or the steady inclusion of new styles and tones as a medium matures (Rixon, 2013), our analysis of game criticism once again exhibits a murky and conflicting view of how best to approach games writing.

Perhaps the most renowned recommendation for stylistic changes to game criticism was the manifesto written by Kieron Gillen (2004) concerning "new game journalism," which he recanted a year later, stating that "there are so many directions that games writing could and should go, picking just one seemed obscene" (Gillen, 2005). In this, we can already detect the internal conflict over how to write about games. On the one hand, the personal voice is viewed as necessary for engaging users (Walker, 2014) and providing more authentic coverage (Gillen, 2004). A critic's greatest attribute is his or her distinct and personal voice (Bissell & Ferrari, 2011; Brice, 2014; Irwin, 2011; Young, 2014; Zucker-Scharff, 2012). On the other hand, the plethora of new voices, particularly those deemed as amateur, is considered a problematic addition to the industry.

As a consequence, criticisms on tone could be confusing and even contradictory. While a more professional and grounded tone (Cook, 2011) was advocated, snobbish (Totilo, 2012; Woodard, 2011; Yin-Poole, 2014) and jargon-filled language (Hamilton, 2014) was equally disputed. A few campaigned for particular styles to be incorporated within the ambit of game criticism, including specialization (Abraham, 2014), more "gonzo journalism" (Ellison, 2015) and creative non-fiction (Wirtanen, 2014). Not materializing in these debates is any consensus around standards for writers' styles. Instead, personal choices drive stylistic decisions. Brandon Sheffield (2011a) evinced this in the development of his own voice: He "tried to voice things that were personal but relatable. Nobody gives a shit what I ate for dinner, but people do care about lost love and feelings of deep nostalgia, or abandoned innocence."

Stylistic choices seem to be correlated to the professional background of the critic. Since game criticism is populated by fans, players, designers, and art critics, among others, these ancillary professions influence stylistic options. Those oriented towards game design and academia promoted styles focused on the science of games (Cook, 2011), or an understanding of their procedural literacy (Bissell & Ferrari, 2011). Those oriented towards the arts, by contrast, and specifically music criticism, supported a more creative approach (Gillen, 2004; Jeffries, 2008; Rayfield, 2012). However, because the primary professional identity of game critics is blurred as they double as academics, practitioners, and critics (Keogh, 2014; Jennings, 2015), they often attempted to deconstruct one style, while appreciating its opposite. As a consequence, with no standard to guide them, critics argued based upon personal beliefs and the bodies of work they had built.

Content and Subject

There is a fundamental disagreement on what qualifies as viable content for games coverage. This is perhaps most acutely portrayed in a debate between Tom Bissell and Simon Ferrari (2011), in which Bissell supported the importance of storytelling within games criticism, while Ferrari pushed for a focus on the rules and processes of a game's system. Likewise, critics have demonstrated their ambivalence over the most fundamental definitions of gameplay (Kirkpatrick, 2013), including "games" and "fun" (Gursoy, 2013) and on their status within the wider game culture. What is considered relevant content for games coverage issues not so much from what game criticism is, but what it could be. In some ways this aspirational viewpoint may

stem from the fact that gamers, critics, and industry professionals often inhabit contradictory positions—expressing a deeply held faith in games' artistic value, implicitly demanding societal acceptance, while simultaneously fostering a discourse that prevents mainstream endorsement.

These contradictory positions manifest in oblique calls for inclusion of underrepresented content and subject matter into games criticism. Game designer and writer Mattie Brice (2014) reproached the coverage of popular games and saw independent games as a means of promoting social justice, and generally the addition of independent and art house games into coverage was the subject of critique (Allen, 2014; Rose, 2014; Yin-Poole, 2014). Bringing different voices to coverage was also important. For instance, Patrick Klepek (2014) recommended a more diverse staff at critical games outlets.

