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Writing games: Popular and critical videogame writing over time

Abstract:

Despite decades of research in game studies and its adjacent fields, other forms of creative and critical writing have arguably had the broadest impact on discourse surrounding the medium. This uneasily defined and liminal space of popular (and populist) critical work exists between those who make videogames and those who research and teach them, and often crosses between the multiple different spheres as a more accessible form of critical reflection with a lower barrier of entry. This area includes writing about videogames in diverse contexts and practices including journalism, criticism, books, YouTube videos, blog posts, and social media. This journal article will chart and engage with this diffuse range of non-scholarly writing and its impact. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of popular writing about videogames in the context of journalism (for newspapers, broadcasters, and magazines), books (such as *This Gaming Life* by Jim Rossignol, *Extra Lives* by Tom Bissel, and *Death by Video Game* by Simon Parkin), and the way that bloggers and non-scholarly writers have influenced the discourse surrounding writing for videogames.

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Keywords:

Creative Writing – Videogames – Writing – Knowledge production

Introduction

The era of the videogame coincided with the decentralisation of knowledge and the decentring of experts and expertise from public discourse: knowledge in this period has been produced by an array of actors within the academy and outside it. Therefore, and despite more than two decades of research, academic work about videogames has only ever constituted a percentage of knowledge about the medium. Instead, knowledge, research, and writing about videogames has been instantiated through a wide variety of online forms, some of which sit at the intersection between scholarly and non-scholarly practice, but many of which reside entirely outside of the academy and the norms and structures that exist within it. Videogame culture is not necessarily unique in this sense, and other forms (including those which developed alongside the internet) have their own associated forms of vernacular knowledge and creativity (Burgess 2006: 206–7). However, when considering the cultural ecosystem of the videogame as well as how knowledge about the medium is produced, such interactions between scholarly and non-scholarly writing must be accounted for and acknowledged in order to make sense of videogame culture.

This means that for the videogame, informal writing and research surrounding the form has frequently been networked, decentralised, and popularised. It is often accessible in the form of blog posts, tweets and other social media discussions, forum threads, YouTube videos, and it is also highly spreadable in these contexts and beyond. Yet its ambivalent relationship with institutions has resulted in knowledge that is often liminal, and that does not transfer between different generations of writers. Furthermore, and as recently illustrated through the Gamergate harassment campaign and more recent interactions with far right political movements, its marginal status leaves it open to regressive and pernicious forces.

Nonetheless, it is this form of writing regarding videogames that has the furthest range in terms of its impact in videogame design and practice, and in terms of an everyday, vernacular knowledge about the form. Videogame discourse is often defined by its relative decentralised nature; this is both a strength and a significant disadvantage when it comes to critical writing practice regarding the form. In this article, I will give a critical overview of the history of such socially-networked critical writing about videogames, and attempt to draw together some of the key issues that have defined writing regarding videogames. This is writing that possesses little of the institutional resilience and the durable networks that usually defines scholarly research: such informal knowledge therefore often remains liminal and uncited, despite its significance. Yet such work is often influential for game designers themselves, revealing ongoing tensions between academia and industry, and fans of the enthusiast variety and those more interested in critical discourse. These complicated frictions have in their most extreme versions manifested themselves in political antagonism between videogame critics and right-wing extremists.

Videogame blogs and knowledge production in the late 2000s

Ten years ago, I was simultaneously pursuing the beginnings of an academic career while also being part of a semi-organised grouping of people writing about videogames online. Much of this writing was networked through blogs and blog comments, all part of what I unfortunately at the time called ‘The Brainysphere’. This was roughly 50 individual blogs that were all related in some way to Wabash College professor Michael Abbott’s *The Brainy Gamer* blog (Golding 2009). Most of these writers encountered each other in one way or another through Abbott’s blog, often leaving lengthy comments and participating in detailed debates on topics as diffuse as: music in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD 1998); when a game can be considered finished; whether certain thematic concerns are incompatible with the medium of the videogame; and retrospective examinations of popular critics of the twentieth century (such as Pauline Kael) and their applicability to videogames. A large number of these writers now either work in the videogames industry (including The Fullbright Company founder Steve Gaynor) or in academia; at the time, however, most were either untrained or in training in terms of formal tertiary education. Nonetheless, the impact of this small and informal collection of blogs was significant. Ben Abraham writes of attending the Game Developer’s Conference in San Francisco over two years and being surprised at the volume of citation that these kinds of writers, his own work included, received:

> I am hardly the exception, just one small anecdote out of a number I could choose from: for instance, the writers/bloggers/developers who give talks speaking to and about each other’s work; the multiple undergraduate university courses from an array of institutions that link to critical videogame blogs and blog posts in their course materials; the journalists who refer to bloggers for opinions ranging from the nature and meaning of flash games replicating the death of Osama Bin Laden to the future of the reprehensible term ‘gamification’ (Abraham 2013: 143-44).

The context for this body of work is significant, as this was also in an era where Web 2.0 technologies and platforms were redrawing the boundaries of what it meant to be part of an online community. The key videogames of this era were similarly pioneering in drawing upon the ubiquity of networked technologies as well as the now-established genres of the home-console era, and accordingly a large number of landmark videogames and franchises emerged during the late 2000s (*BioShock* [2K Boston 2007], *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* [Infinity Ward 2007], *Far Cry 2* [Ubisoft Montreal 2008], *Fallout 3* [Bethesda 2008], *Assassin’s Creed* [Ubisoft Montreal 2007], *Mass Effect* [BioWare 2007], *Portal* [Valve Corporation 2007]). Indeed, this era roughly coincided with a shift from niche communities on socially-networked platforms and more open online ‘publics’ to the ascent of more monolithic platforms like Facebook and Twitter from the late 2000s (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Such a collection of videogame bloggers was more than serendipitous, then: it was enabled and more than partly constituted by a confluence of time, place, and technology.

The interaction between these groups of writers and more formal institutions was also complex. As Felan Parker notes, such work between 2005-2010 was easily characterised as a:

> fragmentary, decentralized discourse, primarily taking place in posts and comment threads on a sprawling network of personal blogs; specialized columns on general interest gaming

websites like *Gamasutra* and *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*; a handful of dedicated sites like *Grand Text Auto*, *GameCritics.com* and *The New Gamer*; and spilling over onto social media (Parker 2014a 168).

Indeed, several of these bloggers would go on to write more professional work for publications such as the above; others even would found their own. Chris Dahlen, who had run the blog ‘Save The Robot’ (no longer online) went on to co-found the print magazine *Kill Screen*, which for Parker, ‘attempted to make game enthusiasm cool by positioning itself as the *Pitchfork* of games (including a direct partnership with the influential music website)’ (Parker 2014a 168). Such venues and writers actively cultivated new forms of writing about videogames. As Leigh Alexander (herself a noted journalist and critic) observed in 2011, ‘In just a few short years we’ve rocketed from wondering what there is besides ‘review’ to an environment where so many people are eager to answer that question that it’s overwhelming’ (Alexander 2011). People created semi-academic tracts, magazine-style feature articles, memoirs, beat-inspired poetry, and strident, manifesto-like sermons. By the end of the 2000s, critical videogame writing had gone well beyond ‘review’.

The crossover between enthusiast and amateur writing and professional work was one of many major shifts that occurred between 2008-2010 that would change this field dramatically. In 2009, Abraham created the website *Critical Distance,* which was designed primarily as a centralised hub to curate and compile links to videogame writing from a wide range of sources. The rationale for such a website was one of archiving and preservation: the original about page for *Critical Distance* claimed that the site’s aim was ‘to capture the videogame criticism ‘zeitgeist’ and act as a ‘memory bank’ in this notoriously short-sighted and quick forgetting industry’ (Gursoy 2011: 44). *Critical Distance*’s existence and ongoing centrality to this form of videogames writing inherently suggests an awareness of the liminality of such work as well as the need to fight against forces that would otherwise see it pass beyond memory. The site’s very rationale is in part to combat the abandonment of previous work otherwise likely outside of institutions and reviewed research. Indeed, today, *Critical Distance* continues to publish weekly roundups as a non-profit organisation, with the tagline ‘Where is all the good writing about games?’. Indeed, this is a question that has been asked by uninitiated outsiders on a number of occasions, much to these game writers’ chagrin. In 2012, Brendan Keogh responded to one instance of this question, posed by *New Statesman* deputy editor Helen Lewis: ‘the implication in Lewis’s article that such videogame criticism simply doesn’t exist yet ruffled a few feathers with those writers (including myself) who would like to consider ourselves as already being videogame critics. We felt slighted, ignored’ (Keogh 2012). By this point in time, many of these writers were now regularly publishing not just in games-specific outlets, but in mainstream publications such as *The Atlantic* and *Slate* (Parker 2014a: 169).

