

Praxis

Too Human versus the enthusiast press: Video game journalists as mediators of commodity value

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article examines the role of mediators in the production of commodity value, arguing that there is a rise in a kind of immaterial labor, shaped by contemporary conditions of late capitalism, that functions explicitly as a mediating force. In this example, video game journalists are understood as actively engaged in producing and negotiating the value and meaning of video games for both producers and consumers. By specifically examining a moment of value contestation, a podcast debate between a journalist and a game developer, this article traces the mediating practices of the enthusiast gaming press and examines the way their history with and relationship to the video game industry continue to structure their ability to filter knowledge and shape desires.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Journalism; Video games

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Many scholars have recently argued that media—practices, products, and forms—are converging (for perhaps the loudest voice, see Jenkins 2006). Media convergence encompasses a variety of events and experiences, and, as Jenkins has argued, marks a change in the way media is both consumed and produced; for example, convergence occurs when news and entertainment content flows "across multiple media platforms" as well as when consumers take "media into their own hands" (Jenkins 2006:17). Yet under conditions of late capitalism—marked in some ways by the rise of immaterial labor, as scholars such as Lazzarato (1996) have already noted—a particular form of divergence is also at work. As Appadurai explained, for example, "In complex capitalistic societies...knowledge is segmented (even fragmented)...between producers, distributors, speculators, and consumers" (1986:54).

[1.2] In the spaces of this divergence—brought on in part by the intensified circulation of capital, information, knowledge, and goods—mediators of all types are

put to work. These mediators rarely make tangible goods; rather, they are transition points, producing affects—entertainment, taste, and experiences—and articulating needs and desires (Lazzarato 1996). They stand between consumers and producers as fulcrums, spinning and molding the knowledge that each has (access to) about the other, impacting consumption habits as they simultaneously shape production practices. Mediators then are often directly involved in negotiating—sometimes adding or subtracting—the value of a commodity or affect.

[1.3] In "Tracking Globalization" (2006), Foster suggested a particularly useful methodological framework for examining the role of mediators: an attention to—and emphasis on—the transformation and contestation of meaning and value by social actors as commodities move throughout their networks. Foster wrote, "Theoretically, the method ought to explicate how value—quantitative as well as qualitative—is variably created and unequally distributed in and through contingent relations or assemblages of persons and things" (296). Mediators are continually engaged in moments of "value contestation" (Long and Villareal 1998:726), a clear moment when actors with (often) diverging interests struggle together over the value and meaning of a commodity. While mediators work actively to fix tastes and produce desires, these moments of contestation are layered: they involve the performance of expertise and the defining and reworking of relationships (between producers, mediators, and consumers) as actors engage in battles over the value of certain commodities. Such moments of contestation are valuable spaces from which to examine the impact of mediators in circuits of commodities.

[1.4] Video game journalists act as mediators of knowledge and value for video games. As I will demonstrate, they impact both consumption and production understandings and practices. Video game journalists themselves help to blur clear lines between producers and consumers, a product of their history as video game fans and their relationships with game developers, yet they simultaneously work to secure those lines as fixed. As they mediate, they perform their expertise at the same time as they work to (in)validate the expertise of others—the producers and fans. Their practices and functions, while not necessarily unique, serve as a useful example of a kind of (commodity) mediation—linked to immaterial labor—(that is, moving into spaces of divergence) produced under conditions of late capitalism.

2. Convergence

[2.1] This project was born out of a moment in which, quite typically, many moments were converging. While this particular moment is contained on—or in—a digital file, a radio podcast, the threads materializing in this moment come from diverse media, relationships, events, and personalities, the elements of the commodity network in

which this podcast is immersed. I begin with this moment, rather than another spot or node on the network, because it is a moment of value contestation, a moment that articulates and dissolves connections at the same times as it works to define them.

[2.2] The podcast is the March 12, 2007, edition of *EGM Live*, a weekly show produced by the consumer video game magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (EGM). The podcast typically features staff writers as the hosts, but this particular show also included two special guests: EGM editor Mark MacDonald (who was not a regular host) and Denis Dyack, the president and founder of the video game development company Silicon Knights (Dyack and MacDonald 2007). Dyack was invited on the show to talk about Silicon Knights' then-forthcoming game *Too Human*; more specifically, he was to go head to head with MacDonald over his "terrible" rating of the *Too Human* playable demo shown at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in May 2006. The ensuing debate continued for the length of the almost 2-hour podcast and radiated outward in the following days, appearing in Web forums, articles, and blogs, and even prompting a "fallout" response from the following week's *EGM Live* podcast (note 1).

[2.3] On the show, Dyack responded to MacDonald's "terrible" preview rating of the demo build of *Too Human*, in which MacDonald had written, "I know from our cover story a few months back that this game has great potential, but in its current state I wouldn't show *Too Human* at a high school science fair, much less the world's most important gaming trade show" (MacDonald 2006). In reaction, Dyack resolutely declared, "I think the whole premise of previewing games a year and a half before their time has to stop...we need to stop previewing games a hundred percent...I think what we need to do as an industry is finish the game, and start the marketing."

