



Analyzing Games Journalism

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AB Abstract

For over two decades, journalistic coverage of the computer and video games industry has been handled by game magazines such as *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and *GamePro*. Recently, however, these magazines are being eclipsed by competing online publications. Readerships have fragmented; the mass-market audience now follows one set of magazines while industry professionals follow another. I analyzed three issues from each of five of the world's most successful game magazines, including both industry and mass-market publications, to identify their common editorial genres, the manner in which they build rhetorical ethos, and their typical visual design features. These determinations in hand, I proceeded to prototype a design that utilizes components from both industry and mass-market publications—a design that could potentially appeal to both readerships and find subsequent success in an increasingly digital landscape.

1 Introduction: Games Journalism and the Print-Online Transition

Since the expansion of the dot-com bubble and the rise of online journalism, news media outlets are transforming themselves to meet the expectations of a wired audience. Today's readerships are more connected than ever: *The New York Times* may have a print circulation of about 1.1 million copies,¹ but it gets almost 16 million unique visitors to its website every month.² *The Wall Street Journal*, meanwhile, has an online readership equal to the *Times*' print circulation, despite its \$103 subscription fee.³ Even publications outside the mainstream media are going digital. *Computerworld*, the 40-year-old flagship of publisher IDG, has recently become an online-centric media outlet "with print and events subsidiaries."⁴ Clocking record traffic numbers each month, it now earns twice as much profit from its website as its magazine.*

Unsurprisingly, a publication's online identity is almost exclusively dictated by its target demographic. Magazines with predominantly computer-illiterate readerships have little use for competitive websites, while magazines with internet-savvy readerships, such as those that play computer and videogames, are well-served by websites that can hook and retain readers—many of whom get their news exclusively from online sources.

In the games journalism industry, websites without print analogues routinely get more monthly visitors than their hybrid counterparts.⁵ Game magazines like *GamePro* have poured resources into their online portals in attempts to stay competitive with leaders IGN.com and GameSpot.com. Meanwhile, magazines that don't yet have strong online components are playing catch-up and partnering with websites owned by common parent companies, as *PC Gamer* did with fellow Future subsidiary GamesRadar.com. The entire industry is moving online.

* Throughout this report, the term "magazine" refers exclusively to print magazines.

As a lifelong gamer and a longtime reader of each of the above magazines and websites, I have become fascinated by this transition. Those publications that have become online-centric impress me as underwhelming, and while my experiences are purely subjective, I have noticed a trend in most gaming sites to favor quantity over quality. I believe this to be a direct result of ad-centric revenue models. Since advertising revenue is often proportional to the number of “hits” (unique page views) a site receives, editors are publishing sub-par content in order to raise the number of pages a website has and increase their potential hit counts.

They may not be as viable in today’s market, but monthly print magazines still circulate, and they have a markedly different revenue model. Advertising is kept separate from editorial* content, which allows a magazine’s staff to be more selective about what it does and does not print. Editors can take time to prepare an issue, since there’s no pressure to produce new content on a daily basis. The result is a publication that can potentially be of a higher overall quality than its web-based competition. And, depending on the reader, it can be more enjoyable to peruse.

I am one such reader: a mid-20s games journalist who isn’t getting the information he needs from online review sites like IGN.com. My complaint is not on the effectiveness of gaming news distribution—industry professionals in my position have long since used their blog networks to track up-to-the-moment happenings within the community. Rather, the problem is a lack of trustworthy, informative, and entertaining content—content tailored to those developers, journalists, and mature gamers who demand a bit more polish in their reading material.

To be fair, a few magazines do tailor to industry professionals. *Game Developer Magazine*, for instance, has long provided informative discourse on career development,

* All content between the covers of a game magazine is either “editorial” or “advertising.” Advertising content is dictated by a magazine’s sales department and is almost always given separate pages. Conversely, editorial content includes anything that is written by the magazine’s editorial department. Aside from the ratio of advertising pages to editorial pages, this report is interested only in editorial content.

reviewed the tools of the trade, and served as a forum for post-mortem development discussions. Meanwhile, *Edge* is among the only magazines in the world to deliver the features, reviews, and previews *Game Developer* doesn't, while still tailoring itself to a professional audience. Unfortunately, *Edge* is published in Europe, and its expense makes it an impractical investment for most American gamers.

Which is where I come in. I am interested in designing an American magazine for gamers like me: game developers, journalists, and those for whom games are a primary means of income. However, given the trend of all publications to move online, it is clear to me that the long-term success of such a magazine would hinge on its ability to attract as large a readership as possible. This means delivering both those features that would keep the magazine accessible to the wider gaming community, and those that would appeal to my narrower, primary audience. Such a magazine would hopefully serve as required reading for all gamers, with honest, entertaining, and well-researched articles that are worth turning off the computer monitor to enjoy.

The idea that print can survive the online transition by prioritizing quality is certainly debatable, but it's not new. Philip Meyer, author of "The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age" and professor emeritus of Journalism at the University of North Carolina, admitted late last year that although print's "endgame" is imminent, it's not necessarily dire. In his article in the *American Journalism Review*, "The Elite Newspaper of the Future,"⁶ Meyer wrote that the key to print's success is contextualized, "evidence-based" journalism—a far cry from the article-heavy, content-light websites of the modern age.

"Not all readers demand such quality," Meyer explained, "but the educated, opinion-leading, news-junkie core of the audience always will." Given the choice between consuming the

unfiltered outpourings of much of the internet and relying on a handful of trustworthy, investigative sources, the “leadership audience,” according to Meyer, will always choose the latter.

My challenge is not to determine whether game magazines will continue to be viable; indeed, given my limited resources, it would not be practical to attempt focus group studies or other trials to conclusively determine such viability, and the absence of any discernable scholarly study on the matter makes my conclusively answering such a question practically impossible. Instead, my goal is to discern what it might take to build a game magazine with the informative, sourced content that is so vital to “leadership audiences,” while simultaneously remaining entertaining, and thusly approachable, to the masses. What, I ask myself, would characterize such a publication?

I present this report in an attempt to discover how a magazine like this might look, feel, and read. Since there is no conclusive way to know whether my design would appeal to both demographics without testing in focus groups, I am left with a single alternative: to identify the common features and styles of a sampling of game magazines; assess those features against both a professional demographic and more mainstream audiences; interview a selection of print games journalists to learn how they perceive the industry’s shift to online media; and synthesize and distill my findings into a hybrid, prototypical magazine mock-up.

Assuming my prototype integrates elements that appeal to industry professionals while still remaining approachable to most gamers, I will have determined a set of design principles that may grant future magazines the potential to survive the print-online transition. Whether any magazine will, of course, is beyond the scope of this report.

2 Methods for Coding and Analyzing Magazines

My process of identifying and analyzing the features of game magazines and designing my own magazine prototype using said features can be broken down into five steps:

1. **Select** five of the industry's most prominent magazines, based on their target demographics, circulation, and the respect industry professionals hold for each;
2. **Discern** what textual features and rhetorical moves are made within the genres of writing found in each magazine, quantifying them and identifying both commonalities and idiosyncrasies;
3. **Analyze** and provide a qualitative assessment of each magazine's core components, with respect to the audiences I'm targeting;
4. **Supplement** my analysis with interviews of prominent journalists who have experience in the industry, in order to both learn how they perceive today's game magazines and what they would look for in one tailored to them; and
5. **Design** a prototype magazine that addresses both the core components of my analyzed magazines and the comments and recommendations made by my interviewees.

This chapter explains how I chose my magazine sample set and identified those textual features appropriate to my prototype. It also discusses my interview process, and lists some of the questions I asked my interviewees.

2.1 Selecting a Sample Set

Because I was attempting to ascertain those attributes of game magazines that appeal to various gamer audiences, I chose each magazine in my sample set for different reasons. Two were selected for their demographics, one for its circulation, and two for the respect they

engendered from their readerships—readerships whose opinions I value highly, because they also happen to be my core audience. Together, these five magazines formed my core sample set, from which I chose three issues each, printed within the last year. This enabled me to separate those textual features that appeared each month from those that did so only once—all while keeping my final sample set manageable at a mere 15 issues.

My final five magazine choices were *Edge*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Game Informer*, *GamePro*, and *PC Gamer*:

- **Edge.** Despite its comparatively thin worldwide circulation of only 31,000,¹ the 15-year-old *Edge* is one of the UK's premier game magazines, and the preferred reading of many industry professionals. In the time I have spent on the QuarterToThree.com forums, where the bulk of games journalists and developers discuss the evolution of their industry, their abounding respect for *Edge*'s content and delivery has shown through time and time again.
- **Electronic Gaming Monthly.** Until its closure in January 2008, *EGM* was widely considered to be the staple publication of the community at-large. Indeed, the magazine did not close due to failures of its editorial staff. Several months earlier, publisher Ziff Davis filed for bankruptcy and closed the vast majority of its print division, leaving *EGM* the sole ZD magazine still in print. However, as longtime ZD employee and respected Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green candidly explained in his weblog, the publisher was forced to sell its properties in order to appease its shareholders.² Since *EGM* continues to be recognized as one of the industry's best magazines, I believe it is worth analyzing in this report.

- **Game Informer.** Gaming’s youngest magazine is also its most popular; *Game Informer* has a circulation of over 3 million, making it the 12th-largest consumer magazine in the U.S. and the most well-read gaming publication ever made.³ As the official magazine of nationwide games retailer GameStop, much of *GI*’s success could be attributed to marketing—magazine subscriptions and GameStop memberships go hand-in-hand. Nevertheless, its success makes it worth investigating, in case any standout textual features are worth implementing in my prototype.
- **GamePro.** With its 20-year history in the industry and a circulation topping 1.8 million readers,⁴ *GamePro* is one of the foundational magazines of games journalism. For much of that history, its editors were identified by their online pseudonyms rather than their real names, a practice that split the gaming community into those that loved the magazine and those that hated it. Today, *GamePro*’s target audience includes teenagers and college freshmen—a far cry from the mature readerships of *PC Gamer* and *Edge*—but its actual demographics are much higher, and the magazine is worth investigating for its potential to widen my readership. I have worked as a freelance writer for *GamePro* since 2006; my experience as a games journalist is rooted there.
- **PC Gamer.** As the last surviving U.S. game magazine devoted exclusively to computer games, *PC Gamer* is marketed to and perceived by its fans as a “hardcore” publication, written by and for lifelong gamers. Having eschewed coverage of consoles in favor of PCs—systems that, by and large, are more expensive to buy and require more expertise to use—*PC Gamer*’s demographic is far older than the competition’s. 86% of its 200,000⁵ readers are 18 or older, and 65% are over 25 years old.⁶

2.2 Editorial Coding Categories

Since publications can differ so widely in their content and delivery, I began my analysis by creating a series of coding categories to track as many objectively quantifiable elements of each magazine as possible. My final coding sheets, found in Appendix A, define five major categories: genre^{*}, organization, style, ethos, and visual design. Brief descriptions of each can be found below, while Appendices B, C, D, and E detail their individual textual features.

