

**THE EMERGENCE OF GAMER CULTURE AND THE GAMING PRESS: THE UK  
VIDEOGAME MAGAZINE AS CULTURAL AND CONSUMER GUIDE, 1981-1993.**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines how the early UK videogame magazine articulated videogaming as both a cultural industry and as a social practice. The research enquires into the key functions of the gaming magazine, and asks how these functions were performed. By tracing the evolution of the role of videogame magazines, from arbitration to celebration, the study shows how these media texts provide a unique route to understanding early gaming culture in the UK. The theoretical framework for the thesis is partly informed by Bourdieu, specifically through his work on the cultural intermediary and cultural capital, and connects to contemporary academic studies on the formation of UK videogame culture (Kirkpatrick, 2015), whilst progressing previous engagements with the topic of UK micro-computing as a masculine pastime (Haddon, 1988a; Haddon, 1988b; Haddon, 1988c; Haddon, 1990; Haddon, 1992).

Textually orientated discourse analysis is combined with content analysis to examine over 100 magazines from 1981 to 1993. The analysis approaches the magazines on a section by section basis: from the editorial manifestos often included in launch issues, to exploring the games review as a new form of quantitative media critique. The cover pages and advertising content are analysed as part of a distinct hyper-masculine gaming aesthetic, whilst the reader's letters pages offer an example of how user generated content (UGC) can come to both represent and regulate subcultural discourse.

The thesis confirms that the videogame specialist press played a defining role across the 1980s and early 1990s regarding the growth and consolidation of emerging videogame practices, both in terms of production and consumption. This Introductory chapter has five sections, and begins by stating the case for examining the videogame magazine. Secondly it establishes what kind of 'gamer' or 'gaming' culture is being conceptualised for the purposes of the thesis. Thirdly it outlines the significance of hobbyism as a precursor to gaming culture. Fourthly it highlights Bourdieu's concept of the cultural intermediary as a vital tool to understanding the journalistic practices of the specialist gaming press. Finally, the introduction moves on to provide a chapter by chapter outline and summary of the thesis as a whole.

## Why Study Videogame Magazines?

It seems fitting to begin this thesis with the question, one I have been asked many times during the six years that this study has taken to complete - Why are you looking at old videogame magazines? Asked by fellow academics, and non-academic friends alike, there is a level of quizzical uncertainty, even humour to the question; a sometimes plaintive why? Certainly as media texts these magazines resist seriousness. They are juvenile, playful, consumerist guides, arguably little more than advertorials for software companies. Furthermore, they are guides for games that very few people play anymore. The magazines are ostensibly throwaway items, made obsolescent and superseded a few months after they went to print. With that in mind it does seem reasonable to ask what relevance do old videogame magazines have today, and indeed what level of relevance did they have originally, in order to give them significance.

To answer the last part first, the question of what gives them historical significance, part of what makes early UK videogaming magazines interesting as texts, invaluable as an archive, and a distinct category of media production, is their innovation and popularity. As publications designed specifically for the gaming sector they are globally the first of their type, and whilst initially niche they quickly grew into a strong specialist industry. By 1983 combined totals of home computer magazines were outselling women's magazines (Haddon, 1988c, p. 5), with some brand circulations passing 100,000 copies (Kirkpatrick, 2015). To provide some context this is in a market where computer ownership was itself only at around 1 million. The chances are if you had a micro-computer you bought one of these magazines. This level of popularity matters because it enabled them to inform many of the debates around computer usage, and gaming identity, that attended the expansion of videogames as an entertainment industry in the 1980s. Furthermore, whilst the niche character of videogame magazines might reduce what can be termed their 'scale' (the amount of the world they generate representations about), they do hold high degrees of 'repetition', 'commonality' and 'stability' (Fairclough, 2003). As a result they do show a notably cohesive sense of identity. This gives the UK videogaming magazine immense discursive potential, one that only recently has begun to be recognised within academia.

The significance of the videogame magazine is connected to their role as record and agent of societal change, in that they both reflect, and construct, the tastes of their producers and consumers. They 'provide us with an invaluable archive through which we can chart the development of a culture and a way of speaking about computers and software that elevates games to a position of prominence.' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 13) As the Kirkpatrick quote emphasises, by understanding the gaming magazine we can gain a clearer awareness of how gaming as a culture emerged. The agency of these texts enable them to operate as elements of social events, they 'have causal effects – i.e. they bring about changes.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 8) Furthermore, from such a discourse analysis perspective, 'it is vital to understand these consequences and effects if we are to raise moral and political questions about contemporary societies,' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 14).

In stating that the case for studying gaming magazines is that they are uniquely influential agents in the evolution of early gaming culture, one response might be but why study videogaming at all. In which the cycle of justifications is to a large extent repeated. The value of studying games has been well established within academia, and in the broader business community. The history of game studies is in part a story of such justifications and self-questioning. I shall only briefly touch upon the matter here, as it has been so thoroughly attended to elsewhere, to state that the study of computer games has societal relevance due to a wide range of factors, which combined make gaming exemplary with regards to comprehending 'fundamental social and cultural processes.' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 1). These include gaming's role in the development of digital technologies and attendant social transformations, including the emergence of PCs and the diffusion of technical interfaces, the rise of the internet and networked virtual spaces, new working practices, and as part of a billion dollar global cultural industry (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Also, more broadly than this, and referring back to much earlier ludic studies (Huizinga, 1949; Caillois and Barash, 1961), to understand our forms of play is to more broadly understand our society and our psyche, the character of play that exists across cultures.

It is the argument of this thesis that these niche magazines played a lead role in the story of videogames becoming a distinct form of entertainment and cultural practice. Yet, crucially, they have been overlooked both in the popular media, and in the field of games studies, due in part to a pervasive US-Japanese bias that is technologically determined. The corporate

success of console gaming by Sega & Nintendo in the 1990s, and Sony & Microsoft to the current day, has retroactively wiped our cultural memory of the trusty micro-computer. To accept such a narrative, and believe that the micro-computer is no longer relevant, is to accept an obsolescence based narrative of the gaming industry (Newman, 2012): that the best is always the next, and the past is to be discarded.

Furthermore, not only is the 1980s relevant, it is arguably the most significant period in the history of gaming culture. By which I mean the period of most significant determination of gaming as a cultural field. It is the principle period in history in which gaming becomes a recognisable social practice, with conventions, rituals, language, and meanings that still remain in force today. In summary, to understand gaming culture (present and past) you need to fully comprehend its emergence in the 1980s and early 90s, and to do that you have to rely (like so many gamers did back then) upon the gaming magazine.

### **What is gaming culture?**

When examining the emergence and evolution of a culture, it is necessary to first outline what is being summoned when using the term 'culture', both generally, and with regards to gaming culture specifically. In this thesis I am utilising a 'social' definition of culture, one where culture

'is a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of, from such a definition, is the classification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of life, a particular 'culture'.' (Williams, 1961, p. 57)

Williams distinguishes various definitions of 'culture' not to prioritise, but rather to stress the common areas and tensions between them, and suggests that it is those commonalities and tensions that make for fertile conceptual ground.

Each concept of culture provides its own attributes and abilities, its own resilience and restrictions in analysing its object of study. In this study an emphasis on the 'social' conceptualisation of culture (rather than the 'ideal' or 'documentary' (Williams, 1961)) has been adopted due to the focus of the research question upon the relationship between

gaming culture and the gaming press. The core emphasis being on values, meanings, and how these values and meaning intersect with daily life via organisational practices. The question of what defines 'gaming culture' is, however, a little more contentious. I should state from the outset that it is not my intention to enter into a debate around what constitutes a games culture now, in 2016, as that is not within the remit of this historical study. There are some useful aspects to the debate though, which I shall briefly touch on.

'Gaming culture', like another term I shall return to later 'Gameplay', has a tautological quality to it that resists analysis. When asking what constitutes a gamer's identity, and the gaming culture they collectively form, it would seem to make sense to choose the activity itself – the act of playing games. Gamer's play games, or more precisely put, gamers 'identify themselves with the activity.' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 72). Yet, it has been argued that the very notion of gaming *as* a culture is inherently flawed, and instead it should be a question of gaming *within* culture (Shaw, 2010). By describing gaming *as* a culture (centred on the playing of games) Shaw argues that 'This has ideological and political ramifications as it allows for videogames to be dismissed both as a form of entertainment or the culture of an 'other'.' (Shaw, 2010, p. 415) Framing the discourse with 'descriptions of who plays, what they play, and how they play ... define "video game culture" as something very distinct, as separable from the rest of some constructed mainstream culture.' (Shaw, 2010, p. 414) Additionally, as gaming has become so dispersed an activity, across all sections of modern society, it no longer has the cohesion to be termed *as* culture in any meaningful way.

However, whilst this is arguably true now, this was not always the case. In the 1980s and early 1990s it is quite viable to describe a particular 'gaming culture', in that there begins to coalesce a distinct set of social practices, for an increasing number of people, who identify themselves and each other as 'gamers'. The conceptualisation used in this thesis of historical 'gaming culture' is linked to that of the 'cultural field' (Bourdieu, 1984), 'in which perceptions and dispositions are aligned with objects and identities and through which a new cultural proving ground is created.' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 71). This alignment of 'perceptions and dispositions' with 'objects and identities' is key to understanding the connection between gaming practice and the specialist press. For it was the magazines that mediated between the objects (games) and the gamers' perceptions of them. Such a conceptualisation of gaming as a 'cultural field' recognises its *constitutive elements*. As

Kirkpatrick argues, 'in the 1980s and 1990s there could be no computer games that were not esteemed in terms of gameplay and no gamers who were not freaks. Gamer identity involved a distinctive kind of male exclusiveness.' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 4)

This is not to say that everyone who played games in the 1980s were male and geeky, but rather that 'gaming culture' was from an early stage constructed and identified with as a youthful, masculine, technophilic pursuit (Burrill, 2008). However, I would not apply the term subculture even to these germinal stages of videogaming, and would instead agree with Consalvo when she recognises the limitations of viewing gaming in those terms (Consalvo, 2007). Instead, and continuing to draw on Consalvo, I would assert that gaming as a pursuit can be best understood as one that developed (and relied upon) its own form of capital. This 'Gaming capital' can be understood as the symbolic currency acquired, and distributed, across gaming culture by gamers. It is an aspirational and legitimating currency, and a key constituent element of hierarchical gaming culture. Having gaming capital is what makes you a gamer, and the promise of getting it makes you want to be one. I shall elaborate a little more on 'gaming capital', before looking at some of the cultural influences that pre-date the timeframe of this thesis.

In attempting to move beyond the binding qualities of subculture Consalvo has reworked Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' to produce the idea of 'gaming capital', which she describes as 'a central element to serious gameplay.' (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4) Gaming capital as a term captures what it means to be a gamer, as being more than just someone who plays games, or someone who plays them well: 'It's being knowledgeable about games releases and secrets, and passing that information on to others. It's having opinions about which games magazines are better and the best sites for walkthroughs on the Internet.' (Consalvo, 2007, p. 18) It is a highly symbolic and discursive currency, a form of 'embodied' cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011). Correspondingly there is an ongoing struggle across gaming culture and the gaming industry as to what gaming capital should entail, about who possesses gaming capital, and what the best way to acquire it is.

In this conceptualisation of gaming as a consumer culture, with its own form of capital, the gaming press plays a key part, 'Specific segments of the game support industry have shaped important elements of gaming capital over the past several decades. The contents of games

magazines ... have had critical impacts on how all gamers evaluate, play, and talk about games.’ (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4). In doing so the niche gaming press has developed a new kind of role for itself, as a dealer in gaming capital. These magazines define the terms of what it means to be a gamer, and then sell those means back to the gaming community as a resource, supplying the demand they have helped to create. In this fashion players are drawn into gaming culture via a cultivation of the desire to possess gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007). The practices of gameplay, games-chat, and modding (via hacks or POKEs) and other sources of ‘gaming capital’ (Consalvo, 2007), that emerge in the 1980s are part of this formation of gaming culture *as* a masculine culture.

These practices of videogaming do not appear immaculately, but are part of a previous understanding of computer play that was forged in the amusement arcade (Haddon, 1988a), and by hobbyist interests in early electronic based pursuits (including computing, CB radio, and remote controlled vehicles). As such the masculinity of gaming culture relates to a wider ‘social imaginary’ (Kirkpatrick, 2013) around play and computer usage. Such a technological social imaginary is the instrumental lens through which gaming makes sense. In this framework the term ‘gamer’ can be usefully seen as not just a type of person per se, but also a subject position offered up by gaming culture. This subject position is one which ‘reflects a positive presence in the culture, a place that allows people to rationalise the pleasure they take in an activity with reference to an imagined community who share their values.’ (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 91) Admittedly there are positive and a negative aspects to this symbolic identification with an imagined wider community, as ‘Gamer identity is positive in the sense that it involves expert knowledge and virtuoso performance, but it also involves what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’. Older people, females and technology enthusiasts are all excluded.’ (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 73) Whilst gaming culture may provide identity and support to its accepted members, it does so often at the expense of barring entry to others.

This process of inclusion and exclusion arguably formed a cycle of insularity that would later become tautological and self-consuming. My approach across this thesis, is to consider early gaming culture, in relation to the gaming press, as a lived and imagined construct, a gaming imaginary. To understand this imaginary it is not a question of repeating commonly held stereotypes of ‘geeks and freaks’, but recognising and analysing the dominant narratives that formed the history of gaming culture.

## Hobbyism as a proto-gaming narrative

Having outlined what is being meant by the term 'gaming culture', and having recognised it's constructed and imaginary character (both as a concept and as a lived practice) it is useful to briefly consider those cultural narratives that pre-date it. This contextualisation is necessary as these proto-gaming narratives would help form the territory that gaming as a culture would later come to occupy. Gaming culture, and gaming as a cultural industry, can be understood as 'a novel articulation' (Fairclough, 2003) of these older practices. When gaming begins to emerge as a cultural field in 1981 it has two distinct narratives to draw upon for its cultural differentiation – hobbyism and the arcade.

The western gaming imaginary draws (albeit unequally, depending on the source and context) upon these two narrative strands for its emerging identity and values. Each story comes with its own creation myths and characters, and whilst dealing with *new* technologies and interactions the narratives themselves are quite traditional. They are sequential, protagonist centred, with an individuated history of alliances and enemies. They are also traditional in that they draw on the concept of nationhood, a discourse of national identity containing 'the idea that people and things from and within specific national borders possess very particular, idiosyncratic, national characteristics.' (Du Gay, 1997, p. 48) This is clearly the case with the emergence of home computing, where Britain is presented as a nation of tinkerers, as Haddon recognises, 'When we first achieved that important statistic of the greatest number of home computers per capita, many attributed this earlier popularity in Britain to a hobbyist tradition.' (Haddon, 1988b, p. 13). From these early stages the image of the hobbyist is deeply embedded into the narrative of British computing practices. Its new heroes would be the eccentric and the entrepreneur, with such figures as Clive Sinclair and Alan Sugar representing the Scientist and the Businessman respectively.

The early narratives of gaming culture generally fall into a work/play dichotomy, and whilst both strands (hobbyism and the amusement arcade) are gendered as male, they are initially quite distinct in terms of the subject positions offered and social practices favoured. I have focused here on the specialist area of electronic hobbyism, as I feel it is particularly relevant to the thesis, as it was from the field of hobbyism that the early computing press emerged. Videogame magazines would gradually splinter away from the computing press as they

sought to consolidate gaming as a discrete cultural field. Yet, to understand what gaming culture is, we need to look at what it defined itself against, its instrumental 'other'. However, it should be noted that the aesthetic, practices, and social rituals (the hierarchies and etiquette, the competing and the collaborations) of the amusement arcade are also inextricably linked to gaming culture. A deeper understanding of the linkages between arcade and home-gaming cultures is one area that offers rich rewards to researchers interested in the field.

### **Electronic hobbyism as masculine 'style'**

The core aspects of electronic hobbyism, vis a vis the development of an early British home computer market, are discussed by Haddon in his early work on the subject (Haddon, 1988c). These aspects centred on a strong sense of technological determinism, combined with an exploratory and futuristic horizon. The lauded values are those of capability, proficiency, the early adoption of cutting edge technologies, and technical prowess (Haddon, 1988c). Hobbyists enjoyed 'tinkering, the fun of experimenting, of learning, of problem solving.' (Haddon, 1988b, p. 7) For the electronic hobbyist scientific knowledge is both enthusiastically shared when attending specialist clubs, and physically enacted at home when endeavouring upon the current technical project. The hobby, in this framing, becomes not simply a specialist interest, but a style defined by specialism. As Haddon notes regarding the 1970s hobbyist press, 'The electronics which were offered in the magazines were so pervasive, entering into so many aspects of daily life, that this technology appears to be more of a general style.' (Haddon, 1988c, p. 135)

This 'style' of electronic hobbyism has its own objects and language, each of which is represented, re-iterated and distributed in the electronics press of the time. Furthermore, the idea that 'these items can be props to self-identity and enable the representation of self to others' (Haddon, 1988c, p. 135) connects the consumption and utilization of technology to questions of identity construction. The usage of objects as identity props, and the development of a shared language of interest, does, in my opinion, raise the option of viewing electronic hobbyism as a style, and thereby as a sub-cultural practice (Hebdige, 1979). If it can then be argued that this form of hobbyism is more than a compartmentalized set of leisure pursuits, but rather a stylized set of practices, distinguished by their tendency

towards leisured specialization, what kind of style is it? For Haddon two key features of electronic hobbyism are the concern with mastery and challenge, and secondly an abstracted, technological, sense of masculinity. This has significant import when considering the masculine discourse that later appears in the gaming magazine, and the psychological impact of identifying with technology in such an abstract and self-referential manner (Turkle, 1984; Turkle, 1996).

Regarding the masculine identity of hobbyism it is Haddon's contention that 'The greater participation of males in hobbies designated as being technological suggests that the identity of a 'challenging' technology has more resonance among males than females. Certainly there are more representations available which show males operating at such technological frontiers' (Haddon, 1988c). In this extract 'participation' and 'representation' conjoin to produce, and regulate, a gendered sense of a technological and challenge based 'identity'. The three factors that maintain this masculine identity of electronic hobbyism are denoted as financial, spatial, and temporal. Haddon argues, via the evidence of his informants that the hi-cost of early computers (pre-1982), the bulky nature of the units and their expansion kits, and the time required for continued and immersive engagement all combined to favour the male consumer.

This is because such large blocks of time, money, and space were not commonly on offer to many women either at work or at home in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is argued by Haddon that women's free time at home was often 'fragmented', and their leisure pursuits less defined by large 'family' purchases. Additionally the 'literature on gender and leisure raises the question of whether many women could command this degree of and type of space for personal interests.' (Haddon, 1988c, p. 146) Furthermore, the lack of column space dedicated to electronic hobbyism, and later to computing, in female gendered magazines supports the argument that despite the rhetoric of futurism, of exploration and emancipation for all, the trajectory was in fact already pointed towards the male. Significantly this sense of early UK computing as a masculine style is echoed by Jean Kelly's framing analysis of popular US magazine discourse around the emergent technology of micro computing (Kelly, 2009).

Yet, Haddon recognizes that this gendering of technology is always provisional, as both market demands and wider social initiatives sought to loosen gendered boundaries, be it for profit or for ideological reasons. One example cited is the BBC's Computer Literacy Project of 1982, a project which 'may have been of particular importance in stimulating greater interest among women.' (Haddon, 1988c, p. 140) This tension, between potential stimuli for demographic expansion, and the desire to repress any such involvement, is a process of significance to my thesis in the sense that the videogame magazine would later play a key role in ciphering such interests.

### **Videogame magazines and the cultural intermediary**

The tinkering hobbyists explored above by Haddon acted as an early form of cultural intermediary for the germinal gaming industry, with Haddon noting 'Those hobbyists were to play an important role in marketing. They constituted an important group of 'opinion-forming end users' who gave a visibility to the product beyond advertising.' (Haddon, 1988b, p. 14) Indeed the public relations apparatus at Sinclair Research would draw close attention to the hobbyists' activities, utilising their labour to sell DIY units. The role of the cultural intermediary would become more significant across the gaming industry as it professionalised in the early 1980s. The overall approach taken in this thesis is one heavily informed by Bourdieu's concept of the cultural intermediary. Whilst I shall look at some of the limitations and tensions associated with the term in the literature review, at this stage I shall briefly introduce the term, and outline how the concept relates to the understanding of videogame culture and the specialist gaming press.

In approaching gaming as a culture it is appropriate to consider it in relation to taste, specifically Bourdieu's seminal conceptualisation of 'taste' as developed in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu tastes are social constructs that are experienced by individuals as personal preferences and dispositions. These tastes are acquired by conditioning, conditioning that relates to social origin and trajectory. Furthermore, such tastes are continually being negotiated by dominant and marginalised groups, each looking to defend or improve their position within society (Maguire and Matthews, 2014). In this framework of individual taste as a social construct, one that is always being gently manipulated, the cultural intermediary are the stratified, fragmented labour force of the

cultural industries. They mediate between the spheres of production and consumption, 'as a group of taste makers and need merchants, whose work is part and parcel of an economy that requires the production of consuming tastes and dispositions.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 15).

There are a wide range of categories of cultural intermediary listed in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), a list so diverse as to potentially make the category unstable, yet what connects them into a meaningful whole is this notion of taste, and their primary role as taste makers. However, it is necessary to narrow down exactly who is being referring to in this thesis. The most typical of cultural intermediaries are 'the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or the critics of "quality" newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 325). These journalist-writers or writer-journalists can be further defined as 'the critic who presides over not-yet-legitimate cultural forms' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 145). In this thesis the cultural intermediary being referred to is primarily the staff (reviewers, editors, and illustrators) of the games magazine. The 'not-yet-legitimate' element cited by Maguire is particularly relevant to a study of the early gaming press as the consolidation of legitimacy, of gaming as discrete social practice, is one of their principal tasks and concerns. The role of the gaming cultural intermediary is not just to sell issues of the magazine, and support the software industry, but also to produce a coherent and resilient cultural form around videogaming.

The concept of the cultural intermediary has been utilised within this thesis as it offers 'a point of entry to study how tastes are formed, legitimated and continue to develop. By locating market actors at the intersection of forms of economic organization, group status competition and individual mentalities, Bourdieu's account assists in keeping agency, passions, anxieties and habituations in the frame.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 24). I agree that keeping such agents and their emotional life within the analysis is important, without it all that remains is a still-life study, one emptied of vitality. When assessing cultural formations it is the assertion of this thesis that we must continue to interpret the work of the 'taste makers', and that 'recognising the journalists role as intermediaries 'allows us to assess their overall contribution to the process of constructing meanings.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 146).

When considering the work of cultural intermediaries, one route for the researcher is to recognise those devices that are utilised within their cultural fields and commodity chains. Regarding videogaming culture these devices were pre-dominantly deployed within the new gaming magazines. These devices included review guides and scoring systems, a newly formed review genre (with its own attendant rhetorical devices and structural conventions), previews, news and features, themed illustrated covers, readership call-outs, user generated content, questionnaires, competitions, and more. The main body of the thesis will look at the cultural construction of meaning via a broad sample of such gaming magazines, on a section by section basis.

In terms of conceptualising the cultural intermediary Maguire and Matthews offer a 5 point outline in their introduction and update to the field of study. These 5 points provide the researcher with guidance in ‘understanding cultural intermediaries’ context, location and defining attributes’ (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 17). These are as follows:

- 1 New economy, new class relations
- 2 New occupations
- 3 Taste makers
- 4 Expertise and legitimacy
- 5 Cultural capital and dispositions’ (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 17)

Keeping each of these elements in mind, elements which recognise the specifics of the socio-economic environment being examined, the range of new occupations becoming available at that time, the type of tastes being formed and legitimacy being exercised, and the relevant stratifications within the sphere of ‘taste making’ it is possible to apply a nuanced critique of the cultural industries via a study of its own agents and the media products they articulate. In summary, for a meaningful utilisation of the cultural Intermediary concept, context is all important. I shall now summarise the core findings of the thesis, on a chapter by chapter basis.

The videogame magazine as a ‘Format’ (Fairclough, 2003) is a highly varied commercial multi-text, composed of a variety documents. Each of which traditionally fit within certain genres: including editorial features, reviews, User Generated Content, and promotional

imagery. This thesis has adopted a mirror structure to that of the magazine itself, with different chapters approaching different sections of the magazine. The result is four chapters of archival analysis, each contributing a range of new knowledge to the field. These examine the magazine sample in terms of its editorial content (specifically manifestos and review guides), reviews, front covers, and reader's letters. The sections were selected to provide a broad, nuanced understanding of the overall texts, and whilst there are absences (for example type-in listings, contents pages) I feel that the core features of the magazines are well represented within the analysis. I shall here outline the findings of each of those chapters in order to provide a coherent overview of the thesis. Chapters 1 to 3 of the thesis relate to this Introduction chapter, the Literature Review, and a Methodology chapter.

#### **Chapter 4: Arbitration to celebration – the evolution of the videogame magazine**

The first of the four analytical chapters has been designed to provide an overview of the specialist gaming press. It examines the evolution of the videogame magazine via the escalating game scores meted out by various magazine brands, and by the editorial manifestos that often accompanied launch issues and moments of rebranding. This enables the research to assess the manifest editorial content, what the magazines explicitly declare as their position, and the latent meanings that are coded into the review scores. The question being asked of the videogame magazine at this stage is what was their *function* and how did this function evolve from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. The function of the gaming magazine is outlined as three-fold: firstly it is to ensure profits for its own controlling interests, secondly to provide the gamer with 'gaming capital, and thirdly to support the products of the gaming industry by acting as 'buyers guides' (Newman, 2008, p. 31).

These three functions do not necessarily exist harmoniously, and this chapter examines how the gaming magazine as a cultural industry tried to balance its role as taste arbiter and industry advocate. The changing review scores (or ratings) are examined as they provided the key information to buyers, both as individual gamers and the software distributors. It is asserted that in performing each of these functions the videogame magazine acted as a key producer of meaning for gamers/games producers, and the dominant consumer access point to the early gaming commodity.

The chapter begins by looking at the broader industrial context of the gaming press, and assesses the efficacy of the magazines in terms of promoting game sales. By comparing review scores with the chart success of over 100 games this research argues that there is a clear correlation between high scores and chart (commercial) success, and that the latent indicator for a 'good' score, one that instructs the buyer to purchase, is around 70%. Furthermore, by constructing and comparing magazine meta-scores with the release dates of 'classic' games (those listed in top 100 pantheons), it is asserted that magazine scoring escalated during the 1980s and early 90s in order to celebrate, rather than arbitrate, videogames as a commodity. This escalation in review scores has recognisable technological, cultural, and economic determinants, which are non-diegetic, rather than diegetic, factors. The result of this is a shifting identity for the videogame magazine: a shifting subject position.

These evolving subject positions are part of three waves of development for the UK videogame industry. The 1<sup>st</sup> wave (1981 to 1984) of videogame magazines is one of arbitration, the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave (1984 to 1988) advocacy, and the third wave (1988 to 1993) celebration. Together they form a trajectory of expansion, consolidation and market segmentation. The fluid, and relatively rapid, rate of these changes places additional discursive pressure on the magazines to assert and adapt their branded identities, a process which is articulated via the use of editorial manifestos and review guides (guides to how the brand's review system works). This chapter adopts a fine grain analysis of these self-promotional features, which articulate the changing values and principles of each publication. They act as what can be called the 'voice' of the magazine, as it calls out to its readership.

This research on the magazine manifesto revealed a set of discourses that move from the establishment of a new niche media (they are both explanatory and exploratory texts with regards to the uses of technology), to the consolidation of a specific *gamer* sense of identity. The final 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of evolution is marked by the production of an increasingly segmented and specialised sense of what that gaming identity entails. Gaming magazine titles from this period (1988 onwards) adopt various strategies of differentiation which are explored in this chapter. In summary, the tensions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave are in part due to the success of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave magazines. In successfully articulating a new, discrete, gamer identity, the industry

produced its own commodity quandary. A dilemma of how to sustain a coherent consumer culture, whilst retaining the kudos of exclusivity and the allure of originality and difference.

## **Chapter 5 – The videogame review as system of media critique**

This examination of the videogame review asks what is their function, form, and core set of discourses. It empirically examines the games review's evaluative conventions and rhetorical devices, and questions how these relate to wider socio-historical developments within the culture of videogaming. This research has enabled the production of a template for understanding the games review as a system of critique. I have termed this a tri-partite system, a system that could usefully be applied outside the boundaries of videogaming, and across other consumer-centric fields of enquiry.

The chapter opens by examining the limitations of videogaming's current dominant evaluative term 'gameplay'. I outline some pre-cursors and alternatives to the term (as they appear in the archive sample), and question its origins and usefulness with regards to understanding gaming culture. It is argued that 'gameplay' has become as metonym for the practice of gaming as a whole, an example of *hysteresis*. Furthermore, that gameplay is now the mark of authenticity that has no real authentication, and has evolved to a point where it no longer needs to provide any. My argument agrees with that of Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2015), in that it views the discursive dominance of gameplay to have occurred at the expense of a broader gaming critical discourse. The remainder of the chapter, with its deconstruction of the games review into its component elements (as a series of syntagms, paradigms, and rhetorical devices) is in part designed to circumvent the tautology presented by gameplay as a term.

The research undertaken for this chapter revealed a highly standardised structure underpinning the games review as a critical genre. This structure can be formulated sequentially into three stages, three stages that the games review will run through with notable conventionality. These are i) Context; ii) Content; and iii) Critique. Numerous examples of the structure are presented, and it is argued that the unanimity of the convention suggests an inherent correlation between the structure itself and the central functions of the review. Furthermore, that this review structure can be regarded as a

metonym of the wider gaming press. The structure is a division of discursive labours, with the review designed to interpellate, inform, and instruct. To engage the gamer and to direct them, in both their purchasing and their play. The formation of a highly standardised three-part structure connects to the emerging cultural capital of the magazine and their (often) young review staff. The cohesive structure acting as a means of framing (or restricting) critical variety, and instilling authority into a media form with little established credence. A case of literary conventions attempting to assure critical conformity and industry acceptance.

The structuring of the review into three syntagms, is a process mirrored within the final stage of 'Critique', where the procession of three syntagms branches off into three paradigms of evaluation. These three paradigms represent the core evaluations of the videogame review, which I have termed the Construct/Experience/Commodity. This assertion is supported by my own research into evaluative categories (such as 'Graphics', 'Lastability', etc.), a taxonomy carried out upon a wide sample of nineteen videogame publications from the 1980s and early 90s. The Construct paradigm is a term that corresponds to the production sphere and is mainly diegetic in focus (i.e. 'Graphics', 'Sound'). The Experience paradigm corresponds to the sphere of consumption and tends towards the non-diegetic (i.e. 'Addictiveness', 'Playability'). The Commodity paradigm is one that centres on consumer imperatives (i.e. 'Value'). In summary the review interrogates the game by asking how proficient is the product's construction, how it will make the user feel, and what is its overall commercial value? A set of standards partly inherited from other fields of consumerism, and in part unique to the practice of gaming.

As has been outlined, the role of the cultural intermediary is a thread that runs throughout much of this thesis. In order to ascertain that role such an analysis needs to attend to their dispositions and devices. Regarding reviews the principle rhetorical devices outlined in this chapter are: wordplay, roleplay, pastiche, and humour. Examples are provided from the sample that illustrate how wordplay and demotic language work to provide a playful and thereby youthful persona. One that connects with the teenage demographic of the magazines. Furthermore, these uses of comedy serve to balance the escalating celebrationism occurring across the gaming industry towards sometimes mediocre commodities, whilst maintaining a rebellious sensibility. Parody and role-play combine with

pastiche to enable the reviewer to deliver such irony on a professional basis, whilst adopting an increasingly sardonic posture. As such humour is employed as a playful labour.

This reliance upon parody and wordplay speaks both of a highly inventive culture, and a critical impasse being reached by the videogame review, where the critique must always obey its commodity function – one caught in a tension between arbitration and celebration. This point of self-reflexivity is arguably one reached by all consumer centric critiques. Connecting this chapter to the overall research question, and central to this thesis, is the argument that videogame criticism evolved, over the period of a decade, from a relatively functionalist consumer appraisal into a distinctly post-modernist, self-reflexive, state of pastiche. Furthermore, that the videogame magazine played a core role in enabling this rapid development.

## **Chapter 6 – The Illustrated gaming magazine cover, adolescent masculinity, and the geek aesthetic**

In this chapter I examine the gaming press in terms of its production of a distinctly adolescent gaming aesthetic from pre-existing Fantasy and Sci-Fi tropes. Textually orientated discourse analysis is combined with content analysis to examine the illustrations used in over 100 magazines, both in terms of their cover pages and advertising content. This research provides new knowledge in the field of games studies by studying the non-diegetic realm of magazine cover illustrations, and by asking not only what kind of imagery dominates, but how do those images relate to wider conceptions of technology and masculinity.

The content analysis for this section established a prioritisation of Sci-Fi and Fantasy motifs, genres stereotypically connected with 'geek' culture. There was also a broader reliance upon the competition/combat centric discourse of sports, military conflict, and action/adventure - themes traditionally considered as masculine territories. Secondly, in terms of participants, whites are presented as the representational norm, and non-whites are only presented as physical or ideological fetishes (black star athletes, oriental samurais etc.). In terms of gender the participants were consonant with the established demographic of the magazine's readership (95% male). However, regarding age the idealized user (the participants on the illustrated covers) is notably older than the teenage demographic. The curious absence of

the child, or even the teenager, arguably reveals a fear within videogame culture of appearing childish/immature, and suggests that the covers are acting as sites of aspirational identification. Thirdly the content analysis (when combined with my research into genre popularity across the time period) determined a prioritisation of certain key gaming genres, genres that would later become central to 1990s videogaming culture. This supports the claim that the videogame magazine, as a vanguard cultural text, helped produce a distinct type of gaming culture, with distinct modes of play. That in doing so they were a principle site for the accessing and distributing of gaming capital.

Utilising the dominant genres established by the content analysis the remainder of this chapter provides a close textual reading of the magazine covers. It is argued that the core conceptual metaphor that links the (seemingly disparate) themes and tropes that populate the magazine covers is one of Adventure. Also, that these illustrations work to present the computer as a gateway to extraordinary experiences - as an experiential interface. It is the central argument of this chapter that in the 8-bit era of limited computing verisimilitude it was game related artwork, on magazine covers, adverts, and software packaging, that helped develop and disseminate a new masculine gaming aesthetic. As such these texts act as sites of masculine role-play, with idealised bodies set within a network of fetishistic Fantasy and hi-tech environs. These heroic male imagos act as a form of idealised surrogate self for the reader. Meanwhile, the Fantasy female is a peripheral, and highly ambivalent, figure within the sample. Whether as Princess, Amazon, or Sorceress, they are inevitably highly sexualised, and offer the readership processes of objectification and identification that involve elements of both sadism and masochism.

In terms of the Fantasy genre the key male tropes fall into a binary of might & magic, Warriors & Wizards. Here there is a Cartesian quantification of the subject into divisions of body/mind, and chaos/order. This division of the self into a quantifiable set of characteristics is an instrumental process, where attributes become abilities, and qualities become testable quantities. In summary the popularity of the male Fantasy figure, that populates much of the gaming imaginary, can be viewed in relation to the teenage demographic of the magazines. A set of responses to the evolving expectations of manhood. It is argued in this chapter that the Fantasy male figure enables two responses to the demands of masculinity and adulthood, firstly by eliding them, and secondly by deconstructing them. By having various

moulds, or tropes, to enter or identify with, the reader is able to enact the various types of manhood that are expected of him, and to do so without facing the inherent contradictions that exist within masculinity as a whole. The result is not so much escapism, but rather a fluid cast of participants, personas that offer both physical strength and intellectual power.

The Sci-Fi illustrations that are so popular on gaming magazine covers, and in wider gaming culture, exhibit a fascination with the relationship between the individual, the social, and the technological. A close reading of the texts revealed two sub-categories that dominate the sample: Aliens, and Spaceships. The magazines can be said to prioritise what is often termed hard Sci-Fi, as opposed to the softer, more cerebral variety. There are three essential Alien tropes within the magazine sample, which exist on a sliding scale of technological sophistication – the Beast, Invader, and Benign Explorer. Here the Alien ‘Beast’ provides a target for man’s technological prowess, the classic spaceman acting as an emblem of hegemonic Western masculinity. Secondly, the Space Invader (that most iconic of videogame ‘others’) presents a dark reflection of that heroic spaceman. Where we explore they Invade. In doing so they represent a subverting of the Western heroic-vision of science and articulate a degree of ambivalence regarding the promises of scientism.

The recurrent trope of the Spaceship on the covers provides insight into a core conceptual metaphor of computing and videogames, that interfacing with technology provides the opportunity for empowerment. Through visual techniques of opacity and disembodiment (you seldom see the pilots for these craft) ‘You’ can become the space pilot, and become built into the technological interface, as represented by the cockpit. The result can be termed a techno-social subject (Lupton, 1995), a subject that is idealised and impervious, the apotheosis of a post-Enlightenment separation of body and mind.

In summary, the magazine cover image acts as both a non-diegetic bridge into the inner-world of the game, and a bridge into the gaming culture that produced and consumed them. What arguably begins with an economic necessity, for the niche gaming press to distinguish itself in the news aisle, develops into a visual medium able to articulate a variety of fears and desires regarding power, technology, and the self. Muscular bodies promise potency, whilst agile fighter ships express an individualistic desire to direct change, and to become

immersed in that change. In this chapter the combination of content and discourse analysis reveals a rich textual realm, one that reflects principally upon issues of order and power, technological mastery and a management of the unknown.

The illustrations used by videogame magazines also reveal a nuanced engagement with pre-existing Sci-Fi & Fantasy tropes that goes far beyond their original remit of boosting retail magazine sales. Such a reading counters the view that gaming culture is always inherently celebrationist towards technology, and that such celebrations are escapist and regressive. In this context Fantasy and Sci-Fi imagery is not so much retrograde & escapist, but a strategic process of fluid gendered identifications. A means of the readership dramatizing their own experiences of change and loss, as they form an adolescent narrative of mastery and control. These influential magazines point to an early, and continuing, tendency of gaming (and geek) culture to playfully celebrate the transgressive, whilst continuing to absorb neoliberal and patriarchal discourse.

### **Chapter 7 - User Generated Content as representation and regulation**

In terms of structure this chapter begins by looking at what is meant by the term User Generated Content (UGC). I then provide a brief outline of the (post-fordist) production context within which the UGC of the sample existed. The study moves on to the findings of the content analysis, followed by a close textual analysis of the use of 'call-outs' (requests for content) across various strains of UGC, the reader's letters themselves, and the editorial techniques that are used to frame those letters. One aim of this chapter is to recognise the users' voice, and the collective identity of that voice, whilst locating it within the wider set of power relationships that constitute the gaming magazine as a whole. To try and understand UGC as a tool for both representation and control.

UGC has a long tradition in the pre-digital media, most notably via the popularity of reader's letters pages. It has been argued that the ongoing popularity of UGC, for those who produce, distribute, and read it, is to a great extent centred on the 'aura' of inclusivity and group identity that it enables. Furthermore, this chapter asserts that whilst the letters of this study pre-date the usual notions of convergence culture, such archival texts do feed into related debates on consumerism and participatory culture.

A core feature of post-fordist industrial developments within the publishing sector is an increased emphasis on the 'effective use of technological innovation and enhanced responsiveness to consumer demand.' (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 53). UGC is highly pertinent in this regard as it fulfils two key post-fordist functions in the drive for innovation and responsiveness across the cultural industries. Firstly UGC helps produce the dominant meaning of new technologies, by instructing the reader via editorial responses to their queries. Secondly UGC forms a feedback loop that assists in the formation of niche consumer markets for those technologies. As such this chapter asserts that UGC plays a significant role in producing both the discourse and the early gaming subject.

UGC is examined in this chapter as a fan-writing genre, a medium that brings together the individual user and the wider fanbase they constitute, with the gaming magazine operating as a gate keeper to such interactions. It is asserted that whilst the fan-writer might only make up a small fraction of the overall readership (less than 1%), they can be said to embody the values of the wider collective that they represent and communicate to. Thereby, to study the super-user (the users with the highest level of gaming capital) is to understand the idealised self of the user-community. This study finds there is a striking similarity between the discourse associated with geek identity, and that connected to the fan in general. Most notably with regards to the negative connotations around 'immaturity, obsession, isolation, and disconnection from reality.' (Jenkins, 2013, pp. 9-10).

The findings of the content analysis for this chapter focus on three propositions, which relate to areas of gender, slang, and genre. The 1<sup>st</sup> proposition was that the gendering of the contributors (super-users) would be representative of the published demographic of the magazine's wider readership (users), which was approx. 95% male. This was found to be the case, though the possibility of a sub-set of 'silent' female contributors, who prefer not to be categorised as feminine, is recognised. The 2<sup>nd</sup> proposition regards slang/humour. A general assertion can be made that up to 1987 humour is present but occasional, whereas from 1988 it is a consistent or systematic feature of the reader's letter writing style. Also, a consistent use of slang emerges in 1986, two years before this comedic turn. Thereby, a general trajectory can be sketched out as being formal/informal/comedic. It is asserted from these findings that humour enabled the readers to form a banter based community, and thereby operate publicly in an otherwise private manner. It also allows the editorial team to

form a synthetic discourse with the readership, where the reader is encouraged to engage with the brand as a living entity. The 3<sup>rd</sup> proposition relates to the principal genres of the letters, which were found to be 'request' and 'argument'.

Regarding the genres of 'request' and 'argument', the content analysis makes visible a clear trajectory, with the letters marking a prolonged period of *argument* over the terrain of videogaming as a social practice (i.e. 'what does it mean to be a gamer'). Furthermore, that as gaming culture is consolidated these debates are replaced by a new type of question, one of comparative consumption combined with 'request'. The letters become a branded debate over which commodity is better than the other, and a comedic set of requests for gaming related t-shirts. This connects to the previous chapters discussion of reviews, and indicates that the path from enquiry to reflection (Turkle, 1984) is being re-directed, and thereby stalled. However, it is clear that the reader's letters do produce a textual feedback loop that was at once personal, informed, and critical in its operations, and as such these letters pages provided a vital collective space for the gaming community.

This chapter goes on to examine the editorial framing (call-outs and responses) of the reader's letters in three key respects: what are the core dichotomies that emerge; how does the subject position of the letters editor evolve; and how does the inherent commodity logic of the 'buyers guide' attempt to regulate the broader discourse. Regarding the call outs there is a notable shift from a customer services register, politely offering assistance and asking for feedback, to that of an informal, youth orientated media shout out. By 1992 this transformation has been completed, with UGC evolving from an adult consumer arena of technical discourse to a juvenile play area. However, the letters also exhibit a clear concern within the gaming community about this reduced seriousness of purpose, one that was shared by the producers of home computers (Haddon, 1988b). As such these letters form part of an early contestation around the quintessential meaning of the technology, one that can be summarised as a struggle between work and play.

The editorial response to this work/play tension, as sourced from the sample, is disavowal. To insist that one form of usage leads to all others rather than supplanting it, and that consumer choice can be relied upon to determine a variety of meanings and applications. Further examples from the sample reveal a persistent re-enforcing of what can be termed a

neo-liberalist free market ethos within the gaming press. It is an ideology where nothing must be allowed to challenge the profit principle, instead consumer sovereignty will produce a self-regulating friction free market, and profit will produce progress. Hyperreal figures such as The Yob (the editorial avatar of *CVG* magazine) work to enable the ostensibly anti-establishment niche gaming mag to act as the voice of the cultural establishment.

As highlighted earlier in this introduction the concept of the cultural intermediary (Bourdieu, 1984) is key to comprehending the practices, devices, and subject positions of the reviewer *per se*, and the youthful videogame reviewer in particular. My analysis of reader's letters identified an editorial strategy which, though not unique to gaming mags, was pursued by them to a heightened degree. This strategy is that of producing hyperreal cultural intermediaries (figures such as 'Big Red' and 'The Yob'), symbolic authority figures that become increasingly detached from any normative sense of the real. Through such characters the reader is encouraged to interact with a fantasy roll call of robots, cyberpunks, and mythological creatures, in a precession of simulation.

The precession of simulation (Baudrillard, 1983) classically follows three stages and can be mapped against the evolving subject position of the gaming magazine cultural intermediary. Firstly there is a reflection of a basic reality; secondly the masking and perversion of that basic reality; thirdly the masking of the absence of a basic reality. In gaming magazines this first stage of reflection is achieved via Staff Bios, where the staff member is recreated as cool media persona. The second stage (masking) is enacted via the use of nom de plumes (e.g. the fictional character of *CVG* letters' editor Lloyd Mangram), and thirdly the absence of any basic reality via such fantasy alter-egos as The Yob. This textual analysis cites various examples where hyperreal intermediaries bolstered the gaming capital of the magazines, and enabled an intimacy between the readership and the brand that exists primarily in the realm of the imaginary. This imaginary was a collective space where the reader and reviewer exist in a shared dialogue, defined by masculinity, fantasy, and youth. Furthermore, such publicly performed banter was based primarily upon components of parody, conflict, and submission.

## Conclusion

The early videogame magazines that constitute the sample for this study hold a particular significance because they provided the only access point to a vast entertainment arena of gaming, and as such 'were virtually the only media through which the consumer role of 'games buff' could be constructed.' (Haddon, 1988c, p. 202) Whilst other, more established, cultural industries had a wider range of access points, including TV, radio, and regular national press columns, the cultural field of videogaming was principally supported and accessed via the specialist press. This gave them unmatched gaming capital, capital which was redistributed back to the readership in the form of cultural legitimacy. It has been previously recognised that this was no neutral mediation, with Haddon stating that 'the only way to follow games directly was to read texts broadly identified as male.' (Haddon, 1988b, p.206)

The symbiotic dynamic between videogame, magazine, and reader/user is thereby one charged as masculine from the outset. The fact that these magazines operated as the principle realm of affirmation, or contest, towards the notion of a gendered gaming subject makes them of relevance to the development of videogame culture as a whole. My thesis will look for both the contestations and the affirmations of this youthful, rebellious, masculine gaming culture via the gaming magazines, texts which remain both 'vital but curiously overlooked' (Newman, 2008, p. 29).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review begins with a truncated overview of the work carried out in the diverse field of games studies, with emphasis placed upon those works that consider the non-diegetic aspects of videogame practice; that being the world outside the terrain of the videogame itself. This is followed by a review of the work that pertains to videogame magazines: namely Leslie Haddon's seminal academic work on their development in the early 1980s, followed by more contemporary engagements with the gaming press as a 'buyers guide' and shared communal space (Newman, 2008), as a source of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007), and in regards to the formation of a videogaming culture (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2015). The selected work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 2011) is also examined at this point, as it provides a connecting conceptual thread between my work and that of Kirkpatrick and Consalvo (particularly regarding variations on cultural capital), and enables an understanding of the cultural intermediary as an articulating figure (Negus, 2002; Maguire and Matthews, 2012; Maguire and Matthews, 2014).