[2.4] Setting the combative tone of the podcast, Dyack at one point told MacDonald, "I gotta tell you, I don't understand the level of harshness...I look at this and go, Wow, did I step on your foot? Did I say something bad? I just don't know where that came from." MacDonald responded, "Honestly, its not like I'm gunning after you, I have absolutely no personal anything towards you, I'm completely doing that on the game, and it's something again where I'm talking to the reader like I would talk to my friend." Consequently, it might seem that the show merely documented a very personal conflict between two people. However, as the two continued to argue the usefulness of previewing unfinished games—different from a review in which a finished game is typically rated and receives a score—they continued to circle larger issues surrounding contemporary video game production and distribution practices, namely, trade shows, vertical slices, demo builds, marketing, the ethically precarious courting of journalists by large-scale publishers as well as, in general, the role of journalists in the video game industry and their impact on production and consumption practices.

[2.5] The EGM podcast is a unique moment and is valuable to begin with in part because the show's content is already directly concerned with negotiating value, debating the act of journalists assigning direct, consumer-oriented ratings to games through previews and reviews. But again, beneath that question, Dyack and MacDonald wrestle with much broader issues that spiral out to multiple, contingent layers: the practices and decision-making ideologies that currently shape how value is produced, integrated, and imagined at several points along a video game's "biography" (Kopytoff 1986); the appropriate relationships that might or should exist between producers, journalists, and fans; the suture point of these communities; and their shifting, symbolic spheres of expertise. In "EGM's Opinionated Preview Guide" to E3, MacDonald rated the demo build of *Too Human* as terrible, explicitly assigning value for his readers. Dyack challenged this on the show: "So...Mark you're saying *Too Human*'s terrible. And we want to make sure we say the names here so everyone knows who we're talking to." MacDonald clarified his position: "I'm saying *Too Human*'s showing at E3...was [terrible]." But Dyack doesn't see a difference; he argued instead that "I really don't think you have a chance of any kind of qualitative assessment at E3. You have, how many games are at E3? 5,000? Okay. And you guys have 3 days to preview 5,000 games that are incomplete, tech's not done...I think that this does not help your audience on deciding what is a good game and what is not, it just helps get them excited or not excited. In this case, getting us panned, in this particular case...what purpose does it serve?"

[2.6] In this moment, Dyack and MacDonald performed and negotiated their separate realms of expertise while simultaneously defining and challenging their appropriate roles and practices as developer and journalist. Continually aware of the forum—a podcast whose primary audience is video game fans—they also worked to define their roles in relation to—and against—fans, readers, listeners, subscribers, and consumers. An additional layer to this discussion, then, revolved around defining and contesting the appropriate or relevant relationships that exist—or should exist—between producers, journalists, and fans.

[2.7] Tracing the convergence of threads that led up to and materialized in this moment is only part of my interest here. The significance of this podcast, as I will argue, is the way it reveals the inner workings of the production of—and the struggle over—commodity value; that work happens in this moment precisely because it is a moment when value and meaning are being contested. But this work doesn't happen all at once or all on one level in any flattened out sort of way. There are layers here, and contestation happens as relations (and fractures and knots) surface and merge, moving fluidly or with friction—outwardly, inwardly—connecting the personal, the structural, the institutional, and the network. For example, it is not irrelevant that Dyack and MacDonald have particular personal pasts and histories that inform their

knowledge and opinions on the topics they face off on; simultaneously, those personal details are embedded in multiple networks, all assemblages of relations that glimmer and twist as they reveal themselves in this moment.

3. E3: Video game makers and "news" makers

[3.1] MacDonald's claim that E3 is "the world's most important gaming trade show" is not entirely an exaggeration. Until its downsizing in 2007, E3 had been a central point of the video game industry's media blitz (note 2). Held annually in May since its inception in 1995, E3's goal was to bring together video game makers and media professionals. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), who sponsors the event, describes the 2009 E3 on their Web site: "E3 will welcome all qualified computer and video game industry audiences, including international and U.S.-based media, analysts, retailers, developers and business partners to preview the latest in interactive entertainment and technology" (<http://www.e3expo.com/>). Like any media or technology oriented trade show, E3 is an opportunity for producers to present new or as yet unreleased games, peripherals, and hardware to journalists, who can then publicize them to consumers.

[3.2] Located annually in the Los Angeles convention center until the event was moved in 2007, E3 comprised (for example) high-profile press conferences by the big names Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo; hotel room meetings between journalists and developers; and developer booths, sometimes extravagantly and loudly displaying new games coming to the market. At press conferences, journalists heard speeches from CEOs and presidents of game companies, and watched flashy videos advertising the latest games or hardware. These press conferences were spectacles, notorious for their high profile announcements and surprising reveals, kept secret until the final moment on stage (note 3). Intense competition often raged over which company could crack the biggest news. In private meetings with developers and distributors, journalists had access to game makers for one-on-one interviews, received guided walkthroughs of game demos, and gained (sometimes playable) access to games that weren't available to all attendees. At the booths on the showroom floor, journalists could get their hands on controllers to play game demos—often after waiting for hours in line with other journalists and, often, nonprofessionals who had navigated their way into the show.