My process of generating these coding sheets began with personal experience; I developed a checklist of content I knew would be in all game magazines, and then proceeded to append it with extra items as they appeared. Once I had finished cataloguing every quantifiable textual feature I could find, I proceeded to categorize them, forming the above five categories. With categorized components in hand, I designed coding sheets that would allow me to quickly and easily notate which could be found in each magazine.

To ensure reliability of the coding sheets, WPI professor Lorraine Higgins and I separately coded a magazine with the sheets—she with only the knowledge she had from the descriptions written up in this report—and then compared our results. Our results were almost identical, and with a few minor modifications to address those issues that caused the coding disparities, I was left with the sheets that can now be found in Appendix A.

2.2.1 Genre

In his book *Genre Analysis*, University of Michigan professor John Swales defines genre as “a class of communicative events” that serves a specific purpose. They are recognizable by their “patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content, and intended audience.”⁷ Thus,

^{*} For the purposes of this report, the term “genre” refers only to classifications of writing as defined in Section 2.1.1, not to game type taxonomies such as “first-person shooter” or “real-time strategy.”

genre is a way for a given community—what Swales defines as a “discourse community”—to shape its communications according to its needs. Fundamentally, a genre can be defined by identifying three things: its textual components, its rhetorical moves (i.e. what is being accomplished by each component), and its purpose for existing (thus explaining why each move is being made).

Journalists have long classified their articles into well-known genres like news and features, and games journalists have only continued this tradition. The subdivision helps readers navigate each issue by locating different kinds of articles and information in different parts of the magazine. A total of seven genres typically exist in game magazines: game previews, game reviews, hardware reviews, industry news, feature articles, columns, and letters to and/or from the editor.*

Though a given magazine might give these sections unique names and organize them in particular ways, the genres they include are relatively consistent from publication to publication, possessing the same textual components and rhetorical moves. The chief difference between them is their purpose: While each genre may serve its own purpose of discussing a given topic in a particular manner, all the genres in a magazine serve the meta-purpose of informing and entertaining that magazine’s target audience.

The first step of my coding process involved systematically documenting each magazine’s content by checking off on their respective coding sheets the fundamental genre components they did and did not possess. Special note of any genre elements unique to each magazine, as well as a discussion of each publication’s purpose, was left for coverage in my analyses in Chapter 3.

* For complete descriptions of each genre and the components they comprise, refer to Appendix B.

2.2.2 Organization

Although the organization of a game magazine's content is somewhat standardized and follows a few fundamental rules, differences from brand to brand remain. For example, the first editorial entry in any magazine is always the Table of Contents (TOC). However, the organization of each TOC may vary; some might list every distinguishable article written by the staff under their appropriate genre headers, while others might only list the headers themselves: "News," "Reviews," "Previews," and so forth.

Many of these organizational differences are distinct enough to warrant codification, especially with regards to the order and placement of genres. Some magazines might follow the TOC with Letters to the Editor, while others might start with news stories and save the letters for the back pages. Breaking this genre organization down is fundamental to understanding how each magazine perceives and appeals to its target audience, since it reflects how the magazine prioritizes its content and what its readership values.

On the coding sheets in Appendix A, I listed the order in which each genre appeared in each magazine. I also marked the organizational structure of each one's TOC.

2.2.3 Style

Many elements of a magazine's style cannot be consistently quantified on a coding sheet, such as the level of informality with which information is presented to the reader, the voice in which a magazine 'speaks,' and the strategies employed for creating a rapport with readers, such as humor or colloquialism. For this reason, I provided qualitative descriptions of each magazine's style, illustrating my points with examples, in my analyses in Chapter 3.

However, there are several elements of a magazine's style that can be quantified and

coded, including whether it uniquely names each genre; whether it uses first-person narrative in its articles; and which of three types of rating systems (grades, stars, or percentages) it uses in its reviews.* I marked which of these elements each magazine employed on their coding sheets in Appendix A.

2.2.4 Ethos

In *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Edward Corbett defines the three types of rhetorical appeals, or modes of persuasion: the appeal to reason, or logos; the emotional appeal, also called pathos; and the ethical appeal, ethos. In particular, ethos relies upon “the persuasive value of the speaker’s or writer’s character.”⁸ Rhetorical analyst Jason Thompson put it more simply, saying that ethos is “the process of creating a shared character with the audience.”⁹ It is based upon the understanding that an audience is far more likely to accept persuasive discourse when it feels it shares a connection with the person behind said discourse. The connection gives the speaker credibility.

In an industry that has transformed so radically from print to online, those game magazines that continue to depend upon print readerships often have only their credibility to attract and retain readers. Thusly, they have to develop ethical connections with their audience to survive. The manner in which a magazine approaches and reports on content could be—and for the purposes of this report, is—defined as its ethos, as it’s responsible for building the connection between reader and journalist.

Ethos has many attributes that can be quantitatively identified and catalogued, and I have attempted to do so by checking each of those attributes off on the coding sheets in Appendix A.

* For a complete discussion of these three components of a magazine’s style, refer to Appendix C.

They include authorship attribution; the writers' levels of skepticism or optimism in previews; the average scores of reviews; the presentation, or lack thereof, of all relevant perspectives in news articles; and the level of balance in letters to the Editor. All have a notable effect on a magazine's credibility while still remaining quantifiable to some degree.*

2.2.5 Visual Design

Long before its style, ethos, and the quality of its content can showcase a magazine's value and retain a readership, its visual design must hook those readers and make the experience of perusing its pages enjoyable. Visual design encompasses virtually every aspect of a magazine's layout. Internally, quantifiable aspects include font choice, column number and width, graphical form, navigational characteristics, image:page ratio, and editorial:advertising ratio. Quantifiable aspects of cover design, meanwhile, include logo dominance and dynamism, font choice, internal references, skybar characteristics, mailer space location, and the presence or absence of advertising on the back cover.

Because the quantifiable aspects of cover and interior design can differ, I split my coding of visual design in two, with a section of the coding sheets in Appendix A devoted to each.†

2.3 The Interview Process

In order to successfully execute this project, I believed it vital to gain as much insight as possible into the world of games journalism and the troubles game magazines are facing today. While I have worked as a freelance writer for *GamePro* for the past two years, I have never

* For a complete discussion of each quantifiable attribute of rhetorical ethos, refer to Appendix D.

† For a review and description of each coded element of cover and internal design, refer to Appendix E.

performed my duties at the magazine's San Francisco offices, and thusly have never had the opportunity to discuss with my coworkers the development of the industry as a whole. Once my analysis was complete, I supplemented it with a series of interviews of three longtime games journalists: Sid Shuman, Senior Editor of *GamePro Magazine*; George Jones, Editorial Director of *GamePro Media* (the umbrella company that includes the *GamePro* magazine and website, and the publication's numerous subsidiary websites such as Games.net and Wikia Gaming); and Dan Amrich, Senior Editor at *Official Xbox Magazine*.

While the interviews I conducted with each of these journalists tended to be more fluid conversations than static question-and-answer sessions, I did enter each interview with a series of questions I wanted to address. Along with interviewee-specific questions dealing with each journalist's own background and expertise, they helped me gain a far clearer sense of the state of print in games journalism, and the manners in which today's magazines are combating that state:

- Who are you, and what do you do at your magazine?
- How did you break into games journalism? Specifically, what made you go to, and stay, with print?
- How do you approach your magazine's design? What do you see it as, and what do you want to see it become?
- What is your magazine's status as a print publication? As a website? What do the numbers—circulation, page count—say is happening?
- How do you differentiate your magazine from the competition?
- In a year or two, is your magazine still in print?
- Across the industry, is print dying?

- Is there a place online for magazines, in the form and style they take in print, or do websites demand a different approach?
- Which magazines and websites do you read to keep up-to-date on the industry? Which command your respect, and why?
- Why do you, or don't you, choose to chase exclusives?
- Who do you see your audience as?

3 Quantitative Analysis

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I elected to break my analysis of the magazine sample set in two. First, using the data I gathered with my coding sheets, I completed a quantitative analysis of all five magazines, identifying their commonalities and differences and summarizing my findings below. I then proceeded to qualitatively analyze each individual magazine, the details of which can be found in Chapter 4.

3.1 Genre

Despite the occasional idiosyncrasy showcased by one magazine or another, my quantitative analysis of the sample set revealed far more similarities than differences. Whether by coincidence or, more likely, by convention, the bulk of game magazines appear to follow a fairly consistent pattern of design.

	Edge	EGM	GI	GamePro	PC Gamer
Previews	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reviews	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hardware					✓
News	✓		✓	✓	✓
Features	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Columns	✓	✓	✓		✓
Letters	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 3.1: Genre presence across the sample set

The most visible manifestation of this consistency can be found in the magazines' genres. As can be seen in Figure 3.1, previews, reviews, features, and letters to the editor all appear to be foundational to the medium and could be found in every magazine I coded. Meanwhile, those genre absences that do exist are the exception rather than the rule: As I discuss in my respective

analyses in sections 4.2 and 4.4, *EGM*'s lack of a news section and *GamePro*'s eschewing of monthly columns are both noticeable—and telling—idiosyncrasies that negatively impacted each magazine.

Broadly speaking, the absence of any one genre in a game magazine is a glaring one, and I believe it vital to avoid such absences in order to best serve the readership. Granted, the need for individualism and a sense of identity or personality in my prototype is important, but cutting potential content is not the way to go about creating it. In fact, following *PC Gamer*'s example and integrating the additional section on hardware reviews would help my prototype stand out from the competition and serve to fill a gaping niche: Though hardware reviews may be the stereotypical purview of PC magazines because of their communities' focus on upgrading to the best, that does not mean such content would be inappropriate in a cross-platform magazine. After all, console gamers need to purchase hardware like TVs, cabling, and third-party peripherals, and reviews of such content could be very helpful.

3.2 Voice & Style

Even within these genres, similarities abound, particularly in terms of editorial style. In reviews, previews, and features, for instance, each magazine uses the second-person perspective to address its readership directly:

	Edge	EGM	GI	GamePro	PC Gamer
1 st -person (singular)		✓	✓		✓
1 st -person (plural)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2 nd -person	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 3.2: Narrative perspectives across the sample set

Indeed, even in the case of *Edge*, which features the most formalized style of any of my selected magazines and contains almost no personal references, those that do exist depict “you,” the player, far more often than “we,” the magazine. Take this representative example from *Edge*’s review of the game *Left 4 Dead* in its Christmas 2008 issue [my emphases]:

Most of the time, Valve’s level design does a fine job of convincing **the player** that the near-linear route **you** take is a natural choice among many possible paths, but occasionally the illusion of a much larger environment proves disorienting. This can easily mean death, as lingering invites further waves of zombies, and ammunition and health are sparsely distributed, necessitating speedy progress. Fortunately, Valve has lavished a good deal of automatic dialogue upon the survivors—alerting **you** and **your** teammates to the presence of ammunition, or pointing out the correct route to take, as well as simply adding character.¹

Certainly, the voice of games journalism shifts from magazine to magazine, and that voice can make a narrative style more or less appropriate. For instance, a publication might approach a game review clinically (as in *Edge*’s case), which lessens the importance of personal references and virtually eliminates the need to write in the first-person—the writers’ experiences are presented as definitive and reflective of the experience any player would have with a game. On the other hand, a publication might elect to write in a voice that encourages a seeming friendship or rapport with the audience (as in *PC Gamer*’s case). The magazine’s voice is that of gamers telling their friends about their experiences, making first-person perspectives necessary and appropriate.

