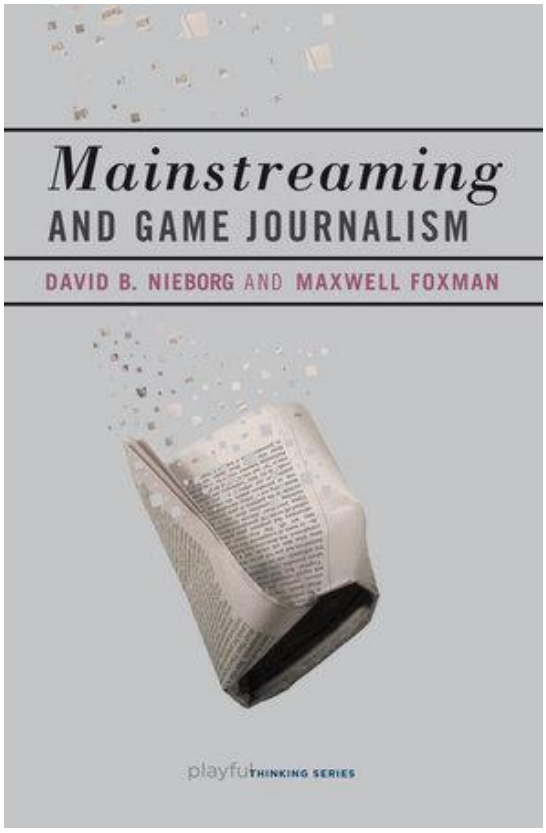
International Journal of Communication 20(2026), Book Review 2331–2333 1932–8036/2026BKR0009

David B. Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman, **Mainstreaming and Game Journalism,** Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2023, 209 pp., $30.00 (paperback).



Reviewed by
Steffi Shook
Manhattanville University

Game journalism, while on the fringes of traditional journalism, was catapulted into gamer vernacular during the height of Gamergate in the mid-2010s. The harassment campaign's façade called for "ethics in game journalism" while followers used the guise to hurl threats. Even so, many who play games became more aware of the profession during the fiasco. David B. Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman recognize the campaign's role in their examination of video game journalism; however, their examination moves well beyond to consider various types of game journalism and journalistic practices. Ultimately, ***Mainstreaming and Game Journalism*** uses the field to take inventory of the practices, identify archetypes of game journalists, and assess whether video games are mainstream.

The authors argue that video games are not, or not yet, mainstream. They do this by forming their own criteria for defining mainstream that moves beyond commercial success. This includes access (ubiquity), a shared understanding (literacy), and a modicum of acceptance (legitimacy). The authors agree that video games are ubiquitous, using the example of *Fortnite* (p. 1), but assert that without a shared understanding, they cannot be mainstream. They define this understanding as ludic literacy, which involves the comprehension of rules, mechanics, and operation. The final marker for mainstream is legitimacy, which video games lack because of the antagonism and ambivalence that surround them. The authors recognize differences when comparing video games to other cultural forms since video games are often not taken seriously. This can be seen in debates around video game violence and the validity of casual games. Cultural specificity is considered as the authors acknowledge that not all nations reflect the United States' views on games. However, in the United States, ubiquity, literacy, and legitimacy keep games from being mainstream.

In addition to this main argument, the book provides a comprehensive inventory of game journalism and creates a useful taxonomy of the practice. The authors identify four occupational archetypes among game journalists and assess their role in mainstreaming games: entertainers, enthusiast critics, game beat reporters, and institutional journalists. The first archetype, entertainers, refers to personality-driven content creators. While they support gaming's ubiquity, they rely on subcultural practices that

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exclude outsiders, thus working against mainstreaming. Enthusiast critics differ in that they support the legitimacy and literacy of video games within public discourse. Through inclusive language, these journalists target audiences beyond gamers. However, there remains a tension in that they must apply subcultural norms in their pieces, causing the authors to label them a hindrance to ubiquitous game coverage. Game beat reporters are employed by major outlets and have the time and space to take deep dives into the gaming industry. The authors find that, like enthusiast critics, game beat reporters must juggle journalist boundaries and subcultural norms. The final archetype, institutional journalists, often use angles to reach mainstream audiences. They fall back on utopian and dystopian frames from virtual socialization to tech addiction. This reliance on old frames means these journalists, despite their subjects, do not contribute to game literacy in a significant way. Ultimately, the authors use these archetypes to demonstrate how game journalists across the board do not contribute to the mainstreaming of video games.