It is within the context of content that gamer identity and identity politics surfaces most clearly. Without a doubt, a number of writers advocated for the inclusion of "women's and other marginal voices" (Abraham, 2014) and stressed the absence of women and other minority groups within coverage. However, less discussion is levied towards the relationships between female and other marginalized game critics beyond vague messages of inclusivity. The reasons for this are not apparent, particularly as a multitude of marginalized voices are represented within our collection. Fisher (2012) implied one possibility in his interviews with game critics: the lack of awareness of their own potentially misogynistic positions. While these writers *do* seem aware of their more philanthropic attitude, ambivalence seems to persist about the purpose

of that stance within game criticism beyond the point of advocacy. And for those who don't identify with a particular marginalized group, a position on the subject seems absent all together. (*5*)

The picture drawn from examining the critiques is a confusing montage of what should qualify as game criticism to the would-be critic. Rather than having an established position, critics champion specific agendas, using game criticism as a platform for potentially expanding the subjects covered by the medium. The use of game criticism as a means to advocate for underrepresented or misrepresented identities explains not only how a writer's personal identity reflects in his or her work, but also how it may trump his or her understanding of a professional identity, and with it the content and subjects that warrant coverage.

Formats

The bread-and-butter of dedicated game magazines and online outlets is still the game review (Newman, 2008). A common critique of game reviews is that they serve as mere shopping guides (Ribbens & Steegen, 2012). However, Zagal, Ladd, and Johnson (2009) challenged the notion of reviews as buying guides and offered a rare qualitative content analysis of game reviews by identifying nine common themes: "description, personal experience, reader advice, design suggestions, media context, game context, technology, design hypotheses, and industry" (p. 216). The authors are much less critical of the review because "[reviews] are rich and varied in terms of the themes and topics they cover" (p. 221), indicating the bounty of subjects covered in this format. Still, if content and subject were informed by

critics' professional aspirations, structure and format became the focus of derision.

No single format was met with approval and more traditional formats were belittled. While authors occasionally championed or identified other formats that might be ideal we once again witnessed how the prevalence of personal identity prejudiced game critics toward particular types of articles. For instance, Daniel Cook (2011) bemoaned the absence of a worthwhile format for critiquing games, in part because of the current crop of writers; blaming critics, hobbyist gamers, and academics/intellectuals for creating a "warm communal bath of gamer burbling." Dissatisfaction in format and structure not only results from *who* was writing about games, but also the purpose of what was being written. Stephen Totilo was quoted for decrying the numerical rating systems common in reviews as "a very artless way of looking at art" (Ip, 2014). However, not every critic considers his or her work within the frame of art or film criticism. Wirtanen (2014) attempted to segregate formats and structures of game criticism into journalism, criticism and non-fiction in order to allow for what he envisioned as more objective reporting. Walker (2014) proposed almost the exact opposite, composing a forceful editorial about the specific decision of his publication, *Rock, Paper, Shotgun,* to have its journalistic writing (as opposed to criticism) be subjective. In this journal, Jennings (2015) declared that there is, indeed, "a longstanding wariness of the subjectivity of the critic" and suggested an approach in which subjectivity is "accepted as central, unavoidable and necessary" (p. 2). Ironically, the ambivalence between objective and subjective modes of criticism has been a

contentious issue for a number of Gamergate supporters, who routinely relate their call for "ethics in game journalism" to the subjective nature of contemporary game criticism.

Besides orientation, practical and industry considerations seem to prompt decisions about format. In an interview recapping his years as editor-in-chief of *Eurogamer*, Thomas Bramwell characterized criticism and reviews, by contrast, as being "the backbone of the site," which expanded throughout his tenure into more "detailed, thought-provoking journalism and criticism" (qtd. in Yin-Poole, 2014). It was the economic and social restrictions of the site that Bramwell cited as factors in his choice of structure. As a consequence, as was the case with style, tone and content, derision rather than consensus is prevalent when it came to the best storytelling format.