Indeed, the suggestion that videogame writers have routinely been forgotten, erased, or overlooked belies the fact that the era of blogging critics that I became involved with and who went on to create publications like *Kill Screen* and *Critical Distance* were hardly the first to think critically about videogames in non-scholarly contexts. Earlier generations of videogame criticism certainly existed, though it was more isolated and less well-networked. Key websites such as *Old Man Murray*, *Insert Credit*, *GameSetWatch,* as well as landmark essays, such as Kieron Gillen's 'New Games Journalism Manifesto' (2004) and 'Bow, N****r' (Bitmob 2009) all made significant contributions. That said, these publications all tended to have a closer relationship with institutions: *Old Man Murray* was part of the UGO Network, which was eventually acquired by the Hearst Corporation; *GameSetWatch* was published by UBM TechWeb, who also run the annual Game Developer's Conference; and before his influential manifesto was published, Gillen had been a staff writer for the leading British videogame magazine, *PC Gamer*.

The question of what kinds of people were allowed by the hegemonic forces of videogame culture to represent such 'new voices' in videogames criticism was certainly a contested one during the late 2000s, and this discussion would eventually significantly reshape the field. The vast majority of writers who fell under the 'Brainysphere' moniker were young white men, mostly in English-speaking countries. In one comment, Regina Buenaobra described this group as 'the incestuous boys' club 'Brainysphere' (Abraham 2014: 74). In response to the clear gender, racial, and other biases apparent at the time of the creation of *Critical Distance,* another website, *The Border House*, was formed in 2009 as a space for feminist, anti-racist, queer, and disabled perspectives. For Parker, 'the safe space and visibility *The Border House* affords to marginalized, politicized voices [was] part of a more general shift towards ideological critique in game criticism' (Parker 2014a: 169). Certainly, although the personal had been a significant factor in games writing since Gillen's 'New Games Journalism' manifesto (which called for a move away from objective writing towards acknowledgement of subjectivity), the fact that such personal writing was largely being performed by the previously mentioned young white men meant that identity politics and political critique rarely intersected with such work. *The Border House*, however, marked a shift where previously disenfranchised and marginalised writers were able to become both more visible and influential when it came to producing knowledge about videogames. Indeed, through this period, writers who were both new in terms of the originality of their ideas, the venues in which they published, and the identities and demographics which they represented, were able to gain a serious purchase on videogames writing. These are writers who helped push videogames writing in a more progressive direction, such as: Mattie Brice (Brice 2014); Jenn Frank, who had professionally been writing about videogames since 2005, but whose writing also helped define this era (Frank 2012); Samantha Allen (Allen 2014); Zoyander Street (Street 2015); Lana Polansky (Polansky 2014); Merritt Kopas (Kopas 2014); Maddy Myers (Myers 2013); Porpentine (Porpentine 2012); Patricia Hernandez (Hernandez 2014); Katherine Cross (Cross 2014); Gita Jackson (Jackson 2014); Zolani Stewart (Stewart 2015); Liz Ryerson (Ryerson 2013); and Austin Walker (Walker 2014), to name only a handful of influential writers from this time.

Finally, the other significant factor in the redrawing of this sphere of critical, non-scholarly videogame writing was the shift towards social media as the locus of the network. Twitter in particular became 'a key platform for circulating links to game criticism, as well as direct interactions, debates, and community-building among critics, adding a new layer of immediacy to the existing networks of communication'

(Parker 2014a: 169). This layer in some cases began to overwrite previously strong networks: debates became much more liminal as they shifted from centralised comment threads attached to articles that could be linked and preserved, to decentralised and ephemeral tweets, many of which were not clearly tied to original discussion points and which could and often would evolve between discussants, actors, and contexts. Although key publication points remained, these informal venues for the creation of knowledge about videogames became more and more transitional and *ad hoc*.

