

Powered by GameSpy: Theorizing and Analyzing The GameSpy Network as Platform Infrastructure

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the late '90s and early 2000s, GameSpy was integral to the popularization of online gaming communities, either in the form of the GameSpy Network—a collection of gaming news sites dedicated to popular game franchises—or through the extensive online gaming infrastructure it provided to players and major game publishers. Hundreds of games for PCs and videogame consoles declared that they were “powered by GameSpy.” Despite GameSpy’s powerful mix of gaming news and connective online infrastructure, it was completely shut down in 2014 in favour of new models of connectivity and real-time content distribution in the digital media and entertainment industries (Mirrlees, 2024).

GameSpy’s ubiquity and reach allowed it to be a foundational part of how people played games online as well as set a particular tone for covering the games industry and its varied subcultures. This makes GameSpy a significant part of what Nieborg and Foxman (2023) call “the mainstreaming of games” and the generation of “gaming capital” (Consalvo, 2007). Despite this, GameSpy is currently an under-studied and barely historicized part of the games industry and its early web infrastructures, partly due to its closure in the early 2010s. Although GameSpy is a “dead platform” (McCammon & Lingel, 2022), we find in its evolution and short-lived dominance, vital clues to understanding the compromised, constrained, and even dying world of gaming and social platforms that define the current Internet. So-called “dead platforms” and their collapsed infrastructures contain relevant “afterlives” (Kneese,

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2022) that provide vital insights into current digital media industries and their practices.

We situate our study at the intersection of critical platform studies and game studies to understand how GameSpy leveraged the more open affordances of the early web to set a template for how user-generated content, gaming news, and online play was distributed, accessed and engaged. GameSpy is an early instance of “platform infrastructure” (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023) in which user activity, content, and online sociality are routed through, and structured by, highly contingent and connective technologies (Poell et al., 2022). While GameSpy’s news sites have analogues in offline publications like *Nintendo Power*, GameSpy nevertheless diverges significantly due to its role as a provider of online infrastructure for game publishers, creating a different set of compromises and conflicts with its supposed editorial independence.

Platform studies of games have focused on opening the “black box” of game console hardware (Montfort & Bogost, 2009), with particular attention on the material affordances and paratextual materials that connect development, code, and hardware. Our analysis of GameSpy’s platform infrastructure is grounded on internet archival research of the GameSpy Network accessible through screen captures on the Wayback Machine. This creates a different corpus of paratextual materials that reveal GameSpy’s platform evolution. By applying Tamara Kneese’s (2022) screenshot methodology, we sift through GameSpy’s vast archive of editorial material, focusing on anniversary retrospectives, company overviews, web-hosting and content guidelines as well as the sites themselves. As Kneese argues, screenshots, by capturing the ephemeral detritus of dead platforms, highlight the specific temporal and material relations embedded in them while also demonstrating how these traces live on—an approach particularly appropriate to the study of contingency.

GameSpy emerged from the burgeoning fan community surrounding id Software’s *Quake* (1996), first as the fan site PlanetQuake.com—and after acquiring the in-game server browser tool QuakeSpy—evolved itself into GameSpy. Compared to the stricter content and publishing controls of popular ‘90s videogame consoles like Nintendo’s SNES (Arsenault, 2017), GameSpy’s life as a platform provider was defined by the relative openness and highly distributed nature of the early Internet and personal computing. This more open ecosystem—at least compared to its console peers—created a different business strategy in which GameSpy made itself ubiquitous with multiple domains that provided both ancillary game content (e.g. mods, patches) and enthusiast gaming news sites dedicated to the most popular games of the ‘90s and 2000s (e.g. *Half-Life*). A combination of editors, reviewers, and unpaid contributors built out the news sites that brought gamers into the GameSpy Network, with many of them using their in-game nicknames (e.g. Hellchick, CitizenC) as their bylines, establishing the type of insider status sought in games journalism (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023).

The journalistic labour provided by GameSpy not only boosted ad revenue, but more crucially connected GameSpy’s audiences to GameSpy Arcade, a social games hub, where they could purchase optional subscriptions and upgrades. Although GameSpy itself was more open and accessible, it was also able to integrate into the closed console ecosystems by providing them with online gaming services, like when it built the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection for Nintendo’s Wii and DS consoles. The pleasures of gaming powered its business model, but also its news sites, which ran on often-free

labour by self-described gaming enthusiasts generating content for its platform ecosystem.

Following the separation of the editorial and social gaming sides of GameSpy's business, both were completely shuttered. Without the synergistic corporate relationships between its journalistic content and games infrastructures, it could no longer keep up with the changes in the restructuring of digital media and online entertainment (Stapleton, 2013). GameSpy is a case study in how digital media firms are both enabled and constrained by their platform affordances. GameSpy lacked the kind of centralization (Helmond, 2015) from integrated software resources (i.e APIs) and other "platform tools" now used by Facebook or TikTok (Mahetaji & Nieborg, 2024). The collapse of GameSpy's news and reviews furthermore presaged the current precarious state of digital journalism. By closely analyzing the traces of GameSpy's dead platform infrastructure, we bring forward a more nuanced analysis of platform failure that can move beyond deterministic accounts of guaranteed platform enclosure and success (Apperley & Parikka, 2018), while demonstrating GameSpy's neglected role in shaping both contemporary games media and its platform ecosystems.

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