

How Video Game Journalists Cover Sexual Misconduct in the Industry

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ABSTRACT

This extended abstract details the research plan for part of the author's dissertation seeking to understand how video game journalism impacted the sexual misconduct crisis. Specifically, it will examine how game journalists covered the 2021 California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) lawsuit against Activision Blizzard for having a work culture centered around gender and race discrimination and sexual harassment. The author's dissertation will involve a thematic content analysis of 100 news articles from both mainstream news outlets and enthusiast press.

Keywords

Video game journalism, game industry, sexual misconduct crisis, ideology of anxiety, game journalism, rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

The game industry has been in a state of crisis since 2019, with women sending waves of accusations of sexual misconduct leveled at both individuals and company-wide cultures of abuse (Lorenz & Browning, 2020; Webster, 2019). With this crisis, the industry is at a crossroads where they can either use public relations (PR) to encourage the public to move on or confront the systemic issues within their companies, hold abusers and enablers truly accountable, and rebuild work environments to be more just and equitable. One stakeholder in the crisis is video game journalists, and while they are expected to report on news, they also must maintain their lucrative relationship with the game industry where they receive press access and even website advertising. This can have an impact on the reporting journalists do, which could influence how readers understand and discuss the crisis.

The author's dissertation explained in this extended abstract will investigate the role of video game journalism in the sexual misconduct crisis. It will focus on one of the most notable cases of sexual misconduct in the industry: Activision Blizzard, which in 2021 was sued by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing for fostering a workplace culture of gender and racial discrimination and sexual harassment (Allsup, 2021). While both game studies and journalism studies examined games journalism for over a decade, studies on game journalism in the context of the sexual misconduct crisis are just beginning. How do game journalists cover the crisis, specifically as it relates to Activision Blizzard? How has game journalism impacted the

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situation of the DFEH lawsuit, and how does this impact the wider video game sexual misconduct crisis?

GAME JOURNALISM AND IDEOLOGY

At the surface, video game journalists and the industry work together in a symbiotic relationship (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023, 70), where journalists receive access to company spokespeople, early game copies, and press events in return for coverage that promotes the industry's games. However, this relationship mostly works in favor of the industry as they can revoke access to journalists who write unfavorable coverage. This has led to an "ideology of anxiety" for game journalists, where the threat of losing one's job leads journalists to developing practices to avoid conflict with the game industry (Fisher, 2012). This ideology has led to a "pervasive sense of resignation among journalists and is used to justify self-censorship and self-imposed limits (Foxman and Nieborg, 2016, 19). In fact, one journalist in Fisher and Mohammed-Baksh (2020) said that his editor would rather omit negative reviews than to deal with the consequences of upsetting a game company.

The author's study will also put the current sexual misconduct crisis in conversation and history with the #GamerGate movement and the wider history of the masculinization of video game culture. While video gaming emerged among consumers in the 1970s as a medium for everyone, trends in the business of video games and how it influenced discourse that eventually centered video games around cis white men (Newman, 2017). Video game journalism played a part in this masculinization by conceiving of the video game player as a cis white man while placing other identities in the periphery (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Cote, 2018). The author's dissertation will track this history of masculinization and how it may have had a hand in both the #GamerGate movement and the current sexual misconduct crisis.

METHOD

Using the media event as a bounded case study (Yin, 2009), this study will conduct a thematic content analysis (Saldaña, 2025) of over 100 articles from 2021 to 2025 covering the DFEH lawsuit and its direct consequences, including the breaking news of the lawsuit in 2021, the settlement in 2023, and the fallout since then. Doing so will chart the course of coverage and how it has changed throughout the entire media event. The analysis will focus on the sources, frames, angles, newswriting practices, and rhetorical techniques journalists use to cover the game industry's sexual misconduct crisis along with how the authors write about sexual harassment and discrimination. The author's study will aim to understand how game journalists use language (i.e. the way they write about the game industry) to achieve the goal of both serving the public's interests and maintaining their relationship with the game industry.

To find evidence of the ideology of anxiety in effect, the author's study will analyze articles from both gaming news websites and blogs and mainstream news publications based in the United States of America. Examining articles from both gaming-focused outlets and more general, mainstream newspapers will show the differences in coverage between journalists who have a stronger or weaker connection to and dependence upon the game industry. Game journalism, with its closeness to the industry, is likely to have higher instances of using information

mediated by games PR personnel and other practices meant to avoid conflict with the industry (Fisher and Mohammed-Baksh, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The author's dissertation will further our understanding of the impact of video game journalism on discourse around video games and how it influences the public's ideas on who can make and play games by incorporating how game journalists mediate information to the public and how games PR can potentially impact this mediation. This study also aims to expand our understanding of how the way game journalists view their role in the industry influences what they cover and how. While previous studies have found that editors will refuse to publish content that could potentially upset their outlet's relationship with the industry (Fisher & Mohammed-Baksh, 2020), there hasn't been a study that investigated how the ideology of anxiety manifests in the content that journalists do publish.

The game-buying public depends on game journalists for information¹, and journalists depend on the industry for its information. How journalists mediate information about the industry and the crisis, therefore, has important implications in how the public understands the crisis which could shape their support or rejection of game companies. The way journalists cover the sexual misconduct crisis could potentially impact the industry at the crossroads. Could the coverage help inspire change in the industry, or maintain the industry's status quo? Once we understand the role of game journalists in the crisis, we can have a better idea of what journalists can do to help make the game industry a more just and equitable place.

ENDNOTES

1 Here I draw from media dependency theory from Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976).

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