[3.3] The games presented to journalists at E3 range in their stage of completion and the form of their presentation. Games early in development—as much as 2 or 3 years from completion—might be presented only with a "teaser" trailer (note 4) at a press conference or developer booth. Games closer to completion might show a longer trailer, demonstrating actual game play footage (often with declarations that clarify

whether the footage in the trailer has been generated in game [note 5]). Games nearer their release date offer E3 audiences a *demo*, or demonstration: a playable level of the actual (though possibly unfinished) game. However, sometimes these demos—particularly if the game is not complete enough to show to gamers as is—may be in the form of what is called a *vertical slice*. A vertical slice is a demo designed to illustrate all (marketable) facets of a game—AI (artificial intelligence), graphics, game play mechanics, and level design, for example—by presenting a small portion of an (often playable) example level. Frequently, vertical slices, since they are typically not simply lifted out of a close-to-complete game and are instead levels made specifically as a demo of an incomplete game, can take a great deal of (side) development time to produce and may not wholly represent the final version. Aside from creating vertical slices for demos to be presented to consumers or journalists, developers might also produce them to be used in house to analyze how the game is progressing, to see if some detail or mechanic is working properly, or to show to distributors or partners.

[3.4] The *Too Human* presentation at E3 2007 was a vertical slice. As Dyack subtly revealed in the podcast, the Silicon Knights development team felt great pressure (possibly from their backers, marketers, or partners) to have a demo build ready to present to gamers at E3. On the podcast, while Dyack avoided answering MacDonald's question, "Do you agree that it should not have been shown at E3?" he did in fact suggest that the vertical slice was shown at E3 against his better judgment because it contained bugs that the team did not have time to fix before the show (note 6).

[3.5] MacDonald's preview of the *Too Human* build appeared in a section of the magazine related to E3 coverage, in a column entitled "EGM's Opinionated Preview Guide." Promising "honest impressions," the guide is headed with the disclaimer that "a lot can happen before these games land on store shelves, so some duds may actually turn out to be studs...and vice versa" (anonymous, introduction to MacDonald 2006). Each preview was accompanied by an 8-bit-looking, *Space Invaders*-like icon in stages of happiness or anger, depending on the preview rating (awesome, good, so-so, and terrible), for readers who "can't be bothered with so much reading" (anonymous, introduction to MacDonald 2006). MacDonald and the EGM staff writers explained on the podcast that one of the requirements for a game to be included in the E3 preview guide was that it had to have a playable demo (*but* the demo didn't have to be played by the journalists; they could simply watch someone else play, including developers presenting the demo to an audience). Given the minuscule word allowance, MacDonald's preview of *Too Human*, after a short introduction, got straight to the point:

[3.6] How was it? In a word: disappointing. Solid combo-friendly controls were lost in a storm of mediocre graphics, lame effects, technical issues (the

game often froze for seconds at a time) and a woozy camera usually zoomed so far back it felt like I was playing *Robotron*. (MacDonald 2006)

[3.7] During the podcast, MacDonald elaborated on his experience playing the *Too Human* demo: "So you can see the video of what I got...it was jittery, or the camera would come sort of in and out, and there were issues with it, and, you know, I had the resulting write-up in EGM judging what we saw at E3, and I came right out and said that."

[3.8] After reading a portion of MacDonald's preview on the podcast, Dyack challenged, "So, I'm just going to call to point, these shots you have here [three stills of *Too Human* included in the magazine next to MacDonald's preview] are actually from the E3 build...So you think those graphics are mediocre?" MacDonald responded, "I still have the video of what I actually saw, and what I saw was, it very rarely looked like this...this looked really good, but in the build..." The other hosts on the show came to MacDonald's defense, reminding the listening audience that a game looks very different in motion.

[3.9] Dyack was also critical of MacDonald's writing style and tone, arguing that it was unnecessarily harsh in order to be provocative: "Saying something like 'I wouldn't show this at a high school science fair,' I know it's good to be down with the readers and stuff, but..." MacDonald retaliated:

[3.10] Well, come on, it's making a point; it's an obvious exaggeration to make the point. I'm a writer; at the end of the day I gotta make something that people are gonna want to read. The reader gets the point that this should not have been shown at E3, and I think that was an opinion that a lot of people shared.

[3.11] Ultimately, Dyack was critical of the industry's privileging of event-moderated relationships. Dyack argued that shows like E3—inflexible to a game's own production timeline—place pressure on developers to present material from games that are still early in production, which can compromise the development of a game. As a consequence, what journalists have access to, and the quality of demos presented to them, Dyack argued, is completely random—and, as in the case of *Too Human*, can impact the gaming public's early opinion of a game. Dyack also argued that industry events like E3—and the products that developers and publishers have to produce for the show—privilege presentation over substance; what might get presented at E3 is "not really what a game is about." But Dyack was particularly critical of the preview process, "rating things that aren't done," and the kind of impact a preview like MacDonald's can have on a game that is nowhere near completion.

[3.12] **Dyack:** If you're doing a preview, the amount of, I'm going to be very blunt, the amount of, you know, potential damage you can do because you guys are press and you're respected, saying anything negative that might not be true with a preview, all you can say is the concept's cool, it may be a little disappointing, but when you go out and label something terrible, that makes a difference, that's an impact...

[3.13] **MacDonald:** Somebody chose to show that build to the press knowing they were going to evaluate it, [and] can't be surprised by the rating.