As can be seen in Figure 3.2, second-person references are predominant in the medium, and it’s probably fair to say that gamers have gotten used to being directly identified. As such, it will be important for my prototype to do the same. In one way or another, all game magazines talk directly to their readers regardless of the written genre; if my prototype does not, it will likely feel out of place and alien to the community.

3.3 Visual Design

Most of the remaining similarities between the magazines lie in their common visual designs. As can be seen in Figure 3.3, four of the five magazines use sans-serif fonts in their body text; all favor angular, boxy graphics over rounded or free-flowing curves; and cooler colors tend to dominate pages and are only eschewed in select feature articles. The front covers of the magazines, while certainly unique in their own rights, all allow their logos to be overlapped by cover art. And in four of the five magazines, those logos change color or style from issue to issue.

		Edge	EGM	GI	GamePro	PC Gamer
Internal Fonts	Body Text Category	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif	Serif
	Header Stylization	Simple	Simple	Simple	Themed	Simple
	Header Dynamism	Static	Static	Static	Static	Static
Cover Fonts	Category	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif	Sans-Serif
	Stylization	Themed	Simple	Themed	Simple	Simple
	Dynamism	Dynamic	Static	Dynamic	Static	Static
	Shape	Angular	Angular	Angular	Angular	Rounded
Logo	Dominance	Submissive	Submissive	Submissive	Submissive	Submissive
	Dynamism	Dynamic	Dynamic	Dynamic	Dynamic	Static
Graphics	Temperature	Cool	Cool	Cool	Cool	Warm
	Shape	Angular	Angular	Angular	Angular	Angular

Figure 3.3: Notable features, magazine design

While it goes without saying that designing a magazine to mimic the visual style of the competition could lead to a bland, stereotypical publication, it is vital to recognize and account for the expectations of the audience—one that is, like as not, overwhelmingly male. Thusly, incorporating strong angles and cool colors into my prototype’s graphic design would be appropriate: Such designs tend to appear more aggressive and better reflect the conflicts that are so common in today’s games, making them more attractive to most male readers.

Besides, there are still allowances for creativity and individuality in my prototype’s design. Take font choice, for instance: Serif fonts are more traditional, hearkening back to the classic days of print and quality news journalism, and reflect the professionalism of the corporate world. Sans-serif fonts, meanwhile, are more postmodern in style, abandoning traditionalism in favor of relevance. While it’s thusly no surprise that most game magazines elect to print with sans-serif fonts, I plan to use serif fonts in my prototype. I want to present articles as coming from a traditional, responsible, balanced source—an effect best achieved with serif fonts. I can still communicate an air of postmodern relevance through the use of angular graphics and cooler colors; in fact, *PC Gamer* has proven the viability of such a combination.

3.4 Imagery & Content

There are even similarities in terms of editorial:advertising content ratios. As shown in Figure 3.4, four of the five magazines I coded have at least twice the editorial content as advertising, while Figure 3.5 shows how most of the magazines tend towards printing around four images per each of those editorial pages:

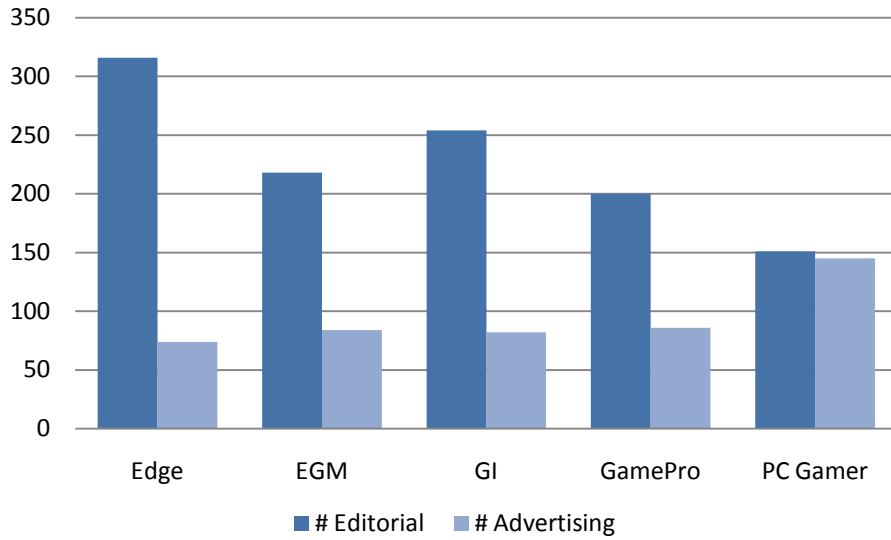


Figure 3.4: Average Editorial:Advertising content ratios, by page count

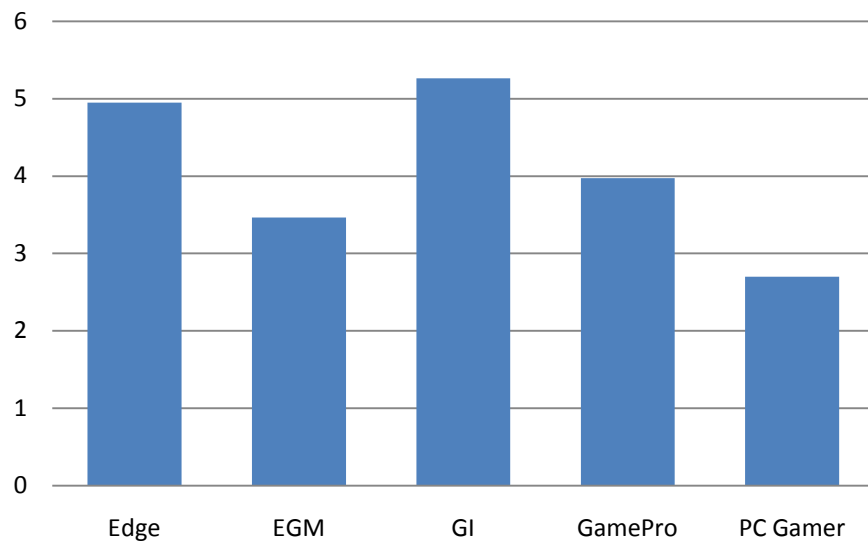


Figure 3.5: Average image count per editorial page

While control of how many advertising pages are printed in a magazine is always out of the hands of that magazine’s editorial team—and doesn’t even come into play in my creation of a design prototype—the fact remains that those readers I’ve interacted with tend to expect around 2:1 ratios of editorial content to advertising content. Were I ever to shop my prototype around for publishers, I would likely want to take this factor under consideration. Granted, as in *PC Gamer*’s case, a publisher must sometimes raise advertising pages in order to pay for printing

costs or reduce the charge to the consumer. In such situations, I'd want to find a publisher that is selective about its advertising, in order to ensure that ads aren't inappropriate or out of place.

Image ratios, of course, are very much under the control of a magazine's editorial staff. Keeping to the apparent average of around four images per editorial page would thusly be appropriate for my prototype, since it allows for plenty of text while still providing the visuals that readers have come to expect. In addition, since pages with many small images tend to feel more cluttered and overwhelming than pages with fewer, large images, my prototype will err towards the latter. I want to keep my readership from ever feeling confused or overwhelmed with content—a feeling that would likely result in that reader simply putting the magazine down and turning to some other form of entertainment.

3.5 Rhetorical Ethos

The importance of balance in journalism is unquestionable; audiences will either become polarized for or against a magazine as a result of its bias, or simply write off the magazine altogether for its inaccurate representation in articles, dooming it to failure. In games journalism, one of the most quantitative means by which a magazine's balance can be determined is the study of its review scores.

It's unsurprising to learn that there are subtle similarities between the average review scores in each of the magazines I coded. In any industry in which ratings are used to score products, reviewers tend to think more alike than not—at least in the broadest sense. What is surprising, however, is just how high the average scores got in certain cases:

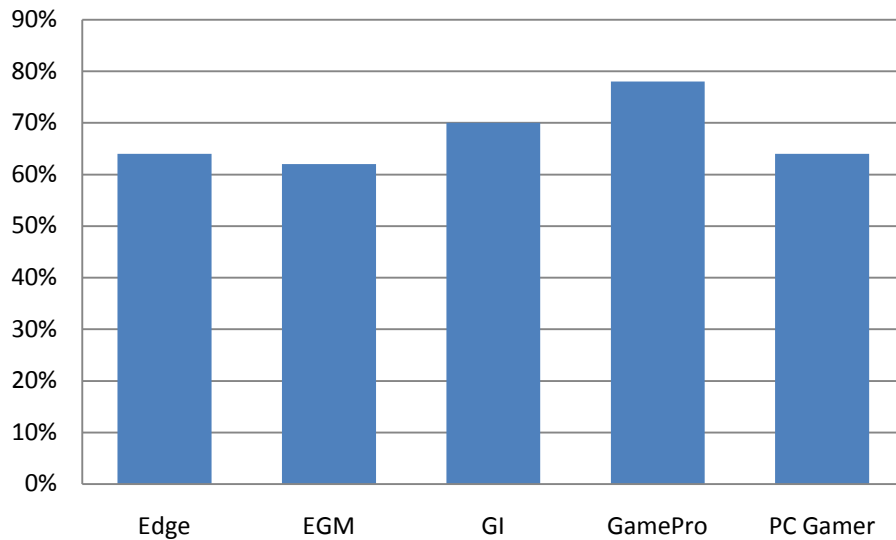


Figure 3.6: Average review scores, transposed to a percentage scale

The fact that average review scores are higher than the percentage scale’s median of 50 is simply because truly terrible games only rarely make it out of development and onto store shelves. As *Official Xbox Magazine* senior editor Dan Amrich explained, “Most games that are lower than seven don’t come out. Most companies will give it more time to cook, or kill it outright and take it as a loss.” As such, games that get reviewed tend to be scored better than the expected statistical average, and thusly the graph in Figure 3.6 shows higher ratings across the board. Granted, magazines could account for this in their grading scales, but common practice is to treat game ratings more like school grades, where averages hang around 70%.

GamePro’s high average score is somewhat misleading, because the magazine’s grading system is on a scale from 1-5 stars; 1, not 0, being the lowest possible grade. Translated to a percentage scale, this puts *GamePro*’s lowest score at 20%, much higher than the other magazines. Ironically, the distinction is not recognized on review aggregator websites like MetaCritic.com, where review scores for individual games are compiled and averaged. Since such sites have become common tools the community uses to quickly judge game quality, *GamePro*’s review scores are, for all intents and purposes, higher than those of other magazines.