The UK videogaming industry can be understood as a two industries that operated synergistically. The *primary* industry is one of games production & distribution, and the *secondary*, or supportive, industry is one of representation, as performed by the specialist UK publishing press (Haddon, 1988c). These industries have been examined in this thesis with the explicit understanding that production considerations structure growth (Haddon, 1988c), and that such considerations do not only emerge from the material base but will, in time, return to transform it. The key assertion drawn from this review is that the videogame specialist press played a defining role during the 1980s regarding the growth and consolidation of emerging videogame practices, both in terms of production and consumption - a role still rarely comprehended, and one that this thesis aims to further illuminate.

### A brief review of games studies

Before I review the key academic works carried out on the videogame magazine (Haddon, 1988c; Consalvo, 2007; Newman, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2015) it is worthwhile

to look at the endeavours of Games Studies more generally, to see where the conjunctions may exist and what benefits may arise from them. This is not a potted history of Games Studies, a field which has long since outgrown any such reductive narratives, but instead a broad stroke recognition of some of the topics relevant to my own work. For a more in depth review I would recommend Adrienne Shaw's invaluable interpretation of Games Studies from a cultural perspective (Shaw, 2010).

An initial a priori of the early academic work around videogames is the games seeming detachment from the material world, in that gaming theorists often focused on the interior diegetic world of the videogame, emphasising its immaterial status as hyperreal simulation. In the early moments of gaming studies this was expressed in terms of the narratives that they tell (Aarseth, 1997) or the abstract rules that frame and formulate our experience of them (Juul, 2005). These early approaches of narratology and ludology should not be seen as defining, or limiting, the field of Games Studies, but they do mark out a time of early disciplinary contestation, consolidation, and growth - they represent a conjunctive moment. Games Studies has since, in its debates, conferences, journals, and other disciplinary activities, expanded to offer a vibrant and eclectic range of perspectives in its attempts to apprehend the 'persuasive power' (Bogost, 2007) of the videogaming experience.

Part of the activity that is of interest to my own work has been a more recent turn in Games Studies towards the non-diegetic aspect of gaming. Through this socially informed perspective the coded world of the game still emanates from the hard wired components of the machine (Montford and Bogost, 2009) via the physicality of the controllers (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Yet now these codes are being recognised as always already informed by the conditions of their own production. These conditions, mediated by the apparatus of play, then inform the culture & conventions that surround the gamer in the form of social practice. In my research this interest in the second, exterior, life of the game takes the form of the production and consumption of the specialist gaming magazine. Whilst Bogost has carried out fascinating work on the journalistic potential of videogames (Bogost *et al.*, 2010), relatively little work has been carried out on the potential of analysing videogame journalism.

The videogame, from whichever perspective it is viewed, is undoubtedly a significant media industry. The most impressive and potent analysis of the videogame industry, as an intersection between advanced capitalist society and technology, is to be found in *Digital Play* (Kline et al., 2003). This is a work that manages to maintain its specificity to the medium of gaming, whilst being of exceptional value to those with interests outside the field of Games Studies. It is a work that has informed my own perspective from the outset. Kline's work draws on that of Raymond Williams, and the field of cultural studies more broadly. Indeed the three circuits model (consisting of culture, technology and marketing) that Kline develops in *Digital Play* has explicit ties to earlier work performed on the 'circuit of culture' (Johnson, 1986; Hall *et al.*, 1996; du Gay and Hall, 1997), a circuit which has its roots in earlier neo-marxist re-workings of the production and consumption cycle.

Other examples of the videogame researched as social practice include Castronova's examination of online gaming, which has revealed the 'real-life' economic implications to these supposedly playful & detached cyber-situations (Castronova, 2005; Castronova, 2007). Combined with this shift in subject material, from the abstracted to the substantive, there has been an increasingly anthropological and ethnographic methodology (Boellstorff, 2006; Gosling and Crawford, 2011), one that re-positions the focus on the gamer within a social sciences framework (Corliss, 2011). Increasingly it is argued that even when the gaming experience is a solitary one there are still questions of audience to be theorized (Williams, 2006; Gosling and Crawford, 2011). Increasingly the data that has become available from observing large-scale online gaming communities (such as *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft* etc.) is seen as highly applicable in terms of providing a wider social critique (Castronova, 2006). It is arguably the increasingly social side of gaming - in terms of the rising popularity of MMORPGs, and the widening demographic of 'Casual' play - that has brought Games Studies to more acute appreciation of the cultural context around play. The next section will approach the UK videogaming industry via the academic work carried out by Dr Leslie Haddon, in his germinal 1988 doctoral thesis on the history of the UK videogame industry (Haddon, 1988c). It will then move on to consider how the work of Newman (Newman, 2004; Newman, 2008), Consalvo (Consalvo, 2007), and Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2015) has progressed such early studies into gaming magazines.

## A case of symbiosis

The earliest significant academic examination of the 1980s UK videogame industry was carried out in the doctoral thesis of Leslie Haddon, with his research covering the early to mid-1980s. This work signals an interest in the adoption of home computing as a highly significant, and gendered, shift in social practice, a subject he expands upon in his later works (Haddon, 1988a; Haddon, 1990; Haddon and Skinner, 1991; Haddon, 2004; Haddon *et al.*, 2006). This interest will lead Haddon to follow ICT as it goes mobile (Haddon and Green, 2009), where it moves out from the private domestic sphere and (back) into the public realm. Haddon's initial doctoral research, generally overlooked in Games Studies, is invaluable for those interested in the formative days of digital play, due both to its analytical insight and methodological rigour. Also, the depth of access Haddon manages to gain to the hobbyist and gaming industry insiders of the early 1980s provides the study with a uniquely contemporaneous quality. It is a quality that actively contests many of the retrospective narratives that have come to exist within the modern gaming imaginary.

It is my intention to progress and adapt this early work of Haddon to include the videogame magazine texts that emerged from 1984 to the early 1990s, and in doing so trace the consolidation and contestations that occurred during that time. The early 1980s saw the continuing rise of videogame magazine popularity, until 'By mid-1983 the number of home computing titles had overtaken women's interest magazines.' (Haddon, 1988c, p.202). Therefore, as Haddon argues, 'It is important to pay attention to this proliferation of magazines because these journals were themselves a part of the home computer phenomenon' (Haddon, 1988c, p.202). As they expanded in volume, both in terms of shelf space and within the gaming imaginary, these publications would play 'a significant role in supporting the rise and changing nature of games.' (Haddon, 1988c, p.209). Intriguingly, the popularity of the computing press played a key role in initially drawing Dr Haddon's interest towards the study of microcomputers (Haddon and Skinner, 1991, p.2). From the outset the specialist magazines' supportive role is rightly viewed in his work as highly significant, and it is from this perspective that the gaming industry and specialist press can be seen to exist symbiotically; each a driving influence on the other.

In highlighting the symbiotic, or mutually supportive, dynamic between the videogame and the gaming magazine Haddon reveals the need to examine the two industries in conjunction. So when Haddon asks 'In what ways did this press contribute to the changing nature of game products?' (Haddon, 1988c, p.202) he is posing a complex infra-structural question, one involving multiple industries that span the various spheres of videogame production, distribution, representation, and regulation. It is not so much a question of media cause and effect, but rather of recognizing shifting business models, and their outcomes upon the tendential subject. I agree with Haddon that the videogame magazine must be understood both as text per se, and as the commercial product of a distinct specialist press. Also, that such an analysis must be combined with an historical understanding of the software houses (the makers and marketers of the games). In his work (Haddon, 1988c) Haddon succeeds in providing a succinct history of both these industries between the years 1981-1984. I shall next partially review that history in order to isolate areas salient to my own investigation. These can be summarized as the increasing professionalization and commodification of the gaming industry.

### **A process of commodification – the videogame industries 1980-1985**

In reviewing Haddon's thesis, it is made apparent that the first stage (1980 to mid-1982) of videogame production in the UK operated primarily as a cottage industry, with independent programmers writing their own games, which were often distributed by mail order. The UK scene differed from the US in that it utilised cheap cassette technology which could be produced, and later reproduced, at home – the ability to run off tapes on demand reducing outlay and fitting with the home-grown potential offered by the mail order system (Haddon, 1988c). This contrasts with the more expensive cartridge & disc technologies of Japan and the US, which were geared towards high-res graphics, requiring larger investments, and the usage of mass production facilities. Such national differences on the production level, as outlined by Haddon, also reveal the need for the analyst to adopt a localized approach to the study of gaming (as is taken in my own focus on the specifics of a UK gaming industry). Despite the apparently 'globalised' nature of the videogame as commodity, this appearance is more ideological than historical. It is how the industry wishes to appear rather an accurate portrayal of it.

The next stage of videogame production (1982-83) is typified by Haddon as a period of 'professionalization' within the industry. As its early successes garnered media interest, with adverts for computer products appearing in the national press by mid-1982 (Haddon, 1988c), so it attracted entrepreneurs from other cultural industries. Personnel from the realm of publishing played a key role in these expansions, setting up software houses for games production and marketing, and founding some of the early specialist videogame magazines such as *CRASH* (1984). These cultural intermediaries brought with them the norms of their previous professions, including an increased emphasis on marketing, graphic design, and market segmentation. This 3<sup>rd</sup> stage (1984+) can be seen as the beginning of market consolidation, where individual entrepreneurship is supplanted (often with tidy profits for the entrepreneur) by corporate takeovers and buyouts. This is reflected in the drop in the number of software companies in the UK from 500 in 1983 to 350 in 1985 (Haddon, 1988c), a trend that would continue. The secondary industry of specialist computer magazines was also consolidated at this time, as the major publishing companies (IPC, VNU, EXAP and EMAP) bought up many of the existing titles and set up new ventures of their own. These 3 stages of the videogame software industry, from 1981 to 1988, can be summarized as ones of innovation, expansion, and consolidation. These have been highly influential in my own development of a 3-wave model of the attendant gaming press (one of expansion, consolidation, and segmentation).

So, what is the impact of such an, arguably common, growth pattern, and why does this narrative of cottage industry to media-corporation hold such a privileged place in the gaming imaginary? My interpretation of Haddon's historical analysis would be that the main impact of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> stages (innovation and expansion) was to create an ongoing tension within the gaming industry, between creativity and commodification. The retail outlets need for quick turnover clashing with the requirement to produce high quality software for an increasingly informed audience. This tension can only be maintained through a reliance on the commodity aspect of obsolescence, and by a discourse of technological determinism. The dominant message being 'it's the best game yet, but not for long'. I will return to this question of obsolescence and supersession later, but at this point it is useful to emphasise that between 1980 and 1984 the gaming industry became increasingly determined by the logic of advanced capitalism, and that the dominance of this logic threatened to undermine the cultural capital of play (its gaming capital), and the narrative of playful auteurism.

Furthermore, the insurgence of the cultural industries into videogaming from 1983 onwards, with companies including Mirrorgroup, Virgin, and K-tel buying up software houses, effectively restructured the games industry, so 'that games releases were now entertainment commodities which could be 'followed' in the same way as contemporary music.' (Haddon, 1988c, p.201) There followed an ensuing shift in software production from utility (home office applications etc.) to a wider entertainment-centric base. The significance of this commodification of the gaming industry in relation to my thesis is that it necessitated a shift in the supporting literature (the videogame magazine) and encouraged a mirror-structure to be produced: that of the magazine as a commodity guide, or as Newman describes it 'an editorialized 'Buyers guide'' (2008, p.31). A clear example of this symbiotic interplay between cultural industries (software production and specialist press), and the consequences of a consolidated market upon the cultural texts it mediated, comes from Haddon's analysis of the switch from a mail order to retail led distribution network. This process occurred during 1982 and 1983, and encouraged software houses to employ larger marketing budgets to ensure product visibility on the newsagent's shelf. This increase in marketing in turn provided the advertising income for the videogame magazines and drove their proliferation. The expanding role of chain outlets (WH Smiths being a key example) in software distribution would also lead to the reduction of small independent gaming shops.

The resultant, advertising driven, videogame magazine can be seen to adapt the conventions of other pre-existing cultural industries by providing the gamer with a segregated format, classified into editorial features on the industry itself, review sections, in-depth previews, charts of latest 'Hits' etc. All these conventions are initially transplanted from the music and film industry, and as such are tried and tested formats, well suited to a competitive marketplace where products were expected to hold a short shelf life. The result, Haddon argues, for the gaming magazine was that 'Games writing became routinised and continuous, instead of haphazard and occasional.' (Haddon, 1988c, p.202). I shall explore this sense of the 'routinised' and the 'continuous' during this thesis, via both the changing structure, rhetorical devices, and subject position of the games review. Haddon recognizes in his history of the micro-computer that magazines, even at this early stage, guided and regulated the gaming text, stating that reviews were 'considered to be vital not just for end users, but as preliminary guides to the distributors who filtered out games.' (Haddon, 1988c, p.198) This filtering is a process that still causes concerned debate in the contemporary

videogame press and community, with IGN's article on the impact of the score aggregating site Metacritic upon creativity in games development (MacDonald, 2012) being just one example.

The salient point at this stage is that Haddon's work reveals the various ties that existed between the primary and secondary industries of videogaming from a very early stage. Also, his study reveals that the videogame magazine of the early 80s held such particular significance because they provided the only access point to a vast entertainment arena of gaming, and 'were virtually the only media through which the consumer role of 'games buff' could be constructed.' (Haddon, 1988c, p.202) Whilst other, more established, cultural industries had a wider range of access points, which included TV, radio, and regular national press columns, the first regular TV slot for videogames did not air in the UK until 1992 in the form of *GamesMaster*. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s no other medium held the same level of gaming capital as the specialist gaming press, one impact of this privileged position was that gaming culture would become in part branded by these magazines, a phenomena that Newman explores in his more contemporary study on the subject.

### **Branding the user**

In Newman's analysis of the impact made by videogame magazines upon videogame culture he cites the 'range of magazines and their coverage' as significant 'in helping to shape the cultures and trajectories of videogaming.' (Newman, 2008, p.30) One part of that 'shaping' is the process of market segmentation earlier noted by Haddon. What was for Haddon primarily indicative of a shift towards the marketing practices of the cultural industries, and part of a general professionalization of the industry, is for Newman also a force for branding the identity of the end-user. Primarily this is still a production issue, a contest for brand loyalty between tech companies, where the magazines play a supporting role. As Newman observes 'The consequence of platform specificity in the videogame magazine sector has been to continue and even promote a rivalry between platforms.' (2008, p.30). However, this 'rivalry' is not just between producers, but consumers too, and it is a rivalry centred on identification between the user and the platform. Be you a Spectrum, Commodore, or Amstrad owner, the identities of one group are constructed in opposition to that of the users of the other machines, with the costs of the hardware tending against ownership of

multiple machines (Newman, 2008). Newman also recognises the impact upon the consumer, and states that such tribal rivalry 'plays an important role in forming and maintaining the identity of the gamer within the wider, and ultimately unknowable, imagined community of gamers.' (2008, p.31)

I would argue that this has two connected consequences on videogame culture: commodification and reification. Firstly it is a branding of the self and the 'imagined community' under the auspices of one commodity or another; secondly in providing the machine with an identity it gives it a lifelike presence - It becomes a thing. This exalting reification of the machine, and the corporation that produces it, is built into the structural considerations of these gaming publications. It is how the text actively represents the context upon which it is dependant for its continued survival in a segmented marketplace. It is the logic of titles such as *Your Sinclair*, *Sinclair User*, and *Commodore User* to equate the gamer with the apparatus of play. *You* become a representative of the branded machine.

Where Haddon succeeds in providing an invaluable contemporary analysis of the early videogame industry and its trajectory, what Newman is able to contribute, twenty years later, is a consideration of the changing social role played by the specialist magazine press. For the large part their two analyses agree on the importance of the specialist press in terms of function. First and foremost, 'At the most fundamental level, the specialist gaming press performs the function of manufacturing the sense of a wider community of gamers.' (Newman, 2008, p. 29) This sense of community producer/provider is of heightened significance in the 'pre-Internet age' of the 1980s, and fits with Haddon's consideration of access, and the magazine as a gendered conduit to the practice of gaming. Newman adds that it is the socially devalued currency of play that produces a need for re-assurance and group acceptance. The magazines providing a sense of a life outside of the game, one occupied by 'like-minded gamers' (2008).

The sense of a 'manufacturing' of community reveals a set of structures within which the gaming subject both exists, participates, and is constricted by. In terms of how these communities are built, Newman argues that 'One of the most effective ways that videogames build a sense of belonging and membership is through their letters pages and competitions.' (2008, p.32) This makes the User Generated Content, and the appeals for

interaction (competitions etc.) of key interest to the analyst, and reader's pages have already formed the basis of several academic analyses of other masculine magazine texts (Benwell, 2001; Stafford, 2008). This thesis will extend such analysis to the field of gaming magazines, and in doing so connect with the recent work of Kirkpatrick on the formation of gaming culture (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Also of interest to my study is the question if videogame magazines are building communities then what kind of community does it support/exclude, and how does it position itself? What type of patron is it? Significantly, for Newman, the videogame magazine, through its provision of tips, cheats, walkthrough guides etc. positions itself as a 'supportive benefactor – a member of the community of gamers – providing help and assistance and sharing knowledge among the group.' (2008, p.32) This sense of benefaction, and guidance, is not simply that of the consumer aid but also the cultural agent. Alongside the manifest role of information provider, certain videogame publications have also played a key role in developing the critical awareness of videogaming as a cultural form; most notable amongst these for Newman is *Edge* magazine. I shall spend a moment to outline the publication, as it represents the continuation and adaption of the early gaming magazine format into the current day. Furthermore, by considering those studies performed on gaming magazines that post-date the sample of this thesis, it is possible to ascertain how much they have changed.

Launched in 1993 by Future Publishing, and initially edited by established gaming journalist Steve Jarrett, *Edge* magazine 'has encouraged the gamer to appreciate videogames as invaluable cultural objects like film, literature or art and the playing, discussion and criticism of videogames as legitimate cultural practices.' (2005, p.29) An earlier essay by Julian Sefton-Green (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000), recognises the complexity of modern videogame magazines, especially regarding the reviews, which employ technical language alongside media critique. Sefton-Green notes that these publications serve as a site of critical discussion for gaming culture and the gaming industry. Furthermore, these discourses have contributed to the development of an auteur culture within gaming (figures cited include Sid Meir and Shigeru Miyamoto), as magazines such as *Sight & Sound* had previously done for cinema.

So has the gaming press significantly matured since the 1980s? *Edge* magazine does represent (and indeed constitutes) an informed, adult, site of gaming culture and could be seen as a contemporary reworking of the earlier, more youthful, gaming press. It draws upon high production values, rich editorial content, and industry insider information to locate it as *the* professional journal of gaming. It also presents itself as objective as opposed to promotional. Firstly, this approach can be related back to the previously noted low cultural capital of play cited by Newman, and the need to counter the low-brow accusations made towards videogame critics. I would argue that rather than viewing *Edge* magazine to be a contemporary development, an update on the previously more juvenile model, it can best be understood as part of what I have termed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave of gaming publications (1988 onwards). The 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave took a segmented approach to the gaming market, offering more diverse products for an increasingly broad range of users. *Edge* magazine is an example of this trend, a key predecessor (also published by *Future*) being *ACE* magazine, launched in October 1987 and aimed at the adult gamer. In summary it is not that modern gaming mags have changed significantly, but rather that they had already changed and evolved by late 1987.

The following description in 2000 by Sefton-Green is revealing, as the format he outlines for the contemporary gaming magazine is one that has essentially remained unchanged since their development in the mid-1980s.

‘Typically, they contain reviews of games, cheats, letters pages, screen shots, adverts for games, adverts for hardware and previews of forthcoming titles. Many of these titles go a long way to address and reproduce the voices of their readership and construct an ongoing relationship with them as older, wiser advisors in the tricky world of games playing.’ (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000, p. 115)

This essay by Sefton-Green represents a rare and rewarding visit to the subject of the gaming press. Whilst it does not touch on the UK publications of the 1980s per se, the magazines he describes, with regards to categories of content, the reproduction of the readers voice, and the construction of the idealised gamer/user as autodidact, do highlight a continuing set of practices that are extremely repetitive, consolidated, and remain stable across a period of thirty years. In summary, the wide range of videogame magazines available both now and historically, fulfilled the role of facilitating a wider culture or

community, with its own set of critical conventions. It is a community that in return provides an ongoing income base for those publications. The following section shall deal with a key strategy, or technique, utilized by the magazines to engage, and maintain, that readership. The strategy is one of immanence.

### **Newman's lure of the immanent**

Newman's analysis of videogame magazine titles from 2007/2008 reveals a definite pre-occupation (within the publications) with an imagined, and immanent, future. This pre-occupation is visible via the number of previews carried for games under production, and the space devoted to news of upcoming hardware. The significance of this is that much of these 'cutting edge' developments are never released, instead they fall into the category of what can be called 'vapourware' (Ricci, 2009). Vapourware is a term Ricci describes as 'invented in Silicon Valley' and 'constitutes representations of the future' (2009, p.581). This is a future that can be perpetually deferred – classic examples of vapourware include the flying car, the personal robot etc. (Ricci, 2009). The appeal of vapourware for hi-tech industry is that it maintains the support and enthusiasm for technology, without the need to invest capital into it. The magazine articles analysed by Newman constitute a collection of vapourware, and perform a celebration of process and technology for its own sake; they are prophecies spoken by a self-referential machine culture.

The emphasis placed on the immanent situates videogame magazine discourse within the spheres of consumption and obsolescence, where the magazines foster an upgrade culture, 'that situates the user/gamer within a web of consumption' (Newman, 2008, p.33). The reasoning for this 'fetishisation of the immanent', Newman states, 'could be found in the videogame industry's desire to maintain interest, commitment and loyalty to its products.' (2008, p.33) Furthermore, the videogame industry as a whole is arguably one defined by its need to constantly release updated products and services (Newman, 2008), as such it forms a procession, or supersession, of commodities. The prominence of supersession, and the horizon gazing that attends it, creates a problem for Newman, in that it serves to 'rid the videogame of any lasting cultural value' (2008, p.33). By continually looking forward videogame culture sacrifices kudos to the novelties of technical progress.

This process of continual renewal, where ‘Each console, graphics card and, most especially, each game implicitly renders that which went before instantly obsolete’ (Newman, 2008, p.33). Newman notes that ‘the position of succession does seem at odds with the cultures of videogaming, play and fandom in which gamers place great cultural and historical value on games.’ (2008, p.35) This process, and the challenges it raises, is returned to in his later work *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (Newman, 2012). In relation to my thesis the significance of obsolescence and supersession is how it relates to what I have described as a tension within the gaming industry between creativity and commodification. Part of my work will be to trace how these tensions are resolved, or repressed, and how they will return. I believe a key tool in the resolution of this tension, and in the construction of ‘cultural and historical value’, is the games review and the procedure of the scoring systems. There is an absence of existing academic material on games reviews and scores, with Newman’s contribution a tantalizing taster of what conclusions further research may provide. The final section of this literature review will first review some key concepts, and recent academic contributions on gaming magazines, most notably by Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2015) and Consalvo (Consalvo, 2007), that will inform the remainder of this thesis.

### **Bourdieu, taste, the cultural intermediary and cultural capital**

The key concepts developed by Bourdieu that feed into this thesis are those regarding the social character of ‘taste’, the cultural intermediary’s role as ‘taste maker’ (Bourdieu, 1984), and the acquired norms of social conduct that can be termed cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011). Taste, from Bourdieu’s perspective, is a social acquisition that relates both to origin and trajectory (social mobility), yet, which is ‘experienced as if they are natural and personal.’ (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 16). Thereby, taste is socially significant as it embodies not personal preference, but rather forms part of the process whereby the individual reproduces the social stratifications they exist within and comes to embody those stratifications. In this framework notions of ‘good taste’ will traditionally orientate towards the socially dominant group, but are at all times being contested and negotiated by social groups looking to improve or defend their own status. The ideological naturalness of Bourdieu’s ‘taste’, and its stratifications in relation to the dominant group (‘good taste’), enables taste to provide cultural cohesion within a group, and produce boundaries between

it and other groups. Taste both unites and divides, includes and excludes, 'In sum, taste is a mechanism of social reproduction: it enables the continuation – and veils the arbitrariness – of hierarchies between and within class groups.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 16)

This conceptualisation of taste, and its attendant concepts of habitus and cultural capital, have been hugely influential across a wide range of disciplines since the translation of *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), and have proved integral to a vast array of academic works, specifically regarding consumerism and consumer practices/cultures. His early texts are foundational to the 'cultural turn' of the 1970s, offering a dialectic understanding to consumption practices that recognises them as socially transformative, rather than restricting their scholarly value to being indicative or representative of other (more traditionally significant) factors. Within Bourdieu's framing of 'taste' consumption practices not only reflect class position, but reproduces those very class positions via the consumption of goods, and the dissemination of what 'good taste' equates to. In terms of how these socio-personal tastes are developed - how the social becomes embedded into, and embodied by, the self - the category of 'cultural capital' becomes highly significant.

Cultural capital has been defined by cultural theorists as 'the norms of conduct we learn through our family upbringing and educational training' (du Gay and Hall, 1997, p. 97). According to Bourdieu this resource can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state of long lasting dispositions, the *objectified* state ('in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)' (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 82), and the institutionalised state (e.g. education). This thesis will be connect to each of these states: the embodied state of gameplay, the magazine as objectified cultural good, and the specialist gaming press as an institutionalised state of capital. At this point, however, it is the notion of embodied cultural capital that requires some further exposition, In order to outline its connections to gaming culture, and Consalvo's concept of 'gaming capital'.

The 'embodied' state of cultural capital is an internalising one, and sees 'external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus,' (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 83) This cultivation is a process of self-improvement, and as such it involves a personal expenditure of time and labour. This is work enacted upon the self, and thereby cannot be delegated to another (Bourdieu provides the metaphor of a sun-tan, or a muscular physique). This notion

of immaterial labour is highly pertinent regarding gaming culture, as I would argue a core reason for playing games is to get better at them, to develop a virtuoso performance within the clearly defined parameters of a specific gameworld. The practice and commitment required to get good at a game, which is then rewarded with a hi-score, then translates into gaming kudos in terms of school-yard bragging rights.

However, such embodied cultural capital, 'cannot be accumulated beyond the appropriating capacities of an individual agent' (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 84), each individual has limits to their capacities, be it for musculature of arcade ability. In gaming this leads to magazines providing supplementary materials (guides, passwords, hacks) that enable 'cheating' (Consalvo, 2007). The capacity linkage between the self and cultural capital, the existence of an accumulation limit, has an arguably more significant effect than just cheating. The appropriative limits provide inherent legitimacy for a social practice that is centred on personal ability. Embodied cultural capital 'manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition.' (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 84), in doing so it coalesces the positive values associated with both nature and nurture. Therefore, embodied cultural capital can be regarded as one form of gaming capital, it is the ability to play the game, and play it well.

Yet, once the subject has, through labours performed upon themselves, raised their embodied cultural capital, what can it be exchanged for? It is Bourdieu's assertion that the conditions of the acquisition and transmission of cultural capital are generally more disguised than that of economic capital, which predisposes its function to being symbolic. Also, that cultural capital is often not recognised as capital per se at all, but instead as competence and authority (Bourdieu, 2011). The resulting transmission is thereby one that goes from personal immaterial labour to social legitimacy, and is an exchange that can result in the production of a newly authoritative subject position: the cultural intermediary.

A key value of the cultural intermediary, as a concept, is that it has provided a connected understanding of the spheres of consumerism and production, with the cultural intermediary (as a figure) acting as an articulation between the two. Furthermore, it can do so without prioritising one sphere over the other. It has also enabled an understanding of overlapping social groups, for example Featherstone (Featherstone, 1991) uses the term in

his account of postmodern consumer culture, whilst for Negus 'this new class faction implies a certain meeting or point of connection between the disaffected, educated, bohemian middle class and the upwardly mobile, newly educated working class.' (Negus, 2002, p. 503) A meeting point that is made visible in the various workplaces of the cultural industries. The concept of cultural intermediaries has also worked its connectivity across various academic disciplines, becoming more inter-disciplinary in its usage, for example, 'research on cultural intermediaries has been engaged to a greater extent with actor network theory, economic sociology and cultural economy' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 15). However, such a diverse inter-disciplinary usage of the term cultural intermediary, and the wide variety of subjects it has been applied to, has brought criticism that it has become diluted and problematic as a concept. These problems could be summarised in terms of classification (who is and is not a cultural intermediary), privilege (how central are they to systems of meaning making), and homogeneity.

It has been argued that research performed on a cultural intermediary model has the tendency to presume the efficacy of a monolithic class of disembodied movers and shakers. They are at once everywhere and nowhere. Such diluted inclusiveness produces a 'analytically-neutered term: a conceptual muddle that fails to assist in unpacking the division of labour involved in the construction of cultural goods' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p. 552). In an increasingly mediated consumerist society more and more occupations can be perceived as involved in cultural 'taste' production. Indeed within the discourse of prosumerism, and the promises of social media practice, we are now users who act as mediators of our own self-image. This raises the question 'are we all cultural intermediaries now?' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012),

Maguire and Matthews attempt to resolve the issue of classification, of who is a cultural intermediary, in their recognition that whilst we all as subjects *could* be said to construct value amongst each other, what marks the cultural intermediary as a recognisable subject is their pretension towards expertise. In the 'struggle to influence others' perceptions and attachments, cultural intermediaries are differentiated by their explicit claims to professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p. 552) This still leaves some uncertainty, do these claims need to be institutionally supported, and if so by whom? However, that sense of uncertainty is not, I

would argue, a weakness of the cultural intermediary concept, but rather a recognition that claims to legitimacy are always already fluid and contested – this becomes all the more apparent in the case of user generated content, and the question of who possesses editorial authority within the web 2.0 publishing model.

The second part of the classification conundrum is not inclusivity, but rather exclusion, one which connects to the privileging of the cultural industries and the media worker. As Negus rightly highlights, 'So, advertising executives, designers and magazine journalists are cultural intermediaries, whereas it seems that biologists, physicists, accountants, priests and trade union leaders are not. Yet there are many other occupational groupings that are crucial to processes of cultural mediation or the linkages which might connect consumption with production.' (Negus, 2002, p. 504) One example provided by Negus is the accountant, figures who become key intermediaries, especially when risk becomes a factor. These 'accountants do not simply 'account' in some instrumental way anymore than talent scouts solely assess 'talent' without any consideration for budgets, the commercial 'market' or financial matters.' (Negus, 2002, p. 506) What is being emphasised here is that taste makers can inhabit the cultural industries at all points of the business, furthermore the 'suit' will often stay at one company longer than the creative. In providing continuity over change they are part of how the industry operates, and how the media texts they produce are formed.

This suggests that the divide between old and new practices (the fordist and the post-fordist) is less pronounced and more arbitrary than is presumed. That the separation between creative and business factors/workers is a somewhat romantic rhetorical strategy, rather than a working reality. In summary, when talking about cultural intermediaries one needs to be mindful of providing 'certain workers a pivotal role in these processes of symbolic mediation, [and] prioritizing a narrow and reductionist aesthetic definition of culture' (Negus, 2002, p. 504) Yet, these valid concerns do not 'neuter' the concept of cultural intermediaries, but rather provide guidance in its application. In their defence of the application of the term cultural intermediary Maguire and Matthews isolate the need to question how creative/active the subjects are, and how accessible or open is the set of occupations they inhabit (how are people included/excluded from being in their role). Vitaly, there must be a nuanced awareness that cultural intermediaries are not a 'monolithic occupational group' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p. 552), and instead vary greatly in the

degree of authority, and the cultural/ symbolic resources they have at their disposal.

Each study must bear close attention to the stratifications, and the specific context, of the industry that the cultural worker occupies. Furthermore, 'the goods, services or behaviours that they frame, and the devices through which that framing is accomplished, also range widely, with each good and device carrying its own accrued degrees of credibility and durability, which must be negotiated.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2012, p. 552). So what is true for journalists is not necessarily the case for psychologists, and what is true for videogame journalists may not be true for food critics. Yet, I argue that there is enough common ground between the various media fields for the theory to be coherent, without overwhelming the differences in the subjects it approaches. The various conceptual tools provided by Bourdieu's work have been successfully applied to the field of gaming culture through the cultural sociology of Grahame Kirkpatrick. I will next outline his work, which will be interacted with throughout this thesis. I aim to supplement his ground breaking research into the formation of UK gaming culture with additional areas of analysis, evidential support, and new perspectives.

### **Kirkpatrick and the Formation of Gaming Culture**

In *Computer games and the social imaginary* (Kirkpatrick, 2013), Kirkpatrick utilises Taylor's concept of the 'social imaginary' as part of a 'reflexive' sociological tradition, where society is itself socially produced. Kirkpatrick follows the dialogue between computer games and broader societal developments via three main intersections: late 1980s user-friendly computers, mid 1990s gaming innovations (including such seminal games as *Doom* and *Myst*), and twenty first century social networks as a new form of ludic practice. These intersections link videogaming as an industry and culture with a distinct, 'streamlined' subjectivity (Kirkpatrick, 2013), one that is inextricably tied to modern networked capitalism. These streamlined individuals are highly post-fordist subjects, being flexible, precarious, and short-termist in their sensibilities. Throughout his work Kirkpatrick's recognises the need for an historical approach to his subject, and locates the UK of the 1980s as the defining era of cultural formation for videogaming. Stating it was in this neglected period that 'gaming was established as cultural practice.' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 70) This counters recurrent US centric bias towards the games console as the key development in the evolution of computer

gaming (Kirkpatrick, 2013).

Kirkpatrick's key work in relation to my thesis is the *Formation of Gaming Culture* (Kirkpatrick, 2015). This book is the first to dedicate itself, as this study does, to the analysis of the early UK games magazine as the vanguard text of a new gaming imaginary. The work is an expansion on an earlier essay (Kirkpatrick, 2012) which focused on the constitutive tensions that compose gaming as a 'cultural field'. This concept of the 'cultural field' stems from his close attention to Bourdieu, where 'each cultural field has its own logic through which contradictions and antagonisms are played out and on which basis relevant practices are established and sustained.' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 75) Equally significant in this framework is the notion of 'habitus', a pre-requisite for the establishment of gaming as a cohesive cultural practice, habitus represents 'a determinate field of habits, dispositions and perceptions, which enabled people to perceive and respond to a class of objects in the necessary way. These behaviours then became part of their normal repertoire of action.' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 75). These concepts of *habitus* and *cultural fields* prove useful to the study of gaming magazines in that they recognise and account for the 'reflexive entwinement of the medium and cultural context' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 85) in a manner that prioritises neither side, but instead focuses on their mutually constitutive character.

The key areas of Kirkpatrick's textual engagement with the gaming magazine, using a mixed-methodology of content analysis and discourse analysis, are: the development of a new language of critique (and the centrality of 'gameplay' to this faltering new discourse); the examination of how gaming discourse resists and embraces accusations of abnormality via the character of the nerd/geek; and the increasingly masculine character of the texts – most notably in the area of user generated content. Influenced by constructionist scholars (Bijker *et al.*, 2012) Kirkpatrick's study on gaming culture (Kirkpatrick, 2015) argues that the initial function, or purpose, of new technologies is initially undetermined, only to be contested by 'rival social constituencies' as its capacities and identity is explored. The lack of explicit guidance as to what early micro-computers were functionally designed *for* gives them a highly self-referential identity, and ensures that these rival constituencies will have plenty to contest over. Computing and games magazines provided informational materiel to both sides (the hobbyists and the games players) of this conflict. The prize being fought over the 'symbolic ownership' (Kirkpatrick, 2015) of the technology's meaning. Furthermore, these

magazines are both historical agent and illuminative archive, which enable us 'to address questions like how games were first interpreted, what kinds of significance people found in them and how they were compared with other cultural practices.' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 6)

It should be noted that the vast majority of the research and analysis for this study was done prior to the release of Kirkpatrick's book, and whilst they share a belief in the significance of the early gaming magazine, and in part a conceptual framework to the object of study, this thesis is not so much a response to *The Formation of Gaming Culture*, but rather a contemporaneous parallel account. Thankfully, in terms of the production of new knowledge, my work attends to different aspects of the publications being studied, and prioritises different concepts - in part due to my own preferences and dispositions. However, the synchronicity of their production, and their shared valuing of the early videogame magazine as a vantage point on gaming culture, does I believe point towards a rich field of future research.

The field of games studies continues to expand at a great pace, and my main contribution, in the form of this thesis, will be to draw into this expansion the complex, and varied, material offered by videogaming magazines in the 1980s. These magazines offer two key benefits: firstly they act as a conjunctive site of comprehending both the gaming industry and gaming subject; secondly they provide a joint terrain of understanding between the projects of Games Studies and Cultural Studies. As Newman states

'Since the earliest days of electronic games specialist games magazines have occupied a central role in the culture of gaming yet they remain largely absent from studies of gaming or critical examination of magazines and periodicals (Hermes, 1995; McLoughlin, 2000; Jackson *et al.*, 2001; Benwell, 2003; Gough-Yates, 2003; McKay, 2006)' (Newman, 2008, p.29)

It is my assertion, like Adrienne Shaw's (Shaw, 2010), that the debates arising from the field of Cultural Studies can significantly benefit those analyses already underway within Games Studies. The videogame magazine, critically absent for so long, still has much to offer in this regard. It is both an industry of representations, and long standing representative of videogame culture.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

This methodology chapter outlines the mixed-methodology of content analysis and discourse analysis as applied in this thesis. It then presents the samples chosen for the study, and the rationale for selecting those samples. This chapter also provides further conceptual consideration and fine detailing on the individual components of the mixed-methodology used, and outlines some of the limitations of the method as applied in this study.

### Introduction

The research question of this thesis centres on examining the functions of the gaming magazine in relation to the formation of gaming culture. The assertion being that tracing the evolution of the videogame magazines, and the shifting role they play, provides a unique route to understanding those cultural industries and early gaming culture in the UK. Such a question could have been approached in a wide variety of ways. After initial research into the available archive of gaming magazines it was decided that the mixed-genre format of the magazine medium would fit favourably with a mixed-method approach. My selection of such a methodology was informed by a variety of sources and factors: including the magazines themselves; the kinds of questions I wished to ask of them; and the existing literature on magazines regarding identity, consumerism, and representation.

Key reference points during these considerations were provided by *Researching Communications* (Deacon, 2007), and *Research Methods for Cultural Studies* (Pickering, 2008). Alongside clear introductions to a variety of approaches, a key tenet of both these texts is that a strict separation of methodologies, enforced in an act of 'academic apartheid', only serves to limit the analyst and their research. As a result I have tried to keep the methodology rigorous, yet flexible, and to this end I have constructed a mixed methodology, mainly comprised of content analysis and discourse analysis, along with some basic statistical ground work. Content analysis was chosen in order to produce valid inferences from the data, for a broad sample formed by different magazine brands, effectively and transparently over a broad period of time (1981 to 1993). The use of textually orientated discourse analysis, informed by the work of Fairclough, would enable such inferences to be then further examined via a fine grain examination of the various genres that constitute the

gaming magazine. This combination of methods can be seen as responding to the demand for pluralism made by the texts under examination, specifically by the hybrid nature of the texts.

### **The Magazine Sample**

The selection of magazine brands to examine was directed by the desire to be as inclusive and representative as possible - within the limits of the project. I have been extremely fortunate in that the gaming community are very active in their online preservation of these retrogaming texts. An extensive archive of them, scanned from physical magazine to Pdf, have been uploaded to the freely accessible website *Internet Archive*, a non-profit archive with millions of downloadable texts (<https://archive.org>). Other sites that work to maintain the magazines online presence, and have been very useful to this study, include *Your Sinclair* *The Rock 'n' Roll Years* (<http://www.ystrnry.co.uk>), *CRASH the Online Editions* (<http://www.crashonline.org.uk>), and *WoS* (<http://www.worldofspectrum.org>). Whilst all these fan-based sites have proved invaluable to this research *The World of Spectrum* website has been especially useful, due to its searchable database of games (by release date and game genre). Without the work put into the development, and maintenance, of these sites the initial data gathering that informed this thesis from the outset would not have been possible.

The selected magazine sample spans the duration of the research question, from 1981 to 1993, though at different points of the analysis this timeframe is condensed. The mixed-genre format of the magazine requires an approach that is highly mobile, one that can move to the relevant timeframe to study new developments, and as a result each chapter has a slightly different sample. To ensure clarity and transparency I have listed below the exact sample (both dates and brands) for each section for the thesis. The sampling table (Table 1) shows the key magazine brands for this study, including abbreviations where used, which are *Computer & Video Games* (CVG), *Sinclair User* (SU), *Your Sinclair* (YS), *CRASH*, *Amstrad Action* (AA), *Computer Gamer* (ComGam), and *ACE*.

Chapter	Subject	Method	Mag Title	Date Range	Sample Size
4	Review Scores	Statistical	CRASH	1984 -1992 Games listed A to L	1259
4	Review Scores	Statistical	YS	1984 – 1992 All games	1723
4	Chart Performance	Statistical	CRASH	May 1984 to Sept 1985	102
5	Reviews	content analysis, discourse analysis	Sinclair User, Amstrad Action, ACE	1984 to 1993 April and October issues for each of the titles published at that time	184
6	Cover Page Illustrations	content analysis, discourse analysis	Sinclair User, Your Sinclair, CRASH, CVG, Computer Gamer, ACE	1982 to 1993 April and October issues for each of the titles published at that time	100
6	Advertising Imagery	content analysis	Sinclair User, Your Sinclair, CRASH, CVG, Computer Gamer, ACE	1 month (October) per magazine title across the date range 1983 to 1991	100
7	Reader's Letters	content analysis, discourse analysis	CVG	All letters, April issues, 1982 to 1992	127

Table 1. Chapter by chapter listing of magazine sample used.

The magazines chosen are representative of the two key formats of videogame magazine, that of platform specific (i.e. *Amstrad Action*, *Your Sinclair*, and *CRASH*) and the multi-platform magazine (*CVG*, *Computer Gamer*, *ACE*), and are all initially produced by different publishing companies – though several of them would be acquired by their rivals in the ‘mergers’ that occurred in the consolidation phase of videogame publishing. This sampling approach adds synchronic and diachronic value to the research. It is an approach which includes not only the high profile ‘successes’ (e.g. *CVG*, *CRASH*) receive attention, but also the lesser-known ‘failures’ (*Computer Gamer*). It is a sample that looks to examine both those texts traditionally included and excluded from the gaming historical narrative. Overall this sample includes a majority of the formative magazines within the milieu, though other notable brands would include *ZZap64*, *Personal Computer Gamer*, and *Your Computer*. It should be noted that these other magazines were also read extensively during the research process, and where useful have been brought into the discourse analysis (e.g. the manifesto for *ZZap64* magazine in chapter 4).

This research could be accused of being Sinclair computer focused, in that the majority of the platform specific magazines in the sample are for that machine. I would argue that whilst other micro-computers did have their own dedicated publications at this time, from the research I have undertaken I do not believe that any significant differences exist between the respective readerships for those different machines. Neither did the conventions developed in the magazines that catered for other popular microcomputers differ. Instead the manifest differences that do exist between magazines for opposing machines can be regarded as more an attempt to brand the reader, as a Spectrum/Amstrad user, for example, than expressive of any highly divergent gaming identities that would impact the study.

Before moving on to the core methodologies of the study I would like to outline some basic preliminary statistical research that I carried out to test some initial propositions concerning the overall function of the gaming magazine. From my own readings of the magazine archive it seemed that the once the rated review was consolidated as a convention (mid 1980s) that the general scores either stayed very much the same, month by month, or went up slightly. The significance of meta-scoring to contemporary gaming websites, along with debates concerning the impact this has on the gaming industry (MacDonald, 2012), led me to conclude that by retroactively meta-scoring publications I could empirically capture any

major changes in the roles of the gaming press (advocate or celebrant), whilst enabling a meaningful comparison of those historical titles with contemporary spaces of gaming evaluation.

The review sample consisted of 1259 scores published in *CRASH* magazine, and 1723 scores published in *Your Sinclair*. The *Your Sinclair* sample does represent all scores published within the timeframe, whilst the *CRASH* scores were limited to games beginning with the letters A to L. This was for pragmatic reasons only, and to enable the research to cover two brands and provide some diachronic range. I do not have a statistical background, and have therefore kept the analysis to a bare minimum. Once the review scores were attained, either from the archive directly (as was the case with *Your Sinclair*) or from compiled online listings <http://www.crashonline.org.uk/misc/reviews.pdf> (these were then checked for accuracy against the original archive), it was a straightforward matter of putting the scores in date order and calculating a median average on a year by year basis for each magazine title. A median average was selected to avoid any extremely low scores ('turkeys' or 'clunkers' that are given a derisory 10%) bringing the overall scores down by an unrepresentative amount. This production of meta-scores, when compared against classic top 100 game lists, enabled a quantitative reading of the stories being told about the 'quality' of the games being produced.

A smaller-scale preliminary statistical study was also carried out to ascertain whether any correlation could be found between the review scores given and the chart success of those games being reviewed. The question of efficacy is an important one here. It matters what scores are being given to games if those scores then impact the sales performance of the titles. As is argued in Chapter 4, without sales efficacy the magazines can only claim to supplement brand awareness for the software houses, rather than influence the buying habits of the readership. To ascertain such efficacy over 100 games reviewed by *CRASH* magazine between the dates of May 1984 and September 1985 had their scores correlated with that game's performance in the Top 30 game charts. This amounted to 102 games that were reviewed *and* made it into the charts. Each game's chart position was recorded for every week they were in the charts between May 1984 and September 1985, both pre and post review publication. The scoring system being 1 point awarded to the game in 30<sup>th</sup> place, going up to 30 points for 1<sup>st</sup> place. This allowed for each game to be given an overall 'Chart

Score' (a total of the positional points received for each week in the Top 30 charts), meanwhile the same data could be used to ascertain whether the publication date of the positive or negative review was followed by relative chart success or decline. An example of the data recorded (Table 2) is shown below for a random selection of the study:

Game Title	Publisher	Rev. Rating	Issue	Chart Score
Air Wolf	Elite	90%	13	43
Battle Cars	Games Workshop	66%	13	6
Chuckie Egg	A&F	80%	2	15
Eureka	Domark	70%	12	3
Hunchback	Ocean	66%	2	82
Lords of Midnight	Beyond	100%	7	87
Rocky Horror Show	CRL	79%	18	37
Knight Lore	Ultimate	94%	12	118

Table 2. Selection of games with added 'Chart Score' value shown

When Chart Scores were totalled for all 102 games and put into descending order, and split into 3 sections of 34, a clear pattern could be seen regarding review ratings and Chart Scores. The table below (Table 3) records the findings.

Charts Score	Avg. Review Rating
Top Third	91%
Middle Third	85%
Bottom Third	77%

Table 3. Charts score vs average review rating

It is clear from this data that the higher a game was scored the better its commercial performance. Furthermore, the analysis showed that whilst a game scoring below 70% would still increase its chart position in the subsequent month, on average by only 2 places, a game that scores 70% or higher would gain an average of 8 places. The basic statistical work done for this study may not be particularly sophisticated, or significant in strictly statistical terms, but it does work to substantiate the already expected belief that games that get good ratings fair better financially than those who do not. Even if this is more driven by a 'negativity effect' (Tsang and Prendergast, 2009b), where bad reviews impact more than good ones, the efficacy of the videogame magazine is strongly supported.