Along with creating these categories, the book traces the history of game journalism from the games' subcultural era, first focusing on the emergence of game magazines. These magazines boosted game literacy by focusing on tips and strategies in addition to answering gamers' questions. The authors label them the enthusiastic press, along with websites and personal blogs. Despite promoting literacy, these publications did not breach the mainstream because of their niche audience. The authors note that this othering played a key role in video games' progression.

The authors distinguish the niche enthusiastic press from institutional game journalists who cater to a broader audience, typically lacking ludic literacy. These institutional journalists often further bifurcate game culture by framing games in various ways, from positive to negative. The authors state that these journalists, despite their wider audiences, do not contribute to the mainstreaming of video games. Rather, they contribute to the ambivalence about game culture with coverage ranging from vilification to frivolity and by questioning the cultural legitimacy of the medium. This question of legitimacy causes these journalists to focus on games because of their commercial success and their artistic merit, ignoring the majority of games and ostracizing genres such as cozy games, which are often marketed toward a female audience.

In addition to defining and categorizing game journalism, the book also considers the roles and experiences of these writers. Skill level is one subcultural norm that game journalists must contend with. While not a professional qualification, game journalists are expected to be skilled at playing video games, and the book provides an example of a journalist who was maligned for being "bad" at a game. The authors recognize that playing "well" is both subjective and political. The measure allows a subset of gamers to police the boundaries surrounding games, dictating who gets to both play and critique them. This expected skill level is one aspect of "game capital" that works to exclude some game writers from institutional outlets. The authors explain that game reviewers and critics never found a foothold within these outlets due to games' position on the cultural hierarchy and a lack of game capital. Another issue facing game journalists is their entanglement with the game industry. Through both interviews and personal experience, the authors detail how game journalists often gain perks while reporting on games, complicating journalistic integrity within the field. While a standard practice is often required to gain access to content, the authors note that marginalized journalists are more often called out for the practice.

The book concludes by offering solutions for game journalism's future. These include game writers moving away from entertainment to focus on becoming a "journalist." The authors recommend drawing on the strengths of the profession to integrate storytelling rather than relying on buzzwords and fads. Additionally, they support having more permanent and structured employment while acknowledging the important contribution of freelancers earlier in the book. Two final recommendations are not pigeonholing journalists who cover games and game journalists reconsidering what constitutes legitimate games.

The book's strength lies in its examination of journalistic practices and types of game journalists. As mentioned in the book, game journalism has been an understudied phenomenon, failing to appear in various overviews of the field. While the profession has become more visible following Gamergate, thorough examinations like the one found here are few. The provided taxonomy of game journalism is invaluable in defining and understanding the industry. From distinguishing between game critics and institutional journalists to providing archetypes based on practices, the book builds out structures that will go on to serve future studies.

The book provides a justification for its examination of the mainstream by stating that play matters. The authors feel that an increased understanding of digital play will lead to more productive critiques. These critiques could ultimately lead to more meaningful games that cater to diverse audiences. Game journalists then have the ability to increase comprehension and legitimize play. Further explanation of how the question of mainstreaming can work toward this increased understanding of digital play would strengthen this justification.

The book is well-suited for a variety of audiences because of its important investigation and accessible writing. Both scholars and nonscholar gamers can find value in its well-researched and engaging content. It will be particularly useful for those at the intersection of journalism and gaming, as well as scholars interested in popular culture. It also serves as an example of solid research in its skillful weaving of interview insights, personal experience, and concrete examples.

Ultimately, *Mainstreaming and Game Journalism* serves as an important addition to video game studies because of its exploration of a lesser examined segment of the field. Its detailed explanations of video game journalists' practices and experiences shed light on an integral piece of the video game landscape. Additionally, the work's definitions and archetypes of game journalists will prove useful for future studies.

https://doi.org/10.65476/rxebjx80