This fact tends to be abused by the public relations teams at various development studios, who often—and understandably—advertise their games with prominent displays of the higher scores from *GamePro* and similar, high-rating publications. To combat this in my own prototype, I plan to use a 1-100 point review scale with review averages in the 60%-70% range instead of the 70%-80% range. Such a scale would be straightforward to the readership by touching on their understanding of percentages; it would be clear and unequivocal in advertisements; and it would prevent discrepancies between the magazine and aggregator websites. It would not, however, be perfect; a 1-100 scale is massive in scope and will assuredly lead to controversy over the smallest gradations in ratings. But as Amrich pointed out to me, “The entire review scale system, as we know it, is fundamentally broken.” A lot comes down to personal preference.

4 Qualitative Analysis

With my quantitative analysis of my sample set complete, I proceeded to qualitatively analyze each of the five game magazines: *Edge*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Game Informer*, *GamePro*, and *PC Gamer*. Since my goal of creating a design prototype based on these analyses involves identifying those components and rhetorical moves that pertain to my target audience and can be incorporated into that prototype, I restricted my discussion of each magazine to such elements.

4.1 Edge

Admittedly, including *Edge* in this project's analysis is somewhat unfair. Printed in England, where the popularity of public transportation keeps newsstand sales consequential instead of laughable, *Edge* has found tremendous success as a content-heavy, ad-light, premiere-readership magazine. Its American cousin, *Next Generation Magazine*, folded seven years ago,

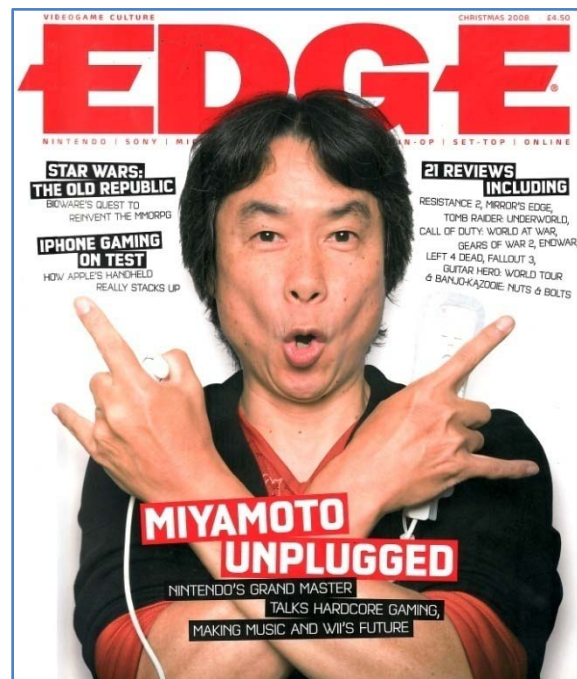


Figure 4.1: Example cover, *Edge* 196

unable to sustain the development model that found such ardent followers in Europe. It appears that magazines like *Edge*—with its 4:1 content ratio, thick binding, and heavy use of whitespace—can’t survive in the American market, where a 40% draw* at the newsstand is considered phenomenal success, and distribution costs for heavy magazines across such a large country are prohibitively expensive.

Nevertheless, I believe analyzing *Edge* can still help me design a better prototype. Though its readership is small and its business model doesn’t fit the American market, the magazine adheres to many of the same tenets I value and want to integrate into my own design:

- It positions quality above all else, as evidenced by its willingness to spread content out over multiple pages—increasing page count, weight, and price—in order to provide the audience with a better reading experience.
- It publishes a wide variety of people-focused features, reflecting more the mainstream, human-interest angle of magazines like *Wired* than the industry-standard, preview-intensive focus of those like *Game Informer*.
- It appeals, so far as I can tell, to a large portion of the demographic I’m looking to target: industry professionals who demand quality journalism and in-depth reporting in the magazines they read.

4.1.1 Failures

That’s not to say that *Edge* gets it all right; in my opinion, many of its features detract from its effectiveness in appealing to a wider gaming audience. For instance, its choice to not attribute any of its articles to their authors engenders the sense that the magazine speaks as a

* “Draw” refers to the percentage of a magazine’s newsstand copies sold per amount printed.

singular, authoritative unit. Unfortunately, that stance risks alienating readers by elevating the magazine above its audience. As a writer, I would much rather speak as an industry professional than down to them, and judging by my interviews with fellow professionals, they're looking for the same thing.

Edge's reviews and previews also tend to be highly critical—often to a fault. Granted, its competition can be overly forgiving in their reviews and sometimes even act as cheerleaders for previewed games, and *Edge's* more critical tone is sometimes a welcome shift. But every time it takes that tone, it risks coming off as condescending. As much as serious, professional gamers want to see honesty in game articles, they ostensibly share a passion with *Edge's* writers and want to hear from people who genuinely love games. Yet the overt criticism that can be common in *Edge* leads to articles that almost forget the joy of gaming.

Take this example, for instance, of the final paragraph in *Edge's* review of *Fallout 3*, which it scored a fairly average 7 out of 10 (as opposed to the wider media's average 9+ rating):

Fallout 3 enjoys some of the benefits of being a slightly smaller game than *Oblivion*—it's a more intensely designed world, and thanks to the concentration and thoughtful crafting of its quests the player never grinds. These substantial boons aside, however, Bethesda treads water in most other areas of obvious improvement, and *Fallout 3* is disappointing in its lack of finesse. But then submersion in this world means that you quickly look past the many frustrations—the uncanny NPCs, the occasional broken quest, the ill-conceived interface, the dozy voice-acting. It's a game that rewards the long-haul with deep, inventive missions which eschew the usual fetch and kill structure, ensuring that the many hours spent in *Fallout 3's* wasteland aren't wasted.

Though it's difficult to get a sense of a magazine's style from a single paragraph, the fact that the review doesn't touch on whether the game is ultimately fun to play—a quality that should serve to punctuate any review with some degree of finality—speaks volumes about *Edge's* tendency to analyze the components of a game without appreciation for the joy it does (or doesn't) evoke. That's not to say the details presented aren't of great value to readers, or that the

advanced vocabulary and sentence structure aren't an appealing departure from much of the competition's simplicity. But as comprehensive as the game descriptions might be, there's no intrinsic excitement about those games. There's no joy.

Indeed, the most damning feature of *Edge* is its lack of personality. In any of its given articles, references to the people who play the games—from the reviewers to the readership—are few and far between. While games are accurately described and keenly criticized, its players are always held at arm's length. Objectivity in reviews is appropriate; objectivity about the readership simply dismisses them.

Take this representative passage from a recent *Edge* review of *Warhammer Online*:

This is mainstream MMO's finest PVP hour, however. The player fights are blended smoothly into the world, so a move from thumping a server-spawned monster to fireballing a player-controlled foe feels both natural and joyous. With both types of kill granting universal experience, there isn't the uncertainty about how and why players would battle others that's so terrifying to MMOs' more casual audience. Lower level characters are temporarily bumped up to the zone's average when they enter, death penalties are almost non-existent, and resurrection is fast, so the sense of risk dissipates—and the sense of reward grows, RVR victories being the route to the game's most desirable armour and weapons. While the later sieges are thrilling, *WAR*'s single greatest achievement is transforming that dauntingly vertical climb from PVE up to competitive PVP into a gentle incline.²

Note that at no time are the players referenced directly. It isn't "your" fights that are "smoothly blended into the world," but the more general "player" fights. It wasn't the reviewer's ("my") sense of risk that dissipated thanks to non-existent death penalties, but simply a general dissipation that would seem to affect no one and everyone at the same time. And, once again, the joy of gaming isn't communicated: The writer tells us that the gameplay is "joyous," but we as readers never feel that emotion. Contrast that paragraph with the following, taken from *PC Gamer*'s review of *Everyday Shooter*, scored 84% in its August 2008 issue:

I also fell completely in love with the eclectic soundtrack that underscores the game with a mix of soothing melodies and catchy guitar riffs. The eight tracks form a complete album when formed sequentially—a terrific record that I would buy even if it wasn't attached to a game. When combined with the dynamic harmonies and chords activated by your actions in-game, the gameplay turns into an engrossing dance party located at the intersection of euphoria and excitement.

Note the use of the first-person singular perspective, which instantly draws readers into the article by giving them a sense of context from which the information is flowing—it's not random data being synthesized into written form, but the experiences of a fellow gamer who plays games for the same reasons the audience does. Likewise, note how the writer takes care to discuss his emotional responses to the game: how the melodies were “soothing,” the guitar riffs “catchy,” the dance party “engrossing,” and the overall album so good that he “would buy it even if it wasn't attached to a game.” Such details could be presented in *Edge*, but never with the same emotional context.

Certainly, there's nothing inherently incorrect about *Edge*'s approach to its writing, but the style does engender a disconnect between the magazine and its readership. Given how critical community is in gaming, such a disconnect rubs against the metaphorical grain of the general populace.

4.1.2 Successes

All that said, *Edge*'s successes more than make up for its failures. For starters, its writing is, though undeniably distant, still action-packed and wholly compelling, reflecting a skill I would want to showcase in my own prototype.

Meanwhile, the magazine is a visual masterpiece, and most of that boils down to its one-two combination of a nonstandard page format and keen use of whitespace. Measuring 9" x 10.5", the wider, squatter cut allows for more breathing room between columns and along the

outside margins. Add to that its visual design team’s spacious approach to layout, and reading *Edge* is comfortable—a stark contrast to the semi-bewilderment encouraged by many of its American competitors’ packed layouts.



Figure 4.2: *Gears of War 2* review spread, *Edge* 196, pp. 86-87

Even a cursory examination of the two-page spread from *Edge* shown in Figure 4.2 reveals how whitespace in print can ease reader eye strain. Instead of squeezing screenshots side-by-side, *Edge* keeps them spread apart with white strips of uniform width. The sidebar on the far right side of the second page fills up only part of the margin, but the excess space is left empty. The most obvious use of whitespace is at the upper-left corner of the first page, above the review’s title and vital stats: In any other game magazine, this space would have been used to showcase an extra screenshot or two, but *Edge* elected to leave it empty, imparting a less cramped, more open feel.

Its spacious approach to layout even extends to the number of discrete articles that appear on a page—namely, one and only one. Where other magazines might cram a news ticker, a short

feature, and an unrelated sidebar onto a single page, *Edge* has a “place for everything and everything in its place” mentality that keeps the reader from feeling overwhelmed with information:

And the magazine does other things well, too. Its rating system can be grasped instantly and without explanation (although its lack of additional qualifiers that could give readers a quick summary of reviews may alienate more mainstream audiences). Meanwhile, its letters section is open and revealing, with criticism of the magazine printed and responded to at face value—an honesty that I, as a reader, can appreciate.

4.1.3 Application

Despite its flaws, *Edge* remains the finest-designed magazine in the industry, and one that I could learn much from in designing my own prototype. Its propensity to make use of whitespace and keep a structured, one-topic-per-page organization is one that I’d like to emulate, since it keeps the reader comfortable, never letting content get in the way of entertainment.

Conversely, *Edge*’s depersonalization of its writers is its most critical flaw. In my prototype, it will be vital to attribute each of my articles to their respective writers and to print columns, not just by outside contributors, but by members of my editorial team. This way, my readers will be able to follow writers, get to know their styles and perspectives, and thusly become both more informed and more connected with the magazine as a whole.