[3.14] **Dyack:** The entire industry was surprised by the vehemency of this. Our partners are going, "So what you are saying is we made a mistake."

[3.15] Clearly, E3 and the practiced grooves of developer and journalist routines structure the production practices. Producing a vertical slice for a trade show like E3 can take a great deal of prime, potentially critical, development time away from work on the actual game, to present to the public something that may not always be a good representation of the game to come. Yet E3 demonstrates an economy that producers and journalists have built on each other: developers need previews to create the desired hype and buzz around a forthcoming game, and journalists need trade shows like E3 to create content to fill magazine and Web pages. Although journalists, via their editors, might be largely the ones who shape what previews look like, they don't always have complete control over this. Dyack may in fact have been responding to the previously tacit understanding between developers and journalists that previews will always be positive, advertisement-like presentations. *Newsweek's* video game columnist N'Gai Croal has argued that the preview-review system has a "fundamentally broken nature...in which historically previews and features have almost invariably been positive—or optimistic, if we're being more charitable—before the truth, good or bad, was finally revealed in the text and scoring of the review" (Croal 2007). MacDonald, along with EGM's "Opinionated Preview Guide," clearly violates this understanding. Even with this violation, the practices of producers and journalists remain tightly enmeshed, representative of the long symbiotic relationship that has existed between game development companies and game journalists.

4. Enthusiast(ic) press

[4.1] MacDonald and his colleagues at EGM belong to a subset of journalism that is referred to by mainstream journalists as the *enthusiast press*. Typically, the enthusiast press produces consumer-oriented publications that focus on publicizing specific categories of goods, often high-end technological products (such as video games,

computers, or cars), though the category has recently been used most frequently to refer to a particular kind of video game journalist and publication. The label carries the connotation that video game journalists who belong to the enthusiast press are not "real" journalists; this is an understanding, however, that MacDonald and others often resist.

[4.2] In a blog post, N'Gai Croal (2007) explained why the enthusiast gaming press is derided by developers:

[4.3] The reality is this: publishers generally hold the enthusiast press in utter contempt, and they have for a long time. This disdain began as scorn for the enthusiast media's roots in video game fandom, rather than traditional journalism from "respectable" publications, but it has since metastasized into a veiled but nonetheless seething anger over the advent of the Internet and with it the rise of fan sites, forums and blogs over which publishers can exert little pressure, let alone control.

[4.4] With this departure from their once symbiotic relationship, Croal argues, the rise of gaming Internet news sites and forums, and the practice of providing retail outlets and publishers with statistics regarding page views and site traffic have now locked the producers and the enthusiast press in a parasitic dance. Croal's blog post on "Contempt" was in part a response to the then-recent firing of a *GameSpot* (<http://www.gamespot.com/>) editorial director, which was rumored to be the result of that Web site's poor review ratings given to the game *Kane and Lynch* (2007) complicated by the recent huge advertising deal struck between *Kane and Lynch's* publisher, Eidos Interactive, and *GameSpot*. Croal called this complication "the deal with the devil that the business side of enthusiast outlets struck long ago—taking advertising dollars from the very companies that they cover" (2007). Enthusiast gaming publications continue to find themselves mired in practices that flirt with ethics that "real journalists" might find questionable. However, the video game enthusiast press has been shaped by a very particular history that marks it as different from mainstream journalism, and that history continues to structure the kinds of relationships that the enthusiast press has with game makers. Those relationships continue to shape production practices.

[4.5] One of the first gaming magazines in the United States ([note 7](#)), *Nintendo Power* was self-published by Nintendo and originated as a replacement to their *Fun Club Newsletter*. The newsletter was originally a way for Nintendo to track its growing consumer base; after sending in a Nintendo warranty card, gamers were automatically enrolled in the Fun Club and sent a newsletter. The newsletter contained feature stories on games as well as tips and still images from top-selling games. When the Fun Club membership reached 1 million, Nintendo of America's president, Mino Arakawa,

established *Nintendo Power* (note 8). Although it was composed of "editorial" content, *Nintendo Power* was, in essence, an extended advertisement for Nintendo products and services. The magazine included "stories about game characters, lists of kids' high scores, and loads of maps and charts, as well as lots of game tips" (Sheff 1994:178). Articles covering games that were in preproduction helped Nintendo essentially to presell their product: "The best games (or the ones Nintendo wanted most to sell) were covered in spread after glossy spread of maps, galleries of characters, and player tips" (Sheff 1994:180). *Nintendo Power* and its popularity helped to establish a format for game content and news—glossy spreads and high-profile, in-depth coverage of forthcoming games, very similar to the content found in video game magazines and Web sites today. Although most contemporary video game publications, whether print or online, are not actually published by game companies (note 9), these publications continue to make their primary revenue through advertising dollars from the game publishers and developers:

[4.6] One would have to be naive or foolish not to understand that there has always been a mutually beneficial relationship between journalists who cover consumer products or entertainment and the manufacturers or publishers of the goods in question. The journalist and his or her outlet gets a story that is of interest to their readership while the company gets exposure for whatever they are trying to sell, and this remains true today. (Croal 2007)

[4.7] The enthusiast press has been positioned over time primarily as a marketing venue, with a clear hand in encouraging consumers to buy and play the games that benefit the press's relationship with game publishers. Game publishers have a variety of strategies to court magazines and encourage favorable coverage of the games of their choosing—for example, giving journalists swag (free stuff, which can range from games and posters to an airplane ticket or a high-definition TV) or promising exclusive access to game information (like screenshots, early demos, site visits, or developer interviews). Producers and publishers also act on this perceived "marketing" relationship with the enthusiast press with more strong-arm tactics: pulling advertising or withholding a magazine's access to game data (such as stills, descriptions, and code) if the magazine doesn't positively rate or discuss that producer's company or games. A lingering impact of these practices is a conflict of interest—and a dismissal of "objectivity"—that doesn't sit well with the more mainstream form of American journalism.