Nonetheless, knowledge was indeed produced in these venues and by these semi-scholarly actors. Writers such as these, who blogged and tweeted about videogames, became experts and their ideas proliferated. This reflects the fact that videogames, like other fields, found themselves in a networked environment which expands ‘the dynamic between author, text, and reader by offering a space for metafictional discourse’ (Skains 2010: 96), blending the line between traditional authors and the community that surrounds their work. This, of course, is also signalled by the shifting dynamics at work regarding expertise. Though expertise remains domain specific and reliant on a number of factors, Mathieu O’Neil argues that the emergence of networked technologies and practices in recent years has seen a ‘radical redefinition of expertise, which is no longer embodied in a person but in a process, in the aggregation of many points of view’ (O’Neil 2011: 312). This leads Abraham to conclude that videogame blogging through this era represents ‘something like a distributed network of overlapping ‘extended minds’, each knowing and producing, and contributing to a greater whole’ (Abraham 2013: 149). The seductive utopianism of Abraham’s conclusion here is somewhat undermined by the subsequent liminality of this ‘greater whole’ through this period. Despite *Critical Distance* and other efforts to archive and canonise videogame writing, frustration with a lack of visibility, institutional recognition, and memory remains. The uncomfortable question of whose work is selected out by legitimising forces to represent ‘expertise’ within the semi-organised field of non-scholarly videogame writing, and why that is so, remains.

Yet it is clear that some non-scholarly videogame writing has attained the level of expertise for many, and is drawn upon and cited in a wide variety of contexts. This includes game design and industrial contexts beyond the academy and its associated critical spheres of discourse. This is in some ways contrary to the field of game studies, which by now has been publishing for two decades yet for some still faces fundamental questions regarding its relevance for game designers. Mitu Khandaker, who in 2010 was a PhD candidate at the University of Portsmouth (and is today an Assistant Professor at NYU Game Center), asked a variety of game makers what their opinion of videogame scholarship was under the title of ‘Are videogame academics irrelevant?’. ‘As someone in the industry, I just don’t pay attention to the output of games academia – none of it is relevant to me,’ replied designer Jonathan Blow (Khandaker 2010: 70), who in 2008 regularly turned up in the comment threads of videogame blogs discussing his game, *Braid* (Number None, 2008). The question of the lack of memory in terms of research is also present in actual scholarly research regarding games. In a 2013 editorial for *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth writes:

> There is a very common trope in game research (especially in student papers) that goes like this: ‘almost nothing has been done in area X’, where X happens to be the author’s own topic. This trope is a dangerous one, since it tends to reveal not the author’s originality but instead their lack of both curiosity and scholarship (Aarseth 2013).

Critical Distance’s tagline – ‘Where is all the good writing about games?’ – along with their current landing page (which opens on a search bar with the question ‘I wonder what has been written about… ?’) seems doubly pertinent in this context. It may well be possible in the light of such systems and networks, that for videogames, non-scholarly work has been curated, cited, archived, and organised more effectively than scholarly writing. There certainly exists no equivalent search engine or curated periodical for videogame academia, for instance.

Certainly, there is persistence when it comes to a number of key ideas stemming from the non-scholarly videogame criticism community. Chief among these would be the near-universal adoption of designer and blogger Clint Hocking’s term ‘ludonarrative dissonance’. Hocking, then a designer at Ubisoft Montreal, coined this expression in a blog post from 2007, using it to critique *BioShock*’s ‘powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story’ (Hocking 2007). The phrase has undeniably persisted and is used ubiquitously in videogame scholarship, critique, and the popular press. Today, you will discover 146,000 results for the term via Google, a dedicated Wikipedia page, many academic studies that adopt the expression wholesale (Payne 2014; Toh 2015; Ralph and Monu 2015), and a parody game called *Ludonarrative Discodance* (Serious Business 2013).