## Content Analysis

'Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to the context.' (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21)

Before outlining the counts and coding of the various content analyses carried out I will consider the affordances and implications of content analysis as a method and as a predictive project. This will enable an engagement with the method's advantages, disadvantages and core stipulations. To begin with there is the question of quantities and qualities, and how they relate to content analysis. 'First, the pursuit of content analysis is fundamentally empirical in orientation, exploratory, concerned with real phenomena, and predictive in intent.' (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 9). In comparison Berelson states content analysis to be 'A research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.' (Berelson, 1952, p. 147). Both statements seem to present the method as centred on the objective world out there, and to approach that world in a systematic and empirical manner.

However, a key distinction is that for Krippendorff it is an empirical method, not a quantitative one per se. It is a method that can and does work in a qualitative sense, which Krippendorff is recognising by omitting the term quantitative, as previously used in Berelson's definition of the method. For Deacon Berelson's definition of content analysis reveals the 'scientific ambitions that prompted its development' (Deacon, 2007, p. 118) of which Max Weber was an influential advocate. This scientism has led to content analysis being considered by some to be positivistic, and arguably incompatible with a constructivist conceptual paradigm. Yet, the work of Krippendorff counters such absolutisms, and provides a route for the constructivist analyst to involve content analysis, and in doing so shore up the more potentially subjective boundaries of their work.

Krippendorff crosses the positivist/constructivist divide in two significant ways; firstly by highlighting both the polysemia that occurs within readerships, and the shift in signification that happens over time and across location. He states 'content is not an absolute or objective quality of communications. Sender and receiver may radically differ in the way particular broadcasts are interpreted.' (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 17) Secondly, that whilst the

method must be systematic, and that the texts are themselves systemic productions, that they can not be understood discretely from their socio-political and historical context of production & consumption. Krippendorff warns the researcher that ‘messages do not have a single meaning’ and that ‘meanings need not be shared’ (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 22). This connects with the constructivist position that decodings will always vary, and encodings, consciously or otherwise, can be subverted. These factors culminate in Krippendorff’s statement that ‘the claim to have analysed THE content of the communication reflects an untenable position.’ (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 22) This acts as a stark rebuttal of any absolutist reading or interpretation.

The benefits offered by the procedures of content analysis is that they provide transparency, and a replicable method for the reading of manifest symbolic content, without reducing the text to simply the surface level. It is an approach that can be both textually fine-grain, whilst remaining comprehensive of the material framework within which the magazine articles and discourses exist. This thesis carried out three pieces of content analysis: concentrating on the modality of the videogame Review, the cover page illustration, and the reader’s letter.

## **Chapter 5 Methodology – Reviews**

The content analysis for game reviews covered three gaming publications – *Sinclair User*, *Amstrad Action*, and *ACE* – over a period of ten years. The overall number of reviews in the sample population totalled 184. Only two issues of each magazine per year were coded for analysis, the April and October editions. The restriction of the content analysis to two issues per year was a pragmatic one, as to do every month would have been too labour intensive for a project of this size and limited resources. Alternatively to shorten the overall timeframe would have reduced the diachronic import of any findings. The months of April and October were selected to avoid any unrepresentative ‘bumper’ holiday issues that might occur in summer or at Christmas.

The review sample was coded for ‘Score’, ‘Number of screenshots per review’, and ‘Number of reviews per page’ – to ascertain any changes in the primacy of screenshots as an illustrative device, track the space being dedicated to the review genre within the magazines, and distinguish any possible correlation between high scores and additional

coverage. The second area of analysis was the modal range of the review. The emphasis on modality was in order to address the review as a complex interplay between text and image. Each of the reviews were analysed in terms of whether they contained different modes of representation, and how many modes were used in total for each review – this resulting total being the multi-modal *range* of the review. The modes were coded as ‘Written Text’, ‘Themed Typography’, ‘Illustrations’, ‘Photography’, ‘Diegetic’. These modalities were chosen to be, as close as possible, both mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Therefore, the modal range available to any single review would be between 1 and 5 (a text only review being a 1, and a review that contained all the modes being a 5). In this analysis multimodality can be seen to operate as both a variable and a semiotic resource, capable of tracking and expressing a shifting culture of representation within the videogaming press. The categories were developed with the intention that they would be generic enough to be applicable in other fields/genres, whilst remaining closely tied to the specific conventions of the games review. An example of the coding for one magazine issue (*Sinclair User*, April 1984) is provided below (Table 4), with the modal categories highlighted for clarity.

Game	score	s.p.p.	size	s-shots	S-Sh	Txt	Txt-Th	illus.	Photo.	Range
The Guardian	60	0.0	0.25	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Winged Warlord	60	0.0	0.25	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Monkey Biznis	70	0.0	0.25	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Skull	50	0.0	0.25	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Sherlock	90	1.0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	3
Wrath of Magra	80	1.3	0.75	1	1	1	0	0	0	2
Dyslexia Beater	80	0.0	0.25	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Star Trader	70	2.0	0.5	1	1	1	0	0	0	2

Table 4. Example of content analysis on videogame reviews

## Chapter 6 Methodology – Cover pages and advertising imagery

The content analysis sample for cover illustrations and advertising imagery comprised of 100 covers and 100 advertisements. Whilst all coded adverts were contained in the same overall sample of magazines as the cover illustrations, not all the adverts were coded for all the magazines. This is due to the volume of ads per issue (unlike the single instance of the cover

page), which made the proposal unworkable. Rather than randomly, or arbitrarily, selecting one advert to code for each of the 100 magazines, I decided to select one issue per brand, and to select different years for each of the brands (i.e. *CVG* October 1983, *Computer Gamer* 1985, *CRASH* October 1986 etc.). From the 6 different brands 6 magazines in total were coded for adverts, which brought the total population of the sample to 100, which enabled a comparative assessment of their dominant themes with the cover pages.

The sample was coded for 'Theme', 'Game Genre', 'Tie-In', 'Subject', 'Gender', 'Age', 'Race', 'Violence', and 'Modal Range'. The 12 categories for 'Theme' were produced via smaller test runs, and through my own knowledge of the archive. I feel each of the categories is suitably distinct to provide a list that is both mutually exclusive and exhaustive (as evidenced via only 1% being designated as 'Other'). On the very few occasions when an image did crossover two categories, I chose what I felt fairly reflected the dominant theme (i.e. a knight wielding a light sabre is principally a sci-fi theme that draws on fantasy elements, so would be coded as sci-fi). A full list of the categories and their frequency for the cover pages can be found below (Table 5).

Cover Theme	Coding	Frequency	%
Play	1	4	4%
Consumables	2	5	6%
Fantasy	3	13	14%
Sci-Fi	4	32	36%
Action Adventure	5	8	9%
Sports/Racing	6	8	9%
Martial Arts	7	5	6%
Military	8	8	9%
Superheroes	9	3	3%
Cartoon/Cute	10	2	2%
Education	11	1	1%
Other	12	1	1%

Table 5. Thematic categories and frequency for covers

The coding for 'Genre' relates to game genre, and 'Tie-in' to whether the game was derivative of another source (Book, Coin-op arcade machine, TV show etc.). Each of these

counts were applied via the *World of Spectrum* database search function, which enables the user to search by game title, and to be provided with a date of release, Tie-in by category, and Genre. The WoS site has coded all games on its database into 29 game genres, each of which have firm currency in historical and contemporary gaming culture (e.g. Board Game, Shoot-em-up etc.). It also provides 10 categories of 'Tie-in'. A combination of these codings (theme, genre, and tie-in) enabled the research to compare the % of games released in a set year that fall into certain genres (i.e. what % of games in 1984 were shoot-em-ups) and compare that to the magazine sample, to see if the games on the covers were representative of the overall software market, or were prioritising key genres over others, as was the case.

The coding of 'Violence' was into implicit (weapon present but not in use), and explicit (weapon in use or evidence of recent use), as previously used by Burgess (Burgess et al., 2007). It should be noted that the category of violence was the one least applied in the research, as the results were unsurprisingly high, as has been evidenced many times previously in other studies.

## **Chapter 7 Methodology – Reader's letters**

The content analysis sample for reader's letters comprised of 127 letters sourced from 11 years of *Computer & Video Game* magazine (CVG). The month of April was chosen for each year of CVG from 1982 to 1992. All letters in those issues were coded for 6 variables, including 'Date', 'Gender', 'Genre', 'Informal language' (slang), expressions of 'Brand loyalty/critique', and whether the topic was predominantly 'Hardware/software'. The number of letters per page was also recorded for each issue. The breakdown of categories in relation to 'Genre' was taken from Richardson's study of newspaper UGC (Richardson, 2008). These are: argument, anecdote/observation, joke, request, thank you, and apology. Whilst most of these categories are relatively self-explanatory, for the sake of clarity, the term argument relates to any letter that predominantly 'expressed a positive or negative position with respect to a proposition', an expression of which occurs in a context of disagreement (Richardson, 2008, p. 64). These genres were coded both in terms of principle and secondary use – e.g. whereby a letter may principally be a request for information, it may also utilise anecdotal elements. Additionally, what is ostensibly an argument (e.g. over a game review) might also be an anecdote of self-congratulation (the reviewer suggests the game is too

hard, the reader says he has completed it etc.).

The analysis found the most useful overall categories in this case were those of 'Gender', 'Genre', and 'Informal language'. The category of 'Brand loyalty/critique' was less evident than was expected (either as positive or negative), and it quickly became apparent that the 'Hardware/Software' binary was flawed to the point of being unusable as a stable category in this case. The problem experienced with coding the letters into software/hardware categories consisted of the merging of these two fields into an overarching register of consumption i.e. a common query would combine software & hardware. For example, 'I'd just like to ask where all the C64 stuff has gone' CVG125 (1992). Within the discourse of the gaming magazine, talking about technology, or hardware, is now a case of discussing branded commodities (which is better, Sinclair or Commodore?), and comparing their capacity to play games on. Within this framework of consumer debate it became evident that to separate the letters into those concerned with hardware or software was inherently arbitrary. The next section will outline the influences drawn upon in the discourse analysis element of the methodology.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Textually orientated discourse analysis was combined with content analysis in this thesis to examine over 100 magazines from 1981 to 1993. Where the statistical data collection and content analysis provides meta and meso levels of engagement with the texts (as is the case with the trajectories of review scores, or the favoured themes of cover illustrations), a textually orientated form of discourse analysis has been utilised for the fine detail of the analysis. It is an approach that encourages a consideration of the texts as being socially embedded, within an interlinked set of societal and institutional procedures and processes, which are both discursive and material.

Whilst the discourse analysis approach of this thesis is heavily informed and directed by a selection of the works of Fairclough (Fairclough, 1988; Fairclough, 2003; Fairclough, 2013) I would not claim it to be a piece of Critical Discourse Analysis per se, nor would I claim to be a linguist in training or inclination. However, some of the concepts and frameworks of CDA have proved invaluable to my study of how cultural industries can intersect with lived social

practice. A core element of my research question is how the evolution of the specialist gaming press corresponds to the development of a coherent gaming identity and culture. This is a question that centres on the 'dialectical relationships between discourse ... and other elements of social practices.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 205)

It should be noted that my key interests throughout the research have been more empirical than redemptive. They are with the texts themselves, and with the cultural phenomenon they represented, advanced, and regulated. However, Critical Discourse Analysis is in part defined by its aim for positive societal impact, it is both critical and redemptive, as Fairclough states 'The aim of critical social research is a better understanding of how societies work and produce both beneficial and detrimental effects, and of how the detrimental effects can be mitigated if not eliminated.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 202 & 203) In contrast this research does not focus at this stage on what the contemporary gaming industry could amount to, or what today's gaming culture should entail or enable. The focus for this exploratory piece is principally archival, yet, it does possess the potential to be developed towards such critical ends in the future.

The CDA approach of Fairclough exemplifies a social approach to language in that it utilises 'textual analysis as the first stage in a threefold process of analysis.' (Deacon, 2007, p. 156) This first stage is concerned with the formal properties of a text, whilst the second stage is concerned with the relationship between that text and the 'processes of production and interpretation' that provide meaning to it (analytically moving from text to discourse). The third stage focuses on the shaping influence of those contextual factors (situational, institutional, and societal) that condition the productive and interpretative processes (Deacon, 2007). This threefold approach has informed my own study of the gaming magazine (as a text), the gaming press as a process/institution of production, and gaming culture as the interpretative site of the user. The work of Fairclough has provided many conceptual gains to the thesis, concepts which can interact well with Bourdieu's theories regarding the cultural intermediate. The concepts that have been utilised in this study include: 'mediation', as the movement of meaning (Silverstone, 1999); 'discourse' as representation and as regulated practice; 'governance', 'genres of governance', and the 'format' as a collection of genres (Fairclough, 2003). I shall briefly outline how each of these concepts feed into this study of gaming magazines. The findings of the analysis have already

been summarised in the Introduction chapter, and will be presented in fine detail within each of the subsequent individual chapters.

Firstly, mediation is the movement of meaning ‘from one social practice to another, from one event to another, from one text to another.’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 30) This occurs not just between individual texts, but chains or networks of texts. The social practices in the field of gaming and the gaming press include reviewing devices (evaluative categories etc.) and editorial replies to letters, each feeding into schoolyard based games-chat (Haddon, 1988c). Meanwhile the scores given out to games by the teenage review staff guide retail distributors as to which games to stock on their shelves. How these games are represented and evaluated within the media influences how they are perceived, played and collectively experienced. And, due to the dialectic nature of the relationship, vice versa. This circularity of mediation, where meaning is perpetually produced and reproduced, enables a fruitful collaboration between discourse analysis and theories on cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002; Maguire and Matthews, 2012; Maguire and Matthews, 2014), and the circuit of culture model they operate within (Johnson, 1986; Du Gay, 1996; Du Gay, 1997; du Gay and Hall, 1997).

The notion of discourse is central to this thesis because, as Deacon argues, it enables ‘us to focus not only on the actual uses of language as a form of social interaction in particular situations and contexts but also on forms of representation in which different social categories, practices and relations are constructed from and in the interests of a particular point of view, a particular conception of social reality.’ (Deacon, 2007, p. 151) Within the CDA framework discourses are perspectives on the world. They are ways of seeing, which are related to the subjects position in the world, their identity, and their relationships to others. Through acts of mediation these discourses come to represent ‘aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world.’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124)

Furthermore, through such representations ‘Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in certain directions.’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124) For example, ‘gaming as a male hobby’ would

be a discourse that is realized in its mediation by the gaming specialist press, either via the language of the reviews (Kirkpatrick, 2015) or the hyper-masculine representations used on front covers. Each mediation works to include, exclude, prioritise, and subordinate the potentiality of what gaming culture might be. This ability to produce or reproduce discourse via mediation ensures that 'the capacity to influence or control processes of mediation is an important aspect of power in contemporary societies.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 31)

This concept of discourse, with mediation corresponding to influence and control, connects the analysis of language and representation to the governance of material conditions, where 'governance' can be defined as 'any activity within an institution or organisation directed at regulating some other (network of) social practices(s).' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 32) Advertising, consumer reviews, are all in part aimed at governance. These promotional genres of governance 'have the purpose of 'selling' commodities, brands, organisations, or individuals.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 33), and the specialist consumer magazine is defined by its reliance upon, and synchronicity with, such genres of governance. Also, the magazine can usefully be understood as a consolidated collection of different genres, as a 'format', the 'mixing of genres in texts takes the form of what we can call the emergence of 'formats', texts which are effectively assemblies of different texts involving different genres.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 69) Fairclough uses the example of Websites as a format, the magazine would be another highly influential one. A neoliberalist critique could argue that the proliferation of these promotional texts, and their linkage with other genres (into chains) and social practices, can be said to constitute the colonisation of social life by market interests. This thesis asks if this is all the videogame magazine amounted to, a promotional 'buyers guide', or did it constitute something more than a celebration of consumer goods.

A final point, before moving on to the analysis of the gaming press, is to do with the limitations of this study in relation to a somewhat absent reader. No totalising connection can be made between the shifting representations and conventions of a text, or a body of texts, and the practices, and identities, of those living individuals who bought and read the magazines. I have kept in mind the significance of the voice of the user, and recognised their mediated status, and later chapters will concentrate on that voice via the reader's letters pages. Yet, at all points in this study the magazine reader is being mediated, he is being represented, and always already categorised - included or excluded. While I have remained

aware of those who have been abjected, those cast out of the symbolic arena, my method and interests draw me towards the broader culture that is being generated, and to the tensions that exist within it.

The analysis of a specialist consumer text (such as the videogame magazine) must bear close attention to the specifics of that text's demographic, in order for its findings to have any honest relationship to that text. To do otherwise is to poach meaning from the user, the fan - to paraphrase Jenkins it is poaching from the poacher. Whilst it is important not to simplify readership patterns into essentialist identities in this case the evidence clearly points to a certain type of user: that of the adolescent male. The regular publication of reader questionnaires by several of the sample magazines (CRASH in 1985 & 1987, Amstrad Action in 1989) consistently placed the average age of the reader at around 16, with over 95% of the survey replies being male. The surveys also showed that the readers for these magazines regularly bought other titles, meaning that a clear demographic for the 80s videogame magazine as an industry can be confidently established. I agree with Barker (Barker, 1989; Pickering, 2008) that the socio-ethnographic method is a key component of a reader-centric analysis. And it is an aspiration of mine to bring the videogame reader in from the cold at a later point in my studies on the gaming magazine, and to listen to their unmediated voice.

## **Chapter 4: Arbitration to celebration – the evolution of the videogame magazine**

This chapter examines the evolution of the videogame magazine from advocate to celebrant of the home-computer as games machine. This is achieved via an analysis of the escalating review scores meted out by various magazine brands, and through a close textual reading of the editorial manifestos that often accompanied launch issues. This enables the research to assess, and compare, the manifest editorial content, what the magazines explicitly declare as their position, with the latent meanings coded into the rating scores. The function of the gaming magazine is outlined as three-fold: firstly it is to ensure profits for its own controlling interests, secondly to provide the gamer with 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007), and thirdly to support the products of the gaming industry by acting as 'buyers guides' (Newman, 2008, p. 31). These three functions do not necessarily exist harmoniously, and this chapter examines how the gaming magazine as a cultural industry tried to balance its role as taste arbiter and industry advocate.

### **The commercial significance of the videogame magazine**

If, as argued, one of the core functions of the videogame magazine is to support the videogame industry, by filtering the commercial potential of games (Haddon, 1988c), then it is necessary to assess whether they succeeded in this function, as the critical efficacy of the magazine's core genre (the videogame review) directly impacts upon its overall discursive significance. The magazine's role as a 'buyers guide' to users and retail distributors gives it cultural and economic capital, and whilst their significance is becoming more accepted, both by contemporary accounts of the magazines (Haddon, 1988c) and in retrospect (Newman, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2015), their ability to influence the game buying process should not be assumed.

The question of critical efficacy, of causality between positive critique and retail sales, is highly pertinent to this thesis, and one that envelops the genre of the commodity review. It is a question that drives advertising revenue for the reviewing publications, and underpins their wider discursive authority. Without critical efficacy the review can only promise its

media clients increased brand awareness. It should be noted that any direct causality between specific moments of advocacy and ensuing retail purchase is contentious and contested ground. This is due to the overdetermined nature of both consumer decision making, and the wider commercial popularity of a product. The review is only one factor amongst many in deciding consumer preferences, and these preferences exist within a yet wider set of cultural and demographic parameters (Tsang and Prendergast, 2009a). Yet, I would argue that the review is a significant factor in general, and one whose specific efficacy can be made visible via an examination of the scores provided by the video game magazine.

This section will now assess the commercial significance, or power, of the review's scoring system via a statistical comparison of scores meted out, versus the subsequent chart performance of the games. It will then analyse diachronic and synchronic trends by meta-scoring two videogame publications, and correlating their changes in scoring to a shifting subject position on the part of the videogame specialist press; one that goes from arbitration to celebration.

It is my assertion that the quantitative nature of video game reviews (with their notable reliance upon scoring systems) allows for a form of assessment that other, more qualitative, mediums are less susceptible to. To support this assertion I have performed a study on over 100 games reviewed during 1984 & 1985, in an attempt to measure the level of correlation between their chart success and the scores they received from the videogame magazines. In terms of review scores vs chart performance (Table 6) the findings display a clear correlation between high review scores and high chart positioning, with the top third of the charts scoring an average of 91% in their reviews, compared to the bottom third's average score of 77%. Furthermore, by cross referencing the timing of the review release dates to subsequent movements within the Top 30 videogame charts, we see that those games scoring below 70% moved on average only 2 places up the charts in the month following the review, whilst those games scoring over 70% moved up a far more notable 8 places.

<b>Charts Performance</b>	<b>Avg. Review Score</b>
Top Third	91%
Middle Third	85%
Bottom Third	77%

Table 6. Charts score vs average review rating

Therefore, it can be argued that i) there is a general correlation between high review scores and chart (commercial) success, and that ii) the benchmark for a 'good' score, one that instructs the buyer to purchase, is around 70% and upwards. This is the golden line of advocacy, the magazine's stamp of approval. This figure is anecdotally substantiated in an autobiographical history of *CRASH* (released by them in 1987 over four issues), where a software house claimed that 'we were informed by the most powerful software distributor of the time that unless a game achieved better than 65% in *CRASH* it wouldn't be accepted for distribution' *CRASH45* (1987). The small study provided by my research does support the presumed efficacy of the videogame review, and qualifies the notion of what a good review score looks like, a qualification that becomes more useful when we start to more broadly analyse and meta-score the 1980s videogame magazine. In the following section I will be meta-scoring two publications from two different publishing houses (Newsfield, and Dennis Publications), these have been chosen in order to allow tracking of synchronic variety and diachronic change. The changing scores for these publications enable a grounded understanding of how the role of the video game magazine changed as the 1980s progressed, and as the field of gaming culture became consolidated.

### **Meta-scoring the historical video game review**

It has been argued that scoring systems that rely upon ratings are inherently reductive, indeed that their very purpose is one of 'data reduction', to produce what 'can be viewed as single dimension indicators of product quality.' (Tsang and Prendergast, 2009b, p. 1271). The modern *meta-scoring* system acts as a second order of such reductionism, one that involves the collating of many individual scores to form one aggregate score. It is an increasingly prominent, and contentious system of contemporary critique (MacDonald, 2012).

Two such types of meta-scores are provided by the influential and popular Meta-Critic website: the first is that of the game, whereby numerous review scores for the same game are collated to provide an average overall score for that game. This average score has become a key indicator of commercial success within the gaming industry for any new software title. Secondly, and more significantly for this study, a meta-rating is also produced for the publisher of the reviews - the publication or website where the reviews were collated from. In the instance of the Meta-critic website these scores then provide the reader with a

profile of the review publication, which indicates whether the source of the review is a fair, generous, or harsh reviewer.

As the videogame magazine rates its products, so it is possible to observe how those scores change over time and across different publications. My assertion is that the production, and analysis of, meta-scores for historical videogame magazines allows for a breadth of understanding that an individuated analysis of the reviews cannot provide. What follows is an overview of my findings from meta-scoring two publications: *CRASH* magazine (sample size 1259), and *Your Sinclair* (sample size 1723). The key query here being: what do the review scores tell us about the changes occurring across the synergetic gaming industries of games production (software) and representation (publishing). In brief, why do the scores keep going up?

My meta-analysis of the reviews published in *CRASH* and *Your Sinclair* reveal that the average review score given by each of the magazines substantially increases, by over 10% for each publication, between the period 1984 to 1992 (Chart 1). This is significant as it suggests either i) a rise in the quality of the games being reviewed, and/or ii) an increased tendency by the specialist gaming press to celebrate, rather than critique, the videogame as a consumer product. The first scenario can be regarded as one where an increasingly experienced, and well-funded, field of games designers drive up the scores by improving the quality of the product. The second scenario signals a shift in the purposing, or function, of the videogame magazine due to more non-diegetic concerns. It is a question of whether the determinations for these escalating scores lie inside or outside the game.

Regarding the escalation we can compare the scores provided by the two publications over the sample period. The data shows an increase in the meta-rating for *CRASH* to be a notable 11% for the period 1984 to 1992, and a substantially higher one of 20.5% for *Your Sinclair*. Closer examination reveals four stages that can be applied to both the magazines' scoring trajectories. Firstly, there is a sharp increase during the initial 12 months, following the publications adoption of a rated review system; secondly there is a long period of stability (from 1986 to 1989), where there is a change of less than 2.5% in the overall meta-score. This period of stability is characterised by an avg. rating of around 70%. Thirdly, the stable period is followed by a period of escalation in the meta-scores. This period of escalation

occurs between 1989 and 1991: where scores increased by up to 10%, from around 70% to the 80% level. The final stage is a brief period of declining meta-scores, and a partial return to previous levels. To summarise there is an initial increase, a levelling off, another sharp increase, and finally a decline.

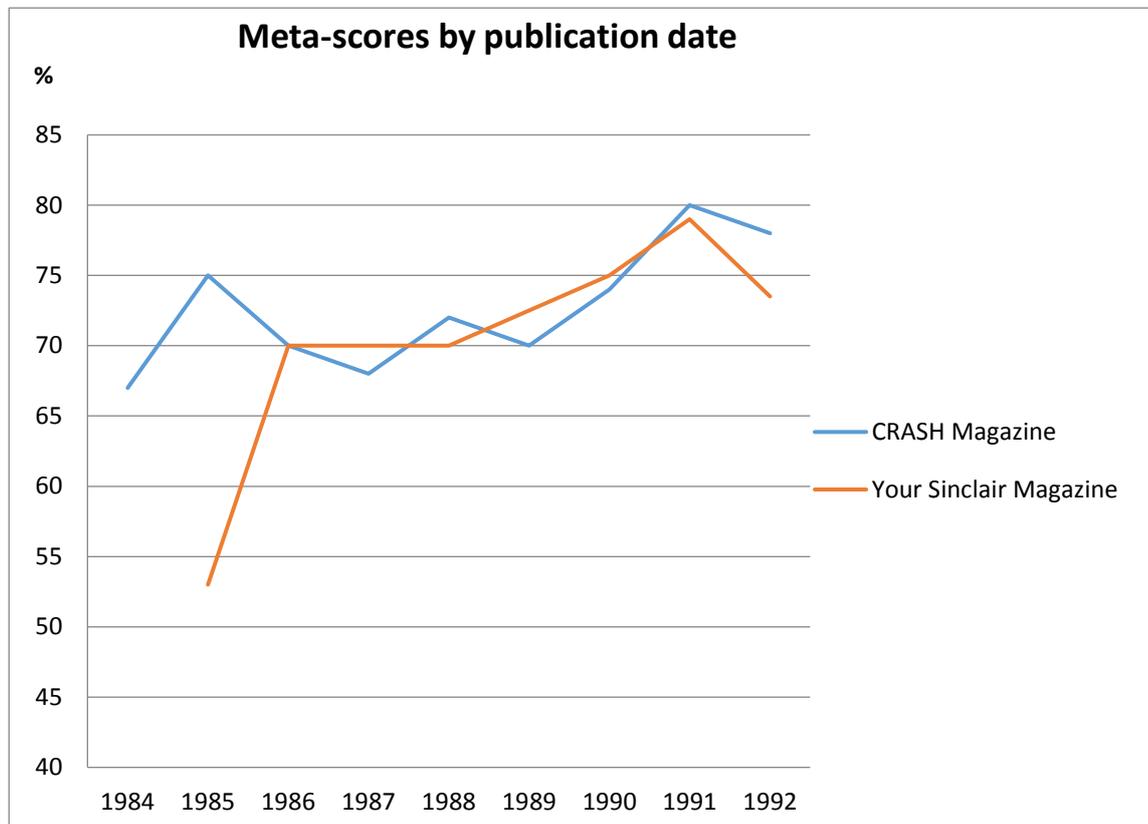


Chart 1. Meta-scores for *CRASH* and *Your Sinclair* 1984 to 1992

To return to the earlier proposition, that this escalation of review scores is due to either changes in the quality of the videogames produced, and/or a changing attitude within the specialist publishing press (from critique to celebration), the problem that emerges is how to discern the key determination. Examples of 'good' or 'bad' game design could be pulled from any point along the timescale. Citing one game's qualities against another proves little, and would be a reductive process. What can be done though, as we are discussing not what defines a good game, but rather how the narrative of videogame evaluation changes, is to interrogate the stories being told about the games on a macro level. The scoring percentage is one storytelling device, another key device within gaming culture, and the wider media industry, is the development of a pantheon of classics. Indeed, one of the functions of the scoring system is to fix an individual product within, or outside of, that pantheon.

These pantheons are represented within the videogame magazine in the form of 'Top 100' listings, and as such represent a subjective account of the best 100 games at a certain point in time. I have compiled two such top 100s, one is by a contemporary magazine critic in 1992 (published in *Your Sinclair*), the other is an online retrospective and user generated poll. The former can be regarded as an instance of institutionalised gaming capital, and the latter an expression of embodied cultural capital. What they share is the instrumental use of knowledge as a means of legitimating authority: the authority of the pantheon as a construct, those games that are included in it, and the voters own authority as critic. These top 100s allow for a comparison of the release dates of 'classic' games to the rising meta-scoring trajectory. The premise being if the meta-scores are linked to game quality/popularity then the release dates of the classic games should correlate with those years that show a rise in review scores.

In comparing the results of these polls an interesting pattern emerges (see Chart 2). The release dates from both the critic's and the fans' top 100 show a peak in the production of classic games between 1983 and 1986, which does in part support the first rise in meta-scores from 1984 to 1986. However, these polls also contradict the notion that games then continued to increase in quality between 1987 and 1991. Instead if we compare the trajectory of the meta-scores with the gaming pantheons, both contemporary and retrospective, the correlation suggests that as ratings go up the quality of the games decline.

The critic's poll (which out of the two should most closely mirror the trajectory of the rising meta-scores, as the same critics provided the scores initially) lists only 15 games for the period 1988 to 1993, compared with 70 classic games from 1983-1986. The retrospective top 100 by *World of Spectrum* users closely correlates and supports this data. This strongly suggests that the rising meta-scores do not reflect an increasing quality in games and gameplay (post 1987), but instead must be a product of operations within the publishing industry itself. These operations are a combination of cultural, technological, and economic factors, all of which fuse to produce a shifting identity for the videogame magazine: a shifting subject position. I have outlined three subject positions for the early video game magazine, these are arbitration, advocacy, and celebration.

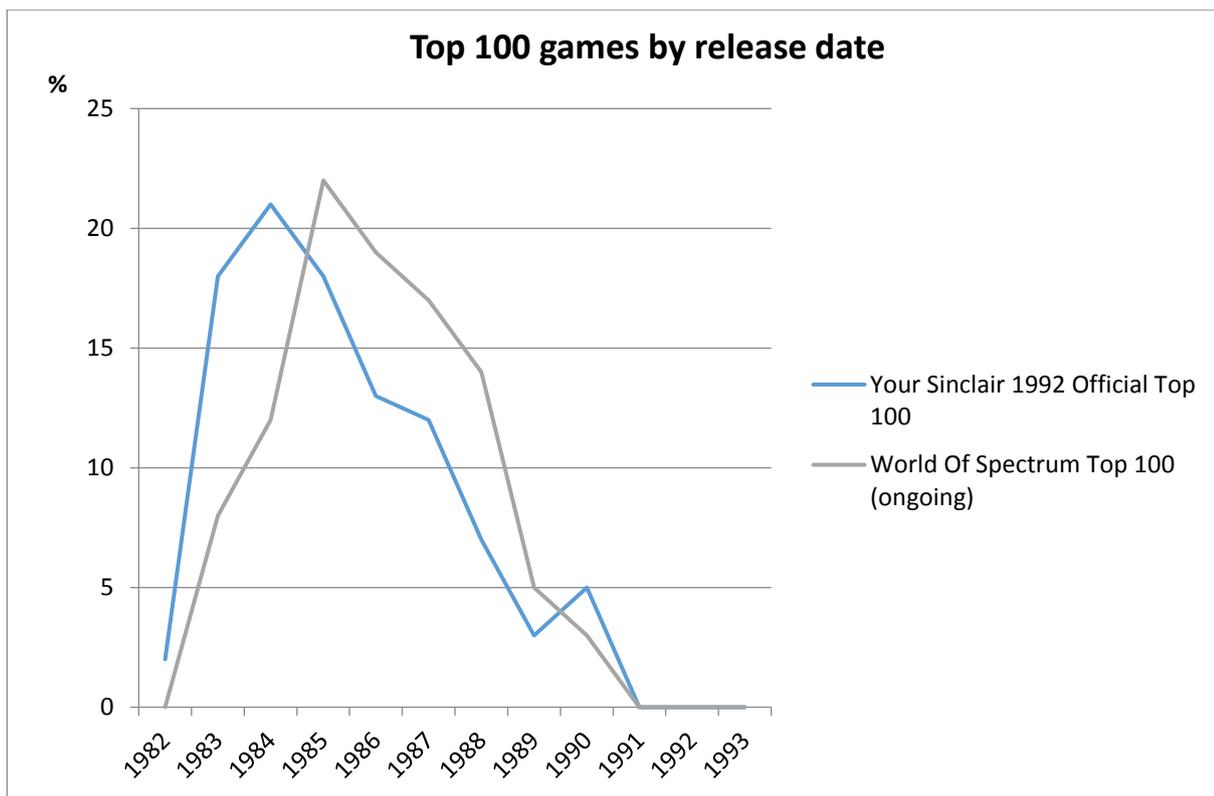


Chart 2. Top 100 games by release date

### The changing role of the videogame magazine - arbitration, advocacy, & celebration

Returning to the review scores data it is clear that *Your Sinclair* began with an arbiter role, but shifts its position to that of gaming advocate. The initial arbitration position can be described as one that stems from the new specialist publishing sector's need to be seen as an authentic and independent evaluator of the gaming industry. A source of institutional gaming capital, capital which can then be transferred to its readership upon consumption. As such an arbiters' meta-score will be below the golden advocacy line of 70%. Subsequently the shift to advocacy is visible as the magazine's ratings rise between the months of October and November 1985, when the average score increased from 54% to 69%. These escalations would never be reversed, and from 1986 onwards *Your Sinclair* would remain in the 70%+ scoring bracket. This shift corresponds to a re-branding of the magazine that occurred two months later in January 1986, when the magazine moved from a hobbyist to a games centred publication. In this new paradigm the gaming experience had to be not merely represented (as one possible computing activity amongst many), but actively advocated as the principle purpose of the microcomputer.

A key device in the advocating of videogames is the review score system, for to increase the perceived quality of the games you need only up the ratings. By the early 1990s these meta-scores had risen to around 80%, a clear indication of an increasingly celebrational attitude to gaming critique. The second publication meta-scored as part of this study, *CRASH* magazine, is a clear and open advocate of videogaming from its launch in 1984 onwards, and accordingly the increase in its scores across the 1980s is less marked. However, there is still an 8% increase between 1984 and 1985, which suggests a similar need to first establish authority (with its lower scores circa 1984) before later increasing its review scores. Notably it was the arrival of *CRASH* on to the specialist gaming scene in February 1984 that pushed other publications to rebrand as gaming centric magazines, and in doing so it initiated what can be termed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave of videogame magazines. The trajectory that both these magazines follow (from arbiter/advocate to celebrants) is symptomatic of wider technological, and economic, pressures being applied to the gaming industries of the time. I shall outline these pressures before looking analysing the magazines in more textual detail.

The popularity, and technological potency, of the 8-bit computer in the early and mid-1980s (notably the Sinclair Spectrum, Commodore 64, and Amstrad 464) enabled the specialist gaming press to maintain a critical position, whilst still generally supporting the wider gaming industry. At this stage there are enough quality games available (as shown by the top 100s) to allow for relatively transparent advocacy towards the software houses. This is the time of stability in terms of scores, from 1985 to 1989. However, as the 8-bit computer technology becomes increasingly obsolescent in the late 1980s, and economic factors (advertising revenue specifically) continue to require the discursive support of an ailing set of machines, the scores begin to rise towards 80%. The gaming commodity at this stage (1989-1991) is being latently supported via the manifest rise in review scores. It is being celebrated for its own sake, and for its own requirements. The function of the review scoring system has become to prop up the declining sales of the obsolescent 8-bit machine, as the new, more powerful 16-bit computers and consoles enter the marketplace. However, this escalated applause for the commodity cannot be maintained at the cost of reader identification indefinitely, and the reversal of the rising scores in 1992 signals a need to recapture plausibility and maintain its gaming capital. To be seen as the voice of the gamer and not the gaming industry.

The overall pattern of the rise, and eventual fall, in meta-scores from 1984 to 1992 is symptomatic of the magazines progressing through three different historical stages, three overlapping waves of development. Each of these developmental stages has their own identities, their own subject positions. To recap, in general (there are notable exceptions) the 1<sup>st</sup> wave (1981 to 1984) of videogame magazines is one of expansion & arbitration, the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave (1984 to 1988) consolidation & advocacy, and the third wave (1988 to 1993) one of segmentation & celebration.

Whilst the meta-score allows for an inroad into the shifting functions of the videogame magazine, and the commodity critiques it contained, to understand them further the methodology must shift to a finer, more textual, grain. In the following section I shall approach the 'voice' of the videogame magazine via its review 'guides' (not the reviews themselves, which will be analysed in the next chapter). These guides are editorial manifestos that mark out the magazine's position in terms of software critique. They outline the chosen categories of evaluation, and what 'makes' a good game, and as such they are discursive attempts at governance. They aim to consolidate both the meaning of game evaluation (of gaming critique), and by extension gamer identity 'within the wider, and ultimately unknowable, imagined community of gamers.' (Newman, 2008, p. 31) In doing so these manifestos help trace the development of the early UK videogaming press.

### **The magazine review guide as manifesto**

The videogame magazine can be understood as a commodity that talks avidly of itself, in an attempt to mark out its own, highly specialised, market position, in doing so it is also attempting to fix its relationship with the readership. Some parts of this relationship are both dialogic and solicitous. They request audience engagement in the form of letters, opinions on favourite games, program listings, and questionnaires. These operate as feedback loops within the highly mobile, post-fordist, production system of specialist publishing. Other expressions of the videogame magazine, like the review guide, are more unilateral, they act as pronouncements of intent and purpose.

The manifestos are produced by a member of the higher strata of cultural intermediary (the Editor), and articulate the core values and principles of the publication, forming a guide by

which the brand can both be identified with, and made identifiable. It can be broadly argued that branding is ‘about fostering a number of possible attachments around the brand, be these experiences, emotions, attitudes, lifestyles or, most importantly perhaps, loyalty.’ (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 238) I would argue that the review manifesto is key to this process of self-promotion and branded identity construction, and accordingly tends to accompany both the videogame magazine launch, and any major design overhaul or rebranding that later occurs.

The following section forms an overview of such review manifestos as they appeared across the sample. These articles outline the review systems and attendant ethos of the magazines, and are direct editorial articulations of the gaming press, and as such are valuable texts in terms of understanding the wider industry. They are texts laden with the discourse of their producers. This examination hopes to examine both the manifest and latent content of the discourse: to recognise both ‘What You Will and Won’t Find’ ZZAP1:7 (1985) when the commodity talks of itself. The following analysis is split chronologically into 3 sections, covering the periods i) 1981 to 1984, ii) 1984 to 1988, iii) 1988 to 1993. This segregation stems from the results of my own research, and the aforementioned proposal that the British videogaming press passed through three initial waves - arbitration, advocacy, and celebration.

### **The first wave 1981 to 1984 – establishing a critical approach**

A feature of the earliest British videogame magazines - *Your Computer* (1981), *CVG* (1982), *Personal Computer Games* (1983), and *Sinclair User* (1983) - is that they often launched without distinct manifestos regarding their reviews section. This is for two revealing reasons, firstly at this germinal stage the videogame review has not become the modus operandi of the medium – it does not require explanation because it does not hold discursive priority. Secondly, the 1<sup>st</sup> wave products of the video gaming press do not need to aggressively distinguish themselves from each other, due to a lack of congestion in the market. Instead the 1<sup>st</sup> wave manifesto, when it does tentatively emerge (the following extract from *CVG* emerged after it had already been in publication for 12 months), concentrated on outlining the new evaluative terminology and conventions that are beginning to coalesce around the videogame review. They are as exploratory as they are explanatory in nature.

The *CVG* manifesto introduced three categories of critique, three categories by which games will be scored. These are 'Getting Started', 'Value', and 'Playability'. This is a seminal moment in the lexical development of videogame critique, and their introduction warrants quoting in full, as it establishes a criteria utilised (with variations) across the industry for much of the early 1980s. Furthermore, the following passage marks the beginning of a formulated purpose for the game review/er per se.

'The complete guide to discovering if you'll enjoy the cassette or disk reviewed: Getting Started refers to loading instructions, loading difficulties, and whether or not the game is easy to understand. Value is the value-for-money side. Does the cassette or disk appear well presented and put together? Does it make good use of the machine's abilities? Playability is probably the most important mark to look at. Is the game a good example of its type? If it is an original idea, will it succeed in holding your attention? The main bulk of the review is the place where our game testers can give their own opinion on the offering but the marks seek to provide an accurate buying guide.' *CVG*12:78 (1982)

The manifest purpose of the early review, as suggested by this extract, supports Newman's proposal that the videogame magazine acted as a 'buyer's guide' (Newman, 2008, p. 31), a 'complete guide' *CVG*12:78 (1982), where the subjective opinions of the reviewers will be counter-balanced by the objective affordances of the grading system.

The outlining of the categories of critique in the *CVG* manifesto articulates the marginal cultural position of the technologically specialist 1982 home computer scene, in that there is an overt concern with access, with 'Getting Started'. Secondly, 'Value', that most sacrosanct of consumer ideals, is prominent and defined in terms of packaging and construction (how the game is 'put together'), which is the traditional language of the manufacturing industry. Finally, and most ethereally, *CVG* introduces the notion of 'Playability', a term that will later morph into Gameplay and become the measurement of excellence within modern videogame culture *sin qua non*. Crucially, 'Playability', that 'most important' of categories, is further categorised into generic excellence (a type of best in show), originality, and durability (what will later often become termed 'Lastability').

Furthermore, the three categories of 'Getting Started', 'Value', and 'Playability', discursively balance the old and the new, weighing the wider ethos of the commodity against the

particular affordances and promises of the videogame medium. They will form the tripartite paradigms of the videogame review, which are examined in the next chapter. Whilst other publications will perform differing critical conventions upon the videogame, varying both in terms of the categories used and the grading's applied, the philosophy underpinning the approach is very stable and repetitive. The following two publications, *Sinclair User*, and *TV Gamer*, did not explicitly categorise their reviews – games were given instead just one overall score instead of *CVG*'s three different scores. Yet, in their review manifestos the logic behind the scoring reveals a similarly stratified approach to the one instigated by *CVG*.

*Sinclair User*: Factors for grading: 'value for money, the layout of the screen instructions, conciseness of the program and its speed of operation, the accomplishment of the task it aims to achieve, the innovation of concept, and the use it makes of the machine.' SU18:133 (1983)

*TV Gamer*: 'we've starred the best of each type of game. They're the ones a keen gamer would wish to look at first – and if we've missed your favourite why not write in and tell us?' TV1:8 (1983)

Whilst the first quote supports the notion of a pragmatic, technologically deterministic, and production-centric paradigm of critique being formed, the second quote recognises a more ideological, yet, dialogic process in operation. The *Sinclair User* quote talks of *what* makes a good game, the *TV Gamer* quote is, crucially, talking about *who* decides what is good. It suggests the construction of a new ('keen') gaming sensibility, and hints towards the constitutive role played by the media. By presenting its evaluative rationale as one that accords with the tastes of the 'keen gamer' the gaming magazine reveals its intentions to appeal to, and to produce, the 'keen gamer' as a subject position. This process of interpellation connects to Consalvo's concept of 'gaming capital' and its central role in determining the 'serious' gamer. Yet, this quote also speaks of the fluid boundaries between the authority of the producer and the consumer. The newly formed gaming press does not have the confidence at this point to be wholly authoritative, and instead continually seeks positive feedback. This provides a discursive gap within which the reader can inform the industry of what indeed it means to be a gamer. The circulation of gaming capital between individual and institution is not unidirectional but dialogic. The next wave of videogame

magazines will concentrate on developing, and controlling, this dialogue of identity production.

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave 1984 to 1988 – Identity building**

‘A magazine is a living entity – a kind of three-way partnership between publisher, reader and advertiser.’ CRASH2:9 (1984)

‘Like most living things, ZZap!64 has parents. Its Ma and Pa are the magazines *CRASH* and *Personal Computer Games*. Er, respectively.’ ZZAP1:7 (1985)

These editorial quotes for *CRASH* and *ZZap!64* are illuminating ones, in that they speak of a consciousness regarding the relationship, or ‘partnership’ between producers and consumers, between representation and identity. The magazine appears in these quotes as the commodity come to life, complete with a genealogy. The reified commodity is presented as possessed of a certain vitality or anima. This vitality, illusory or not, is reliant upon the construction of a shared identity, one achieved through partnerships and ongoing dialogue with its readers and clients. It is this dialogue that is fundamentally changed by the launch of *CRASH* in 1984, which effectively repurposed the British gaming press.

Whereas earlier magazine titles focused on selling new products, and introducing new technologies, *CRASH* and the publications that followed it would concentrate on distributing an equally novel, but more abstract type of innovation: videogaming as lifestyle. Yet, like *ZZap!64*, *CRASH* did not emerge immaculately. Indeed it introduced very few new elements, and is more an amalgam of the pre-existing conventions that were spreading across the home computer specialist press as a whole. Instead *CRASH*'s success is in its consolidation of these previously disparate parts and conventions into a new paradigmatic whole of videogaming as entertainment. The sister publication *ZZap!64*, released in May 1985 for the Commodore 64, is a publication that is born fully formed into this 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave of identity-centred video game magazines. Accordingly it introduces itself with a confidence and self-awareness previously unseen within the field, and, despite its youthful demographic and persona, represents a new level of cultural maturity for videogaming as a social practice.

The manifesto *ZZap!64* presents in its May 1985 launch issue is vigorous in terms of expressing its own identity, and in its interpellation of the reader. It includes the usual roll call of staff members and scoring systems, but quickly expands to outline its ideology, its system of inclusion and exclusion, announcing 'What you WILL find in ZZap!', and 'What you WON'T find in ZZap!' (see Figure.1). In an analysis of what 'We Will Find' it becomes clear that the only thing truly new about the conventions being offered is how firmly they have been consolidated since the launch of *CRASH* twelve months earlier. These conventions include:

'Page after page of ultra-detailed, up to the minute reviews by our expert game playing team on just about every new 64 game.' ... 'A unique ratings and comment system designed to make crystal clear the games' strong and weak points.' ... 'Detailed playing tips, maps and cheat methods on dozens of different games to allow you more enjoyment of the titles you already own.' ZZAP1:7 (1985)

Other features listed include a dedicated adventuring section, news and 'gossip', nationwide gamer high scores, and gaming industry special features.