4.2 Electronic Gaming Monthly

The fall of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, better known as *EGM*, is a special case among game magazines. While other publications came and went, *EGM* dominated the magazine wars

for the latter bulk of its 19-year tenure. Gamers and industry professionals alike considered it the representational magazine of the wider community, and its former editorial staff still holds something of a place of honor among games journalists.

As both *Official Xbox Magazine* senior editor Dan Amrich and *GamePro* editorial director George Jones explained in their respective interviews with me, *EGM* was closed, not because of any failures of the magazine, but because of the failures of its publisher, Ziff Davis. Its antiquating distribution model drove the company ever deeper into debt. When Ziff Davis was finally forced to declare bankruptcy and sell off its assets—*EGM* included—to appease its shareholders, no one in the industry was surprised. Apparently, the magazine had been for sale for almost five years.



Figure 4.3: Example cover, *EGM* 233

Since the magazine’s closure was not a result of any failure of the editorial staff, and it had, in fact, won the respect of its readership, I believe it worthwhile to consider those elements of its composition that I might apply to my prototype:

- Its status as the consummate magazine of the gaming community reflects a success that any game magazine would want to emulate, my prototype included.
- Its use of color and form is starkly different from the hard-edged, cool-colored competition.
- Its particular take on balance in game reviews by splitting up reviews among a “Review Crew” is unique in the industry.

4.2.1 Failures

Of course, despite its many accolades, *EGM* didn’t get it all right. Though its closure had nothing to do with the strength of the magazine, that strength came from its editorial team. In several ways, its design was flawed.

Perhaps the most telling of those flaws was its method of organization. Instead of a news section, *EGM* opened every issue with a section called “Press Start”: a concoction of features, previews, and miniature opinion pieces mashed together without consistent order. Admittedly, the stereotypical organization of game magazines by genre may be a bit stale, but it’s also fundamental to the reader’s understanding of where different sorts of articles can be found. By blending several sections of the magazine together into a single meta-section, *EGM* turned printed pages into web-like blends of data—a shift the medium simply doesn’t support.

There’s a reason the Internet is colloquially referred to as “the web”: it is an interconnected network of data that allows readers to jump between articles and ideas with ease. *EGM* seemingly attempted to emulate that sort of structure by providing multiple kinds of articles in a single section, and often on a single page, but they lacked the thematic connections necessary to make each article flow to the next. This is not a new concept—any major feature

article has body text, sidebars, interviews, and so forth that are thematically linked and thusly work together—but it isn't taken to heart in *EGM's* "Press Start."



Figure 4.4: Black text on monochrome background, *EGM* 233, p. 26

The web's influence leaked into other parts of the magazine's design, as well. In terms of graphics, for instance, *EGM* often used color gradients instead of solid color, a common practice online. In print, however, the effect lends a washed, fluid feel to the magazine that detracts from a sense of structure—key in a medium that relies on page numbers, headers, and columns of text. Nor do the failures in visual design stop there: There are numerous examples of images being washed out and used as backgrounds for body text, such as in Figure 4.4. It would be acceptable if the text remained readable, but that's often not the case; text tends to bleed into those background images and become difficult to read.

4.2.2 Successes

That's not to say that all of *EGM*'s design decisions were bad. In fact, one of its best features was its willingness to spice up its design with warmer tones and colors, lending each feature article a bright feel. Sometimes the results were less than spectacular, with gaudy colors lending a juvenile sense to the magazine that contrasted starkly from its writing style. But the willingness to use untouched regions of the color palette was a bold and memorable move.

Still, where *EGM* truly shined was in its editorial content. The magazine worked hard to develop a reputation for solid, well-written reporting, and the biggest contributing factor to that was the Review Crew. Since Day 1, *EGM* made it their policy to have multiple reviewers play and review games in order to provide more balanced perspectives and scores, and while it wasn't always possible (in later years, minor titles were only assigned to single reviewers), it gave the publication an unmistakable air of authority.

4.2.3 Application

Giving a readership access to second opinions in reviews is an excellent way to proof a magazine's scores, and *EGM*'s Review Crew is a model that I'd like my prototype to follow. While it is by no means perfect—focusing too much page space on second opinions in reviews can shrink the main review, sacrificing depth for balance—it's a system worth building upon, because it helps prove to the reader that scores are not simply picked from a hat.

EGM's willingness to stretch the color palette in its graphics is worth remembering when it comes time to design my own graphics and layout, but I will, at the same time, need to remember the confusion engendered by the magazine's "Press Start" section—a true testament to

the importance of simple organization. Without a straightforward structure, readers looking to find particular articles could easily be left thumbing through an issue in frustration.

4.3 Game Informer

Quite the stark contrast from *Edge* and *EGM*, *Game Informer* (abbreviated *GI*) is among the less respected game magazines in the industry—at least among industry professionals—despite being far and away the most successful. As the 12th most popular magazine in America, gaming or otherwise, and with a gargantuan circulation of over 3 million copies per month, *GI* has emerged as the new voice of gaming. All that, and it's only been around for seven years.



Figure 4.5: Example cover, *Game Informer* 190

GI's success (and much of the industry badmouthing it receives) can best be attributed to its circulation model. Nationwide games retailer GameStop sells subscriptions to the magazine under the guise of store memberships, which customers buy in order to get discounts and be able to trade in their games. Clerks will sell GameStop memberships for \$15 and tell customers that

they get a free subscription to *GI* to sweeten the deal, but the fact is, it's the magazine subscriptions that are being sold and the memberships that are being given away. That may not be how customers hear it, but it's the only way circulation audits can include those subscriptions, and bigger audit numbers mean pricier ads and more revenue for the publisher.

However it may circulate, though, its position at the very top of game magazines makes it well worth my analysis, to see just how its approach to games journalism might be worth considering for my prototype:

- It places a surprisingly heavy emphasis on news—not the investigative feature-style news of most other game magazines, but unbiased reports of the goings-on in the gaming industry.
- Its cover stories are always world exclusive reveals of upcoming games, making it the go-to source of information on how games are evolving.

4.3.1 Failures

GI's circulation model may give it its bad rap in the industry, but its inconsistent writing is a much more pertinent weakness. The magazine's editorial content tends to fluctuate from surprisingly decent to markedly substandard, and while that might be attributed to the faults of one or two writers in other magazines, *GI* only attributes the authors of its reviews, and even those bylines only include first names. Failures that should fall on the writers fall on the entire magazine instead, and its reputation suffers as a result.

Nor do the problems end there. *GI*'s rating system is curiously contrived, with a basic 1-10 scale complicated by .25, .50, and .75 divisions, and a relatively high average rating. In the magazine's own description of its system, scores of 1-4 all basically mean the same thing: don't

play it. It's a surprisingly complex scale for a publication that is serving a mass-market audience—if not, in fact, tailoring itself to that audience.

4.3.2 Successes

Fortunately, from a design and structural perspective, *GI* actually does a whole lot right. Its extra-large, 9” by 10.75” page format and small yet readable font lets the magazine pack each page with both imagery and text, without feeling confusingly dense. Its cool, consistent color scheme makes it easy on the eyes, and its simple graphics lend it a surprisingly clean, if slightly bland, look. The paper quality is excellent, the magazine itself thick and heavy, and the content ratio is incredibly high for an American publication.



Figure 4.6: *Rise of the Argonauts* review spread, *Game Informer* 190, p. 84

On the content side, *GI*'s reviews are a sort of simulacrum of *EGM*'s Review Crew, including extensive “second opinions” with write-ups and ratings. Most of the reviews’ ratings, convoluted though they might be, are accompanied by extensive qualifiers—a nod to readers

who want quick-and-dirty overviews of a game before picking it at their local GameStop. Indeed, *GI*'s success stems from the fact that it knows its core audience: gamers who shop at GameStop for the newest, shiniest games, and who use the magazine as a tool to buy said titles. That audience even affects the magazine's selection for cover stories: The magazine won't put a game on its cover unless it's a world-exclusive reveal.

There is, however, one nod to the audience that should never have been made. That *GI* gears itself for a male readership isn't much of a surprise; the readerships of all game magazines are overwhelmingly male anyways. But its complete lack of female editorial staff is immediately noticeable and unforgivable. Having a female perspective is an invaluable lesson every other gaming publication has already learned.

4.3.3 Application

The biggest lesson to be learned from *Game Informer* is that exclusives can make magazines incredibly attractive. If a reader can learn about a major developer's new game from a print magazine before having heard too much about it online, he or she is likely to turn to your publication for other content, too. Less applicable to my prototype but just as important is the necessity of hiring female talent to an editorial staff—female gamers might not be in the majority, but they still read game magazines.

4.4 GamePro

At almost 20 years old, *GamePro* is the second-longest running game magazine in the world and arguably the most foundational. Existing in a state of perpetual competition with archrival *EGM*, *GamePro* was the frontrunner in the early years before *EGM* found its footing.

Defined by upbeat articles and “editorial personas” (pseudonyms the journalists would write under), *GamePro* was the magazine gamers read when they were dreaming of growing up and making it in the gaming industry. In fact, a surprising number of today’s games journalists have written for *GamePro* at some time in the past. There’s even a running joke among many journalists that everyone “does their time” at *GamePro* before moving on.



Figure 4.7: Example cover, *GamePro* 240

Unfortunately, the magazine sank to a reputation-destroying low about five years ago when the writing quality and game coverage diminished. Admitting that you read the magazine became an embarrassment, and it wasn’t until new Editorial Director George Jones arrived the following year that things took a turn for the better. The *GamePro* of today is a very different beast, though it still battles with its past and the community’s latent memories of what it once was.

As Jones pointed out to me when I interviewed him about the magazine's progress, *GamePro* has become a surprisingly stable publication, and I believe it to be worth analyzing to discover how it found success in the face of imminent failure:

- Its newsstand numbers are now holding steady while the rest of the competition bleeds.
- It targets the most mainstream gaming readership in America, an editorial model that has proven surprisingly viable, despite being pronouncedly unpopular.

4.4.1 Failures

In spite of the numerous changes that have overtaken the magazine in recent years (including a halt to “editorial personas” and a focus-tested simplification of their rating system), *GamePro*'s design still has a lot of weak spots. One of the most volatile is the magazine's penchant for being overtly positive in its previews: Nary a skeptical word is mentioned about the viability of upcoming games, and only rarely will writers ask questions about what isn't known. While *GamePro* openly admits that it seeks to provide its readers with “positive commentary” about a pastime it loves as much as they do, it could do with a dash of *Edge*'s skepticism to keep from coming off as the industry's cheerleader.

The *GamePro* staff's relationship to its audience is another source of concern. Ever since the magazine dropped its use of “editorial personas,” it's had difficulty defining who its writers are. Many magazines use monthly columns written by their editorial staffs to help build personalities and strengthen relationships with the audience, but *GamePro* does not. Coupled with its periodical inconsistency in attributing its articles to their respective writers, the magazine feels as though it is missing a vital piece of its personality.

Even *GamePro*'s layout is problematic. The navigation headers along the top of each page feel large and clunky, streaked with hash marks the same color as the font. Feature fonts tend to be needlessly stylized, while page graphics tend to flip-flop between rounded corners and boxy shapes.



