

TEMÁTICA LIVRE

Plataformização da produção cultural e jornalismo de games: uma entrevista com David Nieborg

Platformization of cultural production and games journalism: an interview with David Nieborg

Edição v. 43
número 1 / 2024

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577
Niterói (RJ), 43 (1)
jan/2024-abr/2024

A Revista Contracampo é uma revista eletrônica do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação da Universidade Federal Fluminense e tem como objetivo contribuir para a reflexão crítica em torno do campo midiático, atuando como espaço de circulação da pesquisa e do pensamento acadêmico.

AO CITAR ESTE ARTIGO, UTILIZE A SEGUINTE REFERÊNCIA:

Plataformização da produção cultural e jornalismo de games: uma entrevista com David Nieborg.
Contracampo, Niterói, v. 43, n. 1, P. 01-15, jan./abr. 2024.

Resumo

Nessa entrevista, David Nieborg aborda os temas-chave de sua carreira acadêmica. Primeiro, analisa a economia política dos jogos triple-A, destacando sua evolução de um passatempo para um setor importante da economia global. Examina suas cadeias de produção de valor, as estratégias de rentabilização e as relações entre as empresas de hardware e as game publishers. Nieborg, então, explora o conceito de "plataformização da produção cultural", ressaltando como as plataformas estão remodelando a criação, distribuição e monetização dos bens culturais. Apesar do avanço nas ferramentas de produção de conteúdo, Nieborg identifica os persistentes desequilíbrios de poder resultantes dos domínios das grandes plataformas digitais. Ele conclui com as ideias de seu último livro, que aborda as dificuldades do jornalismo de jogos em ganhar legitimidade e visibilidade na cultura mainstream.

Palavras-chaves

Jogos Digitais; Jornalismo; Plataformização; Produção Cultural

Abstract

In this interview, David Nieborg discusses the key themes of his academic career. Firstly, he delves into the political economy of triple-A games, highlighting their evolution from a hobbyist pastime to a major sector of the global economy. He examines their production value chains, monetization strategies, and the relationships between hardware companies and game publishers. Nieborg then explores the concept of "platformization of cultural production", emphasizing how digital platforms are reshaping the creation, distribution, and monetization of cultural goods. Despite advancements in content production tools, he pins down persistent power imbalances from the dominance of big digital platforms. He concludes with insights from his latest book, which addresses the struggles of games journalism in gaining legitimacy and visibility in mainstream culture.

Keywords

Digital Games; Journalism; Platformization; Culture Production

Introdução

In this interview, David Nieborg, currently Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough, talks about the central themes that have permeated his academic career: the political economy of the digital games industry, the economics of apps and platforms and games journalism. It was conducted on October 10th, 2023, via online platform Zoom, and lasted about an hour and a half. My contact with Professor Nieborg was due to my exchange period as PhD visiting student at University of Toronto, where our thought-provoking conversations about platforms, labor, and game industry - important themes for the research agenda of both –, could be crystallized in this dialogue.

In the first part of the interview, Nieborg focuses on the subject of his doctoral thesis (Nieborg, 2011), his first major work, the political economy of the so-called triple-A games, the “blockbusters” of the video game industry, with high budgets, licensed franchises and large production teams working under a strict division of labor. Investigating their production value chains, their monetization logics and the relationship between hardware companies and publishers, the author shows how this industry, which began as a pastime of programmers and hobbyists, inspired by the spirit of “refusal to work” at the end of the hectic 1960s, has become one of the key sectors of the global economy, with billion-dollar figures that already exceed those of the most successful Hollywood films.

Subsequently, the author refers to the implications of the concept of “platformization of cultural production”, the result of a theoretical framework developed throughout his work - notably in an article written with Poell (2018), and in a more recent book, *Platforms and Cultural Production*, with Poell and Duffy (2020). Faced with the challenge of reflecting on the growing power of digital platforms in the circuits of cultural and media production, Nieborg concludes, in an instigating combination of elements from political economy, business studies and software studies, that the main implication of the subsumption of cultural production to the logic of platforms is that cultural commodities become something “contingent”, in two senses. Firstly, because cultural producers are becoming increasingly dependent on a select group of large corporations that own the technical infrastructures that increasingly intervene in the creation, distribution, marketing and monetization of production practices in multiple sectors of the cultural industry. Secondly, in the sense that the cultural goods and services that circulate in the platform ecosystem are becoming more malleable and modular, being constantly subject to revision and recirculation according to the informational feedback that flows from users’ activities.

