

Is Games Journalism In Crisis? Examining The Shifting Gaming Media Ecosystem

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade the gaming sector has exploded in profits, going from strength to strength even amidst a global pandemic (Read 2022). Yet 2024 has been filled with numerous layoffs all across the field – with one count placing the number at an extraordinary 8,8000 jobs lost in the first two months (Zwiezen & Shepard, 2024). One area affected by these layoffs that has not yet been analyzed is the gaming media sector. Despite the growth of streaming platforms like Twitch and other independent content creators in the field, the gaming media landscape has faced numerous layoffs and cuts, both at enthusiast sites dedicated to covering games and popular culture like IGN (Liao 2023), as well as more traditional legacy outlets such as The Washington Post (Ellison and Izadi 2023). Just as games journalism once transitioned from the domain of magazines and “niche” press (Kirkpatrick 2015, Golding 2021), it now finds itself transitioning away from the advertising-based online model which has been its default status for the past decade – a transition which has caused numerous layoffs and shifts in the field.

This new landscape has not yet had much in the way analysis. Nieborg and Foxman (2023) recently analyzed the tensions in the working conditions and lack of mainstream recognition the field receives in their book “Mainstreaming and Games Journalism”, but they explicitly leave open the question as to what the possible futures of gaming journalism may be. This paper, then, will build upon their analysis, as well as earlier analysis by scholars such as Fisher and Mohammed-Bask (2020) and Kirkpatrick (2015) to highlight how emerging tensions caused by layoffs are being negotiated by creators in the industry. This will be combined with discussion of increasing precarity in media highlighted in other fields by authors such as Lorusso (2019) and Rodino-Colocino, Wolfson, Dobler and Kumanyika (2021) to situate this crisis in the broader media landscape. Particular focus will be given to an analysis of the precarity which workers in this field face and comparing the role of what is traditionally viewed as games journalism with the variety of forms of “gaming content creation” popularized by Twitch, YouTube and other new media platforms. In doing so it will not only shed light on how the broader gaming media sphere is being changed, but also how these changes reflect broader trends within new media ecosystems which replicate the neoliberal ideologies of the platforms which control the fields. Nieborg and Foxman argue that games journalism has failed to become

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mainstream due to the way the field is constructed. This paper takes this theory and pushes it further, arguing that the field is being further marginalized with these movements in the ecosystem further consolidating power in the hands of platform holders and corporations and making accountability even more difficult

To do so the paper draws on ten in-depth, semi-structured remote interviews – 16 hours in total – with current and former games journalists from Australia, the UK and the USA, gathered as part of my doctoral project examining gaming podcasts and their creators. The majority of these creators now work independently from the gaming press, with their work being funded primarily through crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon, a fact which only serves to highlight the field’s precarity. Interviews covered a wide variety of topics related to these issues, including details of their past employment, discussion of why they decided to go independent, criticisms of the field and its current state. These interviews form the basis for this paper, which will highlight three key aspects of this ongoing shift revealed during textual analysis of these interviews – conducted as part of a broader grounded theory methodology.

The first is how journalists in the field are increasingly forced into positions with little to no job security, forced into freelance or casual positions on a permanent basis. This section will highlight their perspectives on the industry here, focusing on their explanations for what caused this shift and their speculation about what the future of the industry may hold. Following this I will shift to a discussion of why these creators often decided to pivot towards independent work and “gaming content creation” more broadly, analyzing both their motivations for this change as well as how they frame their work. Some of the creators embraced the label of games journalist while working independently, while others were more hesitant, highlighting the “gaming content creation” field as one which was distinct from their previous work. This discursive framing is particularly relevant given the blurred lines and overlap between the fields; gaming journalism is arguably in crisis while gaming content creation continues to jump from strength to strength. Building on this overlap, the final section will dive deeper into what distinguishes the two fields, highlighting the ways that the resources and goal of games journalism sit in tension with the goals of the majority of gaming content creation. To do so, I will draw on the work of David McNeill (2023) on the differences between access journalism and investigative journalism which tie this issue into the unequal power dynamics in the field which I have previously stated were exasperated by this shift. This insight is important for our understanding of the politics of this ongoing transition, and its effects on those working within gaming media. The paper will then conclude with a call to action highlighting the need for further research into the current crisis moment in the field as well as the continuing need for the existence of a robust games journalism field alongside the growing gaming content creation sphere. These changes represent an ongoing crisis which workers in the field face – one which further diminishes their power and ability to hold these institutions. Unfortunately, this crisis is still ongoing, and while this paper does not present a solution, it is my hope that highlighting these issues will spark further discussion about the current state of gaming journalism both in Australia and abroad, as well as emphasize the importance of analyzing the field for game studies as a discipline.

BIO

Ryan Stanton is a PhD student at the University of Sydney. His doctoral research is the first large scale analysis of gaming podcasts and is focused on situating them within the broader gaming media ecosystem. He is particularly interested in issues of labor

and precarity, analyzing how these creators make a living in the field. Prior to this, he completed his honors analyzing the fan communities of Actual Play podcast, *The Adventure Zone*, which was recently published in the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

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