Partly, the persistence of certain threads of non-scholarly videogame criticism must also go beyond the archival efforts of individuals and communities to the form of publication. With the small and usually briefly-held exception of some print-only videogames criticism from this era (such as early *Kill Screen* editions), all non-scholarly videogame criticism is intensely *spreadable*. In their book *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green identify a recent shift in the media landscape from distribution to circulation, where ‘a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013: 1). For our purposes, this means that writing about videogames can travel like it never has before, even considering that the videogame is a medium born of the digital era. Jenkins *et al* write that:

> The shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement towards a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 2).

The very format that these ideas are instantiated in – blogs, tweets, statuses, webpages, comments, forum posts – is also in part the cause of their persistence. A term like ‘ludonarrative dissonance’, born from a blog post in 2007, can spread quickly between disparate online groups and, if shared widely enough, eventually become cited and institutionalised through academic research. Already, writes Brendan Keogh, there is ‘rich and exciting discourses concerned with videogames as a cultural and an artistic form that academic videogame critics ignore at their own peril' (2014a). Thus, in videogame culture, practice, and criticism, we can see the birth of a kind of non-scholarly expertise that is decentralised, spreadable, and often informal.

Institutional interactions

Beyond the informal networks of blogs and social media, we have also seen a third space of videogame criticism emerge. This space frequently crosses over between academia and popular criticism, and often includes long-form works, accessible and open-access scholarly research, and those inside institutions self-consciously attempting to engage popular audiences. These works often gain a significant purchase in both scholarly and non-scholarly videogame knowledge, and take advantage of both form and context.

Particular focus must be given to the emergence of non-scholarly long-form writing as a possibility for creating knowledge about videogames from the late 2000s. Non-scholarly books about videogames have existed as far back as Martin Amis' *Invasion of the Space Invaders* (Amis 1982), yet have usually been relatively scarce. Videogame journalists with a substantial purchase in crossover contexts have also published generalist books: *This Gaming Life* by popular *Wired*, BBC, and *Rock Paper Shotgun* journalist Jim Rossignol (2008); *Extra Lives* by *Slate*, *New Republic*, and *New Yorker* critic Tom Bissell (2010); and most recently, *Death By Video Game* by *New Yorker*, *Guardian*, and *New Statesman* contributor Simon Parkin (2015). Each has had some impact on how videogames are discussed despite sitting between institutional recognition and more grassroots videogame writing. Along with Leena van Deventer, I also wrote one of these crossover books for a generalist publisher in 2016, *Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny, the Fight for the Future of Videogames* (2016).

However, long-form writing has also been experimented with by both the marginalised and those who can experiment with form and context. First among these was the game designer Anna Anthropy, who in 2012 published the enormously influential *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives Are Taking Back an Art Form* via Seven Stories Press (Anthropy 2012). This book became emblematic for its framing of the 'zinester', a term that actively rejects specialist knowledge when it comes to the practice of creating videogames. For Parker, Anthropy's book:

> combines traditional notions of Romantic authorship and independent artistic expression (modeled on print zines and punk music) with activist identity politics and a kind of amateur populism, which suggests that game design could be similar to sketching or taking a snapshot, and not the exclusive domain of specialists (Parker 2014a: 174–75).

This is all the more significant because of Anthropy's own relationship to the formalised institutions of scholarship, as detailed in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* itself. She describes her time at Guildhall, Southern Methodist University, where she did not complete her studies, in strongly negative terms: 'Plano Texas, is brown and not much else. They have a Frito-Lay factory, parking lots, and a videogame school' (Anthropy 2012: 68). Particularly, Anthropy criticises the way that college education of this type was about training students to become good workers, including unreasonable expectations about labour. Anthropy, along with designer Naomi Clark, went on to write the equally-influential text book, *A Game Design Vocabulary: Exploring the Foundational Principles Behind Good Game Design* (Anthropy and Clark 2014).