Thus, against the backdrop of the game production field, the author asserts that, despite the countless possibilities opened up by new content production and distribution tools, the promise of the democratization of culture that dates back to the dawn of the digital age still comes up against persistent power relations and inequities resulting from the union of big capital with the scalar power of digital platform infrastructures.

After some considerations on the viability of the cooperative model in game production, the interview closes with the author’s new book, written in partnership with Maxwell Foxman (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023), a materialization of a long-held desire to write about an activity that he practiced professionally in his native Netherlands before completing his doctorate. Nieborg reflects on the obstacles and difficulties that journalists and gamers have faced in their attempt to transform games into a mainstream culture, i.e. one that enjoys enough legitimacy and visibility to be considered worthy of being “taken seriously”. Aware of this complex and challenging scenario, in which stereotypes such as “games are for kids” still persist, but also certain of the central importance of video games for contemporary culture, Nieborg, at the end, cites some suggestions that could help games journalism in its difficult task of converting games into a mainstream culture.

Me: David, since your PhD thesis your research focus has been the political economy of triple-A

games, the so-called “blockbusters” of the industry, with bigger budgets and greater complexity. However, over the last few years, the ongoing influence of platforms on creation, distribution, marketing and monetization of specific sectors of cultural production stimulated you and other scholars to coin the concept of “platformization of cultural production”. In what fundamental ways does platformization affect the publishers that produce blockbuster games?

David Nieborg: Games are always platform-dependent, and it became the big argument in the book. You can't play a game without any kind of platform, otherwise it's a board game. But digital game you need a piece of hardware and software. In other industries, specifically journalism, that's so different. What is so interesting about the game industry is, you could see early on is that... What's in it for game platforms? What do Sony and Microsoft want to do? So, they have their own economic incentives. And that's why I studied blockbusters, because I found game platforms, Sony and Microsoft, they want the biggest hits, they want to sell as many games as possible, because the more games you sell per device... It's called tax-rate... So, if you sell one PlayStation, Sony wants to sell at least seven or eight games over the duration of five years to make money back on the hardware. So, they have a very specific business-model, razor-blade business model. I found that there was an incentive for publishers and hardware providers, Sony and Microsoft, to make the big hits bigger. Bigger is better. And they said those things publicly, like “Bigger is better”, “We want big hits” and “We also want big hits every year or maybe two”. So, every year you have *Call of Duty*, every year you have *FIFA*.

Me: It looks like the Hollywood industry, right? It's like a Hollywood, but for games...

David Nieborg: Yes! And what helped me enormously was to read a lot of theory and research on Hollywood. There was very good scholarship at the time. I did my PhD during like 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and the ends of the 2000's. And I started reading literature and research on Hollywood, Hollywood blockbusters. And most of the research was from the 1990's. It was about movies like *Jaws* and *Indiana Jones*, you know, all the big ones. And I was reading this, and I was like, it's similar, like you are saying. Some of the economic logic is similar. And that's always fun as you hear a scholar: “Ok! This is very helpful!”. Half of it was similar, but then the interesting question becomes: What's different? And then, that gets interesting... As a scholar I was like “Ok, in what sense the game blockbuster differs from the movie blockbuster, in an economic sense?” And one of the big differences is of course technology and the hardware-platform. Hollywood is much more disperse, you have movie chains all over the country and you have “windows”, how they call it, you go to the movie theater, but then you have VHS video tapes or later DVD's, later Television, they go to airplanes... So, there are different windows where you sell the intellectual property. And games do not have that. The game industry had to figure out a way... We have this intellectual property, *Call of Duty*, which is not that exciting, guys shooting each other, and how can we sort of get the most money out of that. So, what they figured out is like every year they do an “installment”, but then digital distribution came up and like: “Oh, every quarter we can put a bunch of maps or a package of stuff, for like ten dollars or twenty dollars instead of sixty dollars or fifty dollars”.

So, they found ways to get it with the platform, found ways to get more recurring revenues. And that was really a back and forth between the publishers, who wanted to make money also in the summer, because normally in the summer it is very quiet, people go outside, and still sell map packs or other kinds of downloadable content, as it was called. Today we don't use that term anymore because everything is downloadable content. So, I find that super interesting, that they broke up those big games in small pieces. And today it's even the smallest pieces. Today, we don't have downloadable content, today you download a game for free, and you can unlock a lot of stuff. But the logic it's has been sort of those seeds have been planted ten fifteen years ago of publishers experimenting with how we can cut up a game in the smallest possible pieces to sell it back to people. The game is already done, right? They can give it away for free completely, but then they don't make money.