However, it is in terms of what we won't find that the new sensibilities (and priorities) of the second wave videogame magazine become apparent. There will be no more type in 'crummy' programs (the program listings pages that dominated the early home computer format), no more 'boffins', or 'Anything to do with business software. (It's a HOME computer.)' Significantly there will be no more 'Half-baked reviews by clever dick journalists who care more about trying to be funny than game-playing. (We're games fanatics.)' ZZAP1:7 (1985).

Here we can see a clear attempt to cordon off the profession of games reviewer from the wider cultural realms of non-specialist media journalism. There is a defensive pronouncement of being fan-centric, of the culture belonging to the super-user. It is a policy of isolationism, of games for gamers, that stresses the discursive separation of gaming from that of work ('business') and technology. This new gaming press is determined to be seen to be about leisure, rather than act as a back door entrance for science and education - as typified by such initiatives as the BBC Computer Literacy Project (1981).

# ZZAP-ED

## Money bags

Roger Keen, Franco Frey

## Slavedriver

Chris Anderson

## Tape collector

Bob Wade

## Joystick junkies

Gary Penn, Julian Hygnell

## Typing queen

Lucy Anderson

## White wizard contactor

Steve Cooke

## Art supremo

Oliver Frey

## Layout loonies

David Westers, Gordon Druce

## Gentle persuader

John Edwards

## Fa-Mail order

Carol Kinsey

## Subscriber's friend

Denise Roberts

## Writing palace (reviews, news, songs, etc)

Zzap! 64, 1 Church Terrace, Yeovil, Somerset BA20 1HX (Tel 0325-78011)

Home base (advertising, subscriptions, mail order, etc) Newfield Ltd, 1-2 King Street, Ludlow, Shropshire, SY8 1AG. (Tel 0584-5851)

Colour magic brewed at Scan Studios, Wallace Road, London N1.

Transfer to paper achieved by Radwood Web Offset, Yeaman Way, Trowbridge, Wiltshire BA14 9DL.

Distribution throughout known universe by COMAG, Tavistock Road, West Drayton, Middlesex UB7 7QE.

## Circulation Manager

Tom Hamilton

All circulation enquiries should ring 021-742 5383

Now get this, people. Every word and picture in this mag has been sweat and blood and OUR sweat. You can't go printing it without our word. Okay. OK? Also, since we're pretty busy people, we can't promise to return things you send to us unless you include a suitable stamped addressed envelope.

For the record the company who publish us each month are Newfield Ltd (see Home base address above). Pretty cool they are too.

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Cover by **OLIVER FREY**



**WELCOME** to the first issue of Zzap!64, the magazine dedicated to entertainment on the world's greatest home computer. Without being too modest, we happen to think the magazine you are holding is going to cause quite a stir. Until now Commodore did fan-zines in search of a good read have had to choose between the general games magazines (and put up with boring stuff about Spectrums, etc) and the oh-so-serious Commodore magazines (and put up with pages of complex computer jargon written by unintelligible buffoons).

Which is strange, because by far and away the most common user of a 64 is running the superb games and entertainment software available for it.

Zzap! 64 is dedicated purely and simply to helping you get the most out of these programs. It should help you decide which of them are worth buying, and it should help you get more pleasure out of those you already own. It's a mag which we hope every 64 owner can understand, get to know and come to love.

We've had an amazing time putting this first issue together. Hope you have an amazing time reading it.

See you next month.

*Happy Zapping*

*Chris Anderson*

## What you WILL find in Zzap!

- Page after page of ultra-detailed up to the minute reviews by our expert game-playing team on just about every new 64 game.
- A unique ratings and comment system designed to make crystal clear the game's strong and weak points.
- Detailed playing tips, tricks and cheat methods on dozens of different games to allow you more enjoyment of the titles you already own.
- A large section dedicated to 64 adventuring.
- The most exhaustive and up to date news and gossip on the game-playing scene.
- A comprehensive list of national high scores on 64 games plus regular playoffs against the record holders.
- Special features on the 64 games scene's key people, products and issues.
- A regular column by the amazing Jeff Minter.
- Stacks of competitions with great prizes.

## What you WON'T find in Zzap!

- Type-in program listings. (What's the point of spending hours typing in a program program which probably won't ever run?)
- Articles on interrupts, interfaces, operating systems, registers or program stacks. (We don't really know what they are. We don't really WANT to know what they are.)
- Half baked reviews by slow-witted journalists who care more about trying to be funny than game-playing. (More games favorites!)
- Anything to do with business software. (It's a HOME computer.)

## How Zzap was born

Like most living things, Zzap! 64 has parents. Its Ma and Pa are the magazines Crash and Personal Computer Games. Er, respectively.

It was Ma who started it off. Crash had had an incredible impact on the Spectrum games industry during 1984 and sold every month like hot cakes. So it was natural that the guys behind it would want to try to do the same for the 64.

Late in the year they printed an enticing ad. Editor wanted. It was spotted by PCG's editor, who adored working on PCG, except it meant commuting to London. From Somerset.

The people at Crash were amused to receive his application, since it was he who had started a stinging match with Crash at the start of the year with an unfortunate gossip item in PCG.



\*ZZAP-64-06-DO-PR1-ZZAP64 HGR6 TDDIV,3

ZZAP! 64 May 1985 7

Figure 1. Zzap, and its editor Chris Anderson, introduces themselves to the reader

The new *ZZap!64* manifesto seeks to break away from mainstream journalists and ‘boffins’, suggesting that the identity it seeks to construct is instead youthful, rebellious and anti-establishment. Indeed much of the remainder of the *ZZap!64* manifesto centres on the new and youthful editor (Chris Anderson), and the writers of the magazine. This is an attempt to introduce their cultural intermediaries to the audience, and thereby construct that common ground required by the 3-way partnership of ‘publisher, reader, and advertiser.’ These intermediaries can be understood as one of the ‘two causal ‘powers’ which shape texts: on the one hand, social structures and social practices; on the other hand, social agents’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 22). These social agents are not reducible to the level of structure or practice, and have their own potency in terms of providing textual meaning, they ‘texture texts, they set up relations between elements of texts.’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 22) The form of causality they engage in is irregular and organic, open to subversion, reliant on interpretation. Yet, the plurality of the relations between texts are also constrained by the existing social structures and the conventions that surround them.

In terms of identity the core tactic of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wave videogame magazine is to depict these young, upcoming, media professionals as transgressive figures. It is alleged that editor Chris Anderson was chosen in part because he had started a ‘slanging match’ with *CRASH* during his time at *Personal Computer Gamer* and ‘As a punishment they ordered him to start work immediately on the new magazine’ *ZZAP!8* (1985). Similarly, the staff listing on the welcome page for *ZZap!64* list his job title as ‘Slavedriver’, whilst the others members are jokingly denigrated as ‘Joystick Junkies’, ‘Typing queen’, and ‘Layout loonies’. The tactic of parody encompasses the entire staff, with the piece proclaiming ‘The team was assembled, the games played, the words written, the issue produced. Now let it be read.’ *ZZAP!8* (1985). There is a wonderfully mock-serious, epic quality to this statement, a pseudo-biblical fastening of creation to the utterance, or reading, of the word. Indeed this editorial piece so neatly summarises the emerging identities and interests of the mid-1980s videogame magazine that it is hard not to take the publication at its word, and to let it speak for the videogame magazine per se.

Yet, it must be remembered that whilst it is symptomatic of the wider field, it is so symptomatic as to make it exceptional; so representative as to make it unrepresentative. *ZZap!64* is a new formulation of the videogame magazine, with a new level of manifest self-

awareness, and like *CRASH* it acts as a coalescence of the traits that emerged before it. It does, however, vividly mark out the industry practices of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave, practices Chris Anderson would continue with Future Publishing and their plethora of later gaming (and non-gaming) publications. *CRASH* and *Zzap!64* as brands defined the identity of the early gaming press, and in doing so helped define the culture of gaming. A culture that would become more specialist, and segmented, as it moved into the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave.

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> Wave 1988 to 1993 - *Segmentation and Supplementation***

‘You might think it takes a bit of nerve to offer a completely new way of rating games. It does – but we had to take the plunge. Because we think you, the buyers and players of computer games, have been getting a raw deal. Sure ratings usually tell you how the graphics score. Yes, they’ll put a figure on the sound. And then there are all those Playabilities and Lasting Interests and Value for Moneys and umpteen other labels that just don’t give you the info you need. So, if you want to get the real dope on a game; if you want to find out if it gets you right from the start; if it exercises the old grey matter; and, most important of all, if you’ll still be playing it next week, month or year – get a load of our exciting new system.’ ACE1:43 (1987).

This is the launch manifesto for *ACE* magazine, released in October 1987 by Chris Anderson’s Future Publishing (see Figure 2). It provides a useful overview of the emerging 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of gaming magazines, as it introduces both the challenges faced, and the solutions offered, by a maturing culture of game critique. Firstly, there is all those ‘umpteen’ labels of critique that *ACE* mentions, an accusation that recognises the over-production of gaming terminology. A glut of meaning that occurred as each publication sought to distinguish itself from its competitors by inventing its own critical language – my own research has recorded over 50 different evaluative categories used across the 1980s and early 90s. The dialectic tension here is between competitive branding on one side, and critical consolidation on the other, where a crowded and bustling marketplace has led to a lack of consensus on how to assess the products being reviewed. The result is an alleged ‘raw deal’ for the user, and an undermining of trust - a vital quantity in the producer/consumer partnership. It is a case of the inflated discourse threatening to stagnate, or even devalue, the gaming capital being distributed by the specialist press.

# SCREEN TEST

## The ACE System

Each review starts with the name of the game reviewed, the supplier and the version we've tested for the main review section. If other versions are available for review at the same time then you'll find information on them in separate boxes. Where two versions differ substantially then the box will be quite long; where the game is essentially the same the comment will be brief and to the point.

Each review also has a Release Box, giving information on prices and when other versions are expected to appear. We can only pass on what the software houses tell us, so OUT NOW means we've actually seen the game and that it will be in the shops. IMMINENT means that the software house is confident it should be on sale by the time that issue of ACE is on the street - but you know as well as we do that these things are never certain. NOV 87 means that that's when the software house is expecting the version to be available. We will, of course, be keeping you updated on all release news.

Each and every game reviewed in Screen Test is seen by all 5 members of the team, although the review is written by one person. The ACE Rating is our collective opinion, but if a game provokes a violent difference of opinion then we'll allow space for a dissenting voice to be heard. Games are tested thoroughly and our opinion is influenced only by the good or bad qualities of the game itself. Trust us - between us we've seen more games than Scififi had hot dinners. You can rely on our judgement!

## The PIC chart explained

A new system takes a bit of getting used to, so we've cooked up some ratings for a fictional game. Standard Issue Scrolling Coin-Op Conversion to help you along. You know the kind of thing: good scrolling, fast and noisy action, picking up extra weapons. Now check out the ACE treatment this game gets.

**AUDIO:** How does the game sound? Are the in-game effects mighty booms and piercing screeches, or just gurgly blips? Do you want an LP of the title music, or would you prefer a pair of earplugs? Does that digitised speech say "Missile launched" or is it more like "Missile lauged"? Sound makes a big difference - just look at Impact (p48) for example. There's 200K of digitised effects here!

**IQ FACTOR:** How much thought does the game demand? Is it an epic of strategic planning, or a mindless shoot-em-up? A low rating here doesn't mean the game's bad - but don't expect it to tax your grey matter too much. Brainiac game this issue is Ter (p62) with a perfect 7 for IQ.

**FUN FACTOR:** Is the game instantly playable? Does it offer immediate, compulsive pleasure - or does it take long-term commitment to get anything out of it? Expect a high fun factor for coin-op conversions - Bubble Bobble (p66) is the top scorer this issue - and a low one for games based on theology books.

The IQ Factor and Fun Factor are used in conjunction with the P.I.C. curve to tell you what TYPE of interest a game offers.

**VISUAL:** What does the game look like? The more of these squares that have turned white, the higher the game's visual score. Gray squares mean jerky animation, flickering sprites, colour clashes or poor attention to detail. Check out Quixote (p44) and Sidewalk (p45) for the kind of game that gets lots of its white ones.



You might think it takes a bit of a nerve to offer a completely new way of rating games. It does - but we had to take the plunge. Because we think you, the buyers and players of computer games, have been getting a raw deal. Sure, ratings usually tell you how the graphics score. Yes, they'll put a figure on the sound. And then there are all those Playabilities and Lasting Interests and Value for Moneys and umpteen other labels that just don't give you the info you need. So, if you want to get the real dope on a game; if you want to find out if it gets to you right from the start; if it exercises the old grey matter; and, most important of all, if you'll still be playing it next week, month or year - get a load of our exciting new system.

**PREDICTED INTEREST CURVE, or PIC for short.** One look will give an instant idea of the game in question. The higher the curve, the more of your attention the game holds at any one time; the top of the box means total obsession, while the bottom means complete and utter indifference. In our fictional shoot-em-up, here those graphics mean you'll be pretty impressed after a minute. You're even keener after an hour, thanks to those nice controls. But frustration at those sudden deaths has taken the edge off this by the end of the first day, and after a week the lack of death is starting to show as well. By a month you've been just about everything the game has to offer and want a new challenge, but the playability and great graphics mean you'll still be looking it up occasionally in a year's time.

Figure 2. The minimalist aesthetic of ACE magazine signals a new seriousness of purpose in the gaming press ACE1:43 (1987)

Yet, what does this fresh new publication offer the gamer in the face of such discursive overdetermination? The answer is more new labels, scores are now out of a thousand instead of ten or a hundred, and the categories are mainly re-workings of previous norms: 'Graphics' becomes 'Visual Effects', 'Sound' becomes 'Audio', and 'Lastability' becomes a visual chart entitled the 'Predicted Interest Curve'. The only significant shift is the replacement of any generic 'Playability' with a segregated notion of 'IQ Factor' and 'Fun Factor', and it is this separation that reveals the other challenge being faced by the video-gaming press in the late 1980s. The market is not just crowded, but increasingly segmented.

As the 1980s progressed the videogaming demographic evolved, and where previously all players were relatively new to the medium, for the medium itself was new, there now existed a hardcore of experienced gamers, who actively identify themselves as such. Players who had amassed greater gaming capital than their younger brothers and wanted this resource to be recognised. This hardcore group is being continually supplemented by new aspirant players, and bordered by the more casual gamers. The challenge offered by this cultural evolution is that the identity of the gamer is now more pluralistic, and less essentialist than before. The *ACE* manifesto of 1987 recognises this cultural change and appeals specifically to the seasoned gamer, offering them the 'real dope'. In doing so it is also responding to the increasing hyperbole of the specialist gaming press, and the cynicism produced by low-standard games and escalating review scores. The raw deal becomes a new opportunity for the increasingly self-aware videogame magazine commodity.

Returning to the *ACE* manifesto, the new categories of 'IQ' and 'Fun Factor' reveal how the challenge of a non-essentialist gaming identity is converted into a selling opportunity.

**IQ Factor:** 'Is it an epic of strategic planning, or a mindless shoot-em-up? A low rating here doesn't mean the game's bad – but don't expect it to tax your grey matter too much.'

**Fun Factor:** 'Is the game instantly playable. Does it offer immediate, compulsive pleasure - or does it take long-term commitment to get anything out of it?' *ACE*1:43 (1987)

These quotes suggest that the dividing line for the gamer between 'IQ' and 'Fun' is not intellectual, or demographic, but instead centres on two types of engagement: compulsive hedonism (Fun) versus long-term serious commitment (IQ). Similarly another 3<sup>rd</sup> wave videogame magazine *Mean Machines* utilises the notion of 'Game Difficulty' to differentiate

between the types of gamer that will (or should) be interested in a game. The 'difficulty' category 'tells you how easy or tough the game is. If you're a novice player, easy games should keep you happy. If you're a veteran joystick jockey, medium or hard games are recommended.' MM1:6 (1990). The new paradigms of gamer type ('novice' vs 'jockey') under construction are ones designed to cater for a newly segmented market. It is a sensibility which will later evolve into the notion of casual versus hardcore gamers (Juul, 2009), a distinction that I would argue is a false dichotomy from the outset, and one designed for primarily commercial reasons.

Whilst *ACE* attends to the segmentation of the videogame market by appealing to the 'mature' sector of the market, *Mean Machines*, released in October 1990 (see Figure 3), approached the same market developments by specialising in the console arena - one that is demographically younger than home computers. Like *ACE* its response to the discursive overdetermination of the evaluative medium is simply to supplement, to keep adding more. *Mean Machines* MM1:6 (1990) presents an encyclopaedic system of critique that supplements the old with additional detail, and in doing so attempts to circumvent the tension between rival terminologies by including all of them. This results in a vast array of categories and evaluations in their review format, including 'Game Difficulty', 'Lives', 'Continues', 'Skill Levels', 'Responsiveness', 'Presentation', 'Graphics', 'Sound', 'Playability', 'Lastability', 'Overall', 'Players', 'Format'. However, despite all the new additions I would argue that the core categories have remained the same. As with *ACE* it is only the impression of novelty that is important, not its provision.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the rising review scores, and their variance from the top 100s, attest to the shifting subject positions being assumed by the publications; a change in their cultural role within the gaming imaginary. Technologically they tell of the initial novelty and subsequent obsolescence of the 8-bit microcomputer, what Newman has referred to as supersession (Newman, 2012). Economically they inform the analyst of the conflicting pressures to garner income from two different revenue streams, advertising and subscriptions, and to celebrate the game whilst accurately informing the reader.

# THE RATINGS SYSTEM EXPLAINED

Here at MEAN MACHINES we are committed to giving you the most in-depth console reviews. Here's how our ratings system works.

## GAME DIFFICULTY

This tells you how easy or tough the game is. If you're a novice player, easy games should keep you happy. If you're a veteran joystick jockey, medium or hard games are recommended.

## LIVES

Tells you how many times can you die and still return from the grave.

## CONTINUES

Tells you how often you can restart from where you died. Beware: too many continues can allow you to finish the game too quickly, and seriously damage your enjoyment.

## SKILL LEVELS

Many games let you fix the difficulty level for yourself, so you can increase the challenge if you get good at it. This tells you how many skill levels there are.

## RESPONSIVENESS

Is it humanly possible to avoid that mutant's death-beam, or does the joystick refuse to obey your frantic commands? This section lets you know!

## PRESENTATION

This is an important part of any game. Are the instructions clear (and in English)? Do the option screens make sense and look pretty? Is the screen well laid out? Is there plenty of in-game info? This rating tells you all.

## GRAPHICS

This includes not only the quality of the sprites and their animation, but the backgrounds as well. Graphics are judged not only on their prettiness, but on how well they are suited to the game.

## SOUND

The difference between a booming, catchy intro tune and a few weak beeps that sound like a dying Spectrum is indicated here. Music and effects can make a big difference to a game, so don't ignore this factor.

MEAN MACHINES 6

**NINTENDO REVIEW**

**LIFE FORCE**

BY: KONAMI

PRICE: £29.99

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

GAME DIFFICULTY: MEDIUM

LIVES: 3

CONTINUES: 3

SKILL LEVELS: 1

RESPONSIVENESS: GOOD

1-2 PLAYERS

**PRESENTATION 79%**  
One or two-player option and great screen layout.

**GRAPHICS 86%**  
Detailed and colourful sprites and backgrounds.

**SOUND 83%**  
Very similar bursts and effects to the arcade version.

**PLAYABILITY 85%**  
A bit difficult at first, but it's great, slower when blasting all the way - and dead and score too!

**LASTABILITY 88%**  
80 levels of frantic action and the two-player option ensure a long-lasting challenge.

**OVERALL 86%**  
A stunning shoot 'em up which is a must for your collection.

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## PLAYABILITY

Some games you just can't stop playing, no matter how late at night it is. This measures the addictiveness of the game, and how much you'll think about it - even when you're not playing it!

## LASTABILITY

You don't want to spend your cash on something that will only last a week. Check this box out to judge if you are going to be playing it in a month, or be bored with it within a week.

## OVERALL

This is it. This mark takes into account all the above ratings and acts as a guide to the game's overall quality. If a game scores over 90%, it's a Megagame and is well worth buying!

## PLAYERS

Simply tells you how many players can play the game - either simultaneously, or one after the other.

## FORMAT

This icon tells you what type of cartridge the game is on - here's the full list:

NINTENDO



SEGA



MEGADRIVE



## GAME TYPE

These nifty icons show you what sort of game it is - here's the full list:

SHOOT 'EM UP



SPORTS GAME



PLATFORM GAME



DRIVING GAME



BEAT 'EM UP



ARCADE CONVERSION



Figure 3. Mean Machine supplements the range of evaluative categories, as it segments its audience MM1:6 (1990)

This section on the launch manifesto and review guide has revealed a trajectory that goes from the establishing of a new media, to the consolidation of a new gamer sense of identity, resulting in the production of an increasingly segmented and specialised sense of what it means to be a gamer. It is in part the success of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave magazines, in articulating a distinct gamer identity that produced its own commodity dilemma, one that continues to the present day. It is a dilemma of how to sustain a consumer culture that is centred on exclusivity, on being hardcore and 'elite', whilst remaining inclusive and open to new customers. The kudos problematic of how to sell without selling out. To paraphrase the *ZZap!64* piece, what you do find in the review manifesto is a setting up of new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion – inherently an ideological operation. What you don't find is a solution to the escalating demands of the commodity ethos, where all history is branded, and all progress soon to be obsolescent.

The next chapter moves from the review guides discussed above to a detailed analysis of the review and the reviewer. It approaches the review as the defining genre within the gaming magazine format, the space within which, more than anywhere else, the cultural intermediary will have the opportunity to texture the texts as a social agent. These intermediaries were sometimes surprisingly young, and when not so were always presented as youthful. As such they represent both an aspirational ideal and an honest or authentic fan. They are the gamers who have reached the accolade of 'elite', the ones who gets paid to play.

## Chapter 5: The videogame review as system of media critique

### Introduction

Whilst the videogame magazine as a multi-text contains many sub-sections, each intertextually linked, it has been argued that 'the most obvious function of the videogame press, however, is performed by reviews of the current crop of titles.' (Newman, 2008, p. 31). The centrality of the review, Newman argues, is made apparent via the allocation of a coherent space within the magazine – the review 'section' - and the tendency for the front pages to proclaim the number of reviews inside. These tendencies would suggest that reviews clearly sell copy. If the review is the core mechanism of the videogame magazine, and I agree with Newman that it is, then to fully understand the function of the videogaming press we must understand both the videogame review as a genre, and the subject position of the game reviewer.

The videogame review is a place where critique and consumerism coalesce, and a space where the cultural Intermediary must display their expertise and authority as a reviewer. The review itself is generally short in length (often 4 to 6 per page), and comprised of a critique of the game itself, screenshots (pictures of in-game footage) accompanied by explanatory text, and a review scorebox. The review system contained in that scorebox usually categorises the game in terms of such qualities as graphics, sound, playability, etc. These are sometimes further aggregated into an overall rating or score. Whilst the videogame review has been recognised by the gaming industry, its users, and a few academics, as central to the identity and functionality of the videogame magazine, these reviews at once invite and resist critical interpretation.

They invite due to their prominence, yet resist critical absorption by their sheer weight in numbers. The *World Of Spectrum* website lists 10,724 games for the Spectrum, just one amongst several popular brands of micro-computer at the time. Furthermore, many of the games were reviewed multiple times, by competing publications. *CRASH* magazine produced 2,694 videogame reviews during its 8 year publication run and is only one of more than 30 similar publications released within the timeframe 1981 to 1993. As such the reviews fill the magazines as critical and diverse micro-texts, consumer artefacts that provide invaluable

contemporaneous accounts of the games they assess. Yet, their diversity and plenitude produces resistance to any critical understanding of them on a methodological level. To avoid reducing the variety of the gaming review to a monolithic formulae, or focusing too narrowly on a few examples this thesis examines them in various ways, as a scoring system, as a genre, and as a set of rhetorical devices. Firstly, it is useful to recognise the particular kind of 'new journalism' that games reviews form a part of, and the significance of the peer reviewer as an authentic critic/gamer. This will be examined in relation to the British music press, which acted as a pertinent media forbearer to the videogames review. This is part of recognising the cultural industry context with regards to the type of mediation being enacted.

### **New Journalism and rock writing**

The influence of the hobbyist press upon videogame culture has been clearly outlined in the early work of Leslie Haddon (Haddon, 1988b; Haddon, 1988c, p. 137). I would add to this by proposing another set of cultural influences, those that stem from the changing conventions and identities articulated by the British music press. The adoption of 'New Journalism' by 'alternative' magazines in the 1970s is arguably the most significant single factor with regards to changes in the British music press. The shift here is one of sensibilities, the forging of new conventions and subject positions within the arena of consumer and cultural criticism. The new position is at once both mainstream and counter-cultural. Whilst each individual publication, within each media sphere, must be understood as a culture in and of itself, there are distinct areas of overlap between the different specialist magazines that support the music and videogame principle industries. These areas of common ground can be defined in terms of ownership and synergistic business practices, conventions of commodity critique, and the role of the reviewer. It is only by outlining the changing role of the British music press that the videogame press can be placed within its appropriate wider socio-cultural framework, as a media consumerist guide.

In his seminal piece of socio-musicology Simon Frith outlines the post-war transition from pop to rock that occurred in the music press (Frith, 1983; Frith, 1988). The 1950s music press is described 'the industry's own public view of itself and were written accordingly, in a breathy adman's prose' (Frith, 1983, p. 167). These publications operated as unabashed

promotional puffery for the pop music industry, with little or no sense of critique. However, in the post-Beatles (post 1965) era this mainstream approach was found to be inadequate for the demands of a newly progressive 'rock' market. In response there is 'an attempt from *within* the rock world to develop an account of the music as art.' (Frith, 1983, p. 167) Frith characterises the two main influences upon this new form of rock critique to be firstly the American underground press (including the *LA Free Press* and *Berkeley Barb*), and secondly the new specialist music press of the late 60s, including *Crawdaddy*, *Creem*, and *Rolling Stone*. The underground press provided a sense of ideology, of being 'not concerned with music as such but with lifestyle, with "dope, sex and revolution"' (Frith, 1983, p. 168). Similarly, the new specialist press presented itself as supra-entertainment, '*Rolling Stone* is not just about music, but also about the things and attitudes that the music embraces.' (Frith, 1983, p. 169). This notion of being about more than the music, of possessing an identity that can be (and should be) adopted, is a vital development in terms of the specialist entertainment press.

The question then arises of how to convey these 'things and attitudes' that formed the coalescing 'rock' identity, one centred on 'its political stance, its aggression, its sexuality, its relationship to cultural struggle' (Frith, 1983, p. 168). This is not a rhetorical question, but rather one answered by rhetoric: by the rhetorical techniques of New Journalism. The key figures of New Journalism are recognised as including such writers as Terry Southern, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, George Plimpton, Hunter S Thompson, and Truman Capote (Long, 2012). The core innovation of New Journalism was 'the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction using techniques usually associated with novels and short stories.' (Long, 2012, p. 65)

This new style acted as a means of 'combining personal memoir and experience with reportage.' (Long, 2012, p. 65) In the context of music journalism it converted the previously pseudo-objective commentary, on the qualities and style of a certain record, into a subjective narrative of audio-exploration. It made a story of the act of listening, and made the reviewer the protagonist. The practitioners of this new supra-musical genre would recognise this in their own reminisces, with Charles Shaar Murray of *NME* explaining that 'I was deep into New Journalism, I learned how to describe a rock concert by reading Norman Mailer describing a riot in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*.' (Long, 2012, p. 65). Similar

homages to New Journalism figures are to be found in videogame press histories. One article in *CRASH* recalls the progress of a staff reviewer Jon Minson, 'Looking at his entry, there's little to suggest that this man will one day turn into a voracious ligger of vituperative prose and metamorphose into the Hunter S Minson we all know' *CRASH*:45 (1987). The knowing wink to cult gonzo journalist Hunter S Thompson signals a shared reservoir of cultural references with the pre-existing British music press.

In terms of production, the videogame magazines of the 1980s share many of the same business practices as their musical consumer relatives, often similar marketing strategies, the same revenue streams, etc. These economic similarities become influential as cultural practices when we consider that the two cultural spheres, of music and gaming, were catered for by many of the same publishing companies. Such cross ownership encouraged a cross-pollination of conventions and styles, the quirky sub-headers and playful language of the music review become quickly embedded in gaming journalism. Similarly, the flexi-disc give-away, 'the perfect marketing tool for the *NME*' (Long, 2012, p. 13), acted as a precursor to the cover tapes and discs that became so central to the increasingly competitive arena of videogame magazine retail in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The aforementioned cross ownership encouraged such paradigms to cross mediums and cultures. Whether this is a process of homogenisation, or a more dialectic to and fro of influences, is a query that must be answered in attendance to each specific instance, on a case by case basis. However, on a broader meta-level it can be asserted that it is the synergetic relationship, between the primary and secondary industries of cultural production and representation, which acts as the true constant. It is synergism as a paradigm that binds the mediums together.

Regarding this synergy Frith comments that 'In general terms, even if their final ends were different (magazine circulation versus record sales), the British music papers and record companies saw themselves as having the same interests.' (Frith, 1983, p. 166). It is not, however, a relationship of dominance and submission, but instead one of mutual accord, 'Music papers and record companies work together not because the papers are "controlled" by the companies' advertising, but because their general image of the world, the general interpretations of rock, are much the same.' (Frith, 1983, p. 173) Where Frith talks of 'rock' identity the same can be said of the processes regarding the construction of a 'gamer' identity a decade later. The accordance of interpretation that Frith refers to, between

producers and articulators, is of particular significance regarding the new lifestyle mags of the post-modern era, as guides become ideological drivers: 'They don't just want to know what they do like, they also want to know what they might like and even what they ought to like. For them a consumer guide is a guide to rock value. What they like matters.' (Frith, 1983, p. 175). As consumer guides become ideological, so the sociological significance of understanding the role of taste, and taste makers, becomes all the more heightened.

In terms of publication house style, and reviewer subject position, the preferred tendency of the new British music press can be described as one of 'calculated eccentricity' (Frith, 1983, p. 172). However, such playful eccentricity does not necessarily translate into direct criticism of those in control of music production, as Frith argues 'There is still little coverage of the rock business as a business.' (Frith, 1983, p. 173). The cultural intermediary mediates between the listener and the music, between the reader and their potentiality as a living 'cool' subject, but not between the music industry and their audience (at least not critically).

This is the inherent tension of such counter-cultural occupations, how do you occupy the position of authority whilst disclaiming any responsibility to such ownership. This tension is an ideological one, a disjunction, as Frith argues, 'between the available ideology of rock, an ideology drawn from the concerns of the underground, and the demands of rock promotion.' (Frith, 1983, p. 170) Similarly, for *NME*, Long comments that 'Any kind of residual façade of counter-cultural cred that the paper's journalists might've tried to maintain in their writing was undermined when it was juxtaposed with, say, recruitment adverts for the British Army or ads for Woolworths.' (Long, 2012, p. 138). Furthermore, the kind of rebelliousness being advocated can at times seem a highly masculinised one, with one fellow journalist Lucy O'Brien describing *NME* as possessing 'The aura of a sixth-form boys common room.' (Long, 2012, p. 137) To conclude, whilst the music press may present itself as radical, it was often highly conservative in its business practices. I would argue that whilst the visual medium of videogaming has often led to it being viewed via a cinematic lens, the closest (and most illuminating) cousin to gaming culture is that of the music industries. The following section will introduce the videogame reviewer as a cultural worker, as purveyors of that relatively new form of journalistic practice developed by the music press.

### The videogame reviewer as authentic gamer

The gaming industry, when talking about the games reviewer, tends to place their youthful identity at the centre of the consumer narrative. A narrative always already designed to promote and critique consumer goods, whilst developing gaming capital for its readers and publishers. As such the videogame reviewer's authenticity, and legitimacy, stems from this insider status as young 'elite' gamers within a new field of cultural practice. Their role as idealised 'honest gamers' is described by one videogame artist of the time.

'It was almost like your school friends were reviewing the games that you hadn't seen yet, that weren't released yet, and were telling you which ones were good, which ones were bad, which ones you could save your money up for. You trusted them as well.' (Caulfield, 2014)  
Mark Jones – videogame artist – *Ocean*.

The higher strata of media workers, the editors who employed these young review teams (sometimes, as in the case of Robin Candy, the reviewers were as young as 13), were highly conscious of the gaming capital provided by such an informal peer review system. Gaming capital which, for the publishing brand, converts into reader loyalty and retail sales. Early videogame publishing supremo Chris Andersen describes the shift in the business model as being one from traditional journalism to a new gamer-centric form of critique: 'we went from really thinking of it as content that should be written by quote 'journalists' to increasingly seeing it as content that had to be written by gamers themselves' (Caulfield, 2014). Adverts were placed in the magazines to find these young new writers, informal networks were also setup around the office premises - Roger Dean (founder of *CRASH*) describes the recruitment of review staff direct from their database of mail order users. Another common tactic was to run 'best player' or review writing competitions, and to mine the responses for new staff, Andersen describes one such instance of this, 'the secret purpose of it was to find amazing people to bring in as writers, who were really the best and knew what they were talking about ... You wanted that passion, of authentic I'm in love with this as an activity to come through and infuse' (Caulfield, 2014). In this case the winners were Julian Rignall and Gary Penn, both in their late teens, and both of whom would go on to write extensively for *CRASH*.

This sense of the passionate player, one who is invested in and loves their work, is core to the authenticity of the gaming cultural intermediary as taste maker. For the critic must be presented as more than a job title, but a calling, 'Cultural intermediaries are more than simply their occupational category. They are taste makers and legitimation authorities because of their personal investment in the work.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 22) The model of authority being utilised draws upon notions of subculture, grassroots organisations, the aspirational, and the symbolic, where 'their constructed meanings and personal lifestyles must carry credibility if they are to be taken up by others.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 20) These 'honest gamers', within the paradigm of the gaming magazine, form a family unit of playful workers. As one gaming article argued, 'At times Newsfield has been like a large family, with all the members heading in much the same direction, yet split by family rifts, arguments, even feuds.' CRASH48 (1988). The veracity of these notions of being grassroots, with its attendant authenticity, are highly variable across companies and time periods, but the consistency with which the notion is utilised is not. Again, it should be recalled that this is at a time when review writing is become more 'routinised' (Haddon, 1988c) rather than more haphazard or organic.

However, it is accurate to say that many of the games reviewers were very young, and that via the cipher of the gaming magazine they were imbued with surprising levels of cultural capital. The dissonance between their otherwise low social standing (being young and without qualifications), and high economic impact would trouble the software industry, and lead games designers to lodge caustic responses to reviewers via the letters pages. In retrospect it does seem improbable that 'a bunch of mere schoolkids was passing judgement on games which would then affect large companies' sales' CRASH46 (1987). One response to this dissonance is to emphasise the authenticity of the review *team* en masse, whilst making the individual reviewers anonymous.

Other tactics, explored in this chapter, would include various rhetorical devices (e.g. humour) and a highly consolidated review structure to provide consistency and reliability. In this manner the young reviewer makes the brand trustworthy, providing gaming capital to the brand, which was in turn redeployed to legitimate the staff's opinions. Thereby, a dialectic of trust is created between the independence of the individual and the reliability of

the organisation. At these early stages of the gaming industry there is anecdotal evidence that the articulations between magazine staff and software development were particularly fluid and dynamic. Accordingly game programmers would visit the magazine offices and discuss possible improvements to games under development, in the hope of attaining higher scores from the magazine (one example given is Steve Wilcox of Elite software house and their new game *Kokotoni Wilf*). Before moving on to explore specific examples of the textual work of the reviewer, their devices and rhetoric, and the semantic structure they operated within, it is necessary to approach arguably the most dominant discourse within gaming critique, that of gameplay.

### **Gameplay as critical tautology**

Before setting out to analyse the videogame review there is a need to recognise, and move beyond, a core concept in the field of videogaming, which is that of 'Gameplay'. Gameplay has been identified as a term that emerged in the mid-1980s, and which became 'the key concept in video game criticism, one which has held sway over the tastes of gamers for the subsequent three decades.' (Kirkpatrick, 2012) Its discursive domination over the field of videogame criticism, as a key determinant of gamer tastes, and of product success, has led other influential communication theorists to ask the question 'How should we analyse video and computer game play.' (Kline *et al.*, 2003, p. 30). It is a question that arguably exists at the core of early game studies, and in the gaming industry represents the 'philosophers stone' (Kirkpatrick, 2012) of successful game design.

Firstly some definitions to try and hold the elusive term down. Gameplay is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as 'The features of a computer game, such as its plot and the way it is played, as distinct from the graphics and sound effects.' (OD), whilst for Kirkpatrick 'gameplay is opposed to things like graphics, character, plot, and so on.' (Kirkpatrick, 2012) Already the position (re: gameplay or non-gameplay) of 'plot' appears problematic, in one definition it is a 'feature' of the game, and therefore it is gameplay (OD), and in Kirkpatrick's definition it is not. The problem with gameplay, and why it must be considered prior to any meaningful analysis of videogame critical practice, stems from this ethereal quality. Oblique and self-reflective, it tends to mean whatever it needs to mean, often without any recognition or consensus over the meaning that is constantly adapting. As such it is both

discursive and ideological. This insubstantiality has not prevented the term from becoming common sense, indeed its malleability is a key source of its discursive success.

Indeed gameplay has become the dominant term employed by gamers and games designers alike, and as such it has formed the ground of debate that exists between producers and consumers. It 'serves as both the core evaluative concept in game discussions and as the mark of authenticity in gaming identity' (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Furthermore, 'The concept of gameplay marks the point at which gaming bids for autonomy as a cultural practice and subsequently it becomes the philosophers stone of game creation: it is the enigmatic mark of value that designers compete over.' (Kirkpatrick, 2012) Gameplay sells games, and validates the practice as autonomous, for no other medium has the quality of gameplay. In doing so it makes videogaming unique from its media brethren of film, TV, and music, and offers unique promises of audience engagement. As Kirkpatrick captures in his work on the topic (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2015) gameplay, as a philosopher's stone, is indeed alchemical, it transmutes the disparate activities and experiences of early videogame play and turns them into a coherent set of social practices.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the terminology of gameplay linguistically binds the practice of play to the practice of evaluation, whilst the act of play limits and informs the critical terminology of *gameplay*. This is a double tautological bind: what makes a game is its gameplay, and what makes gameplay is the game. As such gameplay exercises a form of conceptual critical mass, it draws any critical analysis of the gaming medium into its dark tautological hole. Whereupon asking what is gameplay, you hear in response only *that it is how a game plays*. This analysis will hope to break this cycle and go beyond the meaning of gameplay per se, and to do so it will be necessary to look at the time before gameplay.

### **Early gaming terms - whatever happened to Playability?**

Whilst gameplay is an evaluative term that emerges in the mid-1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2015) it does not become discursively dominant until towards the end of the decade, during a period I have termed the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of videogame magazines. Etymologically gameplay was preceded by 'Playability', a common category of evaluation employed from 1982 onwards by *CVG*. In examining its linguistic predecessor a little light can be shed on

how the meaning of gameplay has been constructed by the gaming industry. Each of these are definitions of its predecessor/alternate term 'Playability', which come from magazine rating guides that explained the categories of evaluation to the reader (as examined in Chapter 4).

'Is the game fun to play right from the start or, after a complicated start, does it become fun to play?' CRASH1:10 (1981)

'Playability is the all-important question of game balance, how long it will build your attention and how addictive it is.' CVG23 (1983)

'Some games you just can't stop playing, no matter how late at night it is. This measures the addictiveness of the game, and how much you'll think about it - even when you're not playing it.' MM1:6 (1990)

The core tenets of these definitions are fun, engagement, and gaming balance. Whilst other evaluative categories focus on technology 'Playability alone is exclusively focused on the experience of the player.' (Kirkpatrick, 2012). In his ground breaking work on the subject of gameplay Kirkpatrick marks the origin of the new *gameplay* terminology as being autumn 1985, with CVG magazine using the term during its review of *Maze Gold* CVG40. Whilst I have discovered earlier usages of the term, as a category of evaluation in *TV Gamer* magazine (March 1984), I would agree with Kirkpatrick that its usage only became significant from the late 1980s onwards. I would also argue that the key shift from playability to gameplay is one from consumption to production. Whilst playability always contained within it the sphere of production (the playability of a game being perceived as dependent on how well it was programmed) it still primarily emphasised the experiences of the gamer. Gameplay, with its new emphasis on diegetic features, places the producers more in control of the dialogue of interactive play.

Furthermore, such a shift to gameplay is part of a wider change in the timbre of the overall dialogue between magazine and readership, and signifies a new prioritisation of entertainment over the technical. A development which 'constitutes a structural

transformation of the discourse around computing which ultimately shifts the position of games in the culture.’ (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 14) This movement relates to the need within the gaming industry to distinguish itself as a discrete practice (or cultural field), rather than be regarded as the juvenile offshoot of home computing - as a field with its own language and conventions. However, as Kirkpatrick has noted, from the late 1980s onwards, ‘the magazines do not develop a fully fledged evaluative discourse, in fact there is a decline in the range of evaluative concepts and ideas’ (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The attempt to produce a nuanced lexicon of critique for itself stalls. Gameplay is in part the cause and effect of that lexical diminution. It is what became of all the other terms of evaluation.

What has made gameplay so potent, and able to consume the other categories of evaluation that surrounded it (certainly by the mid-1990s), is its ability to sell gaming products on vagaries, without directly asserting what it is that the game involves. Instead gameplay produces ‘provocative objects that come with ‘false promises’ of transformation.’ (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Furthermore, gameplay is a self-actualising term, ‘Successful game designers produce games with gameplay and in persuading players this is what they have done they determine what ‘gameplay’ signifies.’(Kirkpatrick, 2012). I would add to this analysis by arguing that gameplay can be considered metonymical. Metaphors operate via the ‘idea of ‘transference’, of transferring something from one place to another, on the basis of a perceived similarity between the two ‘places’’ (Leeuwen, 2004, p. 29) These metaphors, if successful (i.e. used repeatedly as the dominant way of referring to the subject), no longer transfer meaning from one place to another, but instead become representative only of themselves. They become the ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In becoming self-actualising the metaphors become metonymical, as ‘the market’ has for the economy, so in this case gameplay has become gaming.

This is the source of the tautology, and can be correlated with Bourdieu’s sense of *hysteresis* (Bourdieu, 1984), a process where agents ‘are responsible for the existence of the thing that calls them into existence.’ (Kirkpatrick, 2012) Gameplay, as such, is the mark of authenticity that has no authentication, and has no need to provide any. It is akin to the hyperreal, ‘the generation by models of a real without origin or reality ... the map that engenders the territory’ (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 2). This conversion of play to gameplay is reminiscent of Baudrillard’s description regarding natural time’s conversion into free-time, which

‘therefore, no longer in fact is free, since it is governed in its chronometry by the total abstraction which is that of the system of production’ (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 151). In this process of commodification time is converted into a lifeless possession: structured, segmented and quantified. The same occurs when play is converted into gameplay, and then returned to its previous owner as an exchange-value - it becomes a drained ‘consommé’ of play.

To summarize, gameplay became significant as the dominant quantity that the gamer was encouraged to demand, as the key bearer of gaming capital. Yet, it did so at the expense of a broader set of gaming critical discourse. Furthermore, gameplay, as a category, elides categorization, in that it promises the gamer rewards according to their ability and knowledge (their embodied gaming capital), regardless of taste. In doing so gameplay also avoids the pitfalls of post-fordist market segmentation, and instead re-constructs the users’ preferences as multi-faceted and critical. If the game is good then the gamer should accept it regardless of genre. In doing so it performs both a commodity and identity function, both opening up the market and consolidating the gamer as connoisseur. Finally, gameplay is reductive, and metonymical, in that it converts organic play into a commodity and then returns the original act of play back to its user as a tepid experience, one now determined by the forces of production. In order to move beyond the metonym of gameplay I will attempt to deconstruct the videogame review as a critical text: beginning with a content analysis of its modality (including some extrapolation on its key mode, the screenshot); followed by an examination of its structure (or syntagms); then moving on to its key paradigms and rhetorical devices.

### **The modality of the games review – the rise of the screenshot**

Where gameplay has been argued to be the key term that differentiates gaming critique from its media relations (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2015), I would suggest that the rise of the screenshot is of at least equal significance to the gaming review as an overall genre of critique. The origins of the screenshot can be traced back to the first wave of videogame magazines, where it gradually replaced, or supplemented, the in-house game-themed illustrations (see Figure 4) previously used to communicate the content and genre of the reviewed game.

# CENTRES TV GAMES CENTRES TV GAMES CENTRES VIDEO SCREEN

## BAFFLED BY THE BLACK AND WHITES

### BACKGAMMON, CHECKERS

Two traditional board game favourites have been given a new lease of life through the video medium.

Checkers and backgammon have been transferred to the television set via the Interton VC4000 Video Computer system, for enthusiasts who cannot always find human opponents to play against.

Both are easy boards for the computer to display and combine simple rules with plenty of scope for tactical play so the computer makes a worthwhile opponent, even if it will have a tendency to play safe.

Checkers or draughts as it is commonly known, is displayed as a board and pieces and there is no deviation from the traditional rules. You can play either black or white — black goes first — and then try to out-think your computer opponent. Be wary of the computer if it appears to be offering up a sacrifice — it probably has something nasty planned for you.

As usual the opening strategy determines who ends up with the most kings and that is the player who will usually win the game.

Backgammon too keeps to the traditional rules but without the gambling element, it is not as skillful as the original. It will, however, help to sharpen up the players' skill at outmanoeuvring an opponent on the board. And it will teach beginners the folly of leaving an exposed piece in a vulnerable position.

For those of you who have never played the game, it involves moving counters around the board in the opposite direction to your opponent and trying to get yours home first — but if a counter is left alone it can be captured by your opponent and returned to start.

These cartridges are available from retailers in the U.K. from specialist dealers and some large department stores. The retail price is £16.95.



## BURN UP THE CIRCUIT

### GRAND PRIX

Turbocharged cars are currently burning up the formula one race tracks — and now you can catch up with these high powered machines in this latest Activision game.

You are at the wheel of a highly tuned turbo race car lined up on the grid for a Grand Prix.

The circuit ahead is filled with numerous hazards which you must overcome with expert control of the Atari joysticks. Apart from avoiding other vehicles watch out for oil slicks. If you drive over them you're taking a risk and it could cause a multiple pile-up.

Manoeuvring the car round the circuit is tricky. Not only are there sharp bends to contend with, but you also have to drive your car over narrow bridges.

The race is run against the clock which means you must

combine speed with safe driving to come out on top.

Grand Prix is produced by Activision for the Atari Video Computer System and has good graphics and sound effects making the game more realistic. It sells for the standard price of £14.95.

● Philips' new concept in video games combining a television adventure with an actual playing board is to be unveiled this month.