In conclusion, this analysis was performed to serve two purposes—first to see how a critic's identity manifests in the public writing and statements of game critics, and secondly to understand how game critics view their practice. What emerges is not only how intertwined these two perspectives are and how they affect each other, but also how conflicts between the two breed ambivalence over the role and work of game critics. Within this analysis we identify what we term a "network of ambivalences," referring to the interconnection of categories under investigation. Identity and motivation not only engender ambivalence when applied to the perceived role of game critics, but also affect the writing style that critics embrace. Choices surrounding style can generate ambivalence about structure, and vice versa. Rather than attributing ambivalence to any one category, we

can understand it as emanating from each of them. Instead of relying on a set of practices and methods with which to develop an occupational ideology, the multiplicity of possibilities of what game criticism can be seems to have accelerated irresolution and contradiction in public statements. However, as we will deduce in our conclusion, codifying the definition of a game critic, or at least his or her authority as an arbiter of taste, is becoming increasingly necessary as game writing enters the mainstream media.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we trace how game criticism and critics have been inextricably tied to the games industry and its audience. The game press not only is connected economically to the industry, which acts as the critical source of information about upcoming releases, but also has been complicit in establishing and representing the culture of games. The fallout of their coverage, although it may not have been their intent, is an environment rife with ambivalence and tension —comprised of dichotomies like "hardcore" versus "casual" games and particularly exclusionary to female players and other perspectives outside the stereotypically male and heterosexual "gamer" identity. Furthermore, the conflicts that arise from that identity and the political economies of the game industry and game criticism—in which the latter is dependent on the former for professional survival—have had a demonstrable effect on the role and output of the game press, hampering the development of a clear occupational ideology, and with it common codes and values.

By closely analyzing the meta-criticism of game critics, we identified a network of ambivalences about some of the most basic elements of the

occupation—including style, content, and format—and how critics characterize themselves and their purpose within the industry. Not only were frustration, confusion and anxiety expressed about these categories, but also ambivalence about one category would be swayed by a sense of ambivalence about another.

The result of our historical and analytical research is somewhat paradoxical. While critics helped shape, and have themselves been shaped, by gamer identity and culture, they do not possess a clear understanding of their own identity and professional practices. Moreover, their work has been informed as much by personal background and prerogatives as anything else, and seems not to cohere with the gamer identity they helped establish. Game critics from the world of game design are ambivalent about the absence of design. Marginalized groups remain ambivalent about the lack of scorned voices, and the list could go on *ad infinitum*. However, clearly missing is a common understanding about style, content, and format, as well as a critic's purpose, all of which can advance game criticism. Nowhere in our analysis did a coherent professional identity emerge. Instead, critics relied on their personal backgrounds and careers to attempt to define and critique their work within game criticism.

This conflicting and fluid understanding of the role and purpose of games criticism as a form of arts criticism is hardly extraordinary. In fact, not only has a changing definition of the role of the critic been found in a number of aforementioned arts and culture sub-genres, but the various instances of meta-criticism all expressed anxiety or in the case of film criticism, a "perpetual crisis" (Frey, 2015; Jaakkola, 2015). It is not

surprising that as cultural tastes shift and new demographics enter into the public discourse that the means by which to evaluate music, film, art, or games change. In fact, such a natural shift is a healthy expression of sustained media criticism. The amorphous definition of the critic starts from the bottom up—with freelancers, the mainstay of games criticism, having the most difficulty understanding their place within "professional and organizational structures" (Forde, 2003, p. 127) of the newsroom.