Me: David, one of the key promises of cultural production in the platforms is the democratization

of cultural production, pointing to the possibility for any cultural producer to disseminate their content and make money from it. Thinking about games, besides distribution platforms (like App Store, Steam, and so on), many production platforms (like Unreal and Unity engines or Roblox) have been emerged in recent years. In this sense, do you identify a democratic potential on these new platforms of production? Do they represent a threat to the big publishers? And how do these big publishers react to this process?

David Nieborg: Yes, I mean... One of my colleagues wrote a brilliant quote: "Games got their printing press with Unity". It got a piece of technology... Brendan Keogh (2023) he wrote that... and I really like that quote, because Unity today... Last couple of weeks there was a lot of debate about Unity... But, years ago, like I said, twenty years ago you needed to pay 10 or 20 thousand dollars for an SDK, a Software Development Kit, you needed a special license from Sony, you needed to set up a business to be able to buy a license, to buy a SDK, and one was 20.000, but you needed 10, 20 or 100. So, that's where game industry was coming from. In my research I call it "capital intensive", it was a capital intensive. You needed a lot of money to just start production.

And then, in a span of couple of years, five, eight years, there was a radical transformation in terms of accessibility to affordable tools. You can call that democratization. But democratization in terms of production! And this is one of the things we write a lot of about in the book. And that's half of the history, always. Yes, today anybody as of yet with a computer, a MacBook, a laptop, or a PC, can download tools to make a game. The capital needed is low. The question then becomes: "Ok, great, can you then distribute it"? Yes! But that already gets trickier, because the AppStore... Steam is accessible... But if you make a game that Apple thinks is boring or repetitive, or whatever, they don't put it in the AppStore. So, that's not as democratic as it seems. But then, marketing and monetization, particularly monetization, is incredibly challenging. Yes, you have democratization, anybody can make games and that is great. People who don't want to make money can also make games. And that's not a trivial detail. Students, artists, activists, you name it. People with other motives than making money or having a business. And it's the same in music, right? Some people make music just because they like to make music. And they buy a guitar in the shop, and they go to play in a bar, or just at home. And nobody says, "Oh, you know, you are a bad guitar player because you bought a guitar, and you are only playing in your living room!". No, it's a hobby, it's fun, you enjoy it, and maybe you play in your backyard for five people or ten people, or for your partner and then "Oh my god! Not again!" [laughing]. So, all of that is outside of the realm of capital. Good, everybody can make music. And, in the game industry, now, or... I should not say industry... In the world of games or in the game's ecosystem or in the games field, now people can make their own games. There are incredibly simple, or a bit more complicated, about also complex themes if you want. You can make a game about climate change, you can make a game about current events, you can make a game about the war in Ukraine or the war in Israel and Gaza. You could make a game out of that. The question is if you would want it. But you could make a meaningful game, which was not the case, or much harder, not impossible, but much harder ten or twenty years ago.

So, that's the massive shift. But I am always interested in industry, I am interested myself in people who do this to make money as their jobs. And then it becomes really complicated. And, are the people, individuals, a threat to publishers? Initially, maybe. And think now we can safely say, much less than I thought. Because, for a couple of reasons. First, publishers are really good at mitigating risks. That's their business, always. They are sort of banks. You could see publishers as sort of banks. They give money to others, and they do that in such a way like insurance companies and banks to mitigate risks and to derisk. And one of the ways to derisk is to make games that have broad appeal and build in audiences. Like *Call of Duty*, or *Warcraft*, or *Candy Crush*, or whatever. And then you put a ton of money in marketing, which an average person cannot do either. So, these publishers have always sort of a built-in advantage, because they have been doing this for a long time, they have a lot of money, a lot a lot of money, they have a lot of experience, they have good relationships with publishers, they have intellectual property that people

like, they have relationships with people who make it, or they have their own studio. So, there is one, two, three, four, five, six, really strong competitive advantages.

Me: And this is good for distribution platforms as well, right? Because they want to sell their games on their platforms, and for them is very good to sell those big games. Those two interests go together...