Another major case study of experimental long-form writing is Cara Ellison's *Embed With Games: A Year on the Couch with Game Developers* (Ellison 2015). After struggling to make rent yet continuing to produce popular works of videogame criticism, Ellison decided to crowdfund her writing using the website Patreon. 'I was also somewhat tipsy when this went up, which explains my stretch goal, that if it got over $1000 I'd visit games developers and write about them,' Ellison told *The Escapist* (Tito 2014). After getting double that amount in crowdfunding support, Ellison travelled the world for all of 2014, living on the couches of those who make videogames, in North America, Europe, Japan, Singapore, and Australia. She published each instalment of her writing for free on her blog, and in 2015, edited the work together into a full-length book. The breadth and depth of her research and writing is certainly unparalleled in terms of ethnographic insight into those who make videogames: the experimental, grassroots, and non-scholarly nature of such writing makes it doubly interesting as a case study.

Finally, in *Killing Is Harmless: A Critical Reading of Spec Ops: The Line*, videogame critic and researcher Brendan Keogh presents a compelling illustration of the crossover ability of non-scholarly videogames research with the scholarly world. Keogh, at the time a first-year PhD candidate at RMIT in Melbourne, in *Killing Is Harmless* wrote one of the first book-length critical analyses of a single videogame. The work began as a series of responses to the videogame *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager, 2012) and evolved into a book-length dissection of the work from beginning to end. It was, with the help of some collaborators, self-published and sold online for $5, where several thousand copies were eventually purchased (Hawreliak 2013). This is an illustrative example of the crossover between academic research and generalist criticism: though Keogh self-consciously set out to perform popular criticism with *Killing is Harmless*, this work nonetheless went on to inform academic research in a number of respects, including direct analyses of the book (Jennings 2015; Fernández-Vara 2015: 213-15; Heron and Belford 2014).

Such crossover work has also been attempted from the other perspective. *First Person Scholar*, founded in 2012 as a 'middle state publication' and affiliated with the University of Waterloo, is 'as an extension of [a mode of intercultural] communication, one that responds to the more *intra*cultural mode of traditional academic publishing' (Wilcox 2015). Taking advantage of its blog format, *First Person Scholar* aims to publish timely works of games criticism from videogame scholars, as well as the crucial groundwork of interviews with scholars and researchers.

Similarly, in 2014, the *Journal of Games Criticism* was launched with an affiliation to the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. The *Journal of Games Criticism* took up an aim 'to create a space for all members of the game studies, game journalism, and game development communities to publish criticism that influences both the making of games and betters our understanding of games as cultural artifacts [sic]' (Hanford 2014). Its first edition illustrates this position clearly, and widely draws on peer-reviewed academic research as well as many of the blogs, writers, and publications mentioned so far in this article. This approach was validated by the significant impact of one of this first edition's articles, again by Brendan Keogh (2014a), which was quickly responded to by videogame writers, many of whom sat, like Keogh, between academia and popular writing (Parker 2014b; Joseph 2014; Street 2014; Brice 2014). There was also a tweeted response to the article by Ian Bogost, at the time the premiere researcher in the field, that he collected together in a Storify (Bogost 2014). In 2014, I described this kind of discussion as a 'thread of critical work in games studies being performed through marginalia' (Golding 2014), and the description seems accurate today. Without having been there at the time, it is quite difficult to follow this discussion and its numerous paths; even having 'been there', today I find it almost impossible to try and track the social media response to Keogh's article, so diffuse and liminal is it. At the time, Keogh himself wrote about his surprise that the article could be so widely taken up:

> What's been especially challenging to deal with and also fascinating is having my academic piece engaged with and read broadly by a non-academic audience… The audience I didn't envision is (again, naively) that audience that reads the vast majority of what I write. As JGC is open access and not hidden behind massive paywalls, my article was shared and read widely by those who would usually read my blog posts and Unwinnable posts and whatever (Keogh 2014b).

This is a curious phenomenon, and an unusual one: indeed, perhaps it is the only popular instance so far of a work of academic videogame writing, within a specifically scholarly context, being engaged with immediately and with sweeping range by a non-academic audience. That Keogh highlights the spreadability of the *Journal of Games Criticism* as a formative factor in his article's success is even more interesting still. It is almost as though Keogh's audience, established through his extended forays into non-scholarly writing, has constituted the audience – and therefore the relative success, by academic terms – of this piece of scholarly writing. The boundaries between scholarly videogame research and non-scholarly writing continue to overlap in compelling and unusual ways.