Quest for the Rings, which featured in our March issue, is scheduled to be on distributors' shop shelves in April. A price is still to be decided but it is likely to be more expensive than the standard Philips Videopac price (£14.95).

## TAKE THE TRENCH TO DARTH'S STAR

### STAR STRIKE

Relive the final conflict of Star Wars against the Empire's Death Star when failure means your planet's destruction.

Take the role of Luke Skywalker on his do-or-die mission to blow up Darth Vader's giant man-made planet. In Star Strike you have to guide your Star Cruiser through space, dodging enemy space fighters as you travel to the Death Star.

Missiles whistle past you and you must retaliate with the deadly laser guns positioned on your star cruiser. If you successfully navigate through the space hazards and reach the narrow trench, which you must fly along to destroy Darth Vader.

Expert flying skills are vital for success because the trench is lined with obstacles and filled with enemy fire. Use your photon torpedoes and manoeuvre your ship away from the attacking crossfire like laser posts positioned on the walls and floor.

Judge the distance from your ship to the trench carefully and when you approach the last few miles focus your sights on that single exhaust vent — the only weak spot in the trench.

If you've got an Intellivision, Star Strike is available from stockists now, the price is £19.95. Intellivision owners can also subscribe to a new newsletter produced by Advanced Consumer Electronics, which gives details of the latest cartridges and new developments planned for the Intellivision and Acetronic MPU1000.



Figure 4. In-house illustration preceded the screenshot as the means of communicating gaming content, as with this excerpt from 1982. CVG6:19 (1982)

**ACTION TEST**

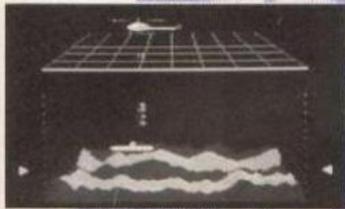
**CONVOY RAIDER**

Gremlin Graphics, £9.99 cass, £14.99 disk, joystick or keys

This is basically a *Beach-Head* clone with some small alterations made to try to improve it. You are in command of a ship which is to patrol the inner sea. We aren't told whose inner sea it is, but it sure is packed with a lot of nasty surprises.

The main screen shows a three way radar screen which tracks air, sea and underwater. The enemy forces consist of ships, planes and submarines. When enemies are attacking you, a flashing square on one of the radar screens indicates where the attack is coming from. Across the top of the screen are four icons: map, sea wolf, exocet and sonar. The map is used to guide your ship around the inland sea so that you can seek and destroy the invaders. Damage inflicted to your ship can be repaired at one of the ports shown on the map.

Your ship is equipped with the latest in weapon technology which includes seawolf sea to air missiles, exocet anti-ship missiles (as used to destroy HMS Sheffield) and anti-sub-



Depth charging a submarine from your helicopter

**SECOND OPINION**

*I didn't care for this at all, it's Gremlin's worst game for a long while. It's a group of old hat ideas cobbled into a game that has very little going for it. The only part I enjoyed was the graphic sequence where the helicopter drops depth charges on a submarine. Apart from that it's very disappointing.* **BW**

**GREEN SCREEN VIEW**

*Thicky identifying activated icon but otherwise okay.*

marine helicopters. The sea wolf missiles are fired at incoming aircraft or anti-ship missiles. The exocet are used to sink enemy shipping and the sonar allows you to control the helicopter and sink submarines. When an attack is over you return to the main screen and continue hunting the enemy.

The sound effects are rather irritating and consist of radar pings and explosions. The icons are clearly defined and easily selected. The background scenes look good and colour is used well on them. The similarities to *Beach-Head* are in the gameplay since the graphics are far superior in *Convoy Raider*. If you already have *Beach-Head* or didn't like it then don't bother buying this, but if you haven't got it and want a shoot-em-up with a minor amount of strategy in finding your enemy, then this is a reasonable option. **GB**

**FIRST DAY TARGET SCORE**

Score 30,000

**HYBRID**

Starlight/Ariolasoft, £9.99 cass, £14.99 disk, joystick or keys

In a prison complex not so far away are some aliens. They hate humanity and have been locked away for a long time. In that time they have developed so that they are again a threat to the State. A team of three Hybrids have been sent to the complex to wipe out the aliens for good. The problem is that the prison was designed to stop rescue attempts and so the defences are turned on the Hybrids.

The hybrids are a mixture of droid and organic material. The three are called Brain, Robot and Xylon and have different strengths and weaknesses. The Brain is weak in combat but is the only one that can teleport itself and the other hybrids by using teleport keys. The Robot is the main combat hybrid with high weapon power and strong armour. It can be

used to disable the weapon emplacements which are scattered about the complex. The Xylon is lower in armour and firepower than the Robot but stronger than the Brain. It is the only one that can switch on bridges in the complex.

The three hybrids start the game with five energy cartridges each and these are used up by collisions with the aliens and by being shot. Scattered about the base are several letters. Picking these up gives one of three effects. E is energy which restores one cartridge of energy. F increases the firepower of the hybrid and A increases the armour rating. Hybrids can also trade energy because after a while it runs out.

By entering a cell all three hybrids can be linked together. They are then teleported to a chamber with an alien in it. There are four aliens to be destroyed which is not an easy task.

The graphics are quite large and reasonably animated but the use of colour is uninspiring. The sound effects are feeble bleeps and pings and the tune is rubbish. The game is quite demanding and the need to use all three hybrids provides variety. Not a classic but should give a few hours entertainment. **GB**

**SECOND OPINION**

*Whoever wrote the instructions nearly turned a decent game into a disaster area. It's all very well to expect the player to work out some things for himself but these instructions don't give you any help at all. Once you've found out what you're doing it's quite interesting but you may get frustrated long before that.* **BW**

**GREEN SCREEN VIEW**

*Good clear graphics mean no problems.*

**FIRST DAY TARGET SCORE**

Destroy an alien.

**The Verdict**

**GRAPHICS** ..... 67%

- Enemy subs and helicopters are well defined.
- Radar screens and maps are simple and unattractive.

**SONICS** ..... 31%

- No tunes just annoying effects.

**GRAB FACTOR** ..... 63%

- Variety of weapons systems.
- Not much to think about.

**STAYING POWER** ..... 48%

- Difficult to destroy all the enemy.
- Gets very repetitive and boring.

**AA RATING** ..... 55%

- Adds little to old games like *Beach-Head*.

**The Verdict**

**GRAPHICS** ..... 76%

- Clear, detailed graphics.
- Poor use of colour.

**SONICS** ..... 38%

- Don't turn the music on!

**GRAB FACTOR** ..... 58%

- Three hybrids with different abilities add variety.
- Very confusing due to poor instructions.

**STAYING POWER** ..... 67%

- Once you know what you are doing it's interesting.
- Only four aliens to destroy.

**AA RATING** ..... 64%

- Just lacks that certain something.

Figure 5. The screenshot can be seen here being used as background illustration; the style of the game begins to influence the aesthetics of the magazine AA25:31 (1989)



The popularity of the screenshot stems from its ability to objectively visualise the play being promised to the user. The screenshot technique literally illuminates the opaque by taking the game out of the box, the code from the program, and placing it onto the printed page. Furthermore, the review promises to provide the videogame magazine, as a medium, discursive transparency, 'If you want to know what a game actually looks like on the screen before you buy it, take a look at our exclusive Action Freeze! section. It will show you in full colour precisely what you will see when you run the program' and 'tell you honestly just what you will – and will not – get for your money.' PCG1:1 (1983) To be able to see a game before buying becomes a core selling point for the videogame magazine as a whole – one that can now present itself as an honest broker between producer and consumer. It allows the magazine to both show and tell.

The other significant trend ascertained from my analysis is the increasing usage, and reliance upon, screenshots within the videogame review. This is true for all three of the publications, with the overall average going from 1 to 2 screenshots per review in 1985, to an average of over 6 shots per review by 1989/1990. It can be stated that not only was the screenshot a part of the widening modal range of the review, but that the screenshot is the defining mode of the videogame review as a medium of critique. As the screenshot becomes more prominent, both in terms of its function and form, so it begins to step out of its own boxed-in reality. The screenshot moves from the closed diegetic world of the game and into the non-diegetic forum of the magazine (Figures 5 & 6). Increasingly the screenshot starts to be used as background illustration, as part of a wider modal flux, and consequently the content of the games begin to stylistically inform the aesthetic of the magazine. The screenshot began as a functional aid for the magazine review, by the late 1980s it has evolved into the defining mode of videogame representation. In doing so it has shifted from functional denotative device to a connotative carrier of stylistic values, and the breaking down of its own delineations in part represents the development of a recognisable gamer aesthetic.

### **Modality – the rising modal range of the videogame review**

The screenshot is only one mode of visual display contained within the videogame review, and whilst it is unique to gaming as a distinctly diegetic mode, it does co-exist with more conventional modes of representation (e.g. the illustration and non-game content

photograph). To understand the broader cultural shifts occurring via the conventions of the gaming review each of the reviews in the sample (totalling 184) were analysed in terms of how many different modes of representation they contained, what can be termed the modal range of the review. The modes were coded as 'Written Text', 'Themed Typography', 'Illustrations', 'Photography', 'Diegetic'. These modalities were chosen to be, as close as possible, both mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Therefore, the modal range available to any single review would be between 1 and 5, with a text only review being a 1, and a review that contained all the available modes being a 5. The chart below shows the results of the analysis of modal range vs time.

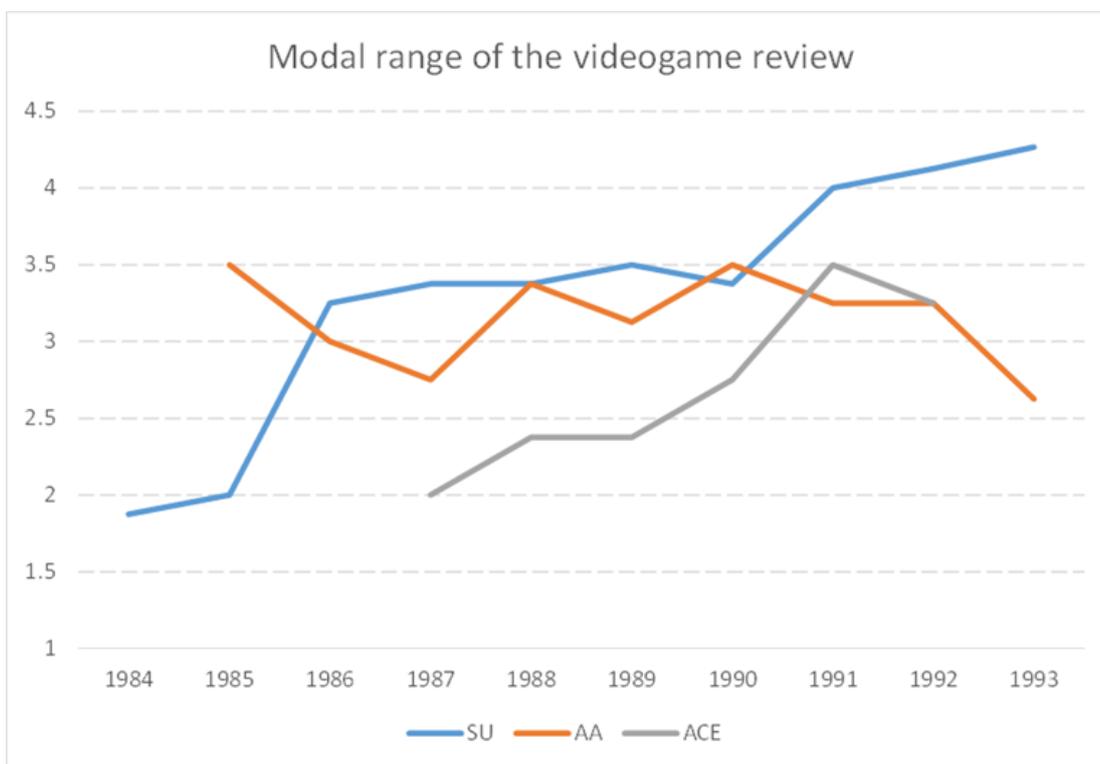


Chart 3. Modal range of the videogame review

These results show that both the *Sinclair User* and *ACE* samples had a tendency to escalating modality, going from an initial low modality of 2 to a high modal range of 3.5 and over.

*Sinclair User* has the highest increase of modal range of the three publications, moving from 1.9 in 1984 to 4.3 by 1993. This extreme shift represents a move from the subject position of journalistic arbitration to one of consumer celebrationism. *Amstrad Action*, however, displays a high level of multi-modality from the outset, which remains consistent across its publication from 1985 to 1993. This corresponds to *Amstrad Action* being an example of a

second wave videogame magazine, one that emerged fully formed, and formulated, within the conventions already established by other ground breaking publications (notably *PCG* and *CRASH*). Its stable modal rating reveals that it immediately utilised multiple visual components and extensive photogenia within its review section. The launch of *ACE* magazine by Future in 1987, and its use of a stripped back, low modal-range aesthetic (Figure 7) can be viewed as an attempt to re-establish a position of authority in response to the escalating rhetoric of the videogame magazine genre, and instead to project a sense of cultural maturity towards an increasingly segmented and wary market. The reversion is to a journalistic (as opposed to lifestyle magazine) set of conventions.

The initially clean, segmented, layout of *ACE* emphasises the visual divisioning of the objective and subjective realms; one where advertising concerns are aesthetically banished from the site of critique. *ACE* is a revealing publication in that it manifestly views its own culture as self-sufficient and authentic, whilst latently striving to maintain that authenticity in the face of outside criticism. It is significant that *ACE* will be revived by Future publishing under the guise of *Edge* magazine, a publication that has done more than any other magazine to present an adult profile of the gaming world (Newman, 2008). Yet, the research performed here into modal range, shows that *ACE* magazine, despite its low modal launch, will later exhibit a high modal range, matching that of its youthful competitors by 1993 (up from 2 to 5). This suggests a pressure to conform to the imagined demands of an adolescent audience, where multimodality is seen to correspond with energy, youthfulness, and a DIY authenticity.

Whilst the cut and paste aesthetic adopted by many of the magazines in the sample suggest DIY ethics and the honest zeal of the fanzine, central to their modal plurality, and an enabling factor for it, is the use (or recycling) of marketing material supplied by the software producers. The recycling of press release imagery becomes a core component of the highly visual medium of the review, and relieves the magazine staff of the requirement to illustrate the copy in-house. The result is a hybridized mode of critique where the commercial vision of the producers is always already invading the discourse of the review. The videogame review would develop these hybrid visual conventions alongside a highly structured review format, one which I shall now examine with reference to the texts. Again the changes in the structure signal shifting sensibilities, and an increasing reliance upon the marketer's pre-

prepared prose. I have termed this videogame review structure a *tripartite* system of media critique. The following section deconstructs the videogame review in terms of its syntagms and paradigms of critique. It will then move to a more fine grain analysis in discussing the rhetorical devices employed by the reviewers.

### **The tripartite syntagms of the review: context/content/critique**

From the very earliest manifestation of the videogame magazine review there is a highly standardised structure that underpins the critical genre as a whole. This structure can be formulated sequentially into three stages: i) context; ii) content; and iii) critique. Whilst the emphases will vary over time, this essential sequence endures across the 1980s and early 1990s, and can be seen repeated in other cultural industries, especially where consumer reviews play a significant role. The structure is a sequence of introduction, description, and evaluation: a narrative that interpellates the game to the gamer. I have termed this structure tripartite, yet, as I will argue, the three parts operate both as syntagms (as sequence) and as paradigms (as types of critique). Firstly I shall provide an example of the structured critique, and then extrapolate on the implications and affordances such a structure provides.

The following lines are taken from various reviews from a variety of gaming publications, in order to display the sequencing at work I have inserted numeric notations to indicate the paragraph of the review being cited.

‘(1)With the TV series of the same name on our screens Richard Wilcox should be assured good sales of his well promoted and now available game ... (2) The basic objective is to fly your jetcopter off the deck of a ship ... (3) Throughout the graphics are excellent’ CRASH4:8 (1984)

‘(1) Mike ‘Lords of Midnight’ Singleton has really pulled out the stops in what is the first true arcade game since *3 Deep Space* ... (4) The location is an underwater power station ... (5) This is where you come into it. You must use the Hermes to knock out the other computers ... (10) to the game’s merit the multitude of features do not detract from the playability.’ CU27:37

'(1) *Arkanoid* is Imagine's umpteenth licence tie-in ... (7) Hit *Fire* and you're off. You're the blocky thing at the bottom of the screen ... (12) That's the game, but its all wrapped up in slick graphics and super-smooth movement.' SU61:47 (1987)

The pattern followed by these reviews, and the many like them, is to first introduce the product, and the context of its production, where there is often a reference to an auteur producer. The middle part of the review is generally a 2<sup>nd</sup> person set of descriptions which form an instructional narrative of 'How-to' play the game (an unusual blend of banuasic directions and 'choose your own adventure' style role-play). Thirdly there is the summing up or critique. The unanimity of the convention is striking, and suggests an inherent correlation between the structure itself and the central functions of the review. Indeed the review structure can be regarded as a metonym of the wider gaming press and amounts to a division of discursive labours. One where the function of the consumer review is to interpellate, to inform, and to instruct; to engage the gamer and direct them.

Another function performed by the tripartite structure of context/content/critique is to provide industry-wide discursive coherence at a formative time for the practice of gaming critique. The newly emergent field of videogame journalism required a clear, easy to follow, format for both its producers and consumers. This would be one which allowed the new and untested cultural professionals to experiment within safely organised perimeters, whilst giving the reader a recognisable and trustworthy sense of equivalence between reviews.

The young review teams, employed by magazines such as *CRASH* and *Zzap!64*, would be provided with pre-prepared context and content sections (by other more experienced magazine staff members) and then left to provide a suitably demotic end critique - one that still had the authenticity they alone could provide as 'honest gamers'. This is part of the process described by Haddon whereby 'Games writing became routinised and continuous, instead of haphazard and occasional.' (Haddon, 1988c, p. 202) Thereby, the standardised three-part structure acts as a means of framing critical variety, and instilling authority into the videogame review. It is arguably a case of literary conventions attempting to assure critical conformity.

However, there is evidence of a shift within this highly stable structure, particularly in terms of the initial syntagm of 'context'. The following examples highlight this development.

'(1) On becoming Mayor, Haggar has put his life of mindless violence behind him – until daughter Jessica is kidnapped by the brutal Mad Gear gang and held for ransom.'

CRASH93:54 (1991)

'(1) Big Dick's in town! Sworn to eradicate crime, the vigilante Private Investigator has decided to meander the environs in search of mendicants, panhandlers, and buskers.'

MM7:16 (1991)

Whereas initially the syntagm of context was predominantly non-diegetic (it spoke not of the game but its framework of production and consumption: the software house that made it, the genre the game belongs etc.) by 1991 the context section is now often diegetic. The references to the fictional characters of Mayor Haggar, and Dick Tracy, are to background plots provided by the marketeers. This takes the contextual, journalistic, depth out of the critique, and angles it instead towards the roleplaying tendencies of gaming culture, and the bland story-telling of the advertising man. It is a move away from the serious and towards the celebrational, away from the adult and towards the youthful. These are tendencies that typify many of the late 80s and early 90s third wave videogame magazines, as discussed earlier. However, the more adult orientated magazines (for example, *ACE*) would stay with the original format of non-diegetic openers, followed by instruction and evaluation. The next section will examine those paradigms that formed the critical evaluations offered by the videogame critique. By analysing these favoured paradigms of critique we can better understand the pleasures being promised to the buyer. As such these paradigms help constitute the boundaries of gaming capital: the emerging evaluative discourse of what makes a good game, and how these games should be talked about by their players - i.e. 'games-chat' (Haddon, 1988c).

### **The tripartite paradigms of critique: the construct/experience/commodity**

The standardisation of the review, into a tripartite syntagmatic structure, is a process mirrored within the final stage of critique, where the procession of three syntagms branches off into three paradigms of evaluation. Each of the paradigms, which I have called the

construct/experience/commodity, refers to one aspect of videogame critique, whilst collectively they form the parameters within which a game has come to be judged. These paradigms are informed by my textual examination of the reviews, and by the construction of an inventory of the evaluative categories used in gaming magazines (Graphics, Playability, Sound, etc.). My research has shown that whilst these paradigms are manifestly present within the set evaluative *categories* of the discrete scoring box, they are also latently active in the main body of the reviews. In this section I shall outline both the terminology, and their paradigmatic centrality to the videogame review system.

Before looking at the data it will be useful to clarify what is meant by the terms 'construct', 'experience', and 'commodity' in this situation. The term 'construct' refers to those factors that have formed the game as a product, and speaks to how well the game has been made or programmed. As such the construct paradigm is a term that corresponds to the production sphere and is mainly diegetic in focus. Significant examples of this paradigm are 'Graphics' and 'Sound'. The most prevalent of all the evaluative categories employed by the gaming magazine (see Table 7) 'Graphics' is a techno-aesthetic term, whilst 'Sound' is the audio equivalent. The 'experience' paradigm relates to evaluating those experiences offered by the game to the gamer, for example, 'Playability', 'Addictiveness' and 'Lastability' are principally experiential categories. This paradigm corresponds to the sphere of consumption and tends towards the non-diegetic, that which is occurring outside of the game.

Thirdly, the 'commodity' paradigm is one that centres on consumer imperatives. Accordingly it cannot be tied into one sphere of the circuit of culture (Johnson, 1986; Du Gay, 1997; du Gay and Hall, 1997), but is instead the wider guiding principle by which all others articulate. The core example of this term in videogaming parlance is 'Value'. It should be noted that whilst some terms of critique (i.e. 'Graphics') nest quite firmly in one paradigm or another, some of the most significant and interesting categories are crossover evaluations, ones that tend to embrace two or all of the paradigms. 'Playability' and 'Gameplay' are such examples of the crossover category, and it has been this ability to span the three paradigms of construct/experience/commodity that has provided the terms with their discursive dominance over gaming culture. Having established the core three paradigms of gaming critique, it is now possible to produce a revealing taxonomy of gaming evaluative categories, in which we can see shifts in emphasis and meaning across the time period of the sample.

## An inventory of evaluation

The table below lists the most popular categories of critique used within the videogame review, and is drawn from my research of a broad sample of nineteen publications from the 1980s and early 1990s. This research has allowed for the construction of a basic evaluative taxonomy of the review, and traces ‘the emergence of a game-specific evaluative terminology’ (Kirkpatrick, 2012) that Kirkpatrick makes reference to in his early essay on the subject. The resulting data reveals how emerging evaluation-sets classified success and failure in terms of the gaming product. The dates listed below also provide a breakdown of when the terms first came into usage, which allows for a fine grain detailing of the trends. Synonyms have been collated in order to recognise the discursive patterns being formed, for example ‘Hookability’ (*ZZap*) has been included in the ‘Addictiveness’ category, as was ‘Addictive Quality’. There was, however, a distinct consistency in the terminology being used for the categories, with variations often only attempts by the magazines at linguistic novelty.

<b>Evaluative Category</b>	<b>Overall usage</b>	<b>1981-1983</b>	<b>1984-1986</b>	<b>1987-1991</b>
Graphics	22	6	12	4
Value	13	5	8	0
Lastability	12	2	5	5
Sound	11	1	7	3
Playability/Gameplay	11	3	5	3
Overall	9	1	5	3
Addictiveness	8	1	6	1
Originality	7	2	5	0
Presentation	5	1	3	1
Instructions	4	3	1	0

Table 7. Most frequent evaluative categories used in games reviews, and timeframe of introduction.

The top ten categories produced by this research reveals how closely the dominant evaluative discourse tends to coalesce around the previously mentioned paradigm of the construct/experience/commodity, whilst recognising diachronic shifts that attend to wider technological and cultural changes within the videogaming sector. The popularity of these various critical terms ebbed and flowed in relation to technological and cultural factors.

Firstly, on the diegetic side, and within the construct paradigm, 'Graphics' is clearly a pre-eminent category throughout the history of gaming evaluation, and signals an early technological determinism within the critical perspective. Technological determinism can be described as always representing 'the way things are as the necessary, inevitable outcome of features intrinsic to certain types of machinery.' (Kline *et al.*, 2003, p. 46) and it is a perspective that has suffused the popular history of computing. In terms of game evaluation 'Graphics' is technologically deterministic in that the visual display comes to represent the outcome of features 'intrinsic' to the machine. Therefore, it is regarded as crucially important from the outset how a game looks, as the visuals are perceived as signalling how well the product has been constructed/programmed. The visual display is the programmer's code made manifest. Alternately, 'Sound' is largely irrelevant as a evaluative signifier up until the arrival of the more powerful 8-bit machines - circa 1984 - as until that point little audio was used on the early home computing machines.

Secondly, in terms of the non-diegetic categories of critique, there is an increased usage of the terms 'Lastability', 'Originality', and 'Addictiveness', in the mid to late 1980s. It is significant that these terms became more prominent at this time, when the amount of available games escalated rapidly, and as the attendant gaming culture matured. With more and more games to choose from the evaluations become more discerning and fine grain (more qualitative than quantitative). The new questions are not simply how good does the game look ('Graphics'), or how well does it play ('Playability'), but instead asks how intense will the experiences be ('Addictiveness'), and how long will the game engage them for ('Lastability'). The rising importance of the experience paradigm signals a stable period of technological development for the micro-computer market. In a time where the 8-bit machines enjoyed a solid support base, their games would grow in sophistication and variety.

Significantly, the term 'Originality', so important in the mid-1980s, when gaming is consolidating its position as a culturally valid and dynamic medium, becomes disregarded post 1987. I would argue that in the mid-1980s the expansion of the gaming industry led to a consumer demand for continual innovation and development, and that these demands were initially met via a shift in both game production and the evaluative framework – it was seen as important to be original. However, by the late 1980s these demands were elided, and

originality is supplanted by the operations of market segmentation; originality is replaced by the provision of difference. This framework of difference had already been constructed via some of the conventions of the videogame magazine (its collective listings and directories of games by type) and the commonplace categorisation of the videogame into various genres. In the late 1980s it becomes more important that games are generically the best yet – e.g. the best looking shoot-em-up - than actually offering anything new.

The shift is away from originality and towards the continual obsolescence of a supersession based culture of technology. The consequence of the rating centric review is to encourage consumption of the new, by ‘emphasising and ranking games with reference to the characteristics and qualities that are indivisibly keyed to the delivery technologies, magazine reviews might be seen to assist in normalising the supersession.’ (Newman, 2008, p.35)

Whilst each of the evaluative categories has their own connotations and functions within the consumer culture of videogaming, they do tend to coalesce into those three core paradigms outlined earlier. Furthermore this tripartite system is one that constitutes, whilst responding to, shifting audience expectations. As such these categories of critique, to paraphrase Brecht, are both mirror and hammer; they reflect and form the culture of gaming.

To end this section, and to re-iterate the stability of the review – its formulaic nature - I shall briefly cite from some ‘Critique’ syntagms of various videogame reviews. This will highlight how the paradigms of evaluation latently underpinned the reviewer’s critique (not just the editorially provided scorebox). For each citation I have inserted the paradigm that correlates with the evaluation. Some evaluative terms, as previously mentioned, crossover into two paradigms.

‘The graphics [*Construct*] aren’t very impressive ... far too easy to play [*Experience*] ... Collecting laundry proves to be an original idea, but it doesn’t prove to be exciting [*Experience-Commodity*].’ YSP8:59 *Mr Wong’s Loopy Laundry*

‘Originality is low [*Experience-Commodity*] ... but this doesn’t make the game any less playable or addictive [*Experience*]. It includes above average, well drawn and fairly smooth graphics [*Construct*].’ YSP8:59 *Mr Wong’s Loopy Laundry*

‘Brilliant character animation. [*Construct*]’ ... ‘Terrific gameplay [*Construct-Experience*] that is easy to learn but hard to perfect.’ ... ‘Plenty of lasting challenge. [*Experience-Commodity*]’ AA1:16/17 (1985) *Way of the Exploding Fist*

‘Overlapping graphics aren’t very good [*Construct*]’ ... ‘not very original [*Experience-Commodity*]’ ... ‘Screens don’t vary much, just get harder [*Construct-Experience*]’ AA1:19 (1985) *Rock Raid*

These citations reveal the three categories of critique continually at work within the videogame review, categories labouring to produce meaning around what makes a *good game*. Whilst the categories applied here are specific to the videogame medium, and are an inventory of its critical format, the wider paradigmatic/syntagmatic approach used here represents an analytical framework that can be used to engage other media products. The consumer review as a wider genre can be said to focus on three enquiries: it asks how proficient is the product’s construction; it asks how it will make the user feel; and what is its overall commercial value? These are arguable the three central tenets of any mainstream critical interaction with the commodity, be it a videogame, toaster, car, or rock album. The following section will now look at those rhetorical techniques specific to videogaming criticism that supplemented the review structure, which were ascertained via a close textual reading of the magazine archive. These rhetorical devices form the reviewer’s arsenal, they are the tools of the cultural intermediary, and reveal a medium that is increasingly youthful and playfully transgressive.

### **Rhetorical devices: wordplay, roleplay, pastiche, & the functions of humour**

#### **Wordplay**

A predilection towards playful rhetorical techniques is evident from the outset of videogame critical literature, with the use of alliteration, homonyms, and metaphors being present in even the driest of the early consumer critiques. For example, the 1982 review for *Caesar’s Invasion of Britain* opens with the header ‘Roman around in ancient “Brighton”’ CVG6:76 (1982). The near homonym of ‘Roman’ and roaming provides a little light relief before the review heads into more scholarly territory, ‘England has always been a difficult country to

conquer but Julius Caesar was one of the few foreign leaders to do so.’ At this early stage the level of humour is discursively fixed in place by a broader, enveloping, seriousness of purpose. In such early videogame literature there is commonly a balancing between the playful sub-heading, and the more workmanlike main bodies of text. This tendency can be regarded as an appropriation of pre-existing journalistic rhetoric and conventions, and emphasises the early consumer review’s intent to possess the authority of the professional journalist. However, in the mid to late 1980s this kind of authority would alter dramatically, as the videogame review became an increasingly playful and sub-cultural medium.

A core means of appearing playful, and thereby youthful, within gaming discourse is for the reviewer to utilise slang, metaphor, and alliteration. This is an expression of interpellation, of speaking directly to the user in what it perceives to be their language. It is the formation of a user/producer identity-bond, a discursive consonance. Following are some examples of the language that typifies the rhetoric of youth-orientated videogame publications from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

*Shockway Rider*: ‘head lopped off, your knees blammed out from under you, or your nose biffed out the back of your head. Grisly stuff.’ The game is described as ‘natty’, contains ‘splatter’, ‘bozo’s’ and the enemies are ‘cheesy’ YS16:39 (1987).

*Final Fight*: ‘better the baddies’ ... ‘Knocking off the street scum’ ... ‘smashed to smithereens’ ... ‘zippy’ ... ‘whoppers’ ... ‘loadsa’ ... ‘Oooo bugger, me knuckles.’ ... ‘duffing up’ ... ‘take a good butchers’ ... ‘bags-of-ouch’ ... ‘whopping graphics’. CRASH93:54 (1991)

*Parodius*: ‘best blasters’, the ‘zaniest’ ... ‘wacky, wacky world’, it’s ‘craaaaazeee’, with ‘flipped-out fighters’ ... ‘P-P-Pick up a Power Pod’ ... ‘Silly Ship Selection’ and ‘Laugh A-Lot Levels’. CVG125:32/33 (1992)

This kind of highly demotic, often onomatopoeic, language begins to suffuse the videogame review as a medium from 1987/1988 onwards, and I would argue such developments articulate wider contextual concerns. The use of comedy, and the playful language that enacts such comedy, serves to balance escalating celebrationism (occurring across the gaming industry towards otherwise mediocre commodities) with a rebellious sensibility. In

doing so the use of comedy preserves the kudos of the magazine against the spectre of commercialism. When there is nothing interesting to say about the product you have to make the dialogue itself interesting, and these rhetorical devices represent an attempt to do that, whilst branding videogaming as a youthful cultural practice.

### **Roleplay**

Another popular rhetorical device within the gaming press, and one that is highly pertinent to the wider culture of gaming, is that of roleplay. This can involve the reviewer writing the review as if they have entered the game itself - as Dan Dare racing to counter the Mekon threat in a Sci-Fi 'boys-own' adventure style CVG60:19 (1986) - or conversely as if the game has entered into the reviewer's physical lived reality. An intriguing example of the latter is the review of an early Sim-esque game from 1987 *Little Computer People* where the reviewer, 'Rachael Smith', role-plays the review in the form of a 'Dear John' breakup letter, to her fellow reviewer & partner 'Gwyn Hughes'. In reality both Rachael and Gwyn were regular pseudonyms for another reviewer Jon Minson, revealing a level of hyperreality that becomes increasingly significant both in the reviews and letters pages.

'Dear Gwyn, how can I tell you this? There's somebody else in my life. His name's Neal and though he's rather short, he's got everything I've ever wanted ... including a place of his own.' ... 'How can I describe him?' YS16:40 (1987)

Significantly the adoption of a Dear John style does not prevent the review performing its functions of instruction and applause, for regardless of which role is played the core conventions of critique remain. Yet, the (role)playful narration of the reviewer does fulfil another specific function: it bridges the non-diegetic world of the magazine and the diegetic world of the game. It is the message informing the medium. As such these role-play reviews become vicarious accounts, virtual play-throughs of the game. It is no surprise that the videogame reviewer would adopt such a playful stance, or partake in role-play, as these activities are core parts of gaming's performative and ludic culture. Two key influences of gaming culture being role-play games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and earlier rule based board/card games. However, what is surprising is the level of self-reflexive pastiche that begins to occur in the late 1980s third wave gaming press, where the reviewer begins to mock their own critical oeuvre and subject position.

## Pastiche

As the style of videogame critique increasingly coalesced across the late 1980s and early 1990s, becoming 'routinised' in the process (Haddon, 1988c), so the reviewers begin to parody that style, with the result being a self-reflexive pastiche. The growing expectations placed upon the reviewer to deliver an ironic, sub-cultural tone on a professional basis, can be seen as producing an ever more sardonic posture. This is a dialectic operation, where in parodying the conventions of videogaming critique, the new convention becomes that of parody itself. It is a continual cycle of kudos management and gaming capital production, of being the first to recognise the conventions that have formulated around the cultural practice, and in doing so to stand apart from them. To become one who has 'Been there, done that, read the book, ate the jelly mould figurine.' CVG125:30/31 (1992) as one reviewer puts it. In order to further explore this new critical maturity I will examine a 1993 review for the game *DJ Puff's Volcanic Caper* YS88:13 (1993), a mediocre title served by a highly nuanced and self-reflexive review.

The *DJ Puff* review follows the accepted tripartite structure of the videogame review, of introducing the context (in this case a delayed release date for the game) before moving on to both content and critique. The reviewer then bridges the initial context and subsequent content sections by asking 'Was it worth the wait?', but quickly follows this with 'Before I tell you that, I'd just like to say a few words about the unusual texture of wood.' YS88:13 (1993) The irreverence of the 'wood' comment signals the new emphasis on pastiche, and recognises (like Paul Morley's infamous mayonnaise based review for the *NME* (Long, 2012)) the very banality of the format. The reviewer appears unable to enter into the usual backplot and how-to rigmarole without recognising the conventionality of their task. Yet, the task of critique must still be performed, and the reviewer duly does so.

'The green DJ has to leap around a load of platformy levels and recover his precious platters. Well, so much for the plot. Who wrote these nonsensical instructions anyway? (*We haven't got any instructions you're reading from your own ancient preview, you clot. Ed*).' YS88:13 (1993)

The reviewer then dramatically performs the process of critique - 'let me warn you I'm reaching in to my big bag of Disgruntled Reviewers Terribly Apt Words and I'm producing the phrase (rattle rattle) 'odds', 'stacked', 'against and 'you'. OK? Here we go. *DJ Puffs Volcanic Caper*, eh? The odds are stacked against you and no mistake, matey.' In summary the reviewer concludes 'See DJ Puff? See the word 'crap'? They go well together, don't they?' YS88:13 (1993)

The rattling of the reviewer's bag succinctly captures the arbitrariness of the task being performed; the capitalised phrasing of the Disgruntled Reviewers Terribly Apt Words emphasising the tired conventionality of the proceedings. This parody speaks not only of the critical impasse reached by the videogame review, but of that reached by all consumer centric reviews, where the critique must always obey its commodity function. The problem being that the commodity may be scorned, but it cannot be spurned entirely by those cultures that co-exist with it. The *DJ Puff* piece successfully parodies the videogame review, and the attendant role of the videogame reviewer, both in terms of its narrative construction (context/content/critique), and the paradigms (the 'big bag') of critique being used. Centrally, the reviewer is also recognising that his own authority as critic is a performance, a role-play. This can be seen as a professionally transgressive act, one that undermines the expert/user, producer/consumer dichotomy that the cultural intermediary relies upon for their discursive power. I shall conclude this section on rhetoric by considering the wider discourse of playfulness, what can be termed the function of humour.

### **The function of humour**

Through the archive examples examined in this chapter's analysis, it can be argued that a discourse of playfulness attends the specialist press of videogame magazines. This playfulness is a discursive resource for the producers and consumers of the videogame magazine. It is there to signal irreverence, thereby independence and autonomy, from the cultural industry of games production, upon which the magazine depends. Humour stands for authenticity, and secures gaming capital, whilst directly appealing to what has been identified as a youthful market sector. Therefore, there is a functionality to the humour: it is not merely playful but a playful labour. Market research carried out by the magazines recognised the youthful and masculine demographic of the sector, with both *Amstrad Action*

and *CRASH* magazine polls placing the average age of the reader as 14 to 16, and citing 95% of the readership as male. The rhetorical playfulness of the reviews can be seen as their discursive response to that demographic.

Furthermore, as the specialist market became more competitive in the mid to late 1980s, so the younger reader is interpellated all the more aggressively. This leads to an escalation in the use of alliteration and expressive demotic language, which proves synergistically useful, as it allows for a wider usage of the review text as marketing copy for the games themselves. The overall critical trajectory, the path taken by the reviews, goes from factual description, to role-play (an interactive fiction of critique), to pastiche & satire – the heavy use of the latter being linked to the increasingly obsolescent nature of the commodity it promoted. Furthermore, the conventions of gaming critique are so consolidated by the early 1990s that they have themselves become the object of ridicule, and this signals in part a crisis within the popular mode of videogame criticism – a question of where to go from a position of irony and pastiche. It is a crisis mirrored by other specialist media press, including the weekly British music press (Frith, 1983; Frith, 1988).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, whilst the overall discourse of the videogame magazine appears increasingly juvenile the review itself is operating on an increasingly complex and intertwined number of levels: as a consumer guide, cultural construct, and journalistic oeuvre. The complexity of the message being belied by the youthfulness of the medium. This interplay between various discourses attends to another correlation, one that exists between the practices of role-play, simulation, and the parodic. Here one practice can be said to encourage the other: role-play is a form of simulation, and simulation is itself a parody of the real. What begins as playful labour, as a pragmatic counterweight to the overriding commodity function of the consumer guide, becomes experimental and transgressive - the problem with playfulness being that it seldom does what it's told for long.

Videogame criticism cycled from its initial functionalist roots of Deeson's germinal 1981 series of reviews in *Your Computer* to a post-modernist, self-reflexive, state of pastiche over

a period of approximately twenty years. The videogame magazine played a core role in enabling this development, acting both as a forum of critical debate and cultural enquiry; and charting its own history as it constructed it (for example, the 1988 'Great Games Evolutionary Tree' ACE4:38). The remainder of this thesis will examine two other core genres of the videogame magazine: the illustrated cover page, and the reader's letters page. Each of these genres exists within a wider tension, one that threatens to perforate the authenticity (or gaming capital) of the gaming magazine, the tension between representing and regulating the emergent culture of gaming.

**Chapter 6: The Illustrated gaming magazine cover, adolescent masculinity, and the geek aesthetic.**



Illustrations by Frank Frazetta

© 1974 ♦ TACTICAL STUDY RULES

## Introduction

This chapter presents a study of the early specialist gaming press and charts how these vanguard texts helped initiate, and articulate, an emergent gamer culture, specifically in terms of producing a distinctly adolescent gaming aesthetic from pre-existing Fantasy and Sci-Fi tropes. Textually orientated discourse analysis is combined with content analysis to examine the illustrations used in over 100 magazines, both in terms of their cover pages and advertising content, in order to establish and examine the dominant tropes. Findings show the imagery used on the magazines prioritised certain themes, identities (young white male), and game types, whilst excluding others. The texts acted as sites of masculine role-play, with idealised bodies set within a network of fetishistic Fantasy and hi-tech environs, whilst providing a diegetic bridge into the game worlds they reference. These influential magazines reveal an early, and continuing, tendency of geek sub-culture to playfully celebrate the transgressive, whilst absorbing neoliberal and patriarchal discourse. This section will conclude with an examination of the gaming illustrator as cultural intermediary via a series of interviews from 1985 to 1986, published in *CRASH* magazine and titled *On the Cover*. This series is discussed in relation to two specific discourses: the illustrator as aspirational, masculine renegade; and secondly the illustrator as art-technician, as a nodal interface between game and gamer.

Whilst the early gaming magazine (in terms of readership) was the province of teenage boys in general (Haddon, 1988c; Kirkpatrick, 2015), sub-culturally it was arguably geeks that engaged most fully with the texts as high-end users. As such the videogame magazine connects with a certain form of adolescent masculine subjectivity, one that Burrill has termed 'Digital Boyhood' (Burrill, 2008). These teenage figures exist in the current cultural imaginary as subjects 'equally at home behind the keyboard and the game controller, who implicitly understands how to hack an iPod, and who has amassed fortunes in online worlds.' (Burrill, 2008, p. 2). Such postmodern characters are defined by their intimate relationship to technology. Whilst they seem (due to their technological affiliations) to be inherently contemporary, these digital boys, or geeks/nerds, have been an identifiable cultural set in popular media since the early 1950s. As such the rise of the geek can be mapped on to the rise of a techno-scientific ideology in the post-war period.

### **'Psychological machines' & 'Digital boyhood'**

In terms of conceptualising boyhood, as a subjectivity, I have drawn on the work of the aforementioned Burrill, and that of Sherry Turkle (Turkle, 1984; Turkle, 1996; Turkle, 2008) to frame my own work. In order to clarify what is being meant by boyhood in this context, of how it relates to technology, I shall outline briefly some of their salient points. Turkle outlines three stages of the child's interaction with technology, stages that can be summarised as enquiry/mastery/reflection: essentially, is it alive, how do I control it, and what does it tell me about myself. Turkle describes these three aspects as 'organizing issues for children as they grow up' (Turkle, 1984, p. 19). For Turkle the computer is a 'psychological machine' (Turkle, 1984), it changes the way we think about the self.

Furthermore, as the child enters adolescence 'experience is polarised around the question of identity ... computers become part of a return to reflection, this time not about the machine but about oneself.' (Turkle, 1984, p. 19) This process of identity production via technology does not end with adolescence, and in adulthood computers continue to 'offer companionship without the mutuality and complexity of a human relationship. They seduce because they provide a chance to be in complete control, but they can trap people into an infatuation with control, with building ones own private world.' (Turkle, 1984, p. 19) The loop constructed being one that goes from the reflection stage back into that of mastery. It is a loop, or script, that is enacted in each of the various magazine sections analysed in this thesis. The review effectively commandeers reflection and channels it towards consumer choice, and the celebration of consumption; the reader's letter similarly reconfigures critique as a form of branded debate. In each case the 'mastery' offered by the gaming press is the legitimating authority that comes with increased gaming capital – the peer acceptance of being in the know.

In terms of this seductive trap of mastery Burrill's work on masculinity and gaming concurs (Burrill, 2008). He argues that boyhood is a state to be accessed, not just a temporal space, and is a place, not a time. As such boyhood is a resource for children and adults, one that allows escapism, providing the opportunity for 'all ages to escape the rule-bound nature of work, the community, and other cultural formations.' (Burrill, 2008, p. 3) This conception of boyhood as resource, not demographic, is significant to this study as it enables the analysis

of boyhood texts with one eye on the adult sphere, with the understanding that these are the territories we regress to, rather than past epochs we move on from. The 3 aspects of engagement identified by Turkle (enquiry/mastery/reflection) can be seen to saturate geek youth cultures, both historical and contemporary. They are articulated in all the dominant aesthetic tropes that form the body of this chapter on illustrations, from Wizards to Space Pilots. I shall use this chapter to connect these tropes to the subjectivity of 'digital boyhood', and question such notions of mastery and escapism. A paradigm where videogaming is an inherently regressive, instrumental, and technonostalgic activity.

In order to understand the appeal of the early gaming magazines, and their choice of aesthetics, it is useful to briefly summarise the geek culture it both articulates and constructs. Traditional nerd or geek interests stereotypically include computers, Science Fiction and Fantasy (Kendall, 2011), whilst their media image is 'asexual, intellectual, wimpy, uncool' (Kendall, 2011, p. 515). Accordingly the content analysis performed in this study did find the dominant imagery to centre on such themes of action-adventure, Fantasy, and Sci-Fi, in what could be termed a thematic consonance with geek culture. Also, geek culture is posited to exist outside hegemonic masculinity, whilst retaining a 'hyperwhite' identity (Bucholtz, 2001), where 'women and men of color are excluded entirely ... protecting the superior economic and technological status of white men.' (Kendall, 2011, p. 519). My content analysis also supports this hyperwhite/masculine theorem, as the magazines systematically exclude representations of both women and non-whites, with the exception of occasional fetishised imagery. This chapter will continue by examining the rest of the findings from the content analysis, and then go on to look at specific magazine covers from the sample, in relation to the dominant thematic categories of Fantasy and Sci-Fi.

### **Content analysis findings**

The content analysis enacted for this chapter of the study had 3 key propositions, these centre on visual themes, demographics, and gaming genres. The first proposition is that the dominant themes within the sample would match the areas of interest conventionally marked as geeky (Kendall, 2011), and that there will be a high level of correlation, in terms of what is included and excluded, between the two representational mediums of magazine: the covers and software advertising contained therein. These correlations would allow for a

grounded textual discussion of the dominant conceptual metaphors within the videogaming aesthetic.

Initial examination of the archive led to the coding of twelve thematic categories (including other). The five dominant themes, comprising over 80% of the combined sample, did show a very high level of thematic correlation between the areas of publishing self-promotion and software marketing (see Table 8). Specifically they showed a prioritisation of Sci-Fi and Fantasy motifs, alongside a broader reliance upon the competition/combat centric discourse of sports, military conflict, and action adventure. It is significant that these themes are ones traditionally considered as masculine territories. Education as a motif appears only once in the covers sample – in the guise of a turtle wearing a mortar board. This would suggest that within the work/play tension that suffuses notions of technology a distinctly male form of playfulness has been prioritised by these magazines.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Covers</b>	<b>Adverts</b>
Sci-Fi	36%	30%
Fantasy	14%	14%
Military	9%	11%
Sports/Racing	9%	17%
Adventure	9%	13%

Table 8. Aesthetic thematic dominance.