David Nieborg: Unfortunately, yes. Because game platforms also have an incentive to take less risk. Apple is not a game company. It is not! It's a hardware-phone company that makes pretty decent software, but they don't see themselves as a game company or a game publishing company or anything like that. So, sure, there are people who work at Apple that want good games on the iPhone, but if they have to pick between a Finnish studio *Clash of Clans*, which has tens of millions of players, which monetizes very well, it sells one or two billion euros in in-app purchases... so that's a ton of money, because Apple get 30% of every euro... So, if Apple has to pick between *Clash of Clans*, which is not offensive, it's cartoony, it's not political, right? It's very cute and unriskey... and if they must pick between that and or a new studio from Brazil that makes a very exciting game about anything. Then they are like: "This is new unproven, will this Brazilian game work in the Canadian App Store?"

Well, first of all, they need to know about it, which is a massive, massive challenge, because Brazilian studio doesn't have a relationship with Apple. So, they must get in front of the eyes of the Apple people working in the AppStore part. That's not easy. That first needs to happen. And if you can get at that point then you need to get an audience of players, they need to play it and like it before you reach the stage where *Clash of Clans* is at. It's not impossible, but it's really, really, really hard. And it's close to impossible. So, Apple is taking less risk, publishers are taking less risk. Consumers also are always a bit risk averse. Because consumers, they have... It's not about money, it's about time. They are confronted with hundreds or tens of thousands of games in the AppStore. What do they pick? Everybody is playing *Clash of Clans*. This weird Brazilian game, nobody is playing it. You see it, will you play it? Then you have to install it, then you have to play it and learn it, and learning a game can take like hours. And maybe nobody else is playing it. But everybody is playing *Clash of Clans*. So, if you want to play against other people you go to *Clash of Clans* and not to the new Brazilian game, which might be better or more fun or anything else.

So, if you add a lot of risk-averse consumers, risk-averse platforms, risk-averse publishers, you end up with an environment that rewards incumbents, companies that are already doing well and have been doing well for three years, five years, ten years. And, we have done a bunch of studies of the AppStore, of the economics of AppStore, and we see that once you are on the top ten, once you are on top hundred, you tend to stay there. But also, you tend to stay there for years. Once you are visible, then Apple... If you have an iPhone you can go to the AppStore, you constantly see, every day in the AppStore there are one or two games that they highlight. Yesterday I looked at the AppStore, there was a new *Warcraft* game, and they promoted the hell out of it.

Me: Yes, to make money, right?

David Nieborg: Yes, because they like *Warcraft*, an intellectual property that everybody knows. So, it ties to what we've just talked about, right? It's not a Brazilian game. No, it's *Warcraft*. Activision Blizzard does not need more money. They have enough money. *Warcraft* might not be that exciting, it seems like... It might be a very fun new game, but it's from one of the biggest publishers in the world, from the US, etc. If you add that all up you can see why indie games and independently produced games are not attractive to publishers, like Electronic Arts, Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft, Tencent. They are doing really well and it's very likely that they will be doing well for a long time, because they have all those built-in advantages. And so, this is what see in game industry, and what I find interesting is how it translates to other industries: the book industry, the music industry, creators and influencers. And I think the dynamic we see in game industry translates really well to other industries, because there also we see that incumbency is rewarded, people who have been doing well... Because, for the same reasons, people are risk averse. Who are you

going to follow on YouTube or Twitch? The person you've been following for months, it becomes a friend, you want to know more about their lives, you are not going to watch a new influencer that's just a month old, you going to go to person who has hundreds of thousands of followers. So, you cannot always blame Apple or blame publishers, it's also we ourselves as consumers are sometimes just...

Me: It's just the structure of the ecosystem, right? And what you've mentioned... Because that's not a question of democratization of culture production, but it has to do also with culture distribution. I mean, distribution platforms that make hard the way to newcomers to go into the field, right? So, are you skeptical of cooperativism of game production and things like that? What do you think?

David Nieborg: No, I am not skeptical about the idea. I don't think... In the current ecosystem it might not be... Unfortunately, it might not be always effective...

Me: Because of the reasons you've mentioned, right?

David Nieborg: Yes, I am not skeptical of the ideal of coops. What I've seen in countries like Netherlands, which has a decent game industry, but there are not a lot of hits in the app economy, there are not a lot of Dutch game apps, there are some, but it's not like Finland or Australia or the US. Let's say if you are a Brazilian or a Dutch Minister of Culture, or you are a Dutch or a Brazilian coop, and you want to promote certain games made by a coop. The challenges are how you can promote those games. So, making games is not as much the problem. A coop can allow for brilliant games to be developed, but that's not a challenge, I would say.