[4.8] In addition, as Croal mentioned in a blog post, the video game enthusiast press grew out of game fandom, where job interview practices might privilege an applicant's ability to take down the office's reigning *Virtua Fighter* champion over the clarity or

skill of the applicant's writing. Writers in the enthusiast press might sometimes be motivated to become journalists because of their intense fandom or their desire to play and report on games before the general public has access to them as well as the opportunities to meet game developers they might idolize. The enthusiast press might also have less training in journalism, reporting, or writing than would be required for someone working for *Newsweek* or *Time*, another reason for mainstream journalism to consider them inauthentic journalists. However, those kinds of skills, in fact, might not be as necessary when working for a game magazine; it might be more beneficial to be familiar with the history and vocabulary of video games and the practices wielded by both developers and a magazine or Web site's reading audience.

[4.9] Despite the pervasiveness of these tight binds—equally constraining to game producers and journalists—some video game journalist outlets are in the process of seeking legitimization. Specifically, magazines like EGM are working with varying degrees of success to negotiate these traditions. Under the helm of editor-in-chief Dan Hsu, who left the magazine in April 2008, EGM began to publicize and promote their movement away from the questionable practices criticized by the industry and mainstream journalism. In several editorials, Hsu explicitly addressed the conflict of interest that has haunted games journalism, and he began to name the publishers and game companies who were attempting to exert pressure on the magazine. In the February 2008 edition of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, Hsu told his readers that Ubisoft, Sony's sport game division, and the *Mortal Kombat* development team at Midway had banned the magazine from further coverage of their games because they were unhappy with the reviews and ratings their games had received in the magazine. In essence, they were refusing to send EGM information or game content such as stills, or to provide EGM with early code so that the magazine could complete reviews before the games were released. Hsu argued, "It used to be game companies would pull advertising if they wanted to punish a magazine for unfavorable coverage. In more recent times, they're pulling the coverage as well" (Hsu 2008). In his June 2007 editorial, Hsu also addressed the ethical standards that the magazine follows in regards to swag:

[4.10] Game companies are always trying to send us free stuff. What are we allowed to keep? We do not accept any gifts...But we are allowed to keep cheap, promotional items...[and] the games that the companies send us. We do not accept flights or hotel rooms from the publishers, either—we pay for those out of our own budgets. And even if we do fly out to see a game, we never promise any coverage.

[4.11] Hsu ended his editorial by explaining that, while these straightforward rules might seem obvious, readers might be surprised by the actual practices of other

gaming publications. Hsu (2007) encouraged readers to ask their "favorite magazine or website what their policies are," and concluded that "the more you know, the more you know whom to trust." Hsu's suggestion that a gaming publication's guidelines and ethical policies reveal whether they are trustworthy cast a shadow on the long history of reciprocal practices among journalists and producers while managing to imply that EGM remained untainted by this history.

[4.12] Hsu took some credit for the shift in the magazine's policies and intentions:

[4.13] When I took over as editor-in-chief in 2001, I also wanted us to get more real with our previews. I was tired of the press-release rehashes our industry had become accustomed to, so I asked for more sincerity and opinions from our writers and editors. Naturally, you have to be fair—the products aren't finished yet, after all—but judging from reader feedback, our opinionated previews have been a hit. (Hsu 2008)

[4.14] This shift in emphasis with previews is what led, in part, to the "E3 Opinionated Preview Guide." In the Dyack and MacDonald podcast (2007), one of the other EGM hosts, Shane Bettenhausen, made a similar statement: "We don't pull punches, we do the opinionated guy at E3 every year, and it's been a hit, but it's not a hit with a lot of developers and publishers."

[4.15] Opinionated previews and other similar "hard-hitting" features are not becoming a part of enthusiast press practices because they are more ethical but rather because they are popular with readers and help to sell magazines. As a result, even as game journalists attempt to move away from the routine and toward more "legitimate" forms of journalism, the paths that are open to them may not be as full of integrity as they imagine. The idea that game journalists work positively for the benefit of consumers—to provide them with honest and straightforward opinions without the framework of the market interceding—is largely a myth. Their mediation continues to be filtered by the market; their ability to sell advertising space and to produce subscribers and site visits—attracting readers with full and detailed, if not "world exclusive" coverage accompanied by large, glossy game play stills and interviews with game developers—remains dependent on the positive benefits of working closely, if not entirely ethically, with producers.