The second proposition was that the choice of representational subjects in the sample would mirror the survey demographics previously mentioned in the introduction, and favour images of white youthful males, representing women only in secondary and supplementary roles. The archival sample did show, unsurprisingly, a substantial masculine bias in its choice of participants. Of those images where the participants were clearly gendered 89% featured a male only cast. The participants are also overwhelmingly white (96% of magazine covers showed white only participants). While a higher level of non-white participants (22%) were present in the advertising sample these exceptions mainly consisted of black athletes and highly mythical images of Oriental warriors. The content analyses would allow it to be

argued that whites are presented as the representational norm, and non-whites are only present as physical and ideological fetish (in this case primarily a fantastical martial east). The whiteness of the participants in the sample can be seen as corresponding to a wider hyper-whiteness within geek culture (Bucholtz, 2001).

This study did find a key region of disconnect between the readership and the imagery being used to identify with them. The imagery may be, like the readership, white and masculine but the participants are overwhelmingly (90%) portrayed as adult (not as children or teens). Indeed the represented participant is more likely to be elderly than child-like, due in part to the popularity of the wise Sage or Wizard figure. The few exceptions to this no-kids rule are fantasy uber-kinder such as celebrity rebel Bart Simpson and cigar toting misanthrope Jack the Nipper, both enfant terribles endowed with maturity and power beyond their years. Therefore, whilst the idealised user is ostensibly being presented as an adult white male, the absence of the child, even of the teenager, reveals a central desire, and fear, within videogame culture. On one level play acts for the child as a drama of adulthood, a means of acting out the potency of the adult realm. Yet, there is also a fear of being seen as child-like, both within the spheres of production (the computer as low value toy) and consumption (play as infantile), which leads to an imagined world without children, where the only representation of childhood allowed is a parodic one.

The tendency to prioritise the white male in gaming has been clearly noted in other areas of contemporary videogaming culture (Kaplan, 1983; Dietz, 1998; Burgess *et al.*, 2007; Burgess *et al.*, 2011), with extensive research carried out regarding the hyper-sexualisation of videogame characters (Martins *et al.*, 2009; Williams *et al.*, 2009; Downs and Smith, 2010; Martins *et al.*, 2011). My findings expands on these studies in two ways. Firstly by examining gaming magazines rather than games – the non-diegetic rather than the diegetic – and secondly by putting the participants into their wider thematic framework (in this case the genres of Fantasy and Sci-Fi). Thereby asking not only what kind of imagery dominates, but how do those images relate to wider conceptions of technology and masculinity.

The third proposition investigated by the content analysis is specific to the medium of videogaming, and centres on a defining aspect of gaming culture, the game genre. The proposition was that the front covers would prioritise certain gaming genres over others.

Meaning that the videogame magazine as a vanguard cultural text helped produce a distinct type of gaming culture, with distinct modes of play. By comparing the overall breakdown, year by year, of game releases by genre (via the online *World Of Spectrum* database) to the content analysis sample it became clear that there was a prioritisation of certain key gaming genres, genres that later became central to wider 1990s videogaming culture. Those genres overrepresented (i.e. they appeared at a frequency disproportionate to their market share) in the sample include Arcade adventures, Shoot-em-ups, and Beat-em-Ups. Those genres underrepresented in the sample are Educational and Text Adventures. Therefore, at this early point in gaming's history there is a notable tendency to marginalise the educational, and otherwise more cerebral, forms of play. Part of the purpose of the remainder of this chapter will be to further examine the tropes that attend these genres (those of Fantasy & Sci-Fi) in order to understand the kinds of pleasure being offered to the user, and the types of mastery and escapism being played with.

### **Action & adventure – the promises of computing**

'Try to think of something more exciting than a computer. What did you come up with: A trip up the Amazon, scoring a goal for England, landing on Mars or, maybe, beating the bank at Monte Carlo? A computer will give you the chance to do any of these in your own living room.' CVG1:3 (1981)

This extract from the 1981 launch issue of *CVG* serves as a useful introduction to the dominant discourse of gaming, that of adventure. When hailing the gamer, as a new type of entertainment user, the gaming magazine is presenting the core promise of the computer as fun and excitement, as adventure. This salesman's pitch contains the a priori that a computer *is* exciting in itself, rather than it being a functional device per se (unless that function is to excite). The computer is presented as a gateway to extraordinary experiences, as an experiential interface. Access to these experiences (previously marginal to unattainable) are now presented as immediate and domesticated via the power of technology. Adventure will also act as the core conceptual metaphor that links the seemingly disparate themes and tropes that populate the covers of the 1980s videogame magazine, and the advertisements therein. It is the conceptual node of the wider gaming aesthetic. It is what the images are about.

The content analysis carried out on these magazines, as previously outlined, revealed a reliance upon images of sports, action/adventure, Sci-Fi, and Fantasy. These broad genres are represented via established tropes and characters which shift and slide from the relatively everyday to the bizarre and exotic, from the concrete to the imaginary. These tropes include the racing driver, the footballer, the fighter, the cop, the soldier, the mercenary, the spy, the fighter pilot, the astronaut, the spaceship, a plethora of mythological creatures, wizards, knights, barbarians, princesses, sorceresses, and amazons. From sports cars to spaceships these images comprise an early gaming aesthetic, one that connects intertextually with pre-existing representational fields (Fantasy Art posters, album covers, illustration for pulp fiction novels, etc.). The connection between these various texts is both an aesthetic and a relationship, one where texts 'set up dialogical or polemical relations between their 'own' discourses and the discourses of others.' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 128) This notion of relations is significant in that it acts as a reminder to consider the themes of gaming culture both alongside each other, and in connection to the wider cultural landscape.

In the remainder of this chapter I shall focus on two areas that come to dominate the gamer cultural landscape specifically: Fantasy and Sci-Fi. Whilst these were already well established, albeit fringe areas of media interest in the 1980s, thirty years later they have obtained mainstream acceptance, and increased cultural capital, in both modern film, television, and videogames. Yet, notably, in the 8-bit era of limited computing verisimilitude it was the artwork for videogames, magazine covers, adverts, and software packaging that helped develop and disseminate this new gaming aesthetic, rather than any diegetic gaming content. It is my contention that whilst developing an aesthetic these representations maintained and challenged established notions of boyhood masculinity and technology. As such they form murals of desire and aspiration.

In terms of masculinity I have utilised influential film theorists (Neale, 1993; Tasker, 1993; Jeffords, 1994) that are contemporaneous to the magazines under examination. These pieces of early 1990s film theory have been chosen as they asked pertinent questions of gendered identity with regards to the genre of action cinema – a genre which contains many of the same action/adventure tropes as videogame magazines. This is not an attempt to map one academic field upon another, as has often been done with videogames, but to recognise

that certain representations, desires, and identities traverse from one medium to another - though they may well change upon doing so. Before looking at the dominant gaming discourses involved in Fantasy and Sci-Fi imagery, and how they relate to masculinity, it is useful to consider first the type of masculinity being invoked by this study.

### **Imagining manhood**

‘How does the son imagine his life as a man?’ (Bly, 1993, p. 99)

This question, raised by Robert Bly in *Iron Jon*, a seminal text for the American Men’s Movement of the 1980s, is significant regarding notions of boyhood, masculinity, play, and the representations around play. Such a notion of masculinity under crisis has been examined extensively in terms of the ‘New Man’, and later Laddism, via the medium of men’s magazines (Jackson *et al.*, 2001; Benwell, 2003). It is approached in this study in terms of the imagined pasts and futures illustrated by the gaming magazine, and the notions of manhood that attend them.

The constructedness of masculinity, and the role played by desire in this construct, is a core concern of early 1990s film theory, and the period saw an engagement with previously unexplored images of the male body in mainstream cinema. Taking Laura Mulvey’s (1975) active/passive, and subject/object binary as a central reference point to the debate the work of Tasker (1993), Neale (1993), and Jefford (1994) operated as a post-modern engagement with these pre-existing 1970s feminist labours, as a result of which a more de-essentialised and mobile gendered subject emerged. A subject less trapped within a prescribed gender binary, one who increasingly played with various roles and identifications. The muscular hyper-bodies that dominated the action genre in the 1980s (Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Van Damme, etc.) connect to a wider body-as-construct (or body beautiful/bodybuilding) culture that emerged at the same time. The key concepts that emerge from this academic work, with regards to my own, centre on processes of identification, the spectacular hard-body, narcissism, the fetish, and female musculinity (or ‘flex appeal’).

Whilst the writers Tasker, Neale, and Jefford vary considerably in emphasis and approach, there is a shared questioning between them of how masculinity is inscribed upon the

viewing subject. They collectively ask what are ‘the mechanisms, pressures, and contradictions that inscription may involve.’ (Neale, 1993, p. 9) How does the user identify with an image in terms of their own gendered identity? Such an identification, these theorists argue, is not a simple mapping process, where the viewer sees and desires themselves as being reflected in the image, but is rather one where ‘desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions, and roles.’ (Neale, 1993, p. 10) This conception of the identification process contains elements of narcissism and narrative play, one where

‘identification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narrative: those of hero and heroine, villain ... Identification is therefore multiple and fractured, a sense of seeing the constituent parts of the spectator’s own psyche paraded before him or her.’ (Ellis, 1982, p. 43)

As a viewing subject the reader recognises the tropes being utilised in this parade, and the entailments appropriate to them, be they valour or vengeance, and are able to move from one role to another, experiencing various aspects of their imagined self as they do so. One moment you are a hero, the next a villain.

Yet, within this polyglossia, this narrative of many voices, not all voices are equal, instead ‘there is constant work to channel and regulate identification in relation to sexual division, in relation to the orders of gender, sexuality, and social identity and authority marking patriarchal society.’ (Neale, 1993, p. 11) The text is always working to maintain and renew existing gender and class divisions, and in doing so perpetuate the existing order. As such these texts form a genre of governance (Fairclough, 1988), one that works through the production and re-production of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). To begin applying the theory to the sample I shall move to examine the theme of Fantasy, a land of Might & Muscle.

This section will begin by summarising the key Fantasy tropes found within the sample, and marking the attendant connotations for each trope, with specific textual examples provided. This will enable the establishing of key areas of tension within the imagery, and lead to a broader questioning of how notions of masculinity are being inscribed onto the reader via

these Fantastical bodies. The key male tropes fall into a binary of might/magic, they are Warriors & Wizards. It should be noted that whilst that the Fantasy pantheon, as an aesthetic tradition, contains a large array of other related tropes (Knights, Elves, Dwarves, Bards, etc.), these two were found to be most prevalent within the archive studied. What follows is firstly a brief summation of the tropes, followed by examples from the sample.

### **Drawing on the past – the use of Fantasy tropes**

**Wizards:** are wielders of Magic, physically slight, possessing esoteric knowledge of the occult, able to command & subjugate, morally ambiguous, manipulative/controlling, and intellectual (See Figure 7).

**Warriors:** possess strength, power/potency, muscularity, sexuality, wild - bound to nature (furs/long hair), tribal, aggressive, driven by base desires, lone warriors (See Figure 8).

It should be noted these are highly condensed readings, and historically contingent to the era of the sample. Each of the tropes mentioned has a long and varied history outside the sphere of gaming, some going back millennia (as is the case with the classical mythic warrior or Druidic figure). Yet, what this highly partial reading does begin to evoke is a certain segmentation within the modern Fantasy tradition. It is a Cartesian quantification of the subject into binaries of might/mind, chaos/order. Where the Barbarian is strong & chaotic, the Wizard has a controlling intellect, he is a form of proto-scientist – a technologist who orders the elements around him, subjugating matter to his sometimes malevolent will.

It is revealing that another common traditional Fantasy figure, The Knight, only appears in this sample as a Pawn (Figure 9). It would appear that the patriarchal knight-figure of Arthurian legend has been replaced by a much less overtly moral character, that of the warrior. This removal of any good/evil binary allows a more fluid set of identifications – the reader gets to decide where the participant's allegiances lie. Instead of offering alternate moral standpoints each of the Fantasy figures represented can be said to exist on a sliding scale between hard & soft power.



Figure 7. April 1985, Computer & Video Games Magazine

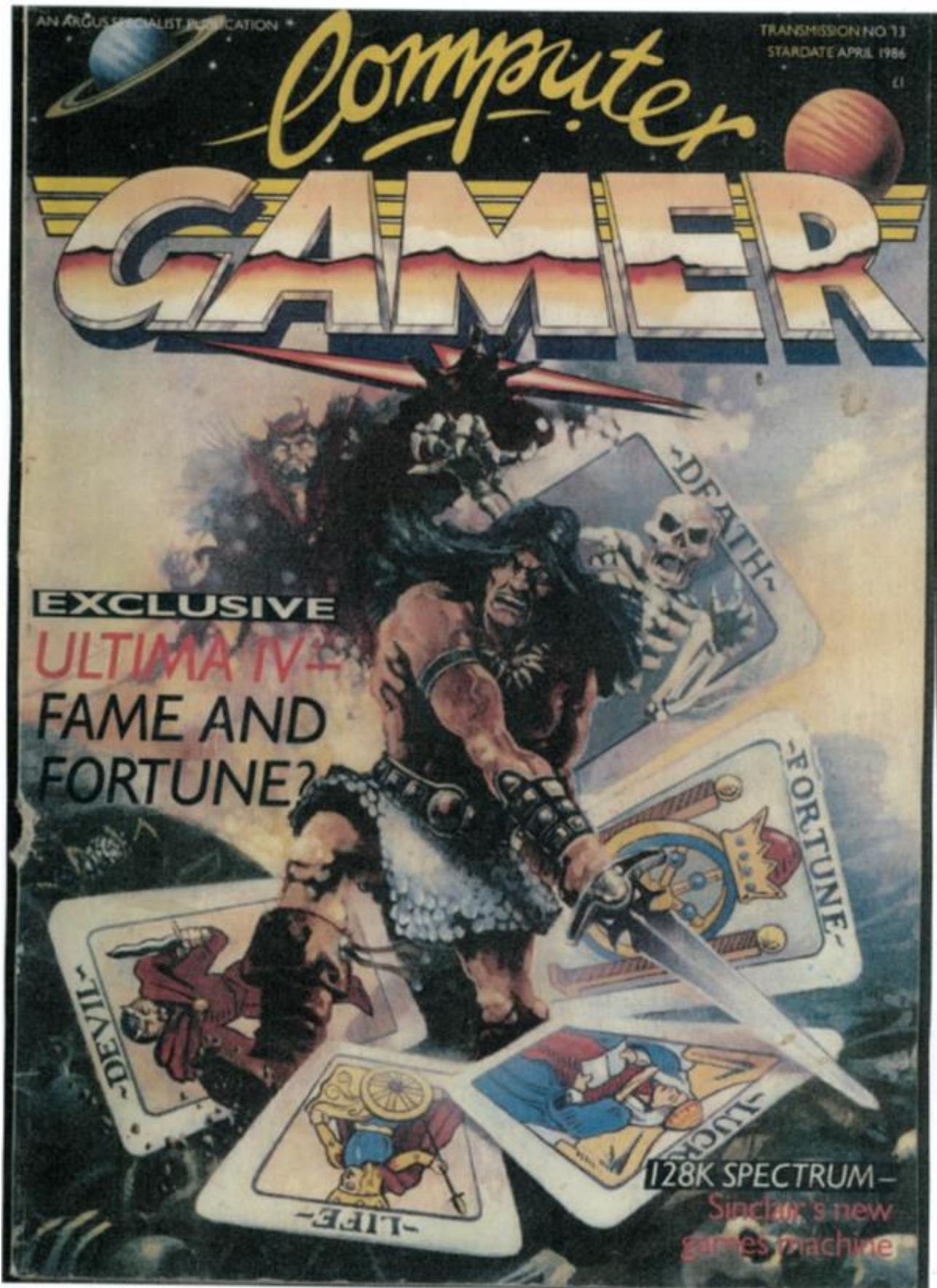


Figure 8. April 1986 – Computer Gamer magazine

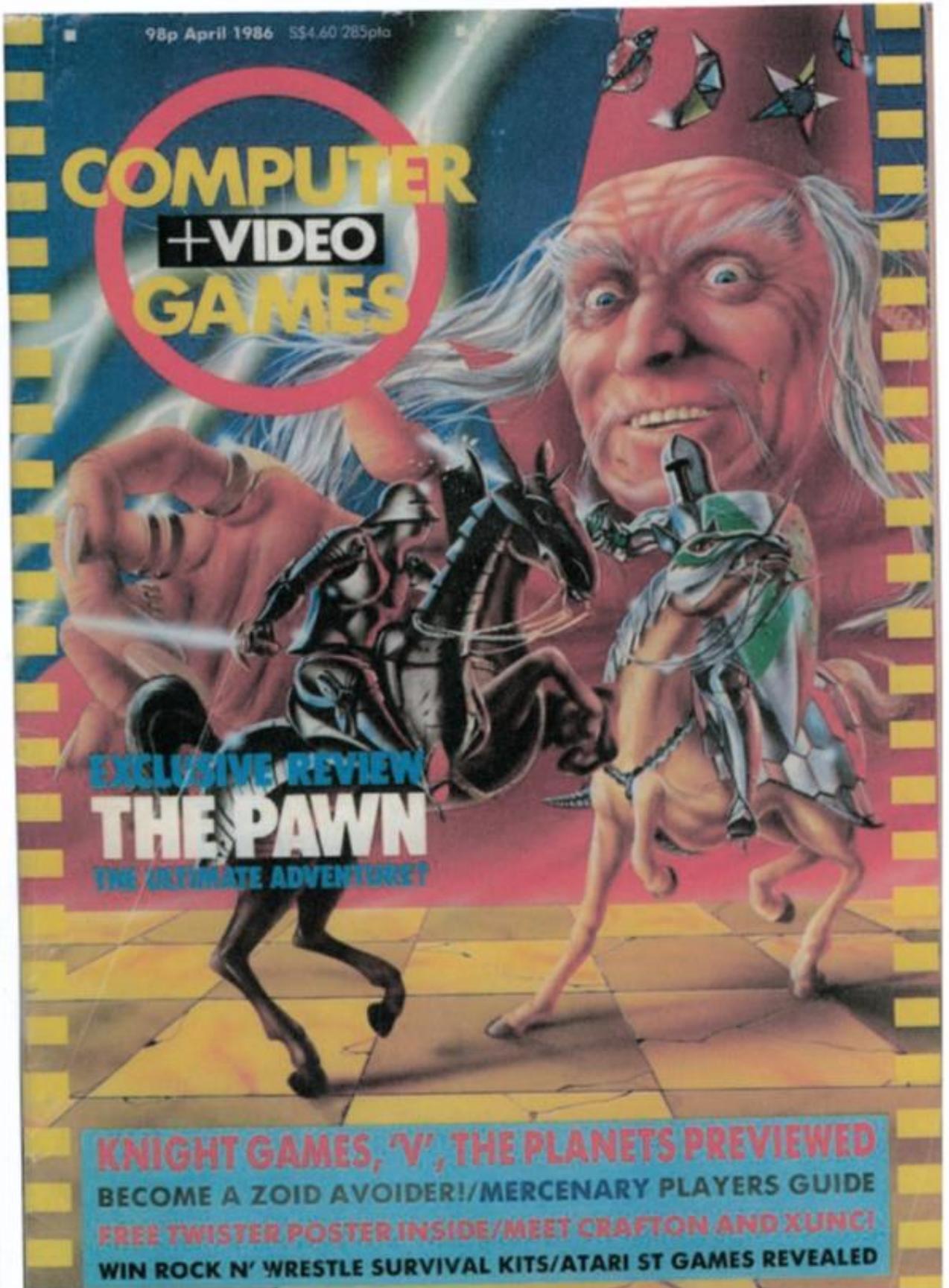


Figure 9. April 1986, Computer & Video Game magazine

Furthermore, this division of the self into a quantifiable set of characteristics is an instrumental process, where attributes become abilities, which then allow certain actions to be performed. This is a process most clearly enunciated by the role-playing tradition that coalesced into *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), a phenomenon that was a primary influence over early videogaming in general, and Fantasy illustration in particular. In *D&D* the balance of the role-play, its rules and structure, rely upon an agreed set of skill specialisations, with each player choosing their abilities in terms of Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma. These qualities become testable quantities, ones that can succeed or fail within the dice based realm of the gaming narrative. The Fantasy images under examination in this study contain those very same qualities, the same binaries. They can be seen to offer the male readership that fluid set of identities that Neale refers to, and constitute the parts of the psyche that are on parade for the gaming user to appropriate. They talk of Order and Power, the power to protect the self, to change the body, and to order the world around to you.

Just as the action movies of the early 1980s performed as 'spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism.' (Jeffords, 1994, p. 16), so too the male Fantasy figures that populate many of the videogame magazine covers contain within them an idealised sense of masculinity. The body of the Warrior, which Jeffords describes as 'Hard Bodies', and their ever-ready phallic weaponry, is the key to their potency, their heroism. For 'what determines a hero is the possession of a hard body.' (Jeffords, 1994, p. 53). In the case of the conventional Knight figure it is hardened with metal, but for the Barbarian it is a body-suit of hyperreal muscularity. Yet, there are clear similarities, where 'The muscular male body functions as a sort of armour – it is sculpted and worked on – which is repeatedly breached.' (Tasker, 1993, p. 18) As Tasker evokes here, the hyper-masculine hero contains within him the fear of feminisation, a drama of castration (which will be returned to later in this chapter). The Wizard, however, represents a different type of power, one that is less overtly militaristic. It is a soft form of power, one which is centred on persuasion and control. The Wizard's defining feature is their capacity for transmutation: the ability to transform one substance into another, convert thought into action, to conjure the ethereal, and adapt the elements to their bidding. They promise mastery, the power of the will over nature, mind over matter.

Both these male Fantasy figures, the Wizard and Warrior, and their popularity within the gaming imaginary, can be viewed as a response to the evolving expectations of manhood in the 1980s, specifically those often termed as the New Man - the need to be seen as emotionally engaged, and sensitive, whilst retaining vestiges of hegemonic masculinity. The Fantasy male figure enables two responses to this new set of responsibilities, firstly by eliding them, and secondly by deconstructing them. Fantasy as a genre is highly capable of escaping questions of social responsibility due to its inherently fantastical nature. It provides a parallel space to reality. A space where the usual conventions and social norms can be re-framed; a space where an alternate set of discourses can be established and explored. Whilst the Fantasy figure always has one foot in the reality that they exist outside of, they are nevertheless able to stand 'to one side of the conventional standards of social behaviour.' (Neale, 1993, p. 30) Simply put, they offer the male reader an escape from the pressures and limitations of reality, a place where they can be both strong & wise, virtuous and barbaric. Ostensibly this reading would support Burrill's notion of an escapist digital imaginary (Burrill, 2008).

Yet, if these Fantasy heroes do act as a form of idealised surrogate self for the reader then that heroic imago could still be a source of anxiety to the reader, as the 'ideal is something to which the subject is never adequate.' (Neale, 1993, p. 13). In escaping the contradictions of the 1980s New Man they have potentially returned to an older, yet still unattainable ideal, a classical form of masculinity. A form of manhood that emanates from the revitalisation of the Fantasy literary genre between the 1930s and 1950s, via the work of such writers as Robert E. Howard (with his popular *Conan* series of stories) and Tolkien.

However, a deconstruction of such idealised heroic masculinity is enabled via the process of fluid alternation, the identification with one trope after another, each one with a specific skill set. By having various moulds, or tropes, to enter/identify with, the reader can enact the various types of manhood that are expected of him, and do so without facing the inherent contradictions that exist within the concept of masculinity as a whole. In this context Fantasy imagery is not so much retrograde & escapist, but a strategic process of fluid gendered identifications. A mobile reconnaissance of the self, at one moment wise and caring, in another moment fierce and merciless. However, it could be argued that such recognition is always already misplaced, and is instead a form of meconnaissance. That these Fantasy

figures are only ever part of a narcissistic illusion, representing ‘phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control.’ (Neale, 1993, p. 11).

Whether narcissistic or strategic, the male Fantasy tropes utilised by the videogame magazines are essentially about power, and provide a sliding scale of identifications. The Wizard represents technological power, centred on intellectual specialisation and the ability to control and convert nature into instrumental power. The Barbarian is pre-technological, raw elemental power. In Freudian terms these two figures would respectively relate to ego and id. These Fantasy tropes together form an adolescent narrative, a ‘dramatization of the struggle to become powerful in difficult circumstance.’ (Tasker, 1993, p. 31) Fantasy becomes a rational response to reality, and offers one answer to Bly’s question of how the son is to imagine life as a man, which is pluralistically. The question of how the boy is to imagine women forms the final part of this analysis on Fantasy imagery.

#### **Princess, Amazon, & Sorceress – ‘welding brass tits on the armour’ (Altmann, 1992)**

The Fantasy female is a peripheral, and highly ambivalent, figure within the sample. As the content analysis revealed the participants represented on the covers, and in the adverts, of gaming magazines are overwhelmingly male. However, notable exceptions are the Fantasy figures of the Princess, Amazon, and Sorceress. Together they illustrate a turbulent set of contradictions that centre on exaggerated, sometimes bizarre, notions of femininity within the male gaming culture of the 1980s and early 1990s. Highly sexualised, they offer the readership processes of objectification and identification that involve both sadism and masochism, what has been termed ‘the have me/be me axes of desire’ (O’Day, 2004, p. 204).

The scantily clad voluptuous female is a mainstay within 1970s & 1980s Fantasy illustration, with the work of artists, including Frank Frazetta (1975) and Boris Vallejo (1999), often veering towards the pornographic in their idealisations. This element of voyeurism is clearly present within the sample, with the *Barbarian* (Figure. 10) games (1987) being the most well known examples – here tabloid page 3 model Maria Whittaker poses as Princess Mariana, while future TV Gladiator Wolf plays the rescuing Barbarian. They perform as comic Fantasy hyperboles, as ‘parodic exaggerated characteristics of gendered identity.’ (Tasker, 1993, p. 14).

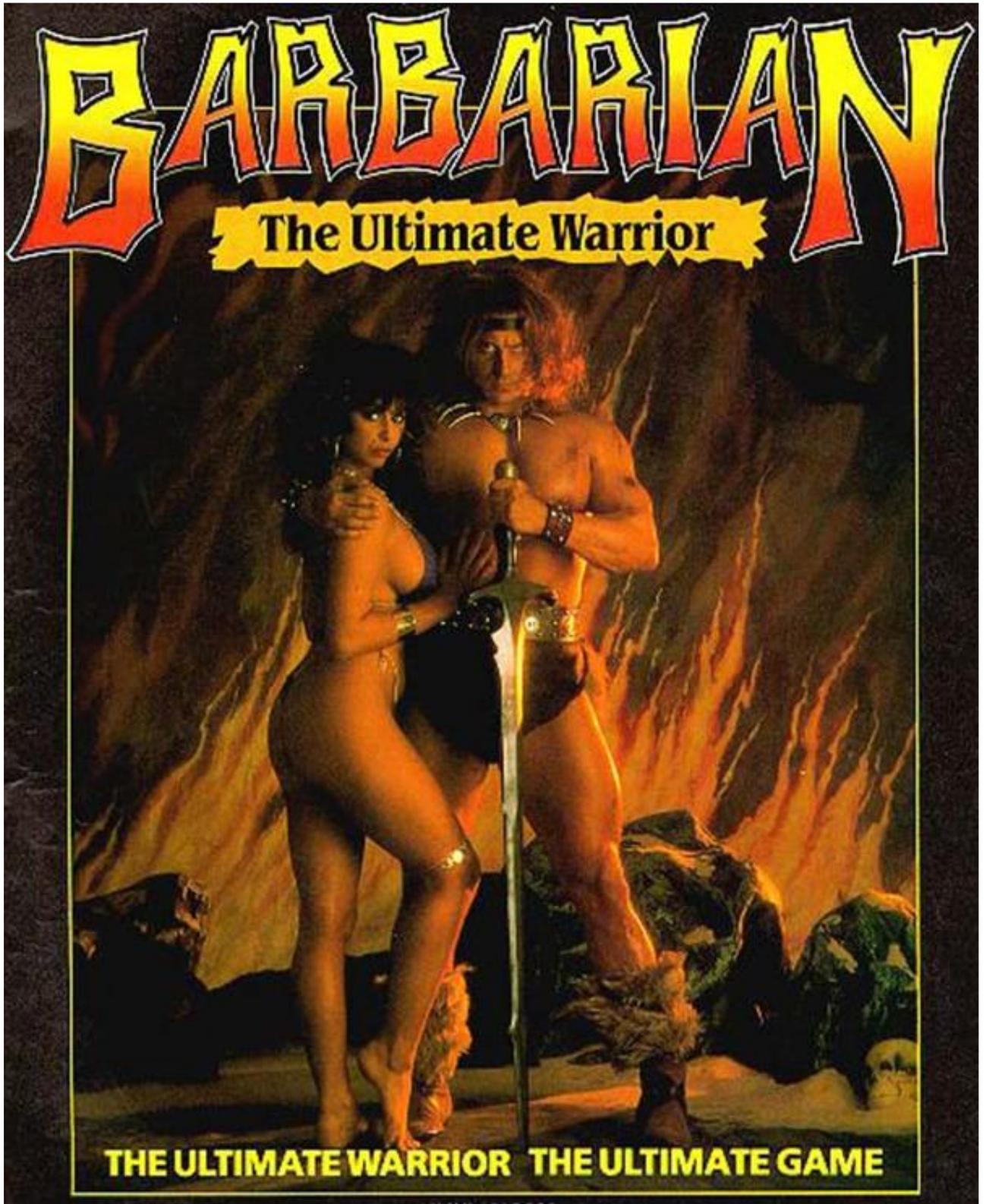


Figure 10. *Barbarian* (1987) advert, released across multiple formats

**VIXEN**

*It was when you thought it was safe to go back in the jungle...*

Atari ST Disc £19.99  
Commodore Amiga Disc £19.99  
Commodore 64/128 Cassette £9.99  
Disc £12.99

Spectrum 48/128 Cassette £8.99  
Spectrum 3 Disc £14.99  
Amstrad CPC Cassette £9.99  
Disc £14.99

*Phone the Vixen Hotline 0323 766676*

**martech**

Martech is the registered trade mark of Martech Games Limited,  
Martech House, Bay Terrace, Pevensey Bay, East Sussex BN24 6EE  
PHONE 0323 766676. TELEX: 878178 Martech G. FAX: 0323 766676

Figure 11. the *Vixen* (1988) image was used as both advertisement and magazine cover image

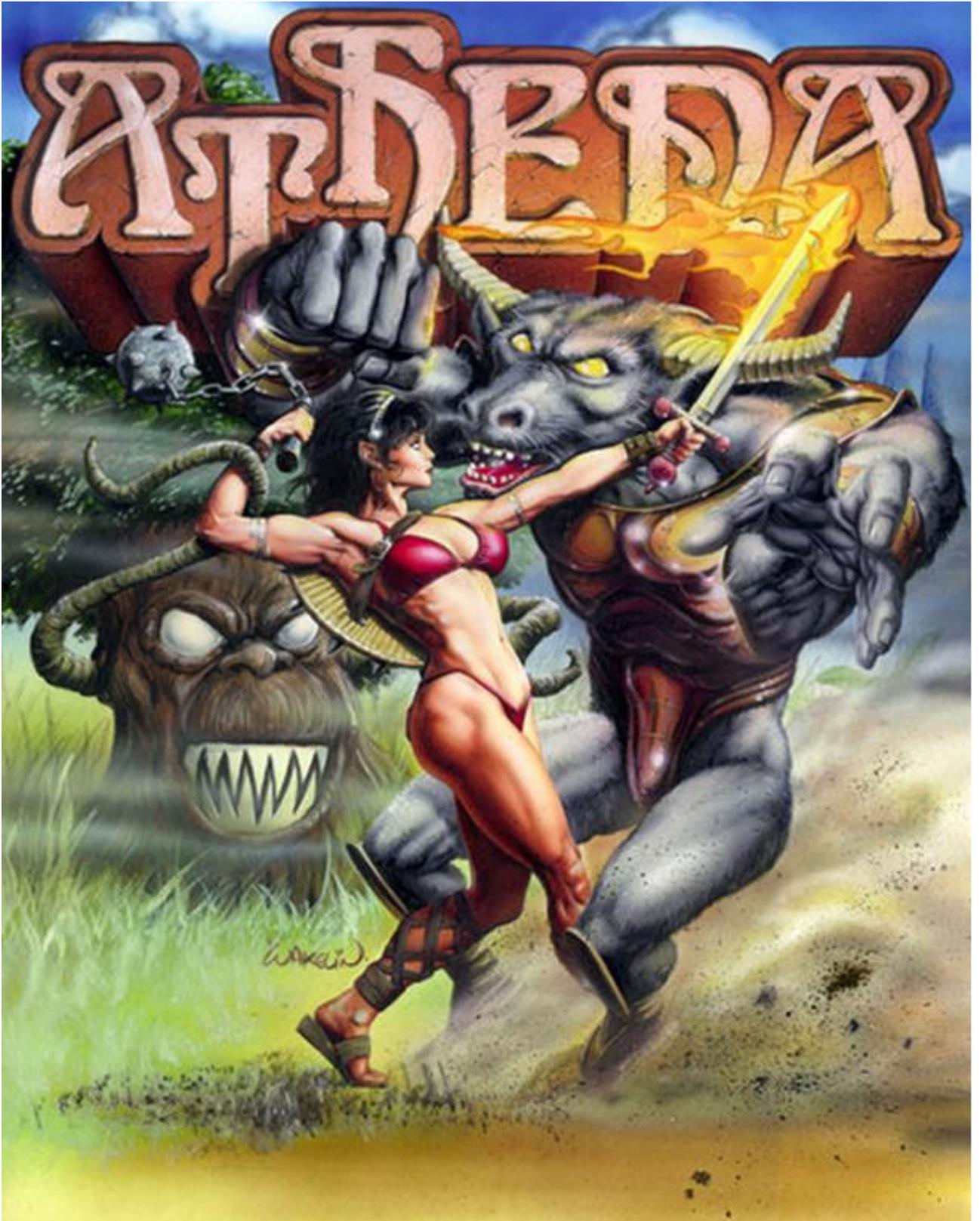


Figure 12. *Athena* (1987) – released as advert image, and free poster in several magazines

Such exaggerations, whilst demeaning, are also innately comical, where the 'Humour is derived from the juxtaposition of the barely clad heroes and heroines (so clearly offered as sexual spectacle) with the intense earnestness of the mock mythologies constructed for these fantasy worlds.' (Tasker, 1993, p. 28) As such Princess Marianna is typical of the sexualised Fantasy Princess, alluring and passive, she enables the male to act out his heroic role as saviour.

The *Vixen* photoshoot (Figure 11), used as both advertising image and magazine cover, is a highly standardised trope of the Amazonian style. The emphasis here is on an exaggerated and raw sexuality, an animal nature which is connoted via the faux-fur bikini costume. Athletic, rather than muscular, the Amazon represents a dichotomy: they are an active subject, whilst remaining the erotic object of visual spectacle. Such active subjects are argued to disrupt the classic active/passive division, where narrative & spectacle exist separately. The male driving the story, and the female there to be seen. Yet, primarily the Amazonian *Vixen* represents a savage challenge to the male warrior, she is there to be subdued. She is the natural realm that must be conquered and made orderly.

A more ambiguous image is that of *Athena* (Figure 12), as illustrated by Bob Wakelin. Athena can be seen as a female warrior figure that embodies 'a contradictory set of images of female desirability, a sexualised female image which emphasises physical strength and stature.' (Tasker, 1993, p. 14) Such embodiments are arguably very much about the mapping of masculine traits on to the feminine body. These images can therefore be viewed as the de-othering of the female, where via the addition of musculature the feminine is made masculine, a process of 'welding brass tits on the armour' (Altmann, 1992) – this quote from one of Altmann's female students perfectly captures the rather shallow feminising of essentially masculine tropes. Such a process thereby allows the male reader to convert threatening difference into the already known and comfortable.

In his work on 'action babes' O'Day terms such activity as gender theft. 'In the action-adventure cinema, therefore, a series of gender transactions and, sometimes, gender thefts can be seen to take place, as qualities of masculinity and femininity, activity and passivity, are traded over the bodies of action heroes and heroines.' (O'Day, 2004, p. 203) However, as O'Day goes on to state, such identification is a 'complex and fluid process ... the action hero

and heroine can be seen to embody and problematize elements of masculinity and femininity, and to occupy both the position of (narrative) subject and (erotic) object,' (O'Day, 2004, p. 204) Therefore, whilst these sexualised images of women may be provided to the reader for purely voyeuristic pleasures, active images like *Athena* may be performing other roles for that readership. Are these female figures instead part of the parade of the self mentioned earlier, one more role for the teenage reader to play out? These Fantasy females are clearly defined in part by their strength, 'these heroines have physical prowess, in swordplay or marksmanship, a strength that marks them as transgressive, as perverse.' (Tasker, 1993, p. 30) They can also be seen as controlling figures, offering the male reader fantasies of masochistic domination. Such transgression is key to understanding the final female trope, that of the Sorceress.

The front cover of *CRASH18* (Figure. 13) from 1985 explicitly depicts the Sorceress as a dominatrix. Here she forces the male figure to kneel chained at her feet, subjected to her will, in the same manner that the reader is subjected to her gaze. Like the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* these magical figures traditionally overwhelm the hero by means of manipulation and seduction. They offer a masochistic scenario for the male reader, but their power is soft, rather than hard muscularity. It is their hyper-femininity that makes them lead roles in a castration tale of loss, 'a dramatizing of the pleasures of empowerment and the fear of powerlessness.' (Tasker, 1993, p. 18) Yet, whilst such complex processes are potentially at play, and are certainly available to the male reader, the reality is arguably more straightforward. The provision of the *Athena* image in poster form by many of the gaming magazines suggests a more overtly erotic function for these images. They are acceptable soft-porn bedroom decoration.

As the men of Fantasy exist on a scale of Order and Power so the women of Fantasy literature exist on a sliding scale, one that moves between the classic binary of object/subject, and passive/active. They are male fantasy sites of heroism and domination, victory and subjugation. The further along the scale you go, the more powerful the Fantasy female, the more potentially transgressive and masochistic the identification. This chapter will now examine the other dominant trope in videogame magazine illustration, that of Sci-Fi, and examine the identifications it offers in terms of technology and the self.



Figure 13. The sorceress offers the male readership a masochistic fantasy, July 1985 – CRASH

## Science Fiction as a genre of illustration

The genre of Sci-Fi is one with a diverse and rich history. This study wishes to locate the aesthetic of videogame magazines within that history, especially with regards to Sci-Fi illustration, and the dominant tropes that populate those illustrations. The videogame magazine, as an aesthetic space for Sci-Fi illustration, is part of a publishing lineage that goes back to the 1920s, where such American titles as *Weird Tales* (1923), and *Amazing Stories* (1926) provided an outlet for Fantasy and Sci-Fi illustration via their covers. These were later joined by such British magazines as *New Worlds* (originally *Novae Terrae* 1936). Whilst *Weird Tales* focused mainly on gothic horror and the occult, a distinct Sci-Fi pulp fiction scene can be said to have emerged in the inter-war and post-war eras. For a history of the medium, the informed, exhaustive, and comprehensive work of Mike Ashley (Ashley, 2000; Ashley, 2005; Ashley, 2007) is an invaluable source. Sci-fi and Fantasy art illustration as a genre would flourish via these magazines, and it is my contention that the videogame magazine cover offered an additional supplementary outlet in the 1980s. One that shared a key demographic, and a certain set of discourses, as it coalesced around gaming culture.

The central common ground between the Sci-Fi illustrations utilised by videogame magazines and gaming culture is a shared fascination with the relationship between the individual, the social, and the technological. It is perhaps an obvious point, but one that it is important to re-iterate, that Sci-Fi is not about the future, or possible futures, but rather it uses those future scenarios as a backdrop to explore present anxieties and desires. As such it is 'a time machine that goes nowhere, for wherever it goes it materialises the same conjunctions of the space-time continuum: the conundrums of Western civilisation.' (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 1) Therefore, to understand the discourse of Sci-Fi is to enable an understanding of the social present-day, for 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.' (Haraway, 1990, p. 34) Similarly, in their introduction to *Aliens R Us* Sardar & Cubitt propose that whilst Sci-Fi often contains little actual science it does engage with science on a metaphorical and ideological level, 'What distinguishes science fiction is a particular view of science; a scientific view of humanity and culture; the recycling of distinctive narrative tropes and conventions of storytelling.' (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 2) Furthermore, with regards to this scientific worldview, 'Science fiction is both afraid of science and in love with science.' (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 5)

This notion of ambivalence (to the imagined referent of an idealised 'science') is a useful starting point in understanding the images within the sample. For in this section I shall ask if this ambivalence does exist, then what types of fears and desires are being constructed in the texts, and how do they relate to their users. It is not a question of whether those fears or aspirations are 'real' or not, fact or fiction, but why do they come to dominate this particular social imaginary. Indeed from a constructivist perspective Sci-Fi is a fiction that produces reality, and to separate the two is illusory. In producing reality Sci-Fi can be said to operate both as a 'normative genre' (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002), and as a 'genre of governance' (Fairclough, 2003), in that it is part of the discourse that determines what is allowed and what is excluded. It's not just little green men and spaceships (though there are a lot of them too).

The genre of Sci-Fi is one that grounds itself in the formulaic, in that formulaic conventions provide the readership with purchase upon often otherwise unwieldy and esoteric narratives. In his introduction to the subject Roberts (Roberts, 2000) isolates 6 categories, or conventions, by which the standard Sci-Fi narrative operates:

1. spaceships, interplanetary or interstellar travel
2. aliens and encounters with aliens
3. mechanical robots, genetic engineering, biological robots
4. computers, advanced technology, virtual reality
5. time travel, alternative history
6. futuristic utopias and dystopias

Of these 6 categories only the first two (spaceships/aliens) appear with any regularity in the sample, whilst the third (robots) appear surprisingly rarely. The fourth (computers) could be said to be implicit within all the others, whilst the final 2 categories receive no engagement by the texts. Therefore, it can be said that these magazines prioritise what is often termed hard sci-fi, as opposed to the softer, more cerebral variety. This study will take the first two categories and examine them in terms of the metaphors they draw upon and in turn reproduce; the types of identity that they enable and encourage.

### **Them & Us: *Aliens and the other***

It is significant that several of the magazine titles in the sample (*CVG/CRASH/Computer Gamer*) all use the trope of the Alien on the covers of their all-important launch issues - so close is the association between Sci-Fi & videogaming. This suggests that for the new sector of 1980s videogame magazine publishing the established tropes of Sci-Fi are a natural discursive fit. The ideal language in which to speak to their potential readership. This bond between Sci-Fi and videogaming was constructed in the 1970s via such arcade successes as *Space Invaders* (1978), *Galaxian* (1979), and the innumerable clones of them that emerged in the early 1980s. Through these games the Shoot-em-up as a genre dominated much of early gaming culture, and the illustrations it used to promote itself.

In terms of them & us, of determining those individuals and ideas who are included and excluded by social discourse, the Alien stands at the edges. These 'Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations.' (Haraway, 1990, p. 56). They live on the periphery, a liminal space where they 'demonstrate what is not human the better to exemplify that which is human. Difference and otherness are the essence of aliens,' (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 6) This is part of the normative function of the Alien, they are the sum of our fears and aspirations, in that they are reminder of what we are, and are not. In academic literature the conceptualisation of the Sci-Fi Alien has often focused on these 'others' as feminine, as 'monstrous mothers' (Creed, 1993). Heavily informed by Freudian psychoanalysis these feminine others act as a site of projected male anxiety. This anxiety being posited as a response to a deepening crisis of masculinity in the 1970s. The role of the Alien as monstrous, and its prevalence in the sample, offers a means of questioning the limits of the gaming community's social imaginary, of what is acceptable and what is not, and of interrogating the kinds of masculinity on offer.

### **Beasts, invaders, and the benign**

There are three essential Alien tropes within the magazine sample, which exist on a scale of sophistication, ranging from the bestial to the benign. Similar to the Warriors and Wizards of the Fantasy realm they present a conceptual range, from monsters of the id to masters of the ego. The Alien-Beast is the basest type, the primal allegory of the Alien as unthinking

animals (cunning creatures perhaps, but without civilization). Whether they have tentacles or claws they operate as targets for man's technological prowess. These Beasts (Figure 14) serve to highlight man's progress and are closest to the 'monstrous mothers' of feminist film theory. These others must meet their nemesis in the imago of the classic spaceman (Figure 15). The spaceman here represents the noble explorer-hunter, a civilising force, bound to technology, encased in a fragile shell of control. He is a recycled version of the Victorian adventurer, akin to Haggard's Allan Quatermain (*King Solomon's Mines*). Therefore, the classic spaceman can be regarded as emblematic of hegemonic Western masculinity, and the Alien Beast's role is to populate a space safari, one that enables the performance of his masculinity and prowess, his frontier heroism.

The mid-range of Alien sophistication can be termed the Space Invader (or Little Green Man), and these aliens have much in common with the classic Aliens of HG Wells's *War of the Worlds*, in that they are 'unknowable, fanatic, equipped with superior technology, bloodthirsty, merciless and cruel.' (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 6) This trope, as epitomised by the 1981 launch cover of *CVG* (Figure 16) is the one most distinctly identified with the medium of videogaming, due to the success of the arcade original. Of the three Alien types these Invaders are arguably presented as the greatest threat, due to their possession and control of technology. They are dark reflections of our heroic spaceman, where we explore they invade. They represent a subverting of the Western heroic-vision of science.

These little green men of the 1950s have become increasingly sinister by the 1980s videogaming milieu, with ever more frenzied reflections presented to the gamer of their own destructive pleasures. The character known as the 'Chairman', due to his place on the boardroom wall of the publishers, is an iconic videogaming image from the launch issue of *CRASH* magazine, and epitomises this dark evolution of the original Space Invader. They have become rageful and frenetic, trapped in an accelerating feedback loop of play – as connoted by the reflections in the alien's visor. As descendants of Wells, and countless cold-war B-Movies, these Space Invaders are images of 'bad science', of technology placed in the wrong hands (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002), and of progress unchecked. As such these images enunciate a high degree of ambivalence regarding scientism. This kind of reading serves to question the often held view that gaming culture is inherently celebrationist towards technology per se.