So, I'm not skeptical of coops being able to develop or even distribute innovative games or not innovative, they don't have to be innovative. But, to develop and distribute games, they are meaningful, that's my bar. They just have to be meaningful, anyway. However, can they market it and monetize it in such a way that the coop can sustain itself? Because that would be the goal as well. You want the coop to remain without the government or somebody else putting subsidies. That, I think, in the current ecosystem would be an enormous challenge. But that's not a reason not to do it, right? As long as you know that the challenge is not making a game or distributing the game, the challenge is how do you get money back, so you can keep funding development... and if you figured that out, and it's not impossible. It has happened, because a coop is also just a way to derisk, right? The way I understand it, you can also set a coop in such a way that you can owe buy-in and then you mitigate risks to get it. That's the same way as a publisher operates, but you deal differently with profits, and the surplus revenue...

So, in that sense I'm not at all skeptical, it's just... As long as you know what the challenges are, as long as you are aware of the political economy of App Development, then you can in theory be successful in the same way that a publisher is. It's not impossible.

Me: So, as you said, coops won't succeed unless they know very exactly how this market ecosystem and this market structure work, right?

David Nieborg: Yes. I mean, what's your mandate as coop? Do you want to be sustainable? Do you want to exist for ten years? Do you want to output one game a month? Do you want to promote Brazilian games? There are all kinds of different mandates you can have as a cooperative. And if your cooperative has to be sustainable over the long term then you have to be... But you have a different mandate, let's say: "We just want to make brilliant Brazilian games, because we care about Brazilian language, culture, etc. And we want to get people together and we don't care that much about... We have found a way to fund this, long-term, without being mindful of, you know, return of investment and money flowing back in". Then, coop is perfectly durable.

And you can even find a middle ground, because you can make money in the Appstore, just not that much, unless you have a hit, or somewhere of a hit, and then money will start flowing in. And the great thing about a coop would then be, just like with publishers, that would sustain development for years, if not decades to come. If Supercell, the Finish company, would have been a coop, they could have funded Finish game research for the next fifty years, they have got so much money, billions and billions of

profits, not even revenue! So, they could have hired a thousand of Finish game developers and put them to work for 50 fifty years, something crazy like that. But it's a company, not a coop, so that money, the revenue went to Supercell then went to Tencent. So, the money from Finland is essentially going to China, because it's structured as business not as a coop. So, if I would have been the Finish government, you know... I felt strongly about keeping that revenue, then a coop in Finland, the SuperCell coop, would have been the best way to keep that money in Finland. If you care about that, right?

Me: So, David, the last question is about your new book. You have recently published a new book with Maxwell Foxman, "Mainstreaming and Game Journalism", which tries, broadly speaking, to identify the role game journalism plays in making games a mainstream entertainment culture. Can you tell me a bit about how the idea of writing this book came up and what were the main problems and concerns which stimulated you to touch these topics?

David Nieborg: The idea came about during my PhD. I started working as a game journalist myself in Netherlands. And that time there was still money in journalism, different than today. So, I started writing for a daily newspaper, and they paid pretty well, actually. And it allowed me to pay my way to grad school, to my PhD, but also, I was studying the game industry, as I told you. And as journalist you are constantly invited to all kinds of events, like to talk to Activion/Blizzard's executives or to go to studios. So, what started all this was me working as a journalist myself. I always was fascinated, because of my research, by the economics of this, but I never wrote about the role of game journalism, because I was in it so much. I tried to do some research on that, but it was mostly a way to get access to the industry and just to write about it the way I like to write it, this kind of stuff. But that started it, and ten years later enough time have passed, and I was like, "Ok, I need to do something with this".

I started having conversations with Max, my co-author, Maxwell Foxman, he is a journalism professor, and we had really good conversations of what's the role of game journalists... What do they do? And in our conversations, we found that, we sort of noticed what journalists and the industry always struggle with, and players, is that games are never seen as mainstream, they are never considered... They are either for children, or they are addictive, or they are bad, they lead to aggression. Those are some of the stereotypes. Or they are just, you know, fantastic, and they make a lot of money. But there are always these frames. But we found that, according to us games are never mainstream, and then we decided that we needed a theory to describe if games are mainstream or not. And what does this even mean? So, they make a lot of money, we established that. But making a lot of money doesn't mean that there is mainstream acceptance.