YouTube and regressive popularism in videogame knowledge production

The elephant in the room for this article is of course this: from August 2014, videogame criticism, along with the rest of videogame culture in the broadest possible sense, experienced a cataclysm whose significance is impossible to overstate. This was, of course, Gamergate, the extended harassment campaign that targeted, in turn: the game developer Zoë Quinn; feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian; other high profile feminist videogame writers and developers (many of whom already discussed in this article); women and minorities broadly within the industry; and their allies. This campaign (calling it a moment implies that it has concluded; in fact, much of the actions of Gamergate are still being experienced) occurred widely within videogame culture, and its locus was in the private life of Quinn. However, many of its most immediate targets were videogame critics of the sort discussed in this article: liminal, precariously employed or freelance writers at the margins of academia. At the dawn of Gamergate in 2014, Keogh wrote that 'I've seen no shortage of excellent writers, mostly those that have emerged from the games criticism blog-o-sphere, feel cheated and disillusioned and ultimately abandoned by mainstream games journalism in the wake of gamergate' (Keogh 2014c). Mattie Brice and Jenn Frank in particular would retire from videogame writing because of the actions of Gamergate (Cox 2014). Equally, just as the audiences and writers involved in videogame criticism of the scholarly and non-scholarly varieties converged, so did the harassment involved in Gamergate, and a number of videogame researchers were targeted (Chess and Shaw 2016). However, much of this discussion has already been had, and I do not wish to rehearse arguments in this article that can be found elsewhere (Golding and van Deventer 2016; Chess and Shaw 2015, 2016).

What I am primarily interested in at this point in this article is the emerging popularity of YouTube as a venue for discussion surrounding videogames. YouTube, along with other video streaming websites like Twitch, have become key focal points for videogame culture in recent years. This is in part led by the phenomena of 'Let's Play' videos, which feature 'captured play sessions of digital games with added, often humorous commentary by the player(s) through audio or a picture-in-picture frame showing the video's creator(s) whilst playing the game' (Glas 2015: 81). This is by now an incredibly wide-spread practice, with hundreds, if not thousands of regular streamers participating in the practice. A few of these streamers have even become household names, such as Felix Kjellberg (alias 'PewDiePie') who has been the most subscribed channel on all of YouTube since late 2013, earning him millions of dollars in the process (Glas 2015: 81).

As a central platform for videogame culture, YouTube has also become a venue for forms of videogame criticism, too, signalling a shift away from the written word and socially-networked criticism that defined earlier generations of non-scholarly work about the form. Anita Sarkeesian's *Feminist Frequency* brand of video criticism, for example, offers critiques of popular culture from a feminist perspective. Sarkeesian deliberately combines her university training and research background with the context of YouTube to critique videogames in an accessible and popular format, selecting and coining phrases to better aid a generalist audience in identifying problematic representations in media from a feminist perspective (Golding and van Deventer 2016: 103–7). In 2012, Sarkeesian decided to focus on videogames for her next *Feminist Frequency* series, 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games', an example of videogame criticism and feminist activism that took 'advantage of new technologies of production and exhibition to reveal and communicate points of dispute' (Torchin 2015: 142).

Other, highly popular videogame criticism can be found on YouTube, such as the *Extra Credits* webseries, which attempts to merge a cartoonish and accessible style with researched explorations into more traditional scholarly topics for videogame studies. *Extra Credits* is enormously popular and professionalised, with over a million subscribers, a twice-weekly publishing schedule, and a large team of creatives. Running under the tagline: ‘Because Games Matter’, *Extra Credits* has published videos on topics as diverse as arts funding for videogames, videogame animation styles, and auteur theory. Perhaps inevitably, *Extra Credits* has received criticism, particularly from other videogame critics and scholars, for oversimplification: ‘it’s a simplistic treatment of a whole category of issues that many people smarter than I have devoted entire careers to,’ wrote Ben Abraham. ‘Is it unfair to judge a 7 minute flash video by the standards of nearly a hundred years of scholarship? Probably, but I’m going to do it anyway’ (Abraham 2011).

