

Instrumental Pleasures: *Game Informer* and the Masculinist Review Discourse of Fantasy Game Magic

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Reviews have long helped players determine which games—and which *aspects* of games—are worthy of their time and money (Carlson 2009; Nieborg and Sihvonen 2009). While today’s games-sentiment industry rests powerfully in the hands of streamers (Johnson and Woodcock 2019) and amateur reviews (Santos et al. 2019), print magazines and their corresponding websites (Zagal et al. 2009) were once key sites of gaming cultural production (Kirkpatrick 2015). Particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, game magazines shaped both individual purchasing decisions and collective notions about what counted as fun. As games journalism developed, reviews increasingly moved beyond headline categories—graphics, sound, replayability, etc.—to assess more particular design features, from NPC dialogue options and RPG skill trees to fantasy games’ spellcasting systems, or “magic systems.”

In this paper, I offer a history of how magazine reviews discursively framed the joys of magic in fantasy games, and I argue that what *Game Informer* chose to emphasize in its reviews of ludic magic systems privileged instrumental—and often implicitly masculine—orientations to play. Building on archival research initially carried out at the Strong National Museum of Play in 2024, I support this argument through close reading and thematic discourse analysis of game reviews in the American mass-market magazine *Game Informer* between 1991 and 2011. By revealing diachronic patterns in *Game Informer’s* reviews, my findings show how reviewers from this period conceived of magic systems as arenas for destruction, spectacle, choice, creativity, and mastery.

Across two decades of *Game Informer’s* publication history, reviewers repeatedly praised ludic magic through a narrow yet durable repertoire of pleasures. These cluster around five discernible themes: a) *destruction*, magic as a reliable force that overwhelms enemies and reshapes environments; b) *spectacle*, magic as audiovisual excess and sensory reward; c) *choice*, pleasure in abundant spell lists, schools, and

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build options, often evoked numerically; d) *creativity*, pleasurable experimentation with combinatorial systems, loadouts, and synergies; and e) *mastery*, magic as a rule-bound system that withholds its power until the player learns to optimize, exploit, and control it. Taken together, these themes not only reveal recurring patterns in what reviewers found pleasurable in ludic magic systems but point to the underlying currents of *instrumental play* that were central to that enjoyment.

T. L. Taylor's concept of instrumental play helps explain the shared logic subtending *Game Informer's* review discourse. Taylor describes instrumental play as "a focus on efficiency and instrumental orientation (particularly rational or goal-oriented), dynamic goal setting, a commitment to understanding the underlying game systems/structures, and technical and skill proficiency" (Taylor 2006, 72). Taylor does not treat instrumental play as inherently masculine, and indeed she shows that women also engage in the pursuit of system mastery. My own claim is somewhat narrower: at the level of the game review, the recurring themes of *Game Informer's* magic-systems discourse imagined a reader oriented toward instrumental play. In light of the magazine's actual audience, this act of imagination was far from neutral.

By 2012, *Game Informer* had built a predominantly young male readership, and its reviews of magic systems likely addressed this demographic. A media kit from the magazine reported that 84% of its readers were men with a median age of 27 (Game Informer 2012). And while instrumental play is not inherently masculine, its cousin—instrumental rationality—has been historically masculinized (Lloyd 1979; Cohn 1987; Rooney 1991). So when *Game Informer* (with its overwhelmingly young male readership) repeatedly praised magic systems as venues for instrumental play, it participated in precisely that broader, historical gendering of rational agency. The following examples show how each theme of magical pleasure supported instrumental play.

Game Informer's gleeful fixation on *destruction* pointed to a particularly salient way that magic systems demonstrated responsiveness to player action ("Throwing down a non-stop barrage of spells ... [in *Dragon Age II*] is empowering, and since you aren't just issuing commands and waiting for their execution, the action feels more immediate." *Game Informer* #216, 2011). The delight of *spectacle* further embodied this commitment to discernibility, as a spell's audiovisual splendor simultaneously communicated its force and scale ("Upper level spells ... [promise] some pretty awesome, multiple impact magic." *Game Informer*, March 1997). The freedom of *choice* spoke to how "fun" magic systems gave players an opportunity to sift through comprehensive spell lists as searchable inventories of units ("There are now 300 total spells [in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*] compared to the first game's 130, and 9th level magic can be cast from scrolls and items." *Game Informer* #91, 2000). The pleasures of *creativity* meanwhile rested on the presupposition that direct,

empirical experimentation was both intrinsically rewarding and structurally rewarded by stable mechanics fully subject to rational inquiry (“[*Jewel Master’s* magic] ring combinations make you think,” *Game Informer*, January/February 1992). Finally, *mastery* was understood as pleasurable because magic systems rewarded players for internalizing their mechanics and converting that knowledge into overwhelming power (“The spell system [in *Two Worlds II*] is even better; as you level up your various skills and collect spell cards, you can build your own set of insane, overpowered abilities.” *Game Informer* #215, 2011).

In the context of *Game Informer’s* past reviews, what was fun about magic systems was tied to their capacity for instrumental play. The splendor of particle effects and the accompanying camera shake may have served as ornamental gloss in the minds of reviewers, but these visual cues still existed to communicate hit registration, spell selection, and scale of effect (Wikström 2018). Aesthetic pleasures such as these still ultimately supported instrumental play. And in this sense, *Game Informer’s* conception of a fun magic system was far from neutral: the magazine regularly favored magic systems that afforded (if not outright demanded) instrumental play as the primary mode of engagement. If this kind of play—rational, efficient, and committed to proficiency and understanding—is understood to have enduring historical associations with masculinity, however socially constructed they may be, then *Game Informer’s* account of what made for a good magic system also doubled as a gendered script of enjoyment.

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