Then, we developed an argument saying, "Ok, for games to be mainstream they need to be visible, visible by a ton of people, not just young people". And in some countries, they are way more visible than the others. In Korea and Japan games are much more visible in everyday life, in the subway, on television, on the newspaper, etc. But in the Netherlands not, in the US not. Those are countries we were focused on. People are typically also not literate. I give you... I give *World of Warcraft* to your parents; they don't know what to do. But you can take your parents to the movie theater, they walk in, they know to sit down, and everybody knows the rules of the cinema and how to watch it, because you speak language, you can read subtitles. So, that's the second part, you need literacy.

And the third part, they need to be legitimate, seen as a legitimate part of culture, and games never really fit those three. Sure, they are visible, but then they are seen as childish, or they are too complicated, like *Dota* or *League of Legends*, they make a lot of money, in some cultures they are seen as legitimate, but nobody understands them because they are so complex. That's not anybody's fault. But that's our argument, games are not mainstream, and then journalists, and the question arises: can journalists contribute to solving that? If we would want it... And we say: "Yes, we want it!". Because we think – that's the starting point of our conversation – games are meaningful cultural objects, games are always meaningful, and in order to have them being more meaningful, more interesting, or better, or more

insightful, you need to have critique, just like film criticism, music criticism, you need to have informed conversations about it, and journalists or critics should lead the way to even more informed than the rest of the public. But what journalists then stumble upon is that games over the last 20, 30 years became more and more subcultural, aimed at guys, young guys, and game publishers most of them did not cater to broader audiences. Sometimes they did, like Nintendo with *Wii* and *Nintendo Ds*, but then they are not always seen as legitimate.

Game journalists have always faced that challenge and in the book we try to sort of explain that mainstreaming logic, or that mainstreaming process. And then we interviewed like 20, 25 game journalists, most in the US, writing for game websites, like *Kotaku*, but also newspapers, *Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, for the radio, etc. And we asked them these questions: What do you see as your role? What can you do? What kind of challenges do you face? They face a lot of challenges. They are increasingly *freelancers*, which makes it hard to do your work effectively. They are very precarious. They are often specialized, because if you can play one genre it doesn't mean you can play another genre. Playing both genres is hard, because some games are so complicated. And sometimes journalists find it hard to be very sincere, because they feel like... they have to say "Yeah, Ok, not too serious, you can never be too serious about games", because then everybody is like "Why do you take games so seriously? They are just games!" And if you are a journalist that's a tricky situation, because as a journalist you always have to take it very seriously.

So, there is always a tension between taking your work serious and the object of criticism serious, but then the rest of news room saying "Oh yeah, there is a war going on and you are talking about video games!?", or, "This is a new movie, *Oppenheimer*, brilliant movie, the director is so smart, look at what he has done", and you say, "Yeah, I have this new *War Craft* game, and this is also brilliant", and "No, no, no, that's for children", "No, it's not children". So, there are always these challenges, and we tried through interviews sort of find a way to talk about it. So, in many ways this is the first book about game journalism. That's one of the other reasons. Over the last ten years I always thought "Oh, somebody is going to write this book and I would like to read it!", because I want to understand my own life better, my own work in the past better, but it never was published, and nobody did this, to write a book about game journalism. So, then we thought "You know, let's just try and do it", and just writing about game journalism could be interesting, but we tried to do more, and tie it to this question of mainstreaming. Because I think that would make the conversation more interesting, to make a broad argument of like "Why are games the way they are today? How can we have better conversations about games?". That's ultimately our goal, "Let's have better conversation about video games?"

We need informed people to help us, newspaper journalists and television people. We just need more, better criticism, without people constantly being apologetic, "Oh, yeah, no, no, no, don't take yourself too serious". "No, no, take yourself very seriously, explain to me what *Dota* is". I cannot play *Dota*, but you explain that to me. Why is *Fortnite* so interesting? Why is *Roblox* so interesting? I am never going to play it, *Roblox* is not my game, and that's fine. But I would love to read about it, because it's an interesting new pop culture form. I like to read about TV shows, or movies, that I might never watch, or book reviews. I like to read book reviews, I never going to read the book, because it takes 10-15 hours to read a book, and it's not my interest sometimes, but I enjoy reading book reviews or movie reviews and also to have a conversation with a lot of people. And game journalism can do a better job, facilitating informed conversations...