5. Divergence

[5.1] Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture* (2006), discusses the way he sees media content, technology, and forms converging. Jenkins argues that "several forces" have begun to erode the barriers that separate different media—newspapers, magazines, radio, print, and television. While large media conglomerates buy up and

subsume diverse media forms (Sony, for example), new media technologies enable "the same content to flow through different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception" (Jenkins 2006:11). For example, television shows can appear not only on TV screens but also on computers and cell phones. Simultaneously, Jenkins argues that hardware is diverging, and consumers need more and more technological gadgets to access increasingly similar content. Jenkins cites a Cheskin Research report from 2002 that claims

[5.2] Your email needs and expectations are different whether you're at home, work, school, commuting, the airport, etc., and these different devices are designed to suit your needs for accessing content depending on where you are—your situated context. (quoted in Jenkins 2006:15)

[5.3] It may seem that current lifestyles alone—our "needs"—are the driving force for the necessity of multiple media devices. Jenkins, however, suggests that the proliferation of diverse and multifunctioning technological accessories is "symptomatic of a moment of convergence...because no one is sure what kinds of functions should be combined, we are forced to buy a range of specialized and incompatible appliances" (Jenkins 2006:15).

[5.4] Aside from noting the evolution of (media) technology to digital forms, which Jenkins divides from "old" analogue media (as do many other scholars; see, for example, Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003; Manovich 2001), Jenkins remains vague on—and then ultimately overlooks—the "forces" that might be driving a convergence of commodity types and forms, and a fracturing of hardware into "must have" specialized pieces (note 10). Contemporary conditions of late capitalism, a frame that doesn't clearly enter into Jenkins's consideration, is likely a very significant force impacting—compelling, structuring, and in fact creating—the changes that Jenkins observes. As Hardt and Negri clearly remind us in *Empire* (2000), capitalism is aggressive in its move to subsume all areas outside of itself.

[5.5] Expanding the sphere of circulation can be accomplished by intensifying existing markets within the capitalist sphere through new needs and wants...Capitalism is an organism that cannot sustain itself without constantly looking beyond its boundaries, feeding off its external environment. (2000:224)

[5.6] The creation of "new needs and wants" in consumers—the ability to continually and flexibly commoditize newer, previously external, or inalienable forms of living (for example, women's reproductive rights becoming purchasable through surrogate agencies)—is a primary mechanism of capitalism's success. As Marx clarified in *Grundrisse*, "A precondition of production based on capital is therefore the production

of a constantly widening sphere of circulation, whether the sphere itself is directly expanded or whether more points within it are created as points of production" (Marx 1861:407). LiPuma and Lee also argue, in their discussion of financial derivatives, that the "global expansion and power of capitalism are now bound up with its capacity to organize cultures of circulation," particularly the circulation of "knowledge, money, entertainment, and technology" (2004:9). The production of new consumer needs and desires, and the creation of consumer identities and lifestyles through product customization and "niche marketing" (see Dunn 2004) as well as capitalism's pure geographic spread into literally new markets and areas—a process of internalizing the external (Hardt and Negri 2000)—are all forms of (widening) circulation. Our BlackBerrys, cellphones, and day planners may not simply be designed to fit the diverse, contextual needs of our e-mail viewing; instead, the profit-making needs of capitalism simultaneously produce goods and the lifestyles that demand those goods in ever widening, ever mutating circles. Any discussion of media convergence, then, could benefit from the consideration of contemporary conditions of late capitalism at work.

[5.7] Considering modes of convergence—or collapsing—both Castells and Terranova have argued that, with the advent of a "networked society," communication technologies like the Internet bring about "a greater possibility of disintermediation" (Castells 2001:84).

[5.8] Advertising campaigns and business manuals suggest that the Internet is...a site of disintermediation (embodying the famous death of the middleman, from bookshops to travel agencies to computer stores).
(Terranova 2000:34)

[5.9] Although this may be true in part—we book our own airplane tickets and buy direct from online "wholesalers," cutting out the intermediaries in these instances—"disintermediation" ignores the way communication technologies themselves act as and enable new forms of mediation (note 11). The spaces and needs for (human) mediators may be simultaneously expanding, veering, or mutating even while other forms of intermediation—the travel agent, the salesperson—are dissolving; there are other types of divergence, then, occurring along with the hardware diversification that Jenkins discusses.

[5.10] In his introduction to *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Appadurai wrote, "Commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge. In the first place, and crudely, such knowledge can be of two sorts: the knowledge (technical, social, aesthetic, and so forth) that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity" (1986:41).

[5.11] The globalization of capital and the transnationalization of production networks, a very practical arrangement of geographically dispersed "links" on a commodity chain—parts from Singapore, labor in China, corporation in Canada—is a very obvious example of the kind of distance that can grow between points of production and then, ultimately, consumption. However, poles of production and consumption aren't split merely through geographic distance; even as the speeding up of information and data transfer allows sales clerks to upload consumer profiles instantaneously to the shop room floor (next door or time zones away)—as in Castells's example of the clothing manufacturer Zara (2001:74)—product "customization" is not the straightforward insistence of a diversified global market or a simple byproduct of "cultural change" (Castells 2001:77). As Appadurai pointed out, commodity knowledge concerns how to "appropriately" consume. (Part of what becomes appropriate under Toyotism is the understanding that consumers have the right—in fact, the need—to demand personalized commodities, the diversification of just-in-time tailored goods.) The growing role of immaterial labor (affective, free, or otherwise) as a function of contemporary conditions of late (or even millennial) capitalism is linked to the divergence of production and consumption knowledge (note 12). Inserted as nodes in (business, economic) networks, the very function of this work is often simply to mediate, to produce the "appropriateness" of our consumer hearts. Immaterial labor, as defined by Lazzarato, is "the labor that produces the informational and cultural concept of the commodity":