Consequently, it might be assumed that critics are merely caught in the tide of an embryonic and morphing sea. And while we do not wholly dispute this possibility, we propose that game critics start navigating their way by grabbing the helm of a trait that *is present* within other forms of media criticism, even as writers in those fields display equal levels of anxiety and conflict about their profession. Scholars have noted a feeling of "exceptionalism" (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, p. 635) and "boosterism" (Jaakkola, 2015, p. 546) by arts and culture critics that counterbalanced feelings of crises or ambiguity within the field. For Frey (2015) in fact these two attitudes are interrelated. The crisis rhetoric of film overlapped and justified the medium at the turn of the century, shaping it as an appropriate object of critique and clarifying the critic's role in relationship to both the industry and the audience (p. 26). However, in our analysis we find little of the optimism or exceptionalism about both game criticism and the role of the critic within coverage.

This deficiency is particularly frustrating not only because it implies an inchoate field, but also because of the potential consequences of critics abdicating their authority, particularly as the

medium matures. After all, games coverage is now decades old and is increasingly entering the mainstream. As illustrated by Gamergate's rapid emergence, the lack of legitimate critical voices making "normative claims about the ability of… [games]... to improve society" (Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003 p. 635) has created a vacuum of critical authority in which the industry, or far worse, anonymous entities can do harm to both individuals and the medium as a whole. Having a legitimate sense of critical authority, as Frey (2015) puts it, yoking "critical authority to the cultural respectability of the medium," (p. 29) is not only an important means of combatting this sort of public vitriol, but will also become increasingly necessary as games critics move from fan sites and publications to mainstream newsrooms. Journalistic sub-genres and arts critics specifically struggle under the hierarchal authority still present in traditional news publications (Forde, 2003; Harries & Wahl Jorgensen, 2003, p. 624), something we also experienced firsthand. Having a clear sense of both the purpose and promise of video game criticism will therefore be a valuable asset in asserting this field within traditional news discourses.

Despite continuous crises and the lack of consensus among game critics, even about a seemingly trivial aspect of how to label their profession as journalism or criticism, the mainstreaming of game criticism and game culture is the ideal moment for change. It is time to break both the cycle of contradiction and conflict, and leave Gerstmanngate, Doritogate, and Gamergate behind. These flashes in the pan should undoubtedly be part of game criticism's institutional memory. Yet, rather than critics being reactive to future moments of tension,

these instances should be seen as a set of teachable moments to prevent history from repeating itself and to work towards a more coherent and productive occupational ideology. It is our goal with this study to highlight the ambivalent and conflicted tone of games critics in order to galvanize conversation and ultimately action. Game criticism is already maturing beyond its routine coverage and it is time we see both its promise and the key role critics play in shaping the medium's future.

Endnotes

1. Research, such as Suominen's (2011) analysis of Finnish game magazines, suggests that individual countries do have different histories when it comes to game critical cultures and practices.

2. In the case of game magazines, this is confirmed by the data of Scharrer (2004), who analyzed advertisements in the US publications *Game Informer*, *Game Now*, and *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, and notes not only "43% of the magazine's pages are devoted to ad content," but also 95.6% of her sample consisted of advertisements for video games (p. 403).

3. Gamergate sprung out of a hashtag and has no clear leaders, only dominant voices. Because a vast majority of Gamergate supporters choose to be anonymous, we should be careful not to consider Gamergate as a homogeneous community with a clear purpose. On the contrary, anyone can pick up the Gamergate moniker and use it to his/her ends. That said, subgroups of Gamergate supporters have made attempts to codify their philosophy. For example, a full year after its emergence, the Gamergate entry at Knowyourmeme.com has been viewed

over 2.5 million times and consists of a whopping 4000+ images and 63.000+ comments. See http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/gamergate.

4. Additionally, the enthusiast press has acted as the vanguard for game coverage in mainstream outlets. For instance, Stephen Totilo has written for both Kotaku and *The New York Times*. Many of these authors have personal blogs, with their content often being cited in enthusiast forums.

5. Ambivalence over the inclusions of new voices actually made its way into *The New York Times*. See Parker, 2013 and Suellentrop 2013, along with corresponding coverage from Totilo, 2013.

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ISSN: 2374-202X