While such series signal another shift from the written word and socially-networked criticism to video, YouTube, and Twitch as hubs, the greater presence of socially regressive forces on these platforms must also be addressed. For Sarkeesian, there is an unequivocal and direct link between the cultures surrounding YouTube and the harassment she received for her *Feminist Frequency* work: ‘The harassment started when I uploaded the Kickstarter video to YouTube’ (Golding and van Deventer 2016, 108). YouTube in particular has served as a hub for Gamergate throughout their campaigns of harassment, with videos directly and personally attacking feminists and videogame critics and developers remaining available and active today. In the campaign against videogame academics, Twitter and YouTube were the primary venues for the public harassment of individual scholars (Chess and Shaw 2016: 26). As Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell note, ‘systems like Youtube that are fantastic at pulling content for copyright violations seem ‘unable’ (aka unwilling) to do anything to put a stop to these vile and violent speech acts – they remain online to continually re-assault their readers’ (Jenson and De Castell 2013: 77).

The legacy of videogame celebrities on YouTube is no less contested. In February of 2017, PewDiePie’s partnership with Disney was cancelled following a video where he paid freelancers via the website Fiverr to hold up a sign that said ‘Death to all Jews’ in public. Kjellberg maintained that this was a joke gone wrong, and has since claimed victimhood at the hands of a mainstream media conspiracy (Herrman 2017a). In even more recent times, Kjellberg has started to video blog on topics beyond the realm of videogames, such as his opinions on the gender wage gap (Tamburro 2017), and appears to be in communication with the far right-wing conspiracy theorist, Alex Jones (Ohlheiser 2017). Moreover, YouTube today is home to what has been described as the ‘YouTube right’, a set of loose communities formed around right-wing channels and personalities. For the *New York Times:*

> They are monologuists, essayists, performers and vloggers who publish frequent dispatches from their living rooms, their studios or the field, inveighing vigorously against the political left and mocking the ‘mainstream media,’ against which they are defined and empowered (Herrman 2017b).

This new home for non-scholarly and popular videogame work is therefore a combatively regressive one, and one that may actively work against the gains that videogame criticism made in diversifying its base writers and intellectual frameworks in the late 2000s. Moreover, it presents a concerning prospect for those who imagine such videogame criticism as a popular gateway for emerging generations of videogame thinkers to make meaningful contributions. What worldviews will become normalised within this new ecosystem of videogame criticism, and what battles will have to be fought by those who will not, or cannot conform to them?

Conclusion

How the videogame is popularly understood has been shaped and defined by successive waves of videogame writing, both inside and outside the academy. These experts have often represented marginalised voices that may not have otherwise been afforded status in scholarship: yet in the contested and often more open field of critical videogame writing, these voices are able to gain expert status and affect discourse. Accordingly, academic work about videogames has only ever constituted a percentage of knowledge about the medium: as Keogh notes, there exists ‘rich and exciting discourses concerned with videogames as a cultural and an artistic form that academic videogame critics ignore at their own peril’ (2014a).

However, the liminal nature of much of this criticism has resulted in a decentralised and de-institutionalised approach that has given rise to issues of forgetting, and poor levels of knowledge transference between established and emerging writers. These are questions that might have been mitigated by the role of institutions such as universities in fostering critical traditions and the awareness of such traditions. However, such institutionalism can come at a cost, and the relative autonomy of non-scholarly critical videogame writing has also alleviated some of the friction that academic work faces in entering industrial contexts. Accordingly, the liminal nature of this form of videogame writing allows it the possibility of breaking through and having genuine and long-lasting impact on the world of videogames in the broadest possible sense. It is also genuinely accessible and highly spreadable in the context of YouTube videos, Twitter and other social media discussions, blog posts, and forum threads.

Yet the new knowledge about videogames comes with a politically charged context that is now impossible to avoid. Though such writing and knowledge is of course accessible and popular, the platforms that make this possible often also bring with them ramifications that are just as far reaching. The videogame writing of the future will likely have to contend with a politically regressive ecosystem, the potentially dire consequences of which remain to be seen.

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