[5.12] Immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work"—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion. (1996:133)

6. Mediating video game value

[6.1] Video game journalists, then, as immaterial laborers, work explicitly to "define and fix" the consumer norms, desires, and tastes of video game fans; they don't make games themselves, but rather they function to create a continued need among consumers for games and to situate a gaming lifestyle or gamer identity—necessarily linked to continued emotional and monetary engagement—as desirable. Positioned between production and consumption, game journalists mediate "appropriate" game knowledge as well as commodity value; as middlemen, they "simultaneously bridge and divide the segmented knowledges of producers and consumers" (Foster 2006:292). Game journalists are not just direct conduits of valued/valuable insider knowledge (What makes Cliffy B cry? What inspires Suda 51? What will Bungie do now that they have left Microsoft? What will be the PlayStation 3's "killer app"?)—they help produce and define that knowledge as valuable. They are also explicit gatekeepers,

determining what kind of knowledge is passed on to consumers and structuring the ways that gamers are, in turn, able to evaluate that knowledge. As journalists act to insert themselves in the production of commodity value, their role requires the continual negotiation and performance of valid/valuable expertise; when journalists preview, review, and rate games, they do this explicitly. They articulate appropriate consumption knowledge by creating and reinforcing categories, distinctions, criticisms: what makes a game good; what game or game play is worth consumers' attention; how much particular types of games should cost; even evaluating and determining what makes a game *a game* or conversely not a game. This in turn impacts how consumers understand the value—and meaning—of the games they consume. Simultaneously, as so clearly evidenced in Dyack and MacDonald's podcast debate, journalists also impact how producers create and imagine their games and, in turn, are able to attract and communicate with consumers.

[6.2] Fans purchase or seek to acquire through other means the journalist's expert knowledge, symbolizing an established consumer trust in that knowledge. MacDonald and the other podcast hosts continually emphasize the need for their work to remain critical and honest so that consumers can trust their judgments and opinions. As Appadurai has explained, "In complex capitalistic societies, it is not only the case that knowledge is segmented (even fragmented) as between producers, distributors, speculators, and consumers...the fact is that knowledge *about* commodities is itself increasingly commoditized" (1986:54).

[6.3] Game magazines are explicitly commoditized knowledge and are often, along with other journalistic produced materials such as blogs and podcasts, the only route to prized insider or expert knowledge regarding future productions, release dates, and industry personalities, all which expert fans might—convinced from within fan circles as much as from magazines themselves—believe must be consumed to make one a "real" fan. As Bourdieu has argued, "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded" (1984:2). Gamers learn that code, in part through the media they consume that surrounds the game commodity; gamers learn—often communicated to them through the enthusiast press that assists in producing "new needs and wants"—how to appropriately be a video game fan.

[6.4] While journalists are mediators of value, their agency, their ability to manage segmented knowledges and add value to—or subtract from—the commodities of their interest, is knit up in webs of other actors, both human and nonhuman: production practices, insider relationships with developers, exclusivity deals, nondisclosure agreements, markets, technology, distribution channels, magazine publishers, subscription numbers, and genre conventions. As discussed previously, video game

journalism as a practice has a particular history—a particular relationship to the game industry—that continues to shape the role of game journalists and the available options they have for mediating commodity value and the related, appropriate knowledge. Historically, magazines and other games-related media functioned mostly as advertisements or consumer reports—positioning journalists as marketers—resulting in the development of a distinct symbiotic relationship between journalists and producers. Journalists were also traditionally themselves video game fans, and as MacDonald reminded Dyack during the 2007 podcast, "I like to think I have the same expectations [as the reader], I mean I'm a gamer...and I go into it with that in mind." Game journalists, then, are able to oscillate between the spheres of production (exclusivity deals, swag, trade show parties) and consumption (opinionated previews, game ratings, industry criticisms), simultaneously positioning themselves within both communities.

[6.5] The impact of this history continues to linger, even as the role of game journalist is itself transforming, though contested in a variety of ways and by a variety of different actors. Dyack is an example of one such actor, and journalists like MacDonald are another. The role of the enthusiast press is also challenged by the fact that game journalism must become inclusive of a wider set of actors. Through alternative distribution networks (downloadable content, for example) and alternative media outlets (personal blogs, Web forums), consumers take on the role of journalists (or interact with "real" journalists to directly and explicitly challenge them), while game makers, with their own company sponsored podcasts and Web forums, hope to bypass traditional press outlets and the mediating agency of journalists. One such forum, the popular message board *NeoGaf*, is a good representative of the unruly nature of contemporary gaming spaces. Described by its owner Tyler Malka as "as a nexus of fandom, media, and industry" (quoted in Ashley 2008), *NeoGaf* is a space where game developers, corporate executives, journalists, and fans all merge, each performing their expertise and battling (as did Dyack in his notorious *Too Human* posting war) over who has the right to mediate commodity value.