Figure 4.8: *Alone in the Dark* review spread, *GamePro* 240, pp. 80-81

4.4.2 Successes

Fortunately, *GamePro* makes up for its shortcomings in other ways. Along with my experience working for the magazine, my interview with George Jones solidified the fact that it is unafraid of change—not exactly a tangible quality, but one that has a tremendous effect on *GamePro*'s viability in future markets. More concretely, the magazine possesses a clean and consistent design; while it might not always feel professional or be impressive to look at, it doesn't drown out content with an overabundance of imagery or a multitude of disparate themes on a single page.

That said, the reality is that *GamePro*'s target demographic is its best feature. By outsourcing its circulation to a separate company, the magazine reduced its newsstand costs. And by putting big, triple-A titles on its covers, it's managing to find the newsstand draw that other magazines aren't. It may not have the retail outlets backing it up, but like *Game Informer*, *GamePro* knows its audience well.

4.4.3 Application

GamePro's readership is an audience I must target if my prototype is to find longevity. That means writing as much about big, triple-A titles as unknown exclusives; using large, high-quality images; and remembering that sometimes, a well-thought-out list article can be as engaging to read for some audiences as an in-depth human-interest feature story is to others.

4.5 PC Gamer

It's unique, it's mature, and it's playful, all at the same time. Since 1994, *PC Gamer* has triumphed as the world's most popular computer game magazine. Where other magazines are multi-platform and console-driven, covering the games and news that affect Microsoft's Xbox 360, Nintendo's Wii, and Sony's Playstation 3, *PC Gamer* is the last surviving PC-exclusive publication in America.

Like all of Future's single-platform magazines, it's managed to stay profitable in a market that is increasingly inhospitable. Based on my investigation, that success appears to be based on three core qualities:

- It knows its readership well, and works to appeal to that readership as often as possible.

- It has managed to develop a distinctive voice and personality that feels transparent and relatable.
- Its visual design is unique and draws on elements more often found in professional, mainstream publications like *Newsweek*, while still remaining “gamey.”

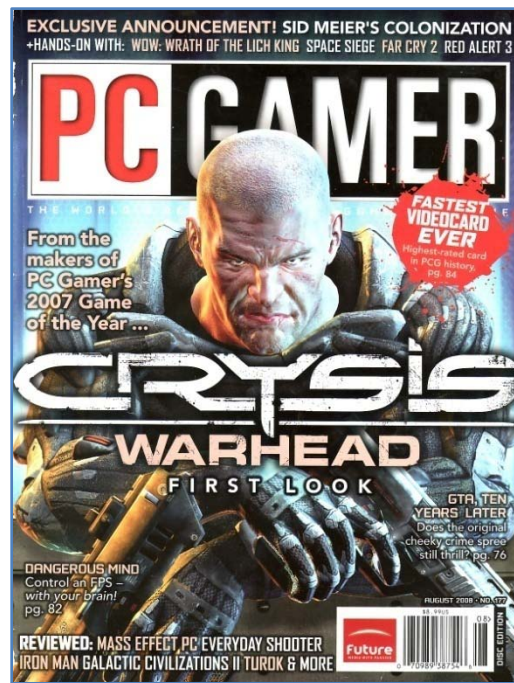


Figure 4.9: Example cover, *PC Gamer* 177

4.5.1 Failures

Ironically, *PC Gamer*'s biggest problem is that there isn't as much of it as other magazines. With a editorial : advertising ratio of almost 1:1, it has the lowest editorial page count in my sample set—a trait that makes it feel packed to the gills with advertisements and short on written material. The quality of what's there makes up for what's not, but only to a point. It's a fairly transparent compensation tactic; its publisher, Future U.S., is trying to shore up sagging circulation numbers with more advertisements.

Those circulation numbers won't be going anywhere but down unless *PC Gamer* finds a way to remedy its second failure: its inability to tap a wider audience. When its staff gets an issue right, its content eclipses the competition, but most gamers don't realize it, because it's simply too specialized a magazine. Its core readership of computer gamers is thin to begin with, since most of today's gamers spend their time in front of consoles like the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3. Add to that the fact that *PC Gamer* is such a "hardcore" magazine, and the potential readership—known in the industry as the "installed base"—shrinks even smaller.

4.5.2 Successes

Of course, as small as *PC Gamer*'s readership might be, knowing that readership and being able to work with it is invaluable, and the magazine has had 15 years to learn. Its audience is almost universally male and surprisingly old, with 65% of its readers over the age of 25. And, because the PC is an inherently advanced platform with rich customizability and a sharp learning curve, that readership is fundamentally "hardcore." In fact, the magazine's "by gamers, for gamers" attitude is eaten up with a spoon, and has a lot to do with *PC Gamer*'s continued survival.

Gaming is a fun pastime, and the magazine's editors know it. They've developed an original voice that connects directly with their readers: knowledgeable, yet playful; thorough, but approachable. The magazine works very hard to identify its writers and let the readership in on who they are and what they do, giving the entire staff a friendly demeanor that says, "I'm just like you. I know I have a kick-ass job, but you can enjoy it with me." Small things, like a willingness to use occasional, mild profanity, pull the staff down to earth. And the fact that a woman has held the Editor-in-Chief's reins doesn't hurt, either—though *PC Gamer* is very much

a magazine for men, it doesn't demean women or make them out to be anything but fellow gamers.

As for the magazine's look and feel, its visual design team hit a home run. Clean, consistent, and classic, it prints black, serif text on a white background and breaks up multiple images with broad bands of whitespace. Color schemes, like many magazines, are on a genre-by-genre basis, but those colors are predominantly dark and warm, with mostly red tones throughout. And the page navigation tools are thin, angular strips down the side that don't feel like they push into the content's space. The result: a visual style that comes off as professional, but still compatible with the "hardcore gamer" mindset.



Figure 4.10: *Rainbow Six Vegas 2* review spread, *PC Gamer* 176, pp. 54-55

All that said, it's the magazine's editorial style that keeps its readership coming back for more. *PC Gamer* will never preview a game unless it's played a copy of that game, and on those rare occasions when it's only been able to view exclusive material, it's up-front about it and makes the feature about the people working on the game as much as about the game itself, so

readers always have a reason to get into a story. Its writers obviously love games, but they're not afraid to point out potential flaws in a design when they see them—in fact, all previews end with a “Hopes/Fears” callout that does exactly that. And as for the rating system, its 1-100% scale is easily understood while remaining fair: Getting a 60% in *PC Gamer* means a game is above average rather than below it, while hitting 80% doesn't cast that game as “pretty decent”; it means it's an excellent title worthy of a buy.

The fact of the matter is that *PC Gamer* feels like a trustworthy source that readers can depend on. It's open, honest, and consistently well-written, without ever feeling aloof.

4.5.3 Application

As a model for my own prototype, *PC Gamer* is a standout magazine. Its status as a “hardcore” publication and the troubles it faces as a result cannot be ignored, and it will be critical in my own prototype to recognize and reach out to as wide an audience as possible—never sacrificing my core audience of gaming professionals, but simultaneously providing for the needs of the common gamer.

That said, its numerous components are well worth remembering as models for my own design. The personalization of its editorial staff; the combined accessibility and capacity of its 1-100 review scale; its use of serif fonts to present information cleanly and classically; and its propensity to not shy away from warmer colors are all components that can apply to both mainstream and more hardcore readers while still standing out nicely from the competition.

5 Synthesis and Adaptation

I've broken down the content of each of the five magazines in my sample set onto coding sheets. I've quantitatively analyzed the complete sample set and found similarities and idiosyncrasies. And I've qualitatively analyzed each individual magazine, outlining their strong and weak points as they pertain to my own prototype. It's time to synthesize.

In Chapter 6, you will find the prototypical design I created based on some of the traits and components detailed below. These traits aren't necessarily guaranteed to help my prototype find success—indeed, as I discussed in the Introduction, it would be impossible for me to test their validity without extensive resources such as focus groups. However, they do represent those elements that I have found to be substantively contributory to the success of the various magazines in my sample set.

For the sake of clarity, I have broken these traits into three categories: those that affect the composition of individual articles, those that reflect my editorial goals, and those that pertain to the visual design I followed in my prototype. Due to the visual nature of the prototype, many of the traits listed below cannot be properly reflected. Such traits would, hypothetically, be put into practice upon publication.

5.1 Prototype Traits: Articles

- *Keep previews authoritative.* Software previews should only be written by authors who have played the game to some extent, or received sneak peeks at content. Readers should always have a reason to come to us before going elsewhere.

- *Don't be a cheerleader.* Previewers must remain critical of the games they are previewing, remembering to show both sides of potential issues and problems that might arise.
- *Don't forget the joy.* If a writer isn't emotionally attached to the article, the reader won't be either. Remember that we all love gaming!
- *Enforce attribution of authorship.* The readers should always know who is writing a preview or review, so that they can recognize a writer's qualifications in writing about a particular type of game. Attribution also enables readers to hold both the writer and the magazine accountable to what they wrote and/or printed.
- *Keep reviews balanced.* Reviews should include secondary or even tertiary opinions in order to maintain balance and help remind the readers that scores are carefully and methodically given. However, these opinions cannot be printed to the detriment of the core review, which should remain well-rounded and fully informative.
- *Use a 1-100 point rating scale.* The percentage scale provides reviewers with the option to account for subtle variations in the qualities of games without resorting to decimal values. It is also instantly understandable and translates directly to the systems used on review aggregator sites like [MetaCritic.com](https://www.metacritic.com).
- *Don't forget the additional qualifiers.* "Good/bad/ugly" sections or similar sections that present additional qualifiers about reviewed games allow readers to get at-a-glance ideas of games if they are in a hurry and thusly serve the wider audience. Such qualifiers should be kept boilerplate, however; extensive content and context is what the review is for.

- *Implement a wide variety of content.* Features, interviews, developer profiles, list articles, hardware reviews—the magazine should be a source of insight into gaming as a whole, rather than a place for a handful of readers to get purchase advice.
- *Chase those exclusives.* There’s a huge market for exclusive content, especially in big franchises. Don’t ignore the readership benefits they can bring to the table.

5.2 **Prototype Traits: Editorial Style**

- *The editors are gamers, too.* Remember to build up the human side of the editorial team by encouraging them to use the first-person perspective in their articles and write monthly columns about their favorite gaming topics. Help the readers get to know each of the writers and come to trust their opinions.
- *Employ female writers and editors.* The feminine perspective is crucial—gamers are not universally male, and the editorial team should reflect that.
- *Be frank, open, and honest.* Publish a letters section that is unafraid of thoughtful discourse and debate on serious issues that arise in the gaming community. Moderation is acceptable; censorship is not.
- *Talk to the readers.* Developing a rapport with the readership and building a sense of community is key to holding on to subscribers. Use second-person pronouns to talk to gamers directly in previews and reviews.