Figure 14. October 1987 – CRASH magazine, the Alien as the savage Beast



Figure 15. October 1984 – CRASH magazine, the Spaceman as frontier hero

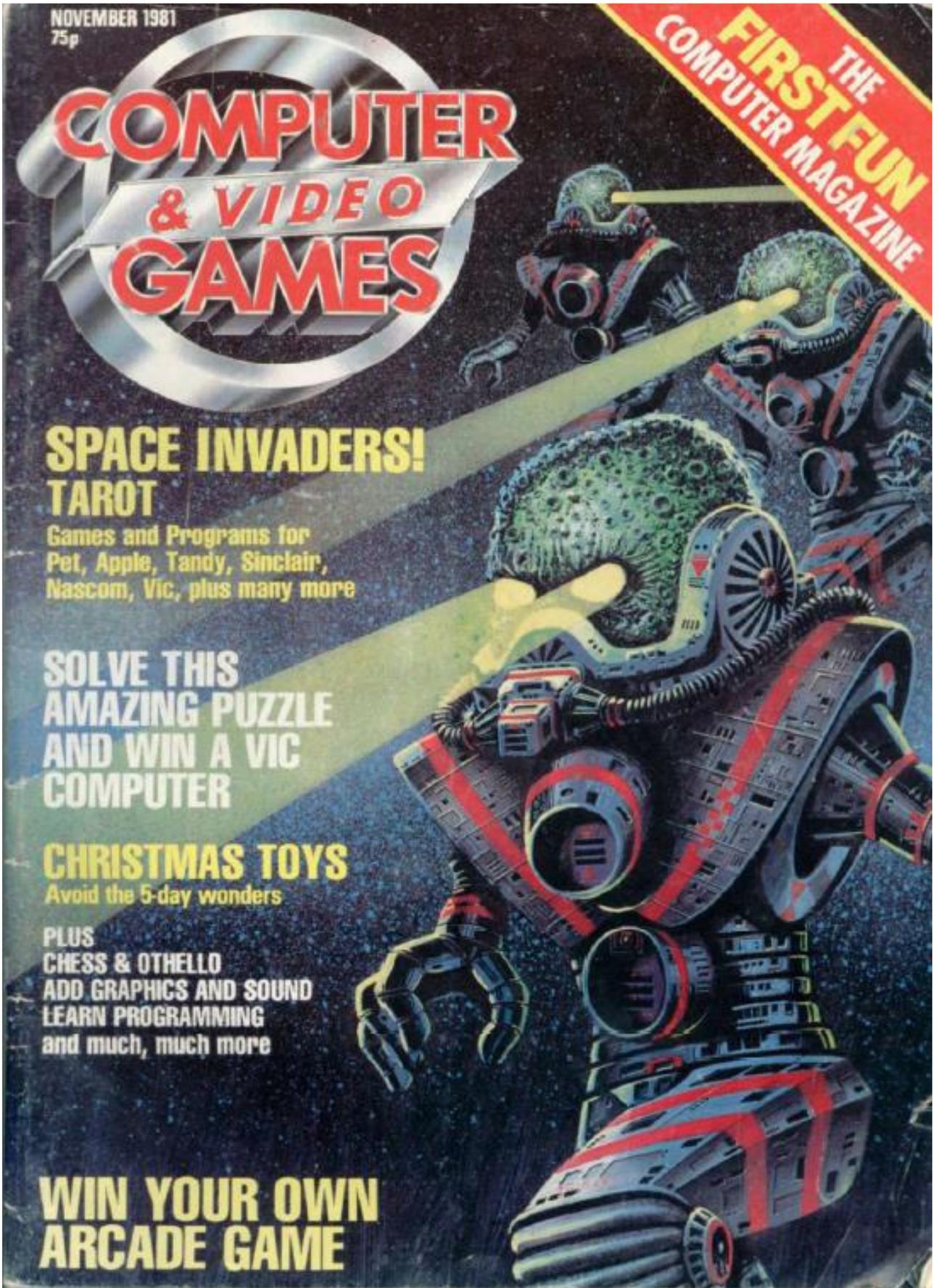


Figure 16. November 1981 CVG launch issue – little green men search out their human prey

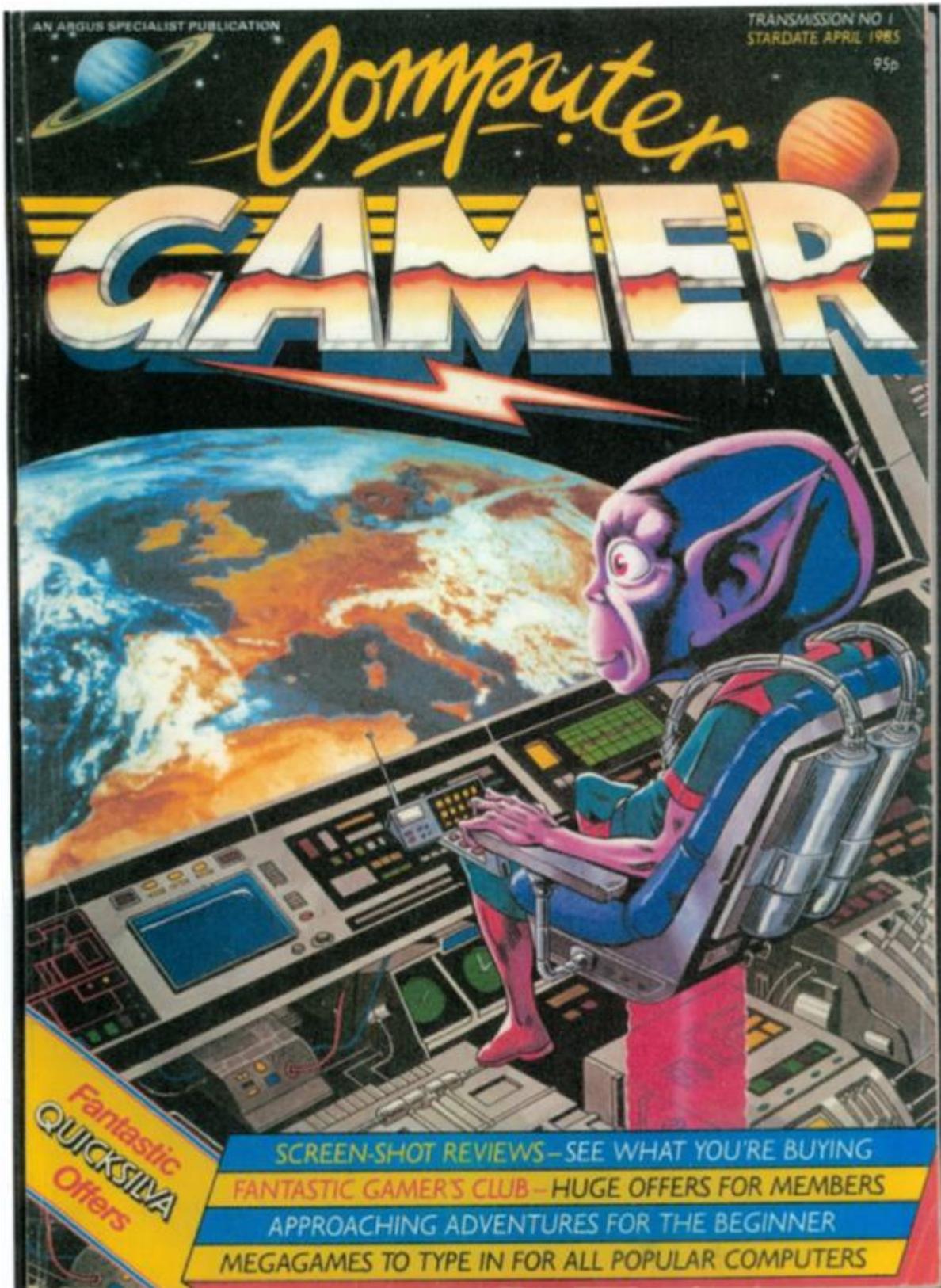


Figure 17. April 1985 – *Computer Gamer* magazine, the benign alien observes without invading



Figure 18. October 1986 – CRASH magazine. The gamer is re-imagined as jubilant alien pilot

Whilst the Alien is generally presented as violent, aggressive, and antagonistic, there is an alternate trope – the cerebral, physically slight, benign explorer (Figure 17). These are binary opposites to the savage beast, and represent an idealised image of Western civilisation projected into the future, a future that then returns to view us from without. They are not monsters of the id, but mimetic creatures of the ego. In this regard Sci-Fi literature can be viewed as a modern version of 19<sup>th</sup> Century anthropology (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002), which sees itself in the lives of the other. Through such an empirical lens planetary types and entire civilisations are classified and categorised. Yet, such a mimetic process is playfully undermined in some of the later imagery produced. One example is from a play on the earlier image of the ‘Chairman’, where now the alien pilot’s helmet is removed and we are left with an idealised image of our self (Figure 18). It is the gamer-self in rapture, in a frenzy of control, jubilant in play. It is an image of mastery, where the Alien was us all along.

These three alien tropes, Beast, Invader, Benign, represent a certain type of Western technological Imaginary, a scale of sophistication that ranges from the primordial savage to cerebral detachment. Where the Fantasy realm reflects upon issues of order and power, here the emphasis is on technological mastery and the unknown, the seductions of a scientific and instrumental ideology, and the promises of empire building. Furthermore, ‘For the political imagination, sf created tools with which audiences could imagine the steady consolidation of technoscientific hegemony, defined by the drive to construct a universal regime of technoscience ... a technoscientific empire.’ (Bould *et al.*, 2009, p. 362) This hegemony centred on science and technology is an idea best typified by the trope of the Spaceship.

### **The medium of technology - the spaceship**

‘Wherever we look, the colonising, imperial mission of science fiction is hard to miss.’  
(Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 16)

The image of the spaceship, and a broad section of the Sci-Fi genre (as typified by *Star Trek*), has been connected in academic discourse with issues of empire and hegemony. The colonising spaceship becoming a metaphor for scientific triumphalism, where new frontiers replace those of the Wild West, and where science replaces the sheriffs badge as the

‘warrant to colonise and control.’ (Sardar and Cubitt, 2002, p. 9) In this section I shall utilise the magazine sample to question and expand upon this perspective. Whilst the Sci-Fi novel offers great scope for a nuanced discussion of, and elaboration upon, such issues as hegemony (Ian M. Banks *Culture* series often centres itself on such a debate), the distilled medium of illustration must instead rely upon pre-existing tropes. The key question here is what kind of reality does the spaceship enable? As imagined evocative objects (Turkle, 2008) what do they make us think about.

Upon examining the sample it becomes evident that there are two main types of ship being portrayed: firstly the big capital ships of empire already referred to (Figure 19). These ships of state are the explorers and colonisers of the sci-fi genre. The notion of progress as a journey, specifically a maritime journey, has particular entailments – movement, hierarchical order (crew), the crossing of borders, direction/purpose, discovery and conquest. Such a metaphor of the trade/war ship connects smoothly to previous conceptions of empire and imperial trade. In the Sci-Fi milieu the zero-g of deep space can be seen as connecting to the monetarist ideals of friction-free capitalism, and to the attendant neoliberalist discourse of post-industrial digital utopias (Dyer-Witheford, 1999).

Therefore, the exploring grand spaceship represents a metaphor for such technological determinism and a neo-liberal conception of economic order. They are the digital capitalists who are constructing ‘a new world of low-friction, low-overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low.’ (Gates *et al.*, 1995, p. 171). These notions of technologically determined free enterprise have historically served as both theory, rationale, and policy legitimization. By the mid-1980s this ideology had become a material force, shaping modern reality. It can be viewed as a partisan prophecy of a future without ideology and without end, where there is only eternal progress. As such these vast ships work to present such progress as inevitable, but it is a progress that must still be steered; there must be captains for this industry. One promise to the readers of the videogame magazine is that they can be those very captains, masters and commanders of the Information revolution. Yet, there is a second, arguably more dominant (certainly more recurrent) image of the spaceship in the illustrations examined, a second type of metaphor and promise.

Numerous illustrations of small and agile fighter ships populate the sample. If the large ships can be said to represent hegemony, and neo-liberal authority, then these small ships would seem to be images of rebellion and individuality - always portrayed in action they are inherently combative and resistant. However, whilst they may appeal to a youthful and rebellious demographic are these representations opposing or supporting the existing order; are these raiders or defenders?

The prevalence of images where small spacecraft attack the large ships (Figure 20 & Figure 21) does suggest a level of opposition to the hegemonic metaphor. Brought into a collective by a common enemy the fighter ships operate as sub-cultural pirate squadrons that dodge and weave around the powerful state-ships. This resonates with a concurrent wider debate within technological circles concerning the popularity of PC vs mainframes during the early 1980s. In both cases there is a level of ambivalence and a critique towards technology, where the grand narrative of progress is deconstructed by the individual users. Whereas the large ships represent the use of technology to control society and produce social change, the nimble fighter ships connect with an individualistic desire to control the direction of technology itself, and to be immersed within it. However, these images are still inherently about power and control; the potency of technology itself is never in question. Instead the space fighter-pilot becomes a metaphor for the interface between man and machine, and it is only a question of where you point the technology.

The illustrations used by videogame magazines on their covers reveal a nuanced engagement with pre-existing Sci-Fi tropes that goes beyond their original remit of boosting retail magazine sales. Furthermore, they do work to advance one trope in particular, and in doing so help develop a new metaphor: that of the active-user, where 'You' become the space-pilot, and become built into the very interface itself. This is achieved via devices of opacity and disembodiment, which in turn produce what Lupton terms a technosocial subject (Lupton, 1995). A subject that is idealised and impervious, the apotheosis of a post-Enlightenment separation of body and mind. This is an aspect that joins the seemingly disparate fields of Fantasy and Sci-Fi imagery, a Cartesian segmentation of the subject into might/mind (the Warrior vs the Wizard), and flesh/circuitry. Furthermore, the spaceships illustrated in the sample are not objects for passive reflection, but empty vessels awaiting active engagement; they require a controller in order to function.

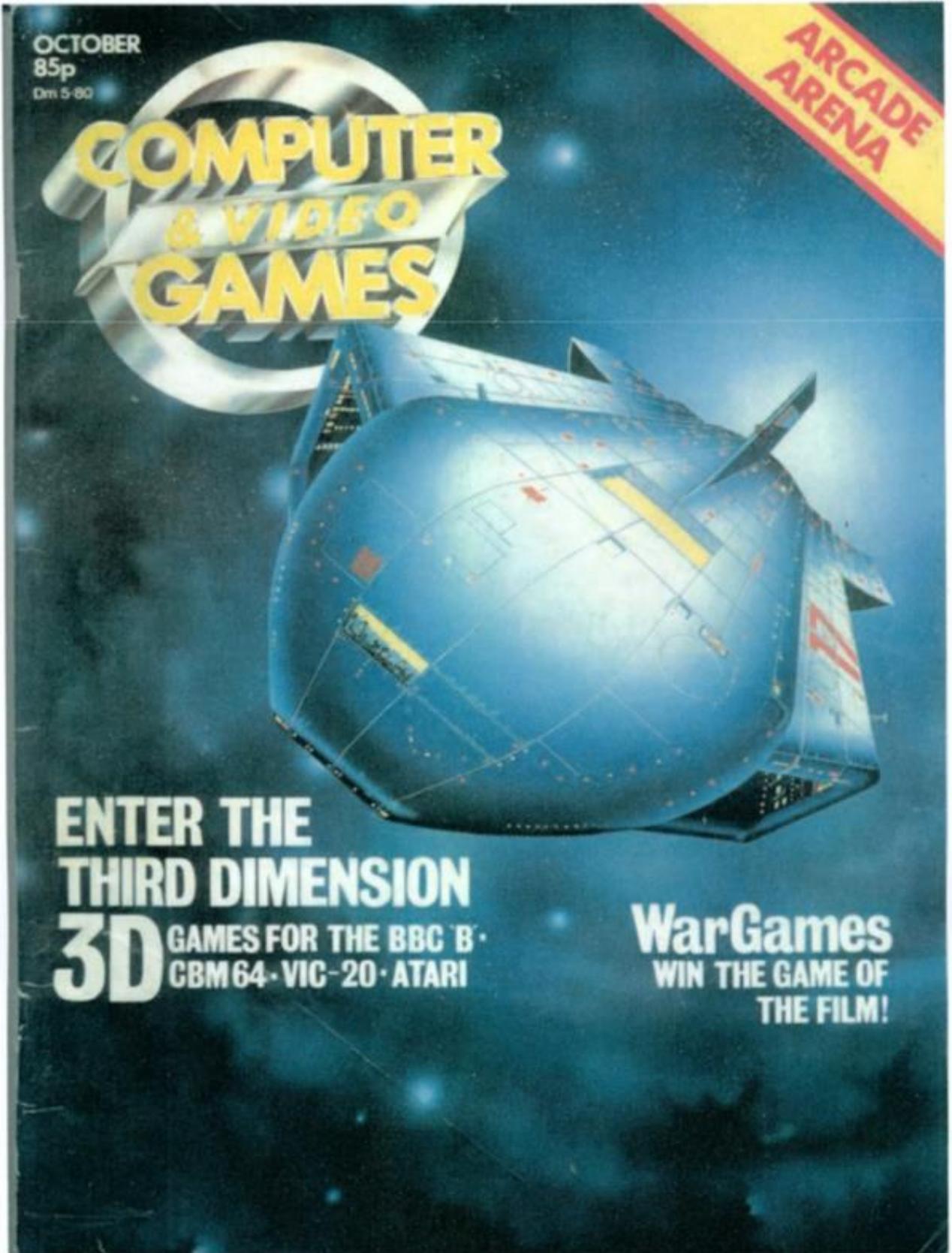


Figure 19. October 1986 – Computer & Video Game Magazine, the capital ship of empire



Figure 20. October 1985 – CRASH magazine, a fleet of nimble craft pursue the enemy



Figure 21. April 1986 – CRASH magazine, the capital ship under bombardment has morphed into a version of the micro-computer

This interactive quality is conveyed by obscuring the presence, or identity, of any on-board active agents. The ships generally either have no visible pilot (especially with the large ships), the pilot's face is obscured via an opaque helmet visor, or the angle of the depiction (commonly from above and behind, in gaming parlance 3<sup>rd</sup> person view) shields their face from view. In doing so the ship becomes trapped in stasis, and in order for the image to function the reader must occupy a position within the cybernetic network of the cockpit. Similar to the cyborg being an idealised form of masculinity, or superman (Halacy, 1965), the fighter pilot has a long history as an emblem of individualised heroic masculinity. As such these new 'Knights of the Sky' offer a potent source of fantasy, and an imaginary means of escape from the dilemmas of daily life.

This escape is not just from the user's own reality, but from the body in general, and as such it forms part of that 'central utopian discourse around computer technology [which] is the potential offered by computers for humans to escape the body.' (Lupton, 1995). By entering into the cybernetic interface of the cockpit the reader-user can obtain the 'control and communication' (Wiener, 1948) between self and technology that is the central promise of cybernetics and Sci-Fi discourse. This is a shoring up of the masculine subject by the always already masculine gendered resource of technology. These fantasies of disembodiment are common across cyberculture, be it the fiction of Gibson (1984), or the theory of Haraway (1990). The physical body is always secondary and must be transcended. It is base, 'meat', a hindrance to total immersion in the cyberscape. The Empty Cockpits of Sci-Fi illustration provide one means of such imagined immersion.

Before drawing some initial conclusions, specifically on the potentially escapist and regressive status of the illustrations used by gaming magazines, it is important to ask how the producers of these images are being represented to the readership. Often these illustrators, as cultural intermediaries, are somewhat peripheral to the overall labours of the videogame magazine. They are peripheral both in that they are not provided the discursive centrality of the reviewer, and that they are less likely to be permanent staff members and are instead contracted on a freelance basis. Yet, in order to comprehend how 'tastes' are being formed in relation to the new gaming aesthetic it is necessary to bring them in from the margins and place them within the 'stratified, fragmented labour force' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014) of the specialist gaming press. Analysing the 1985 to 1986 series of

interviews 'On the covers', carried out by *CRASH* magazine with illustrators who had worked on gaming related products, offers one route to understanding the otherwise liminal figure of the gaming artist.

### **'On the Covers' – interviews with videogame related illustrators**

In studying the archive it becomes apparent that the gaming illustrator, as taste maker, is provided with a degree of kudos according to the level by which the specific brand values their own use of cover imagery. The more visually determined the magazine brand, the more the subject position of the illustrator is venerated. This is especially true with *CRASH* and *ZZap!64*, magazine, due largely to the central role played by Oliver Frey as their in-house illustrator and co-founder of the publications (along with his partner Roger Kean, and brother Franco Frey). As such Oliver Frey stands out as both an artist, and as a proponent of the new arena of gaming related art.

Between March 1985 and January 1986 *CRASH* magazine published 11 articles called 'On the Covers', which interviewed illustrators known for their work on gaming magazine front covers. Most of these artists also worked freelance for software companies, promoting games via the illustrations used on packaging and inlays. These illustrators were not confined to gaming related material, and often worked across a number of mediums, and cultural forms, illustrating for pop magazines and history books. As one interview states 'Book covers, magazine covers, cassette inlays, advertising posters... they're all grist to Stuart Hughes' artistic mill.' *CRASH*20 (1985). These figures represent a reworking of established illustrative practices into the new, niche but growing, digital realm. Some of these illustrators will straddle the barrier between the traditional and the digital, and all will offer insight into the cultural narratives being sketched out at the time.

These eleven articles provide an archival micro-history of a burgeoning media industry during the mid-1980s. A time where the increased marketing and production budgets for games increased competition in terms of retail visibility, which in turn led to a new emphasis on professional, attractive packaging. These distribution shifts, from bespoke mail order service, to independent boutique, and finally to wide-scale retail chains, encouraged and enabled a cultural change in videogaming. This culminated in the building of a particular and

discrete gaming aesthetic. Yet, whilst the new aesthetic is specific to gaming it forms part of a trajectory that shares its history with other cultural products, as one of the *CRASH* interviews asserts, 'Books and record album covers have developed into an art form of their own. Recently the same has happened with computer game cassette covers.' *CRASH*14:128 (1985) These articles allow a tracing of this new gaming aesthetic: one that was non-diegetic, and did not initially reside within the pixelated parameters of the game.

In terms of genre the series of interviews can be considered as promotional, both for the illustrators being covered, and for the media practice of using illustration as a means of selling magazines. The features take the format of some contemporary gaming related context (to attract the gamer interest), followed by personal history, portfolio and career progression, artistic influences and preferred artistic practice. Enough practical detail is provided to allow for emulation and appreciation from the more creative reader, with the articles often finishing with aspirational advice on how to make it in the illustrating business.

Yet, these interviews are more than advertorial and instead form part of the growing cultural self-reflexivity within gaming. They aim to articulate the significance of illustration to wider gaming culture, whilst presenting the videogame magazine itself as a key site of cultural production. They legitimate the role of the illustrator, admittedly whilst garnering gaming capital from them and collecting it for the brand. Yet, they are also promoting self-development and artistic growth amongst their readership in a manner that is both inclusive and supportive.

I shall now explore the series of interviews in relation to two key discourses: firstly the videogame illustrator as an independent, free-spirited, masculine aspirational figure; secondly the illustrator as an early form of digital artist, one who acts as a 'nodal' point in the relationship between the diegetic and the non-diegetic, as an interface between game and gamer. The following inserts for the articles will include an abbreviation regarding the interviewed participant, which are: Steinar Lund (SL), David Rowe (DR), Godfrey Dawson (GD), David Thorpe (DT), Bob Wakelin (BW), Rich Shenfield (RS), Stuart Hughes (SH), Ian Craig (IC), Sarah Rowe (SR), Oliver Frey (OF) – all the participants are white males, with the exception of SR, who is female.

### **The aspirational renegade**

The illustrator, like the games reviewer, is presented in terms that encourage identification with the largely teenage demographic, whilst depicting the subject as distinctly mature. Therefore, these illustrators perform as role models, idealised users who are both accessible and successful. Their artistic influences act as part of their bio, and as a potential shared ground between the magazine readership and these arts professionals. It is often a shared realm of Fantasy art, Sci-Fi, and comic books. It is also a territory defined by passions and fandom. The following excerpts identify this tendency within the texts.

**GD** 'Godfrey's first love is fantasy and his career began with science fiction and magic illustrations.' CRASH16 (1985)

**SH** 'Stuart's first love has always been Science Fiction and Fantasy' CRASH20 (1985)

**DR** 'The computer industry provides such a terrific medium to work in, and there's a great deal of allowance for personal expression — and the games almost demand an illustrator to incorporate a bit of fun and whimsy in his work.' CRASH15 (1985)

This presentation of the star as an accessible ideal is a standard technique within the teen magazine market, in what could be termed the construction of low pedestals. Furthermore, these creative bios form a narrative where initially esoteric interests (tarot cards for example) lead to productive and interesting labours. In the following excerpts two trajectories of school to cool are sketched out, the first draws on the kudos of the music industry, the second on 1960s counter-culture.

**BW** 'Shortly after completing the Graphics course, and once he'd finished the obligatory spell on the dole, Bob started work for a Liverpool studio which specialised in artwork for the entertainment industry, and executed a lot of commissions from rock bands, producing artwork for album covers.' CRASH18 (1985)

**DR** 'After studying Zoology, Botany and English at A level, he decided to 'become a hippy' for a couple of years (in the late sixties) before starting art school ... Between graduating from Brighton Polytechnic in 1975 and becoming involved in illustrating cover inlays, David worked as a 'jobbing artist'. CRASH15 (1985)

Such narratives of progression are significant in how they attempt to elide a core problematic to videogaming. The work/play, child/adult divide, a dichotomy that is central to gaming culture, is collapsed in these ideal-user bios as play provides work, and first loves provide employment. These are the promises of the cultural industries, that the cultural capital earned in youth will provide ample returns in adulthood. The emphasis is often on a counter-cultural sensibility ('hippies') regarding creative freedom, expressiveness, and independence. Their free-lance status is the individuated ideal, contrasted to both big business and big government; it is depicted as an Artisan culture.

When considering the idealisation of the illustrator/creative producer, and the kinds of fantasies that are produced by celebrity bios (be they rock stars, actors, reviewers, or artists), it is useful to attend closely to the habitus of the intended reader – in this case the male teenage gamer. The tales presented in 'On the Cover' are often ones of Polytechnic graduates finding their way through a maze of new social practices via their ability and social networks. These are stories of social mobility for the lower to middle classes, where the wider realm of digital play acts as an enabler of change. The creative professional as a class of activity is celebrated, and this is a process that connects with articles on the professionalization of the gaming sector as a whole in the mid-1980s, the new 'whiz kid' programmers often fixated upon by the wider media.

The gendering of the creative figure (in this case the illustrator) as a masculine one is a process thrown into sharp relief via the inclusion of a female artist, Susan Rowe, in the series of interviews. Whilst this act of inclusion may initially be argued to question any gender bias, the singularity of the inclusion, combined with the oppositions created in the bio, serve only to cement the gendering process being enacted. The article sets out her history and creative style as follows.

**SR** 'In the mid seventies Susan Rowe studied illustration at Brighton Polytechnic.' CRASH22 (1985)

**SR** 'Susan became involved with the software industry in 1981 — she produced the painting for Quicksilva's Christmas card and was invited to paint pictures for cassette inlays by the company.' CRASH22 (1985)

**SR** 'Her work is very delicate and detailed, executed in watercolours — very different from the work of airbrush merchants (such as her husband, David).' CRASH22 (1985)

**SR** 'Susan's chosen specialism was for children's book illustration ... Susan's style is appealing to children.' CRASH22 (1985)

**SR** 'An interesting marriage of talent, Mrs and Mr Rowe. On the one hand the painter of striking and eye catching large paintings; on the other the meticulous, delicate painter of detail.' CRASH22 (1985)

These brief extracts, and the piece as a whole, paint a delicate picture of the artist.

Concerning content and style it presents a softer, more feminine, form of Fantasy. One that is more ephemeral, and enchanted, as opposed to the combative, hyperbolic bodies of the traditional Barbarian or Warrior. Susan Rowe is being presented as an aspirational figure, similar to her male counterparts, and shares the Polytechnic to software house trajectory of the others, but her style marks her as different, as delicate. Whilst the men are 'airbrush merchants', tech-traders in future fantasies of space-ships and alien worlds, Susan displays the 'decorative influence' of William Morris, and 'is interested in botany'. Susan's work is framed as 'appealing' to children, as opposed to teenagers, the emphasis being on the hearth and the bedtime tale. Her femininity is, therefore, signalled by reference to the (imagined) pastoral arts and crafts discourse of history, as opposed to the grand male narratives of an unknown and dangerous future. The dichotomy being re-enforced in Susan's bio is that of tradition vs technology, where the woman acts as supportive supplement to the male; complementing rather than challenging. The second discourse to be examined via these interview is that of the illustrator as node or interface to the videogame experience.

Whilst some of the illustrators are distinctly uninterested in the technology they promote, including Bob Wakelin, the prolific 'airbrush merchant' who produced some of the most iconic gaming images of the time, there is also a thread within these creative narratives that closely connects art and technology.

**RS** 'And his technological background enters his art — one painting, which formed part of a travelling exhibition, involved a fair bit of electronic wizardry which triggered off light emitting diodes and played an audio tape if sensors picked up movement ... 'I'm keen to bridge the gap between engineering and art' CRASH19 (1985)

Similarly in his interview David Thorpe describes himself as an artistic interface between the illustrator (in this instance Bob Wakelin) and the computer screen. A computer graphics artist who translates from one medium to the other. The interface here is between the mediums of illustration and programming, between art and technology. There is in these interviews a growing sense of self-reflexivity and experimentation regarding gaming as an interactive medium. Other illustrators, such as Steinar Lund, were also employed to draw the loading screens for videogames. These loading pages are highly significant as relatively early examples of digital art. For whilst it should be noted that the history of digital art goes back to the late 1950s, it was comparatively rarely exhibited, and these loading screens would have been the first examples of the medium to many of its young audience.

Yet, there is another form of interface being played out here, one between videogame and gamer, and it is the notion of translation that is perhaps the most pertinent here. Like Thorpe's description of the 'artistic interface' the software illustrator, as cultural intermediary, translates the ideal of the game (what the software company would like the game to be like) into an aesthetic reality. Due to technical limitations on the 8-bit machine there is a resultant reality gap between the spectacular images that adorn magazine covers and cassette tape boxes, and the basic pixelated images that appear upon playing the game. That gap, the discrepancy, is both a deceit and a guide. The illustrations provide an imaginative resource, a bridge to cross the divide between desire and availability. The particular importance of the emerging videogame aesthetic, as displayed on the magazine covers, is that they enabled the subsequent acts of play.

This new figure, of illustrator as art-technician, is a diegetic bridge builder into this digital realm. They can be said to be activating the audience, making them as users re-imagine the landscape of the videogame at a time where technical limitations abound. In doing so these cultural intermediaries reconstruct the notion of what a gaming experience *should* look and feel like. As such they are the apotheosis of taste makers, in that they are helping to determine what the experience of interacting with the product will actually consist of. Through their artistic labours these illustrators provided the gaming imaginary with a collective, externalised lifeworld, for an otherwise internally experienced game. In decades to come the inner diegetic life of the game world will come to closely match (even arguably exceed) the shared world of the gaming imaginary, but at this point in its early

history it was the illustrator that sustained the forces of disbelief and kept the adventure real.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude I would like to raise the spectre of escapism and regression. A recurrent moral panic around videogaming, gamer culture, and fan based cultures more generally, is that they encourage a disconnection from reality, and are escapist, obsessive and juvenile (Jenkins, 2013). The Fantasy imagery discussed here, with its hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine fetishes, and the fascination Sci-Fi has with escaping the body and voyaging into the unknown to battle little green men would ostensibly support such 'technonostalgic' criticism. However, it needs to be recognised that this question of regression and escapism is itself partly one of demographics, to cite Erikson 'the playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward into new stages of mastery.' (Turkle, 1996, p. 204) This highlights the difficulty when discussing the cultural practices of a group whose core demographic exists on the borders between the child and the adult. Their liminal status raises the problematic of which direction the subject is stepping, forwards or to the side. Rather than regressive I would argue that the imagery analysed in this chapter acted in an enabling role for its readership, providing a cast of characters, and a range of settings, for the users to playfully experiment with. A means of dramatizing their own experiences of change and loss.

What can be stated with confidence is that the use of such vibrant and creative illustrations, on the covers of videogame magazines, did fulfil an important function, which was to enable the reader to step more easily into the coarsely pixelated games on offer. These images smoothed out the transition from the real into the simulation, and the pluralistic identities that formed on those cover pages helped connect the inner game world with the expectations and desires of the user. In her cyborg manifesto Haraway writes that 'By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.' (Haraway, 1990, p. 35) In the 1980s it was the distinctly non-digital realm of Fantasy and Sci-Fi print illustration that enabled such a fusion for the videogame entertainment industry. The chimeric characters it helped create continue to exist, both on and off the screen, in the contemporary cultural imaginary.

## Chapter 7 - User Generated Content as representation and regulation



## Introduction

This chapter examines the role played by User Generated Content (UGC) within the UK gaming magazine industry, specifically in relation to ideas around participatory culture, and the attempts made to regulate such community led discourse. One ambition of this section is to examine the emergent gaming discourse of the 1980s and early 1990s by discerning the core genres of the letters (via content analysis), and to consider how these shift over time as the magazines become more defined as a discrete cultural space. Further textual analysis of the editorial responses to those letters will then allow for an examination of several key dichotomies within the discourse, and the increasingly hyperreal subject position of the letters editor. These developments are seen in the wider context of early gaming culture, a time of technological determination and a period of contestation over gamer identity. The focus for this study is the role UGC played in this cultural contest around what it means to be a gamer and the distribution of gaming capital entailed therein. Therefore, this study contributes to studies on gaming culture, UGC in general, and 'Zines' (Atton, 1999; Atton, 2001; Duncombe, 2014) in that it examines how the specialist gaming press of the 1980s worked to develop its own 'synthetic discourse' (Fairclough, 1988), in part by appropriating the kudos of both the alternative media and its own readership.

However, it should be noted from the outset that this study is not an examination of the videogame readership per se, and spends more time examining the editorial frame rather than the original UGC itself. A thorough examination of the users would require a different methodological approach than the one employed in this study, arguably one that contained ethnographic elements (including interviews with both the letter writers, and magazine staff), activities that go beyond the limits of this project, but which have traditionally been used on readership studies elsewhere. When discussing UGC, in the form of reader's letters, Barker writes 'They are part of the self-image of the comic. They present that self-image, and help to encourage the right kind of future response from readers.' (Barker, 1989, p. 47) Similarly this chapter examines and understands UGC as a representational and regulatory tool. In terms of structure this study will begin by looking at what is meant by the term UGC; then provides a brief outline of the (post-fordist) production context within which that

content existed; it moves on to present the mixed-methodology being used in the study, and the findings of the content analysis. Finally the core body of the textual analysis will begin by examining the use of 'call-outs' across various strains of UGC, before providing a close textual examination of the letters taken from the sample.

### **UGC – the 'special community' of participation**

In the contemporary mediascape the provision to add UGC is all pervasive, and is indeed a defining feature of Web 2.0 design. However, it is estimated that only 1% of users actively create new content. Writing for the Guardian Arthur comments 'if you get a group of 100 people online then one will create content, 10 will "interact" with it (commenting or offering improvements) and the other 89 will just view it' (Arthur, 2006). As such UGC could be regarded as primarily the province of the super-user. Whilst this form of activity, or labour, is often presented as highly contemporary and innovative, it does have a long tradition in the pre-digital media - most notably via the popularity of reader's letters pages, a stalwart of the modern publishing industry since its inception.

The ongoing popularity of UGC, for those who produce, print, and read it, is to a great extent centred on an 'aura' of inclusivity and group identity. This 'special community' is one 'which you have to go out of your way to join. If you join it, you can become more than you already are.' (Barker, 1989, p. 48). As such UGC requires active agency, and is aspirational. The super-users of early gaming mags, those providing the letters, tips & cheats, fan-art, and type-in programs, arguably constitute a little less than the aforementioned 1% (Arthur, 2006) of overall readership. Yet, though these contributors are relatively small in number, they are highly significant both within the magazines (in terms of the physical page counts of UGC), and within the broader social imaginary of the gaming community. They represent a liminal vanguard of idealised users. Also, whilst the letters of this study existed at a time that conventionally pre-dates convergence culture, it is my assertion that these archival texts usefully feed into the debates on consumerism and participatory culture often associated with convergence theory. As Van Dijck argues, whilst it has often been the tradition to theorize the 'agency of media recipients in close relation to the type of medium' (Van Dijck, 2009, p. 41), and thereby produce an old/new media binary, there is a historical continuity of reader participation (Van Dijck, 2009) that dispels such technological determinism.

There are numerous connective points between the practices of UGC and the broader notion of media convergence, and this ground has been extensively worked over in relation to social media networks, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century shifts in communication technologies. Many of the debates on this topic emerge from, and produce, a dialectic tension between two forces: those of emancipation and control. For a literature review of these cultural and economic theoretical debates, with its oppositions of recipients vs participants, and producers vs consumers, Van Dijck's aforementioned essay on theorising agency offers an excellent introduction (Van Dijck, 2009). On one side of the dialectic there is a democratisation of the media, a broadening of opportunities for people to tell their own stories and share information. Countering this emancipatory perspective is the idea that the same technologies of inclusion allow for media companies to intervene in the lives of their users as never before, co-opting all that counters their interests, and narrowcasting their own ideologically driven agendas into resistant communities. Whilst this debate informs this study, it is my hope that the following work is not contained or restricted to such a dichotomy (false or otherwise) of emancipation and control.

### **UGC as a fan-writing genre**

One aim of this chapter is to recognise the users' voice, whilst locating it within a wider set of power relationships that constitute the gaming magazine as a media multi-text or 'format' (Fairclough, 2003). UGC, as a medium, exists on a highly textual level, in that it is particularly discursive. It is shaped (or textured) by both the author/user, the editorial ethos that selects and frames them from the outset, and the broader text of the publication within which it appears. Before moving to the analysis of the texts (reader's letters and responses) it will be useful to map out some pertinent conceptual territory, and to see where these concepts overlay each other. Regarding UGC and this thesis the core concepts for this chapter can be sketched out as genres of governance (Fairclough, 2003) participatory culture (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 2013), gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007), and geek identity (Kendall, 2000; Simon, 2007; Kendall, 2011; Quail, 2011). The question here being to what extent does the UGC of gaming magazines constitute a participatory culture (one closely tied in to a notional 'geek' identity, and constituted by gaming capital), and how do the editorial responses to this UGC attempt to regulate and govern the production of new meaning.

This analysis considers UGC as various genres of discourse, as different ways 'of acting and interacting linguistically' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). The UGC of the early videogame magazine constituted a range of ways of acting/interacting, including letter writing, map/guide making, and cartoon sketching. These genres are relevant from a CDA perspective because they govern social practice, thereby sustaining existing capitalist structures. Regarding my own research question the most relevant CDA concepts are those relating to the power of these genres to govern, genre chains, and the 'systemic transformations' (Fairclough, 2003) that movement along these chains involves. These transformations, of assimilation and hybridity, occur within a process Fairclough terms 'prospective interdiscursivity': a form of self-censorship, enacted here with the aim of peer acceptance and the accrual of gaming capital. This produces a scenario where governance is enacted without request, although the call-outs for content do constitute a sporadic form of request, a casual reminder of what is expected. Furthermore, in such a conceptual framework these ways of acting/interacting have not only broad structural relevance to the operations of the media industry, but also operate on the level of the individual agent, producing ways of being (or in CDA terminology 'styles'). They work on the macro and micro levels.

UGC providers can be considered as participants producing their own textual artefacts, and thereby producing their own culture. As such it will be useful to further define what is being meant by the term 'participatory culture', as developed by Jenkins and others.

'For Jenkins, participatory cultures are characterised by social networks of people with relatively low barriers to artistic expression, where one finds strong support for creating culture and for sharing those creations with others, and where cultural knowledge is passed informally among members of a social network. Members of these networks share an understanding of the value of fan-cultural knowledge and culture, and also feel a degree of shared connectedness and identification with other fans.' (Williams, 2011, p. 174)

Knowledge is core to this shared sense of identity, and the nodal points that act as gateways for the distribution of knowledge play a key role in how that identity forms (in this case niche magazines). Furthermore, in subcultural theory it is proposed that participatory cultures are 'typically constituted by groups of people who are *fans*' (Williams, 2011, p. 175). UGC is one means of bringing together the individual fan and the wider fanbase that they constitute. The niche publication plays a key role here, operating as a gate keeper to such interactions.

Yet, regarding UGC and fandom, the connection should not be simplified. To be part of a participatory culture it is not required for the fan to actively contribute (Williams, 2011), only that they recognise, and value, the authority of the amateur, or autodidact, to produce meaning. Therefore, whilst the fan writer might only make up a small fraction of the overall readership (the less than 1%), they can be said to embody the values of the wider collective that they represent and communicate to. In this context it can be argued that to study the super-user is to understand the idealised self of the user-community. Whereby the ideal acts as an aspirational norm.

### **The 'Geek' identity of the idealised gamer**

The welcome page for the first issue of *Big K* magazine (1984) offers some insight into the type of identity being constructed in the pages of the videogame specialist press.

'The potential for power in the near future lies with the computer-literate. This means you. They may wrinkle their noses sometimes at your penchant for writing and playing alienocidal (look it up) games, but they envy you your marksmanship just the same ... they gasp at your cool and confident use of power ... Youth tooled up with pixel power' BK1 (1984)

These tech-empowered youths, or digital boys (Burrill, 2008), can be most succinctly defined as geeks. A technophilic identity, where their perceived technical mastery forms part of a non-traditional anti-physical masculinity, an example of middle-class hyper-whiteness (Bucholtz, 1999; Bucholtz, 2001).

The geek/nerd stereotype celebrates technology both as a medium, and as an instrumental world view – one where knowledge and classification is venerated. As was stated in the previous chapter on Sci-Fi and Fantasy the media invariably represents the geek/nerd as 'asexual, intellectual, wimpy, uncool' (Kendall, 2011, p. 515), and as such geek identity exists outside traditional hegemonic masculinity (Quail, 2011). This supposed asexuality is articulated in the general media by the moral panics that sporadically emerge around antisocial computer usage, and the image of the lonely geek (e.g. BBC's QED programme of January 1990 'My Best Friend's a Computer'). Here the geek acts as the atomised representative of excessive technological engagement, with the panic centring on the idea that 'machines might encourage isolated anti-social users' (Haddon, 1990, p. 5). In this sense

they are emblematic of a broader fear towards technology, and a loss of the self in the 'information age'.

Furthermore, geek identity is regarded as youthful in its ideology, which has both celebrative and pejorative associations. Geeks are perceived as early adopters of technological innovation, part of a thriving vanguard for changing social practice. Yet, on the downside, they are presented as juvenile and reluctant to accept adulthood. These combined notions of the immature-technophile form a playful and arguably escapist identity (Burrill, 2008), where the digital imaginary operates as a realm free from the responsibilities of adulthood. In terms of its connection to participatory culture, the geek identity is one that buys into notions of prosumerism, both as media practice and ideology; where meaning is activated in the appropriation of often esoteric cultural products. Furthermore, geek identity has been defined by its high level of fandom, by its active relationship to pulp TV consumer goods, specifically Sci-Fi and Fantasy shows (Fiske, 1992). It is also a culture of play, both technological and social. There are counter-cultural elements, most clearly expressed regarding the persona of the Hacker. Yet, this is more a discrete ideal than a lived practice for the vast majority of the culture.

Most relevant to this study is the striking similarity between the discourse associated with geeks and that connected to the fan in general, notably the negative connotations around 'immaturity, obsession, isolation, and disconnection from reality.' (Jenkins, 2013, pp. 9-10). Part of the question that frames this chapter asks is there something geeky (something marginal, obsessive) about fans, and is geek identity always already a fan-centric one. What territory in the social imaginary do they share? Within a certain paradigm geeks are seen to be attempting to compensate for a perceived lack of status, where they shore up their position on the margins by celebrating their marginality. Likewise 'Fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital.' (Fiske, 1992, p. 33).

In videogame culture this cultural capital assumes its own character and primacy as gaming capital: the knowledge of what it means to *be* a true gamer. In terms of knowledge (its distribution and acquisition) both geeks, fans, and gamers can be understood as autodidacts: 'the self-taught who often use their self-acquired knowledge and taste to compensate for

the perceived gap between their actual (or official) cultural capital, as expressed in educational qualifications and the socio-economic rewards they bring, and what they feel are their true desserts.’ (Fiske, 1992, p. 34) Significantly, Fiske argues that these fandom activities can be both socially empowering and compensatory fantasies, depending on how the texts are responded to (Fiske, 1992). In this sense fandom, and the cultures that draw upon it, operate as shadow economies (Fiske, 1992), each with their own systems of production, exchange and hierarchical structures.

### **Post-Fordism, UGC and the 1980s publishing sector**

It is useful to consider the socio-economic and technological context of the early gaming magazine, as a capitalistic enterprise, before moving on to the textual analysis, in order to recognise the correlations between post-fordist techniques and UGC as a genre. The 1980s and 1990s have been recognised as ‘a period of profound reconfiguration and adjustment within the British magazine industry.’ (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 53). Those reconfigurations are distinctly post-fordist in character: including the emergence of niche products for an increasingly segmented market, a breaking down of traditional vertical business structures into more fluid horizontal zones of influence, a de-specialisation of the labour force, and an overall ‘drive towards the economies of scope.’ (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 51). Of these macro forces the emergence of niche markets is the most immediately pertinent with regards to the specialist gaming press, though shifts within the labour market will also become of interest when considering the increasingly hyperreal characters that staffed the magazines. The rise of the niche, the importance of scope or scale, and the determination of the new, are also especially relevant in considering the confluence of two novel and specialist activities: the specialist publishing press, and the specialist entertainment activity of gaming. In the early 1980s the niche magazine title became one route for large publishers to maintain their profits (Gough-Yates, 2003), a way of adapting their business practices to the changing socio-economic and technological environ. Such niche products were best suited to fit into what was regarded as an increasingly segmented consumer market.

Another core feature of post-fordist industry developments, particularly within the publishing sector, is an increasing emphasis on the ‘effective use of technological innovation and enhanced responsiveness to consumer demand.’ (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 53). My

assertion is that UGC, can be seen to fulfil two key functions in relation to this drive for innovation and responsiveness across the cultural industries. Firstly UGC enables the determination of new media technologies, in that it is part of producing the dominant meaning of new technologies; secondly UGC forms a key part of the feedback loop, between cultural industry and its users, that assists in the formation of niche consumer markets for those technologies. In this frame UGC plays a role in producing both the discourse and the subject in a post-fordist context.

The new subject in this context is itself a niche one, that of the fan. Yet, the changes in consumer/producer relations should not be overstated. For example, the question of how truly homogenous the market was pre-1980s, and how truly segmented it was afterwards is a contentious one. What can be stated with confidence is that the 1980s was a time of flux, one where strategic gains could be made by both consumers and producers. A paradoxical period where 'audiences and industry both seem to be gaining – and losing – power', and where 'media control seems to be concentrating and dispersing in the same transitional moment.' (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008, p. 7) Furthermore, rather than suggest a radical shift in the identity of the consumer (an essentialist move) I would stress that it was the cultural industries perception of the consumer that shifted; it was the ideal user's position in the social imaginary that changed.