[6.6] The EGM Dyack/MacDonald podcast was only the beginning, a small indication or a visible moment of the mediation at work among the day-to-day habits, routines, tasks, and decision-making practices of video game journalists. It was a small example of the work that is being done by immaterial laborers who—as they slip into, and help to widen, the notches created by the forces of late capitalism—shape our lifestyles, identities, desires, knowledges, and needs. As our understandings of the easy categories we tend to cling to—producer, consumer, marketer—continue to collapse and mutate, what comes next is to trace the threads that lead away from the Dyack/MacDonald podcast and into larger social fields and moments; to follow those

threads outward and inward to other scales and networks, where other moments of value contestation continue to flourish, expand, and extinguish.

7. Acknowledgments

[7.1] This essay is based on a coauthored paper presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, titled "Too Human Versus: Cultural Brokers and the Ethnographic Study of Video Games." I'd like to thank my coauthor, Jonathan Corliss, for his tremendous help with this new version and for his continued support and insight.

8. Notes

1. Dyack's vocal defense of *Too Human* and his frustration with journalists and fans (and their practice of judging a game through early production stills and demos) continued to appear on diverse sites across the Web until the release of *Too Human*. In particular, Dyack prompted a heated debate on the pages of the gaming forum *NeoGaf* (<http://www.neogaf.com/>) when he took posters to task for their negative criticism of the game in his June 25, 2008, thread "Too Human—Stand and Be Counted" (<http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=318653>).
2. In October 2006, in an effort to curb the spectacle of E3, which was attracting upward of 60,000 attendees, many whom were considered nonprofessionals, E3 was officially renamed E3 Media and Business Summit and became an invitation-only event. In 2007, E3 was moved to Santa Monica, California, and was held in July.
3. For example, Xbox vice president Peter Moore lifted the sleeve of his shirt on stage at E3 2006 to expose *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games, 2007) tattooed on his shoulder, a dramatic way to announce the series would be released simultaneously on Microsoft's console. Previous games in the *Grand Theft Auto* series had been first released for Sony's PlayStation console and then later ported over to the Xbox.
4. Similar to film teaser trailers, game teaser trailers are typically short and are designed to be flashy and excite (or inform) an audience about a game that either has just entered development or is a year or two from release. Typically, these teaser trailers show very little final in-game or game play footage (because it might not even have been developed yet); instead, footage is often created specifically for the advertisement.
5. Game play footage—images of the game as it is being played—differs from cinematic or cut-scene footage, which typically is unplayable (the gamer sits and watches a short movie as an interruption to game play). Cut-scene footage is often

prerendered (that is, is not rendered by the gamer's hardware in real time), and its graphics may often be of a higher quality than game play from the same game. Since the notorious release of a teaser trailer for *Killzone 2* at E3 2005—the audience was lead to believe that the footage shown was being rendered in real time but later discovered it was entirely prerendered—many trailers begin with disclaimers stating whether the footage is in game or not (that is, rendered in real time).

6. MacDonald asked Dyack on the show to talk about the circumstances that led to the production of the build that was presented at E3, saying, "Because, I mean you've talked a little bit about it before, the game was running better, right? And just the nature of game development, you getting a new version of the engine, that sort of thing, there's no time." Dyack responded, "The bottom line is, in game development, things are going well, [but] the next week you hit a bug, and it just takes everything to the ground."

7. *Electronic Gaming* is reported to have been the first U.S. consumer magazine focused exclusively on video games. The magazine ran for 3 years, from 1981 until the video game crash (Cifaldi 2005). *Nintendo Power* began publication in 1988 after Nintendo entered the failing U.S. video game market with the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985.

8. For a detailed discussion of *Nintendo Power* and Nintendo's early business practices, see Sheff (1994).

9. Magazines like *Official PlayStation Magazine* and *Official Xbox Magazine* as well as *Nintendo Power* are exceptions.

10. Another important point that Jenkins makes about convergence is the way it is "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process"; he argues that "the new consumers [of new media] are active" in contrast to the passivity of old consumers (2006:18). Jenkins's emphasis on the agency of consumers who, through their consumption, production, and interaction with commodities, are "fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture" (18) lacks attention to complex forms of agency, manipulation, and resistance that may exist on the part of both producers and consumers (and "pro-sumers"). Additionally, Jenkins's emphasis may overlook the way digital media (production) also produces new forms of exploitation for workers and consumers. For a discussion of free labor in the digital economy, see Terranova (2000). A more through discussion of these points is necessary but outside my scope here.

11. Jenkins's work might also benefit from attention to the way technology itself is an active, mediating agent, shaping and producing human relationships and habits.

Instead, he argues that "convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence [only] occurs within the brains of individual consumers through their social interactions with others" (2006:3).

12. Even as consumers become "pro-sumers" and "take media in their own hands" (Jenkins 2006:17)—a process that isn't necessarily new—their practices and knowledge, I argue, are still subject to forms of mediation, whether directly through mediators, as in my example, or through technology, mass culture, consumption patterns, or more broadly the conditions of late capitalism.

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