Me: And I was just thinking how games are not considered something cultural and political meaningful in the public debate in many countries. For example, in my country, Brazil, my impression is that leftist and centrist political currents that have been trying to fight against far-right ideas are not totally conscious of the massive appeal games have in contemporary culture, especially among young people...

David Nieborg: Yeah. What we tried to do is not so much... that not everything out there is bad in terms of game journalism. There is a lot of good game journalism. And we only focused on English, because for logistical reasons also. But what we tried to do in the book is also to have a more informed conversation about this. So, if you care about those issues: What needs to happen for a better game journalism to emerge? And it's not one thing, right? It's something that's complicated, but one of the things... At the end of the book, we provide practical solutions as well.

For example, tell good stories. A good story it doesn't matter what it is about. They can be about crypto. They can be about something super complicated. And some of these games are very complicated. But if you tell good stories about, you know, they're about different worlds, game worlds, virtual worlds. To tell good stories, like travel journalism does. When you go to a new city... You've never been to Rome. Like, what's Rome feel like? What does it smell like? You have good food, you know... long history, and you've never been to Rome, but a good travel journalist can in a couple of pages or paragraphs can paint a picture. And you can do the same with *Roblox*. Why is Roblox so interesting? "Oh, it's a new world, with different rules!". Why is it so appealing? Rather than saying, "Oh, Roblox has a frame rate of 25, a low ping, it has servers...". I don't care about the technical stuff. I don't want to grade, "Oh, Roblox, we scored 8.5. It's a great game, 8.5." What does that mean? I don't care. I'm not going to buy Roblox. You can't even buy it.

So, there are all kinds of ways that game journalism could experiment of other ways of journalism that exist, to make their work more accessible to a broader public. That's one of the solutions to solve this issue. And the other problem, and that's not to be solved by a journalist, is: Journalists need steady jobs, because it's a hard job to be a game journalist, because you need to spend a lot of time playing a game. If you go to a movie, it's 2 hours. If you want to play Roblox, and understand it, and play it well, that's 10 hours, at least... 20 hours. And then you just scratch the surface. So, for that job, to do that job well, you need more time, and you need a steady job. And a journalist organization – a newspaper, or a public broadcaster – needs to provide that person with time and space to dig into those worlds. And that maybe is the hardest piece of the puzzle to solve. We cannot solve that, but if people care about this issue, those are the kinds of things that need to change for game journalism to help make games more mainstream.

Or, one just has to accept that games will never be mainstream. Right? They will be forever subcultural. They will forever be for a small group of people. And I think that would be a loss, because I think older people can play Roblox and enjoy it. Or at least know about it, and talk about it with their children, nieces, nephews, neighbors, whatever, and have... And call you and say, "You play Roblox, tell me more about it", rather than... or, you know, for political means. Like, games are politics, they don't have to be separated. Like, with movies like *Oppenheimer*, it's deeply political, of course, right? It's about nuclear, weapons, with politics and science. So, it's an important debate to have and it would be great if games could also contribute to debates about profound... to have facilitated profound debates, like national actions, like war, like the environment. Games can play an important role in understanding how conflicts evolve or emerge, and now by and large it's not the case. If you play *Call of Duty*, you don't understand war better. On the contrary. It has nothing to do with war. It's fun to play, maybe, but it has nothing to do with understanding the world and the warfare better. That's just not the case. And then developers would tell that's not the purpose. Ok, that's fine. But as a critic, as a game critic, I would say: "You can do both, perhaps, you can understand war or the complexity of warfare better and have a game that is engaging or fun". But, if there are no critics that make that case, then publishers, you know, can be a little bit lazy or cater to specific audience.

References

Keogh, B. (2023) *The Video Game Industry does not exist: why we should think beyond commercial game production*. Cambridge: Massachusetts: The MIT Press

Nieborg, D. B. (2011) *Triple-A: The Political Economy of the Blockbuster Video Game*. Dissertation (Doctorate) - University of Amsterdam

Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018) The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, v. 20(11), pp. 4275-4292

Nieborg, D. B., Poell, T. & Duffy, B. E. (2022) *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

Nieborg, D. B., & Foxman, M. (2023) *Mainstreaming and Game Journalism*. Cambridge: Massachusetts: The MIT Press