The new strategic demands of innovation and responsiveness faced by the publishing industry, alongside this new perception of a productive end-user, can be said to conceptually coalesce in the increased significance of the cultural intermediary. These professional figures are the ones most suited to negotiating the ever evolving meanings around taste and technology, and to fix the active user within an appropriate editorial framework. In the context of the specialist gaming press, these youthful self-promoting figures are part of a burgeoning new discourse in 1980s Britain, one concerning aspiration, social mobility, and technology. They connect to a new aspirational rhetoric around the opportunities now available to a technocratic middle class, a rhetoric that coalesces in the ideology of Thatcherite entrepreneurship and the information economy. It is with this framing in mind that I will later examine the letter editor's responses to the readers' queries.

### **Content Analysis findings in gender/slang/genre**

The content analysis enacted for this chapter of the study had three key propositions, these centred on the gender of the participants, the type of language used in the UGC, and the changing genres of the letter. The first proposition was that the gendering of the contributors would closely match the published demographic of the magazine's readership. This would allow for a grounded comparison between the wider readership (as captured via the magazine's own surveys) and what can be termed the super-users – those with a heightened level of engagement, as represented via the letters pages. Of those letters that were explicitly gendered by the letter writer (excluding parody names and fantasy personas) 97% were male & only 3% female. This closely matches the expected demographic as provided by the magazine questionnaires of 95% male.

Yet, 22% of the names provided by the sample were gender neutral, mainly due to the usage of initials, with no overt references to gender contained in the letter. Therefore, there is still a possibility of a sub-set of 'silent' female contributors who prefer not to be categorised as feminine. Interestingly the few explicit examples of female super-users within the sample all make references to being involved in other forms of high engagement gaming (for example, typing in programmable listings, and doing Play By Mail). These writers do identify themselves as both being unusual, and as having fellow female gamer friends. In doing so they represent their groups as being both peripheral and coherent, as a sub-culture within the wider culture of videogaming. One example is Laura Thomson, who writes 'contrary to popular belief, I and several of my friends do type in listing.' CVG54 (1986) Therefore, whilst the vast majority of the letters are identifiably male, there is room to support the notion of a female presence, and one that is not notably diminished by the increased level of engagement. Interestingly there is an underlying presumption of maleness in those letters that are gender neutral in name. When K J Harper writes that their son is having an issue with their computer CVG30 (1984) the reply is directed to a *Mr Harper*: in this way the gender neutral user is sometimes recast as the idealised male user, and any potential difference between the two is removed.

The second proposition was that as a distinct gaming culture becomes established there would an increased use of informal terminology (slang) and humour – thus signalling the

development of an increasingly youthful and playful identity within that gaming culture. Whilst the counts for humour are quite sporadic (which is due in part to the restricted size of the sample) a general assertion can be made that up to 1987 humour is present but occasional, whereas from 1988 it is a consistent or systematic feature of the letter writing style. Also, a consistent use of slang emerges in 1986, two years before this comedic turn. Thereby, a general trajectory can be sketched out as being formal/informal/comedic. Each of these stages signals an increasing discursive complexity on the part of the letter writers, and can be compared to similar developments in the field of gaming critique (i.e. the growing self-reflexivity of the games review).

This escalating usage of slang and humour forms part of a system of bantering, which connects to the increasingly parodic stance of the letters page editor - one whose anti-establishment posturing is examined later in this chapter. More broadly the use of informal language and comedy is an expression of 'synthetic discourse', 'a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual' (Fairclough, 1988, p. 62). UGC relies upon such banter to provide intimacy and informality without publicly confiding in the unseen other, a form of connection without sharing emotions (Benwell, 2001). Thereby irony can be seen to act as a strategy for preserving teenage masculinity (Kirkpatrick, 2015). The use of banter and irony together helps form an imagined community of fellow gamers, 'a place where people can secure recognition for their achievements.' (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 91) The findings of this content analysis support this notion that humour is central to super-users building communities in plain view of a wider readership, and that comedy enables these individuals to operate publicly in a private manner. Yet, the synthetic nature of the discourse does potentially imply that the subject being produced (the gamer) is arguably a rather contrived or synthetic self from the outset.

The final proposition regards genre, and states that there would be an increasing frequency of argumentation as the gaming community sought to develop a coherent sense of identity, furthermore, that these 'arguments' connect to a determination of meaning, and purpose, for the wider technology of home computing. The full findings are listed below in Table 9.

Genre	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Argument	0%	7%	50%	57%	50%	33%	25%	35%	8%	13%	25%
Anecdote	0%	43%	33%	14%	36%	11%	50%	15%	0%	38%	0%
Joke	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%	13%	25%
Request	100%	50%	17%	29%	14%	44%	25%	50%	67%	38%	50%
Thank U	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Apology	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 9: frequency of various genres within readers' letters page; sample from 1982 to 1992

In this sample the proportion of letters that act primarily as arguments are very low for the first 2 years (under 10%), but then come to dominate the medium between the years of 1984 to 1986 (50% to 60%). This level of argumentation is then generally reduced, between 1987 to 1992, to 35% and below. This trajectory of debate can be usefully compared to the genre of 'Requests', which follows an opposite form, from high to low, and to high again (see Chart 4 below).

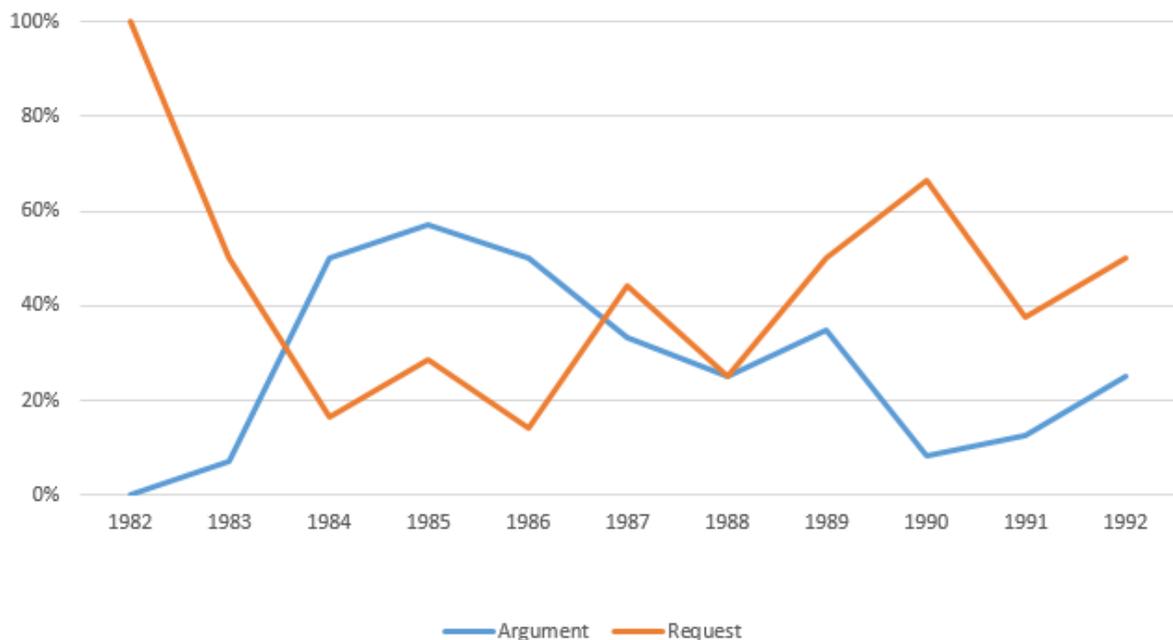


Chart 4. Comparison of frequency regarding argument and request genres within reader's letters.

These two trajectories, when combined, support the proposition that beyond an initial period where *requests* for technical information dominate (a period of 'how does this work') there is then a prolonged period of *argument* over the terrain of videogaming as a social

practice ('what does it mean to be a gamer'). Furthermore, that as gaming culture is formed these debates are replaced by a new type of question, one of comparative consumption: of which commodity is better than the other, i.e. Spectrum vs Amstrad, this game or that one.

Taken together these shifting patterns of argument and request form three phases that closely mirror the three stages of a child's interaction with technology (enquiry/mastery/reflection), as proposed in Turkle's 1984 seminal work on computing and identity, and discussed in the previous chapter. They are replaced in this instance by a trajectory of request/argument/request. In the case of gaming culture this brief analysis suggests that UGC is one attempt to resolve the question of what is the technology designed for. Furthermore, that the typical path from enquiry to reflection is one that is re-directed, and thereby stalled (Kirkpatrick, 2012), by the gaming press. Instead of critical contemplation the process becomes instead a question of consumer choices, and a broader strengthening of consumerist values. How this enforcement of commodity logic occurs, the characters involved and the strategies employed, will be further examined in the remainder of this chapter.

The content analysis for this chapter encountered a sample of letters that together formed a richly textured mosaic of interests, debates, and aspirations, covering a wide variety of topics. Whilst these letters are tightly framed, and regulated by, the editorial prerogatives of the publications they appear in, it is important (in terms of gaming culture) to recognise the playful inventiveness of their writing, as well as the level of expertise and personal investment they display. This is especially true considering the young demographic of the readership. These letters include not just personal opinion on current games, but broader critiques of the germinal review systems being developed across the gaming mediascape. Their UGC produced a textual feedback loop that was personal, informed, and critical in its operations, and as such these letters pages provided a vital collective space for the gaming community. Furthermore, due to the expertise and inventiveness these letters display, in a space too easily dismissed as trivial, they share a cultural relevance with other marginalised media artefacts. Like the fanzine they are mindful objects 'produced by people who are supposed to be mindless followers of mass culture.' (Williams, 2011, p. 178)

With that in mind this section recognises the value of those contributions, and proceeds to examine the framing of those letters in three key respects: what are the core dichotomies that emerge; how does the subject position of the letters editor evolve; and how does the inherent commodity logic of the magazine's role as 'buyers guide' attempt to regulate the broader discourse, whilst maintaining its own gaming capital.

### **Key dichotomies within the callout - 'do you have any views or comments'**

To understand the discourse being promoted by the letters pages it is necessary to first examine the callouts that were initially made for contributions (to consider what was being asked of the readership). I have taken three examples from CVG; the first from 1982, the second from 1989, and the third from 1992, to give a sense of the changing style and register of discourse in these callouts.

'Do you have any views or comments on Computer & Video Games? If so we would love to hear from you. We will also do our best to find answers to any queries you may have or solve problems you might be experiencing with your computer.' CVG6 (1982)

'If you've got anything interesting to say, be they questions, complaints, jokes, silly things, sensible things... or even have pics or cartoons, send em in to YOB'S MAILBAG ... What are you waiting for - get writing. Or YOB'll smash your head in.' CVG95 (1989)

'PHPHPHPHPHRRRRRRRT! Welcome to another bowel-shiftingly brilliant five pages of the world's most amazing pan rattler of a Mailbag! On these very pages you'll find a festering dungpile of letters so pants-droppingly bad they're not even worth spending a penny on ... If you've got something to say, think you re funny, reckon you're hard or just want to know about computer games then this is the place to be' CVG125 (1992)

There is a clear shift occurring here in the style of address, and the type of interactions being preferred. The 1982 text has the tone and register of a customer services communication: asking for consumer 'comments' to improve functionality, and politely offering technical assistance where required. The core message being that feedback enables knowledge. In contrast the 1989 callout adopts a very different position, one that is informal, jokey, and playful. It is the youth orientated media shout out. Views & comments have now been

segregated into various prompts, for both the 'silly' and the 'serious'. The request for jokes, pics, and cartoons also emphasises the increasingly youthful aspect of the editorial stance. The fart noise that introduces Yob's 'Mailbog' in the April 1992 issue of CVG signals the apparent completion of this transformative process within the specialist computing press, from adult consumer arena of technical discourse to juvenile play area. Furthermore, these three callouts briefly enunciate three core dichotomies within the magazines, which can be understood as tensions between the (i)serious/fun, (ii)adult/child, and (iii)work/play, tensions which will regularly emerge in the UGC itself.

The sample contains various examples of letters written by the computing/gaming community that display an evident concern regarding the side-lining of 'serious' computing pursuits by a fun-centric gaming press. In CVG30 (1984) two letters are printed in response to an earlier January letter from Mike Goodwin that suggested many games were childish in nature CVG28 (1984). One letter defends the seriousness of games by citing such specifically 'mature' titles as *The Hobbit*, and various Chess simulators. The defence here centres on drawing upon the previously established kudos of traditional, and purportedly cerebral, forms of play (Chess), and pre-existing forms of cultural production (Fantasy literature).

The second letter that engages with the question of serious vs fun usage of technology is by Calvin Austin, he writes

'The main problem. I think, is that the good side of computers is being cast aside. What started out as an educational project with games as a sideline to keep one's mind stimulated has been completely reversed, with people just buying computers according to how well they can play games.' CVG30 (1984).

Mr Austin goes on to cite his own administrative and educational uses of the micro as alternative engagements with technology (in his case making exam notes and filing notes for his record collection). Unless programmers feed these non-gaming needs, Mr Austin warns, the micro will become a fad, like 'the skateboard craze'. Both these letters address not just seriousness of purpose, but share an underlying fear that the technology, and by extension the user, will be deemed childish. This was a fear that was shared by the producers of home computers (Haddon, 1988b) and evidences an early contestation around the quintessential meaning of the technology – is it a tool or a toy. Yet, what is the editorial position? There is a

certain crafted ambivalence in the editor's reply, which initially argues that gaming acts as a gateway into the more technical activities, only to then conclude 'In any event it's up to the individual what they want to get out of their micro, isn't it?' CVG30 (1984)

The response to the work/play tension by the letters editor is to state that the tension doesn't exist, that one form of usage leads to all others rather than supplanting it. Furthermore, and centrally, that consumer choice is always already sovereign in any matters of technological determination. The discourse of what technology is for is thereby nullified by the core tenet of commodity logic – it's whatever you want (pay for) it to be. Yet, such attempts to reconcile tension as consumer choice is unable to provide any lasting form of rhetorical closure, as evidenced by another letter from two years later in the sample.

'I feel the general content and attitude of the magazine has changed towards the younger reader. Anyone who sends a letter to Mailbag seems to get a silly reply such as Big Red will come and sort you out.' CVG66 (1986)

In this case 'Big Red' was the robot avatar used by the letters page editor (a character which would later be replaced by 'The Yob'). It is my assertion that the increased use of these hyperreal figures within the gaming press is central to the development of the magazine's youthful cultural aspect, and by extension the youthful subject positioning of the gamer in general.

### **Cultural intermediaries & the hyperreal**

In the April 1985 launch issue of *Computer Gamer* (a competitor to *CVG*) the magazine editor is represented as EECAAN the intergalactic advisor, an alien who welcomes the readership with the suitably Sci-Fi callout of 'Greetings Earthling'. Here the imagined reader is met by an imaginary producer, a playful façade that was maintained for the first twelve months of publication. The gaming press in the 1980s and early 1990s is populated by a roster of such imaginary figures, and collectively they form a bizarre, fanciful, and hyperreal labour force; one that works within the realms of aspiration and parody. Whilst *CVG* had military robots (Big Red) and futuristic punks (The Yob), the tropes employed by other publications included Trolls, Wizards, Barbarians, and a Sci-Fi Dominatrix. Where the front covers utilised such Sci-Fi and Fantasy tropes to illuminate the diegetic code of the computer game, these editorial

characters adopted much of the same imagery in their role as intermediaries between reader and magazine staff. Whilst the use of alternate personas is common across the entertainment press (traditionally in the form of agony aunts) the gaming magazine takes such conventions and revels in their playful potential. I will argue that two concepts can be seen to coalesce in these fantasy personas: that of the cultural intermediary and the hyperreal. In the following section I shall look at how these two concepts overlap, and what kind of authority they provide the gaming magazine staff with.

The entertainment or media journalist, whether as critic or commentator, can be understood principally as a cultural intermediary, as professionals who bear expert insider knowledge on the culture/goods they mediate to the user. Their authority is inextricably linked to the ideological production of taste and values (Bourdieu, 1984), and these cultural intermediaries operate as 'taste mappers' and 'taste creators' (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 121) within a discourse of expertise. Their explicit field of expertise will differ in regards to the speciality of the publication (fashion, economics, trout fishing etc.), but their shared field of expertise is that of making the magazines 'symbolically "meaningful" for readers.' (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 121). They provide the texts with the authority of the informed, and as a profession they are adept in selling such 'symbolic authority' (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 123) to the user; that is they re-enforce the symbolic authority of themselves individually, as a collective subject position (the critic), and the organisation they constitute.

The gaming magazine staffer, as a symbolic authority figure (cultural intermediary), became one increasingly detached from any normative sense of the real. From a Baudrillardian perspective this precession of simulation classically follows three stages: firstly the reflection of a basic reality; secondly the masking and perversion of that basic reality; thirdly the masking of the absence of a basic reality (Baudrillard, 1983). By the final stage of the hyperreal the image 'bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.' (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 11). This can be described as a sliding scale of unreality, or reality slippage.

The first stage (reflection) of this process is inherent within the fabricated persona of the cultural intermediary as the outward, personalised, 'face' of the media brand. In gaming publications this is often achieved via the staff bio, a standard convention for producing

familiarity and intimacy between producers and readership. Staff bios for gaming magazines reveal the formation of an anti-establishment subject position, in terms of the reviewers they are portrayed as young, adventurous rebels (the following examples are from *Your Sinclair Magazine* in 1987): 'Tony Lee – Young, free and single, and a wizard with the trigger button. Wants to be a hired assassin after his 'A' levels.' Other examples show a continuity of such rhetoric, 'self-confessed adventure fanatic' & 'Hairy Hacker' Dave Nicholls, 'ace games player' Ross Holman, and 'two wheeled terror' Roger Willis. Collectively these reviewers form critical panels described as 'Our regular crew of software screwballs', or 'our motley crew of Joystick Jurors'.

These phrases contain within them their own tensions, in that they operate via oppositions: for example, regular/screwballs, and motley/jurors. The bios also have the feel of a personals column, and form a small, intimate space of self-promotion. It is a synthetic intimacy that exists primarily in the realm of the imaginary, with the magazine acting as a collective space for the reader and reviewer to exist in a shared dialogue defined by masculinity, fantasy, and youth. These staff bios, alongside regularly published features on the daily office life of each magazine, also promoted the idea of a vibrant workspace where creativity and youth are respected and rewarded. Through such strategies these staff members become mythic and aspirational subjects, a locus for fantasy dialogues with the readership, each designed to bolster identity and self-worth on either side of the conversation, and to maintain the publishing brand's required levels of gaming capital.

The second stage of the precession (of masking) into simulation occurs when the personality of the staffer becomes a fluid alter-ego, as is the case with *CRASH's* letters editor Lloyd Mangram. Often pictured with a paper bag over his head, with the eye-holes cut out, the mystery figure of Mangram wrote for *CRASH* from 1984 onwards. He is a fictitious character, a role played by various *CRASH* staff members at different points in time. This is not so much a malign deception (the readership understood the ploy, and enjoyed guessing the 'true' identity of the character), but is rather an example of fluid labour practices, where the use of pseudonyms allow any available staff member to fill the position of the letters editor on a month by month basis, without breaking the continuity of the section or service. This increased abstraction of the cultural intermediary is itself emblematic of the post-fordist labour changes referred to earlier in the chapter, where enclaves of expertise were regarded

as unnecessary and potentially dangerous (or empowering).

It is at the third stage of the precession where the cultural intermediary becomes wholly abstracted into mythical subjects, such as Trolls, Wizards, and cartoon cyber-punks. It is revealing that these avatars are most readily employed in sections that rely heavily upon UGC (letters pages, hints and tips sections especially), which suggests that there is something about the role of UGC mediator that lends itself to this increased hyperrealisation. I would argue that it is the very unreality of these wholly fabricated avatars that enables the use of irony and pastiche to detach the personality of the brand from the utility of the profit margin, and fosters the impression of organic independence. From a Baudrillardian perspective it is their artifice that makes the rest of the publication appear authentic. Furthermore, it is in the sections of the magazine most open to contestation that the most artifice and manipulation is required. One example of the hyperreal cultural intermediary, 'The Yob', will next be further analysed, paying close attention to the original texts, in the final section of this chapter.

### **Regulating the discourse – the logic of the commodity guide**

The image of the Yob that began this chapter is one of the dystopian and anarchic rebel, the anti-authority figure, with spray can, broken bottle, and knuckle dusters he is an aggressively independent and provocative figure. Drawing on imagery and patois previously popularised by the British sci-fi comic 2000AD, this 'Juve' persona (juvenile) is both an expression of how the youthful letters editor of *CVG* (Julian Rignall) sees himself, and how the *CVG* brand desires to be seen by its readership. There is a Rabelaisian quality to the dystopian figure of the Yob, where traditional authority is supplanted/inverted. Much of the Yob's persona is centred on the playful caustic banter he enables between reader and publication – a dialogue that could not occur without his hyperreal status - a publicly performed banter based primarily upon components of parody, conflict, and submission.

Accordingly the contents page encourages the readership to 'Shuffle your buns down to YOB's fun palace, where you'll find the king of the put-down being uncannily pleasant and polite to his loyal fans - actually that's a lie; he's being his usual, obnoxious self. But that's the way they want it.' *CVG*125 (1992). Here there is a segmentation of the readership into

standard users and super-users, with the latter being a source of entertainment for the former. Not only will the 'loyal fans' be subjected to the new 'king' and his casual authority, they will revel in their subjection, and in doing so attain that authority for themselves. Here are some examples that typify the youthful and masculine discourse:

'Dear YOB. I'm a rock hard punk so send me a C+VG T. Shirt or else.'

YOB 'Rock hard punk? Shove off you girlie nancy, before I flatten your hair with a Doc Marten.' CVG95 (1989)

'I have a great idea about how to get rid of idiots. Simply blow them and their Spectrums up ... Can I have a CVG T-shirt?'

YOB 'Get stuffed, Geek boy.' CVG101 (1990)

'Why didn't you print the last letter I wrote to you?'

YOB 'Cos it was the most boring stream of hoss doo-doo's I've ever had the misfortune to read.' CVG101 (1990)

Here the readership as a public whole can revel in the individuated insults and derision, they can even join in by phoning the premium rate line, branded as 'Shut It', and leave their own insults for The Yob. The conversation being created here is 'a kind of dialogue between comic and readers in which the comic is seen as having a personality.' (Barker, 1989, p. 60). This form of dialogic relationship is recognised in other gaming magazine editorials (see *CRASH* and *ZZap64* review manifestos). Much of the bantering within the UGC of the sample revolves around which console/machine is best, which games are the best, and (as the quotes suggest) obtaining freebie t-shirts from the magazine. Whilst it could be argued that this continual discussion of commodities is itself a commodifying force, it should be emphasised that a core activity here is also that of group consolidation and the accrual of individuated gaming capital (kudos) by the letter writer. Yet, when The Yob does talk about consumer issues, what position does he take, and how does this fit with the persona of the dystopian rebel? The following extracts are responses to reader's letters that touch on a range of gaming industry issues. The first refers to software piracy, the second overpriced games, and the third technological obsolescence.

The Yob on Piracy: 'As for the hacking problem in Europe, I have very strong opinions on this. Pirates are the festering carbuncle on the bottom of the computer industry. It's illegal and it stinks, and there's nothing that can be said to justify it. Pirates write to me at their own risk' CVG95 (1989)

The Yob on overpriced games: 'the crux of the matter comes down to the fact that you don't HAVE to buy a game if you don't think it's worth the money.' CVG90 (1989)

The Yob on technological obsolescence: 'You've got a bit of a point here, but not much of one. It's true that software companies will abandon developments for a machine if it becomes unprofitable, but who can blame them for that? ... It's called progress, in case you didn't know' CVG125 (1992)

In each of these cases there is a stringent, unswerving, re-enforcement of a neo-liberalist free market ethos; traditionally more often associated with Yuppies than Yobs. Firstly nothing must be allowed to challenge the profit principle, as in the case with unauthorised software production. Secondly, that consumer sovereignty will produce a self-regulating friction free market. Finally that profit is, and should continue to be, the principal and guiding logic of progress - a form of Darwinian technological determinism. The rebellious posturing of The Yob does not make these conservative views problematic, but rather it is what enables him to make those assertions, whilst still remaining on the side of the user.

The character of the Yob is interesting to me not so much as an expression of increased machismo within gaming culture, though it certainly speaks of that (Kirkpatrick, 2015), but also as the anti-establishment voice of the establishment. The Yob represents the re-tasking of working class counter-culture (the 'Juve' skinhead), and its appropriation by an emergent, middle class, hi-tech, professional elite. In a manoeuvre previously performed by the grand Dames of the fashion magazines, where personal stylishness acted as compensation for the 'inferior status of fashion journalism in the journalistic world' (Gough-Yates, 2003, p. 120), the hyperreal cool of the gaming letters Editor is there to compensate for the potentially toxic commodity function of the publication as a whole.

## Conclusion

It has been recognised that gaming magazines enabled and governed the growth of a new sense of community for early gamers (Newman, 2004). The UGC analysed in this chapter is part of that promise of participation; a promise that is always already weighed against the needs of its consumerist framework. In this regard the UGC (the letters pages, fan art, tips and hints etc.) allowed gaming magazines to become more than just a 'buyer's guide' for entertainment commodities, but instead enabled them to aspire to the subcultural, anti-establishment kudos usually reserved for the more non-commercial 'Zine'. As such they are both, the niche magazine & the ideological 'Zine', useful examples of the 'active, participatory nature of subculture because they outlive the moments of agency that created them, becoming cultural artefacts that continue as objects of action long after their completion.' (Williams, 2011, p. 177).

In studying UGC throughout this chapter it has been possible to see the fluidity, and significance, of individual agency in the production of media artefacts – both the readers that produced the letters and the magazine staff that commented upon them (e.g. Julian Rignall as The Yob). This forms a situation where the users are 'Social agents [that] texture texts, they set up relations between elements of texts' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 22). This enables a perspective on the cultural industries that moves beyond the limitations of media cause and effect. From such a position the cultural industries can not be considered homogenous, either in source or ideology, nor must their efficacy on the reader be presumed.

Furthermore, this study has shown that UGC performs as artefacts of participatory culture, and as such they 'mark out the contested territories between consumerism and resistance' (Williams, 2011, p. 178), an analysis of which enables a symptomatic reading of the cultural industries that frame them.

In summary, within early gaming culture UGC can be regarded as culturally constitutive texts; 'texts in the process of constituting the social identities of the participants' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 17). The social identity they constituted is one closely tied to the idea of the fan/super-user in general, and the technophilic 'Geek' in particular. They are tales of 'Digital Boyhood' (Burrill, 2008), told to one another, and facilitated by a consumerist publishing sector. Therefore, in terms of representation and regulation, User Generated

Content is, from one perspective, evidence of a more responsive media environment, it is on the other hand a form of immaterial labour. At best a form of crowd-sourced content, and at worst a manipulative feedback loop; one filled with empty ideological promises of social mobility. Such promises are arguably more nuanced, and more significant today than ever before, as the levels of feedback increase, and the levels of social mobility go into decline.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

In the final chapter of this thesis I shall return to some of the core enquiries that have been made throughout the study, briefly recap on the key findings, and highlight the new knowledge and conceptual ground that has been produced through the project. I shall also point towards some further routes of enquiry made possible by this work.

### The gaming magazine as articulation

This thesis has examined how early UK videogame magazines articulated videogaming as a cultural industry and a social practice, and asserts that these media texts provide a unique route to understanding early gaming culture in the UK. It has been argued throughout this thesis that these magazines enabled the gaming industry to *articulate* culture in a highly effective, connective and productive manner. They do not merely represent but constitute what it means to be a gamer. They achieved this by joining together the activities and values of otherwise individuated gamers into an imagined community of like-minded players. Furthermore, they provided the language by which to discuss or critique the games being played, outlined models of good gaming practice (how to win, and what constitutes good play), and distributing the necessary gaming capital with which to structure the stratified social practice of gaming. In doing so these publications played a key role in the formation of gaming culture by setting the terms of digital play.

Furthermore, whilst at first the videogame magazine seems to centre on an extremely niche set of discourses (Wizards, Martians and questions of Gameplay, for example), it has been found that they provided an entry point for their readership (and the analyst) into a much wider media landscape. This landscape provides a shared map of meanings, and a fluid set of identifications that enable a playful response by the reader to problematics of teenage masculinity and the promises of adult instrumental power. They helped provide answers to the question of what it meant to become a man in the information age.

The research for this thesis also enquired into the specific functions of the gaming magazine, and asked how these functions were performed. The function of the gaming magazine was outlined as three-fold: firstly to ensure profits for its own controlling interests, secondly to

provide the gamer with 'gaming capital, and thirdly to support the products of the gaming industry by acting as 'buyers guides' (Newman, 2008, p. 31). It is asserted that in performing each of these functions the videogame magazine acted as a key producer of meaning for gamers/games producers, and provided the dominant consumer access point to the early gaming commodity.

Research carried out in this thesis (see Chapter 4) was able to conclude that videogame reviews did possess what can be called critical efficacy, in that they fulfilled their expected function of encouraging game sales, especially those that rated at over 70%. Secondly, it has also been shown in this research, by comparing meta-scores and top 100 pantheons, that the ratings given out by magazines escalated in order to celebrate, rather than arbitrate, videogames as a commodity, and that this escalation has technological, cultural, and economic determinants. In the previous chapter it was found that alongside these escalating ratings, the modality of the review increased, with photogenia acting as a semiotic resource to assist the review in its commodity function, and the screenshot emerging as the defining mode, and aesthetic, of the videogame review. These evolving subject positions are part of three waves of development for the UK videogame industry. The 1<sup>st</sup> wave (1981 to 1984) of videogame magazines is one of arbitration, the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave (1984 to 1988) advocacy, and the third wave (1988 to 1993) celebration. Together, it has been argued, they form a trajectory of expansion, consolidation and market segmentation.

This trajectory, and the changing meta-functions of the gaming magazine, was in part revealed via a structural analysis of the games review. It was established that a highly standardised structure underpinned the games review as a critical genre, and that the frequency and repetition of the convention suggests an inherent correlation between the structure itself and the central functions of the review – as such the structure of the review is metonymical of the wider gaming press. This structure was formulated sequentially into three stages, three syntagms, defined as i) Context; ii) Content; and iii) Critique, each of which act in a division of discursive labours. Thereby, the games review is a critical-promotional genre designed to interpellate, inform, and instruct. To engage the gamer and to direct them, in both their consumer choices and their method of play. Furthermore, the formation of a highly standardised three-part structure connects to the emerging cultural, or gaming capital of the magazine, and their youthful review staff. This cohesive structure

acted to frame critical variety, and to provide authority to a media form with little established credence. There is cycle here of gaming capital, where the reviewers as authentic gamers provide value to the brand, and the brand re-enforces and returns that capital to them as industry insiders, replete with a quantified system of authority.

Following the structural analysis a subsequent close textual reading of the videogame review (see Chapter 5), enabled a further decoding of the videogame review, and its core concept of Gameplay, into its original component elements – its core paradigms of play. These paradigms have been found to closely correlate with Kline’s theoretical 3-circuit model as developed in *Digital Play* (Kline *et al.*, 2003), circuits of technology, culture and marketing. For Kline the cultural circuit refers to ‘the production and consumption of cultural meanings’ (Kline *et al.*, 2003, p. 50) including the practices and activities associated with the producers and consumers of those cultural texts. Technology equates to ‘the digital artefacts – computers, consoles, telecommunications, and software – that constitute the infrastructure on which these industries also depend.’ (Kline *et al.*, 2003, p. 51) Thirdly marketing ‘involves the research, advertising and branding practices that are also vital to media industries.’ (Kline *et al.*, 2003, p. 51) One proposition that emerges from my research is that by deconstructing the evaluative criteria applied to commodities (e.g. ‘Playability’, ‘Graphics’, ‘Value’), and tracing the changing patterns of their usage, it is possible to read off the main determinations of the production process. These categories of evaluation can be read as articulations of the original design/ers, and those material networks of interests that enable, and restrain, the sphere of production.

In terms of discourse and its subjects, ‘whatever set of meanings they construct, can only be effective if they recruit subjects’ (Woodward, 1997, p.39). Discourse requires acceptance in order to prosper. Volosinov makes a similar proposition regarding language, which withers away into allegory when it falls from usage (1973). The impact of this notion is that the discourse (in this case the evaluative discourse of consumer guides) will shift when the subject refuses it, or if it is believed that they are beginning to do so. This dialectic has been noted in post-modern branding practices (Holt, 2002), where companies struggle to maintain their authenticity, within a market increasingly saturated by promises of cultural capital. Tracing the changes in categories of evaluation is a means of studying the manoeuvres of the production sphere via its representations. The charting of these

ideological trajectories, made visible through the media apparatus, allows an interpretation of the mass media that is neither production or consumer biased (nor prosumer), but one that is instead 'symptomatic' and Material.

The definition of a 'symptomatic reading', as offered by the glossary in *For Marx*, is 'on the model of the Freudian analysts reading of his patients utterances' (Althusser, 2005, p254), which allows the opening up of 'the unconsciousness of the text' (2005, p.254). This also provides a reading that sees, within the shifting strategies and practices of production & consumption, societal shifts alongside the mobile subjectivity of the reader. A symptomatic reading of videogame magazines, within the Material contingency of the 1980s, can offer up a reading of the cultural unconscious of its readers and producers; it can illuminate the emergent, dominant, and residual ideologies of that time and place. As subjects we build our own ideological spaces from which to interpret the world. A multi-accentual and symptomatic reading of ideology allows for an interpretation of the creative potential within social groups and subcultures. Such analysis *produces* understanding, rather than *reducing* meaning, and its actors, to a deterministic set of apparatus, procedures and regulations.

For example, the following diagram outlines the connections that can be drawn between the dominant videogaming discourse of 'gameplay', its core components/paradigms, and the wider societal determinants that drive them. Such a deconstruction allows for a taxonomy of evaluation that enables an increased understanding of meaning production in the consumer realm.

<b>Discourse</b>		<b>Components</b>		<b>Determinants</b>
		Playability / Experience	=	Culture
Gameplay	=	Graphics / Construct	=	Technology
		Value / Commodity	=	Marketing

The degree to which the consumer critique follows its commodity programming, the extent to which it arbitrates or celebrates, is determined by the attendant interests of culture/technology/marketing, as has been displayed in the Chapter 4 analysis of stable and escalating meta-ratings across the 1980s and early 1990s. Another assertion of this thesis is

that the studying of rating systems provides great opportunities for an inter-disciplinary approach to consumer cultures. The quantified nature of the rating system, and the ability to compare meta-ratings with close textual readings, produces a methodology that can be increasingly applied within the contemporary setting, as more and more we are encouraged to rate our experiences, our friendships, and our own aspirations. I would argue that the rating system provides the analyst with the means of examining the media industries via their own observational apparatus.

In the instance of early videogame magazines, persistently rising meta-ratings reveal an upwards push of marketing demands from the software and publishing industry, especially in the face of rising development costs for games and the need for low-risk economic return on their investments. The saturation of the retail market, alongside growing obsolescence of the 8-bit technology at the time, only serves to intensify this pressure. Yet, a balance is required regarding the continuing needs for audience identification – the need to maintain critical authority and gaming capital. The result is a dialectic dialogue. One means for the videogame industry to deal with the resulting crisis in confidence, of how to maintain the authenticity of a supersession culture, is for the critic to rely not only upon both the objectivity of the percentile, but also the gaming capital of the hyperreal intermediary, and the abstractions of ‘Gameplay’. This is arguably a toxic compound, one that promises invention, creativity, and originality, but instead results in a closed tautological system; one that can lead to the ‘autoamputation’ (McLuhan, 1964) of both critique and play.

Moving beyond the amputative tautology of gameplay this study has found a rhetorical playfulness within the videogame review, a mode sometimes demeaned as puerile, but which operated on a variety of complex discursive levels, where conventions are instigated only to be rapidly parodied, and where roleplay and wordplay interlink in an attempt to transgress the commodity purposing of critique. Furthermore this playful spirit helped support the notion of the reviewer as an anti-authoritarian critic, a sub-cultural super-user, to whom the youthful audience could be encouraged to identify. This is both an example of sub-cultural kudos shoring up consumerist agendas, *and* the emergence of a new & authentic voice that has its influences in the New Journalism techniques of the 1960s, and the British specialist music press inspired by it. The chapters on the gaming manifesto (the ‘buyers guide’) and the games review have shown that videogame criticism evolved from a

functionalist genre of consumer appraisal into a distinctly post-modernist, self-reflexive, state of pastiche. And, furthermore, that the videogame magazine played a core role in enabling this rapid development.

### **Gaming's masculine aesthetic and the magazine as diegetic interface**

In chapter 6 the gaming press was examined in terms of how it produced a distinctly masculine, and adolescent, gaming aesthetic from pre-existing Fantasy and Sci-Fi tropes. This research provides new knowledge in the field of games studies by studying the non-diegetic realm of magazine cover illustrations, and decoding those dominant images in relation to wider conceptions of technology and masculinity; recognizing that the images provide imaginative gateways (or diegetic bridges) into the core experience of playing videogames. Thereby, supporting the assertion that the videogame magazine, as a vanguard cultural text, helped produce a distinct type of gaming culture, with distinct modes of play. The images that appear on the front covers of the gaming press can be said to center on a core discourse of Adventure, and discursively labour to present the computer as a gateway to various extraordinary experiences. They act as an experiential interface to realms of order and power, offering technological mastery, and a means to conquer (or at last manage) the unknown.

Furthermore, the gaming magazine cover can be said to have acted as interface into both the inner-world of the game, and the fears and aspirations of the gaming culture that produced and consumed them. What begins as an economic necessity for the specialist press to distinguish itself in the news aisle developed into a nuanced visual medium, one that is able to articulate a variety of concerns regarding power, technology, and the self. Furthermore, in studying the figure of the illustrator as cultural intermediary, some revealing contradictions arise in terms of their role as creative masculine renegade and nodal interface between game and gamer. Whilst some of the illustrators interviewed in the 'On the Covers' articles professed a keen interest in the world of computing and computer gaming, others can be said to be repurposing their artwork within the wider milieu of Sci-Fi and Fantasy. It is only their framing by the context of the articles that fixes them within the gaming imaginary. Otherwise these illustrators should be understood as highly mobile cultural workers, going where the work is, whose interests often lie outside the remit of their cultural productions.

Instead they must be brought into often arbitrary connection with the products they promoted, and the tastes they seemingly advocate.

To briefly recap the findings of this study on UGC in videogame magazines. The content analysis found that the providers of UGC matched the wider readership in that they were predominantly male, with the caveat of a potentially silent female component. Secondly that increased slang/informal language in the sample formed part of a new 'synthetic discourse' that produced group identity via banter, where irony acts to preserve a youthful and developing sense of masculinity. Thirdly, that regarding genre there were two pertinent trajectories in terms of 'argument' and 'request', and that combined these worked to derail personal reflection on the meaning of technology/self into a more generalised narrative of consumerism. These findings informed a discourse analysis of the archival texts that revealed repeated expressions of concern (by the readers) about this direction of the gaming press, specifically in terms of an increased childishness of purpose. The gaming press responded to these concerns by re-affirming a logic centred on consumerism and technological supersession, and an increasing hyperreality regarding the identity of the magazine staff.

This raises the notion of hyperreality with regards to the subject position (and labour conditions) of the cultural intermediary. Whilst carrying out the research for this thesis it became apparent that whilst the magazines were a highly playful and creative space for both the staff and readership, the tendency for the workers to slip along the scale of unreality (both as reviewers and letters editors) arguably signalled an inherently synthetic, and rhetorical quality to their position. For many media industries this rhetoric is linked to a technological celebrationsim, where the 'rhetoric of these intermediaries and their neoliberal successors maintains that technology can unlock creativity, which is supposedly lurking unbidden in everyone, waiting to make us happy and productive.' P27 (Maguire and Matthews, 2014)

The cultural intermediary in this frame must also be understood as the promotion of the enforced illusion of an autotelic mode of being, where work is pleasure and vice versa. Here the contingency of its labour, at once precarious and insecure, is relabelled as a flexible and creative force, one operating within a post-modern entrepreneurial cybertopia. In this new

utopia, where collective creativity equates to an economic dynamo, the 'alleged capacity of the market to govern everything opens up new life worlds.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 29). Within such a neoliberal project these intermediaries 'are in thrall to the idea that culture is an endlessly growing resource capable of dynamizing society.' (Maguire and Matthews, 2014, p. 30) This is not to say, as other schools of thought have, that the cultural intermediary does not exist, or is no longer significant, but stresses the need to recognise that their labours demands a certain level of hyperreality and synthetic discourse to sustain it. These mediators of taste are always already caught within the process of mediation itself.

### **Identities within gaming culture**

As outlined in the introduction a social notion of gaming culture has been utilised in this study. In that there begins to coalesce in the early 1980s a distinct set of social practices, for an increasing number of people, who identify themselves and each other as 'gamers'. This research has emphasised the role of the gaming press in the construction of gaming culture as a dialectic between electronic hobbyist/arcade gamer, or user/player, and tracks their eventual synthesis into the videogaming subject. This subject, in the context of the 1980s is a distinct type of playful & technological male subject, which reaches its apotheosis in the idealised figure of the 'geek'. A role that offers instrumental empowerment to those who will embrace and resist it. This is most thoroughly examined in the thesis via the aforementioned cover imagery, notably its utilisation of pre-existing geek cultural fields of Fantasy and Sci-Fi. Whilst much valuable work has been done on the techno-social chimera that is the cyborg (Haraway, 1990; Holland, 1995; Lupton, 1995; Kirkup, 2000) far less work has been performed on the dominant Fantasy tropes within the modern media. This is understandable, as they offer less immediately tangible metaphors on the modern condition. Yet, as argued in chapter 6, some of the very same problematics of power, control, and desire are inscribed into these Fantasy figures. This would be one area in which an understanding of the role played by videogame magazines would be highly pertinent.

The culture of gaming, and the geek identity that attends it, can be understood most completely within its socio-economic context. This research has only touched on such matters, and an expanded understanding of the links between Thatcherite Britain and

gaming culture would be a rewarding direction to take the findings of this study. In the hope of encouraging such study I would tentatively assert at this point that the geek qualities (the lauding of the instrumental for example) of gaming culture fit within a wider discursive landscape of entrepreneurial spirit and the embracing of new technologies, 'In this respect gaming discourse allies itself with the prevailing ethos of Thatcherite Britain.' (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 96), and is closely tied to the emergence of a broader 'knowledge class' (Negus, 2002).

In Bourdieu's original study of 1960s France there was an emphasis on the rise of a new *petit bourgeoisie*, for whom the 'overproduction of qualifications, and consequent devaluation' of those educational qualifications has led to the production of new occupations, and the need to imbue them with the cultural capital of the now swollen professional classes (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 147). The same cannot be said in UK of the 1970s and 80s, where there are very stable level of university placements, with the steep rise in enrolment not occurring until the 1990s. Instead the pertinent socio-economic factors include rising unemployment during the 1970s (which reached 3 million in 1983), and increased income inequality throughout the 1980s. The scenario, within which gaming culture emerges, is not so much of a fear of social devaluation, or declassiment, but rather a Thatcherite political culture that ideologically espouses social mobility, and an economic reality that objectively reduced such potential. The result of such an impasse is the increased capital attributed to the attainment of knowledge and information technology skills. In such a framework the technophilic identity of geek culture becomes especially potent.

However, the difficulty experienced when talking about modern gaming culture, and defining people by one part of their social practice, is heightened when that practice becomes socially all-pervasive. As Shaw asks (Shaw, 2012) are we all gamers now, and who gets to choose? Gaming is undoubtedly a broader social practice now than in the timeframe of this archival study. The growth of games studies as an academic field, and the breadth of studies that include gaming in their research, have gone far beyond their initially pathologising and paternalistic stance. New definitions of gaming culture have evolved as the games industry has, both in the media and across academia, and these definitions have become more polysemic and nuanced, less exclusive and essentialised.

However, as Shaw notes these 'New definitions of game culture are never used to question the constructed past of video game culture's insularity, maleness, and youthfulness.' (Shaw, 2010, p. 408) This thesis does go some distance in recognising that constructedness, and seeks to determine how such an identity was formed via the discourse of the specialist gaming press. However, there is no guarantee that the complexity of today's gaming scene can be retroactively projected onto the past. There are two points here I would like to address, firstly that the historical demographic and identity of gamers was more particular, in the sense of being more cohesive and exclusive (it was notably male and youthful) than is currently the case. This does not make it less complex or interesting, but is rather reflective of a more compact cultural practice, one that actively sought to designate itself as a cohesive cultural field.

Secondly, that it was this tension between cultural cohesion, and the industry's drive to expand/include that has in part produced the subsequently fragmented and polysemic scenario, most clearly seen in the debates around 'Casual' gaming (Juul, 2009). A question for consideration here is when subjects and institutional agents have actively constructed a certain (games) culture in the past, should it now be disregarded/dissembled, because it no longer exists as a discrete entity. The success of videogaming as a cultural process has meant that its values have migrated across many other spheres of contemporary life (education, business, art, social interactions) – in doing so its success is arguably its own demise as a discrete field. Similar 'demise by success' narratives can be found within various academic fields. Yet, the process that formed gaming culture to begin with become all the more significant because of this, not just as archival history, but due to their migration into daily life.

### **Consumer based cultures – the role of capital and obsolescence**

Finally, I would to consider the significance of obsolescence to gaming culture, and suggest that the ratings centric review (so central to the popularity of the gaming magazine) both encouraged obsolescence *and* provided cultural capital; thereby, resolving the tension between the two. While games are ranked by a technological criteria that seems to ensure obsolescence ('Graphics' etc.) it is in fact the very process of rating that prevents them becoming so. The rated review stakes a place for the successful, or hi-scoring, game in an

imagined and highly symbolic pantheon of gaming 'classics'. This is assisted via the use of the more ambiguous rating characteristics such as playability (a quality not wedded to technology). The review's function is to provide an archive, a history of the good, the bad, and the quirky, which future generations can refer back to. The final review mark provides the lasting stamp of approval, for a score of 10 is always going to be a 10, no matter what the changes in technology may bring.

Therefore, the review score, or rating, is one of the means by which the needs of the industry, for quick turnover, can be synthesised with the opposing needs of the gamer for a culturally valid pursuit, one that possesses history, self-reflexivity, and an ongoing narrative of re-creation (you can see a similar trend for 'modern classics' across a wide range of other leisure/entertainment pursuits). What's more, with the new online delivery systems of gaming portals such as Steam, PS4, and Xbox One, the previously shelved retro-classic can now re-enter the marketplace to be downloaded as a budget title, meaning gaming capital and cash all-round the circuit of production and consumption.

However, whilst the videogame industry does intentionally operate by the logic of designed obsolescence, it is an intention that is never fully accepted. Gamers will always retain preferences outside the strict lineage of release dates, sequels, movie tie-ins, and the next best thing. The private and social practices of gaming cannot be reduced to the marketing plans of multi-national corporations, or to the increased technological capacity of the gaming apparatus. The gamer will always have their own determinations. Any analysis that does not recognise the ability of the subject to operate beyond the narrow confines of their role as consumer effectively takes the dominant discourse at its word, and places the producer in control. Instead the playing subject is always set to return, and to transform the boundaries laid out for them by the material conditions of production.



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