5.3 Prototype Traits: Visual Design

- *Keep images sizable, consistent, and limited.* Small images tend to clutter up the page, while big ones overwhelm it. Go for a happy medium, keeping to around four images per page.
- *Use warmer colors where appropriate.* Cool colors are safer and darker shades can evoke fitting moods, but tap warm colors whenever possible to bring focus to feature articles and life to preview and review sections.
- *Use a clean, clear serif font for body text.* Serif fonts enhance readability, give a sense of wisdom and reliability, and hearken back to the days of classic print journalism.
- *Keep the layout open.* An airy design with lots of whitespace will give the magazine breathing room—essential when appealing to older demographics. Clutter leads to confusion as quickly as poor organization.
- *Organize the articles.* Keep disparate article types separated; don't combine them under a single page or section header. Likewise, the magazine's table of contents should be clear and complete.

6 The Prototype

Regrettably, time and resource constraints prevented me from achieving my ultimate goal of creating a complete magazine prototype with example pages and written content for every genre. I was, however, able to create three example images showcasing some of the most fundamental design points I believe are critical to my prototype. Two of these images are prototype covers and show how my cover design changes from issue to issue, while the final image is a two-page spread of a sample game review, useful for seeing how a few key design elements could be implemented.



Figure 6.1: Sample cover designs, *Professional Gamer*

The most obvious feature of my prototype design is the name of the magazine: *Professional Gamer*. The name evokes a direct industry connection while still appealing to the wider audience by connecting to the dreams of many: to make their favored pastime a part of their working lives. The title is also placed prominently on a static background that always

overlaps the cover art regardless of the game—a tactic that reinforces the journalistic import of the magazine by hearkening to the practices of mass-market titles like *Newsweek*.

Note also the use of a static font for cover text like the skybar and subheaders, which change color to match the palette of the cover art, but otherwise remain the same from issue to issue. Similarly, the use of empty space and the lack of internal references to other articles in the magazine help distance *Professional Gamer* from the ad-centric feel of more text-laden magazine covers.

Fundamentally, the design of the *Professional Gamer* cover, while certainly not ready for newsstand distribution, nevertheless emphasizes the importance of clarity and consistency. Such features help make a cover more attractive to older newsstand buyers by stepping aside from the content-heavy, web-style information dumps of some of the competition.



Figure 6.2: Sample review spread, *Professional Gamer*

The sample *Professional Gamer* review spread I created furthers these design ideals by emphasizing whitespace and structure. Each corner of the spread in Figure 6.2 has a large swatch

of empty space that helps ease eye strain by opening up the page, while the lines of text are sufficiently spaced that they don't turn into indecipherable blocks of words. Heavily inspired by *PC Gamer's* design, the outside borders are simple but distinct lines of warm color that have enough of an edge to them to appeal to non-industry gamers, while image placement takes a page from *Edge's* design, emphasizing wide white dividers between non-overlapping game screenshots. Finally, bylines in *Professional Gamer* are given strong emphasis to encourage the development of relationships between the editorial staff and the readership.

7 Conclusion & Reflection

Six months ago, I undertook this project with a single goal: to create my own game magazine. While I recognized that doing so would require a healthy amount of research and planning, I held on to the rather egotistical belief that the prototype was more valuable than the research. Thankfully, writing this thesis has proved infinitely more rewarding than I could ever have hoped, and my comprehension of games journalism has only deepened for the experience. Creating my prototype became secondary to determining what components would comprise it—hence the lengthy discussion on synthesis in Chapter 5, and the relatively short visual overview of *Professional Gamer* in Chapter 6.

Indeed, I believe that what I have learned about the games journalism industry far eclipses the value of any prototype I could have made, and that my appreciation for some of the most basic rules of writing deepened as I wrote the report. For instance, as any rhetorician would gladly lecture to a willing crowd, recognizing and speaking to one's audience is the first rule of writing. Yet it was not until a month into the project that I grew to understand just what recognizing my audience meant to the success of my planned prototype. By the project's end, I'd gone from seeing audience as an afterthought to using it to drive my entire argument—how my prototype would have to appeal to both hardcore, “industry” audiences and mass-market audiences in order to survive.

The more I investigated, the more apparent it became that games journalism falls into three distinct niches—at least, from the perspectives of its journalists—based entirely on audience. To one metaphorical side, where the mass-market readership looks for its fix of news and reviews, game websites dominate. These sites use the weight of their content to overwhelm and outmaneuver the print competition, and though hugely successful, they nevertheless fall prey

to their own mass. It's difficult, after all, to deliver consistent quality when quantity is the means of survival. As Jeff Green has said, much of the resulting content is "serious hack work: lazy, cliché-ridden, sloppy, illiterate dreck, [written] with no real thought or creativity or care."

On the opposite end of the spectrum are what I've come to call the "industry" magazines: game magazines written for those who make their livings off of games, either as developers, journalists, or professional players. There aren't many of them to begin with—*Edge* is, in fact, one of the only entertainment-focused industry magazines in the world—but their advanced vocabulary and sentence structure and more critical tones are far removed from the styles of most online sites. When I began this project it was an industry magazine I wanted to prototype; I'd become disgusted with online articles and wanted something that showcased well-researched, well-crafted writing. Yet to my surprise, the deeper I dug into industry magazines, the more I was turned away from them.

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the level of criticism with which *Edge* approaches games is so pervasive that the joy of gaming is lost. I began to thirst for that joy, to crave magazines with a critical yet joyous tone. I found it somewhere between industry magazines and game websites. *GamePro*, *PC Gamer*, and *Game Informer* might not reach as many readers as their web-based counterparts, but they still have far wider appeals than industry magazines. And as I've discussed, while they each have their own flaws, the joy they bring to the table cannot be denied.

It is highly unlikely that my prototype will ever evolve to the point that it finds a publisher and makes it to the newsstand, but that goal has long since been eclipsed by a new one: to learn what such a magazine would comprise so that I, along with games journalists around the world, might have a better understanding of our medium. The points I listed in Chapter 5 will certainly not apply in every case for every magazine, but many of the ideals that are presented

could stand to be upheld more often. Because the fact is, as print continues to struggle and websites continue to prosper, magazines will only have their voice and their integrity to set them apart.

Given a joyous voice; given an unassailable integrity; given a desire to reach across demographics and speak to gamers of all backgrounds, a game magazine could find unprecedented success where others have closed their doors. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to be a part of the team that makes that magazine.

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A Appendix A: Magazine Coding Sheets

Analyzing Games Journalism - Magazine Coding Sheet

Magazine Name: Edge Coded By: Dan Tennant
 Sample issue Dates: 08 / 01 / 2008 09 / 01 / 2008 12 / 26 / 2008 Coding Date: 02 / 19 / 2009

Content Genres

- Previews
 - Vital Stats
 - Content Description
 - Strengths and/or Weaknesses

- Software Reviews
 - Vital Stats
 - Minimum Playable Requirements
 - Magazine-Recommended Requirements
 - Content Description
 - Strengths and Weaknesses
 - Comparisons
 - Rating

- Hardware Reviews
 - Vital Stats
 - Content Description / Intended Usage
 - Strengths and Weaknesses
 - Comparisons
 - Rating

- Industry News

- Feature Articles
 - Cover Stories
 - Profiles
 - Interviews

- Columns

- Letters

Organization

- Table of Contents
- Lists all articles
 - Lists genre headers only
 - Some headers, some articles

- Order of Content
1. News (Start)
 2. Features (Interviews, Profiles)
 3. Previews (Hype)
 4. Features (Cover Story, Other Features)
 5. Reviews
 6. Columns
 7. Letters (Inbox)

Style

- Genre Names
- All classic ("Previews," "News," etc.)
 - All renamed ("Hype," "Eyewitness," etc.)
 - Some classic, some renamed

- Narrative Perspective
- First-person singular ("I played...")
 - First-person plural ("We believe...")
 - Second-person ("You'll love...")
 - No personal commentary outside columns

- Rating System
- Graded (A, B, C, D, F)
 - Starred
 - Percentage (# / 10)
 - Additional qualifiers? ("Good, Bad, & Ugly," etc.)

Internal Design

Non-Feature Fonts

- Body Text: Serif
- Body Text: Sans-serif
- Header Text: Plain / Simple
- Header Text: Stylized / Themed
- Header Text: Static
- Header Text: Dynamic (Changes with article)

Non-Feature Columns

- Width: Thin
 - Width: Average
 - Width: Wide
- Columns / Page: 4

Graphics

- Monochromatic
- Warm Colors
- Cool Colors
- Boxed / Boxy
- Free-form

Navigation

- Page Borders
- Page Headers
- No Navigation Tools

Image Ratio

- Few / Small Images
 - Some / Average Images
 - Many / Massive Images
- Images / Page: 4.95

Content Ratio

- # Editorial Pages: 316
- # Advertisement Pages: 74

Cover Design

Logo

- Dominant (Overlaps cover art)
- Submissive (Overlapped by cover art)
- Static (No change from issue to issue)
- Dynamic (Changes with cover story)

Font

- Serif
 - Sans-serif
 - Plain / Simple
 - Stylized / Themed
 - Static (No change from issue to issue)
 - Dynamic (Changes with cover story)
- Rounded
 - Angular

Internal References: 3

Skybar

- Classic
- Variant

Barcode / Mailer Space

- Front Cover
- Back Cover
- Cellophane Wrapper

Back Cover is Advertising?

Rhetorical Ethos

Authorship Attribution

- Bylines
- Writers listed in masthead only

Skepticism in Previews

- Generally skeptical
- Generally optimistic

Average Review Score: 6.4

Bias in News

- Balanced viewpoints presented
- Balanced viewpoints omitted

Letters to the Editor

- Balanced perspectives printed
- Unbalanced / one-sided perspectives printed
- At least 50% response rate from Editors?

Analyzing Games Journalism - Magazine Coding Sheet

Magazine Name: Electronic Gaming Monthly (EGM)

Coded By: Dan Tennant

Sample issue Dates: 07/01/2008 08/01/2008 10/01/2008

Coding Date: 02/06/2009

Content Genres

- Previews
 - Vital Stats
 - Content Description
 - Strengths and/or Weaknesses

- Software Reviews
 - Vital Stats
 - Minimum Playable Requirements
 - Magazine-Recommended Requirements
 - Content Description
 - Strengths and Weaknesses
 - Comparisons
 - Rating

- Hardware Reviews
 - Vital Stats
 - Content Description / Intended Usage
 - Strengths and Weaknesses
 - Comparisons
 - Rating

Industry News

- Feature Articles
 - Cover Stories
 - Profiles
 - Interviews

Columns

Letters

Organization

Table of Contents

- Lists all articles
- Lists genre headers only
- Some headers, some articles

Order of Content

1. Letters
2. Previews (Press Start)
3. Features (Press Start)
4. Feature (Cover Story)
5. Reviews
6. Columns
7. _____

Style

Genre Names

- All classic ("Previews," "News," etc.)
- All renamed ("Hype," "Eyewitness," etc.)
- Some classic, some renamed

Narrative Perspective

- First-person singular ("I played...")
- First-person plural ("We believe...")
- Second-person ("You'll love...")
- No personal commentary outside columns

Rating System

- Graded (A, B, C, D, F)
- Starred
- Percentage (# / ____)
- Additional qualifiers? ("Good, Bad, & Ugly," etc.)

