From Arbitration to Celebration –
The Rise of the UK Videogame Magazine

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines the evolution of the 1980s and 1990s videogame magazine from advocate to celebrant of the home-computer as games machine. This is achieved via an analysis of the escalating review scores meted out by various magazine brands, alongside a close textual reading of the editorial manifestos and review guides that accompanied launch issues. This approach enables a comparison of the manifest editorial content, what the magazines explicitly declare as their position, with the latent meanings coded into the rating scores.

The mixed-methodology used for this study mainly comprises of content analysis and discourse analysis, alongside basic statistical ground work that establishes the rising ratings in the reviews; with ratings rising by over 10% on average between 1984 and 1992. Over 100 magazines from 1981 to 1993 were examined, with 3000 review scores being included in the analysis. The magazine sample consisted of *Computer & Video Games, Sinclair User, Your Sinclair, CRASH*, *Amstrad Action, Computer Gamer,* and *ACE*. This sample examines both those texts traditionally included and excluded from the gaming historical narrative.

Through this research the function of these historical gaming magazines is outlined as three-fold: firstly ensure profits for its own controlling interests, secondly provide the gamer with 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007), and thirdly support the products of the gaming industry by acting as 'buyers guides' (Newman, 2008). These three functions do not necessarily co- exist harmoniously, and this research examines how the gaming magazine as a cultural industry tried to balance its role as taste arbiter and industry advocate.

This study was able to conclude that videogame reviews did possess what can be called critical efficacy, in that they fulfilled their expected function of encouraging game sales, particularly those rated at over 70% by the reviewers. Secondly, that the ratings given out by magazines escalated over time in order to celebrate, rather than arbitrate, videogames as a commodity, and that this escalation has technological, cultural, and economic determinants. In the instance of early videogame magazines, persistently rising meta-ratings reveal an upwards push of marketing demands from the software and publishing industry, especially in the face of rising development costs for games, and the need for low-risk economic return on their investments. The saturation of the retail market, alongside the growing obsolescence of the 8-bit technology, what Newman has referred to as supersession (Newman, 2012), only

served to intensify this pressure.

Alongside this study of ratings, the analysis of magazine launch manifestos and review guides has revealed a parallel trajectory travelling from the establishment of a new media format to the consolidation of a new sense of gaming identity, resulting in the production of an increasingly segmented and specialised sense of what it means to be a gamer. It is in part the success of these magazines, in articulating a distinct gamer identity, that produced its own commodity dilemma, one that continues to the present day. It is a dilemma of how to sustain a consumer culture that is centred on exclusivity, on being hardcore and 'elite', whilst remaining inclusive and open to new customers.

Whilst limited or peripheral academic attention has been paid to the gaming magazine as a cultural form, with notable exceptions (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Cote, A. C, 2018) they continue to occupy a significant position in the collective memory of modern gaming culture - visible via the ongoing popularity of retro gaming publications and communities. The relative absence of the historical gaming magazine from academic study is understandable: as media texts they resist serious analysis. They are often juvenile, playful, consumerist guides, arguably little more than advertorials for software companies.

Yet, this research does find that the gaming magazines informed many of the debates around computer usage, and gaming identity, that attended the expansion of videogames as an entertainment industry in the 1980s. At this germinal moment in gaming history the videogame magazine acted as a key producer of meaning for gamers/games producers, and provided the dominant consumer access point to the early gaming commodity. The research significance of the videogame magazine is thereby connected to their role as both record and agent of societal change, in that they reflect, and construct, the tastes of their producers and consumers. It is through understanding the gaming magazine we can gain a clearer awareness of how gaming as a distinct culture emerged in the UK during the 1980s.

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