Internal Design

Non-Feature Fonts

- Body Text: Serif
- Body Text: Sans-serif
- Header Text: Plain / Simple
- Header Text: Stylized / Themed
- Header Text: Static
- Header Text: Dynamic (Changes with article)

Non-Feature Columns

- Width: Thin
 - Width: Average
 - Width: Wide
- Columns / Page: 3

Graphics

- Monochromatic
- Warm Colors
- Cool Colors
- Boxed / Boxy
- Free-form

Navigation

- Page Borders
- Page Headers
- No Navigation Tools

Image Ratio

- Few / Small Images
 - Some / Average Images
 - Many / Massive Images
- Images / Page: 3.465

Content Ratio

- # Editorial Pages: 218
- # Advertisement Pages: 84

Cover Design

Logo

- Dominant (Overlaps cover art)
- Submissive (Overlapped by cover art)
- Static (No change from issue to issue)
- Dynamic (Changes with cover story)

Font

- Serif
 - Sans-serif
 - Stylized / Themed
 - Static (No change from issue to issue)
 - Dynamic (Changes with cover story)
- Rounded
 - Angular

Internal References: 2

Skybar

- Classic
- Variant

Barcode / Mailer Space

- Front Cover
- Back Cover
- Cellophane Wrapper

Back Cover is Advertising?

Rhetorical Ethos

Authorship Attribution

- Bylines
- Writers listed in masthead only

Skepticism in Previews

- Generally skeptical
- Generally optimistic

Average Review Score: B-_____

Bias in News

- Balanced viewpoints presented
- Balanced viewpoints omitted

Letters to the Editor

- Balanced perspectives printed
- Unbalanced / one-sided perspectives printed
- At least 50% response rate from Editors?

Analyzing Games Journalism - Magazine Coding Sheet

Magazine Name: Game Informer

Coded By: Dan Tennant

Sample issue Dates: 09 / 01 / 2008 10 / 01 / 2008 02 / 01 / 2009

Coding Date: 02 / 06 / 2009

Content Genres

Previews

- Vital Stats
- Content Description
- Strengths and/or Weaknesses

Software Reviews

- Vital Stats
- Minimum Playable Requirements
- Magazine-Recommended Requirements
- Content Description
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Comparisons
- Rating

Hardware Reviews

- Vital Stats
- Content Description / Intended Usage
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Comparisons
- Rating

Industry News

Feature Articles

- Cover Stories
- Profiles
- Interviews

Columns

Letters

Organization

Table of Contents

- Lists all articles
- Lists genre headers only
- Some headers, some articles

Order of Content

1. Letters (Dear GI)
2. News (Connect)
3. Features
4. Columns (Opinion)
5. Previews
6. Reviews
7. _____

Style

Genre Names

- All classic ("Previews," "News," etc.)
- All renamed ("Hype," "Eyewitness," etc.)
- Some classic, some renamed

Narrative Perspective

- First-person singular ("I played...")
- First-person plural ("We believe...")
- Second-person ("You'll love...")
- No personal commentary outside columns

Rating System

- Graded (A, B, C, D, F)
- Starred
- Percentage (# / 10)
- Additional qualifiers? ("Good, Bad, & Ugly," etc.)

Internal Design

Non-Feature Fonts

- Body Text: Serif
- Body Text: Sans-serif
- Header Text: Plain / Simple
- Header Text: Stylized / Themed
- Header Text: Static
- Header Text: Dynamic (Changes with article)

Non-Feature Columns

- Width: Thin
 - Width: Average
 - Width: Wide
- Columns / Page: 4

Graphics

- Monochromatic
- Warm Colors
- Cool Colors
- Boxed / Boxy
- Free-form

Navigation

- Page Borders
- Page Headers
- No Navigation Tools

Image Ratio

- Few / Small Images
 - Some / Average Images
 - Many / Massive Images
- Images / Page: 5.266

Content Ratio

Editorial Pages: 254
Advertisement Pages: 82

Cover Design

Logo

- Dominant (Overlaps cover art)
- Submissive (Overlapped by cover art)
- Static (No change from issue to issue)
- Dynamic (Changes with cover story)

Font

- Serif
 - Sans-serif
 - Plain / Simple
 - Stylized / Themed
 - Static (No change from issue to issue)
 - Dynamic (Changes with cover story)
- Rounded
 - Angular

Internal References: 0

Skybar

- Classic
- Variant

Barcode / Mailer Space

- Front Cover
- Back Cover
- Cellophane Wrapper

Back Cover is Advertising?

Rhetorical Ethos

Authorship Attribution

- Bylines
- Writers listed in masthead only

Skepticism in Previews

- Generally skeptical
- Generally optimistic

Average Review Score: 7.045

Bias in News

- Balanced viewpoints presented
- Balanced viewpoints omitted

Letters to the Editor

- Balanced perspectives printed
- Unbalanced / one-sided perspectives printed
- At least 50% response rate from Editors?

Analyzing Games Journalism - Magazine Coding Sheet

Magazine Name: GamePro

Coded By: Dan Tennant

Sample issue Dates: 02 / 01 / 2008 08 / 01 / 2008 09 / 01 / 2008

Coding Date: 01 / 30 / 2009

Content Genres

Previews

- Vital Stats
- Content Description
- Strengths and/or Weaknesses

Software Reviews

- Vital Stats
- Minimum Playable Requirements
- Magazine-Recommended Requirements
- Content Description
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Comparisons
- Rating

Hardware Reviews

- Vital Stats
- Content Description / Intended Usage
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Comparisons
- Rating

Industry News

Feature Articles

- Cover Stories
- Profiles
- Interviews

Columns

Letters

Organization

Table of Contents

- Lists all articles
- Lists genre headers only
- Some headers, some articles

Order of Content

1. News (Spawn Point)
2. Previews
3. Features
4. Reviews
5. Letters (Feedback)
6. _____
7. _____

Style

Genre Names

- All classic ("Previews," "News," etc.)
- All renamed ("Hype," "Eyewitness," etc.)
- Some classic, some renamed

Narrative Perspective

- First-person singular ("I played...")
- First-person plural ("We believe...")
- Second-person ("You'll love...")
- No personal commentary outside columns

Rating System

- Graded (A, B, C, D, F)
- Starred
- Percentage (# / 5)
- Additional qualifiers? ("Good, Bad, & Ugly," etc.)

Internal Design

Non-Feature Fonts

- Body Text: Serif
- Body Text: Sans-serif
- Header Text: Plain / Simple
- Header Text: Stylized / Themed
- Header Text: Static
- Header Text: Dynamic (Changes with article)

Non-Feature Columns

- Width: Thin
 - Width: Average
 - Width: Wide
- Columns / Page: 3

Graphics

- Monochromatic
- Warm Colors
- Cool Colors
- Boxed / Boxy
- Free-form

Navigation

- Page Borders
- Page Headers
- No Navigation Tools

Image Ratio

- Few / Small Images
 - Some / Average Images
 - Many / Massive Images
- Images / Page: 3.975

Content Ratio

- # Editorial Pages: 200
- # Advertisement Pages: 86

Cover Design

Logo

- Dominant (Overlaps cover art)
- Submissive (Overlapped by cover art)
- Static (No change from issue to issue)
- Dynamic (Changes with cover story)

Font

- Serif
 - Sans-serif
 - Plain / Simple
 - Stylized / Themed
 - Static (No change from issue to issue)
 - Dynamic (Changes with cover story)
- Rounded
 - Angular

Internal References: 2

Skybar

- Classic
- Variant

Barcode / Mailer Space

- Front Cover
- Back Cover
- Cellophane Wrapper

Back Cover is Advertising?

Rhetorical Ethos

Authorship Attribution

- Bylines
- Writers listed in masthead only

Skepticism in Previews

- Generally skeptical
- Generally optimistic

Average Review Score: 3.9

Bias in News

- Balanced viewpoints presented
- Balanced viewpoints omitted

Letters to the Editor

- Balanced perspectives printed
- Unbalanced / one-sided perspectives printed
- At least 50% response rate from Editors?

Analyzing Games Journalism - Magazine Coding Sheet

Magazine Name: PC Gamer

Coded By: Dan Tennant

Sample issue Dates: 05 / 01 / 2008 07 / 01 / 2008 08 / 01 / 2008

Coding Date: 01 / 30 / 2009

Content Genres

- Previews
 - Vital Stats
 - Content Description
 - Strengths and/or Weaknesses

- Software Reviews
 - Vital Stats
 - Minimum Playable Requirements
 - Magazine-Recommended Requirements
 - Content Description
 - Strengths and Weaknesses
 - Comparisons
 - Rating

- Hardware Reviews
 - Vital Stats
 - Content Description / Intended Usage
 - Strengths and Weaknesses
 - Comparisons
 - Rating

- Industry News

- Feature Articles
 - Cover Stories
 - Profiles
 - Interviews

- Columns

- Letters

Organization

Table of Contents

- Lists all articles
- Lists genre headers only
- Some headers, some articles

Order of Content

1. Letters
2. News (Eyewitness)
3. Feature
4. Previews
5. Reviews
6. Hardware Reviews (Hard Stuff)
7. Columns

Style

Genre Names

- All classic ("Previews," "News," etc.)
- All renamed ("Hype," "Eyewitness," etc.)
- Some classic, some renamed

Narrative Perspective

- First-person singular ("I played...")
- First-person plural ("We believe...")
- Second-person ("You'll love...")
- No personal commentary outside columns

Rating System

- Graded (A, B, C, D, F)
- Starred
- Percentage (# / 100)
- Additional qualifiers? ("Good, Bad, & Ugly," etc.)

Internal Design

Non-Feature Fonts

- Body Text: Serif
- Body Text: Sans-serif
- Header Text: Plain / Simple
- Header Text: Stylized / Themed
- Header Text: Static
- Header Text: Dynamic (Changes with article)

Non-Feature Columns

- Width: Thin
 - Width: Average
 - Width: Wide
- Columns / Page: 3

Graphics

- Monochromatic
- Warm Colors
- Cool Colors
- Boxed / Boxy
- Free-form

Navigation

- Page Borders
- Page Headers
- No Navigation Tools

Image Ratio

- Width: Thin
 - Width: Average
 - Width: Wide
- Images / Page: 2.70

Content Ratio

- # Editorial Pages: 151
- # Advertisement Pages: 145

Cover Design

Logo

- Dominant (Overlaps cover art)
- Submissive (Overlapped by cover art)
- Static (No change from issue to issue)
- Dynamic (Changes with cover story)

Font

- Serif
 - Sans-serif
 - Plain / Simple
 - Stylized / Themed
 - Static (No change from issue to issue)
 - Dynamic (Changes with cover story)
- Rounded
 - Angular

Internal References: 3.67

Skybar

- Classic
- Variant

Barcode / Mailer Space

- Front Cover
- Back Cover
- Cellophane Wrapper

Back Cover is Advertising?

Rhetorical Ethos

Authorship Attribution

- Bylines
- Writers listed in masthead only

Skepticism in Previews

- Generally skeptical
- Generally optimistic

Average Review Score: 64.36

Bias in News

- Balanced viewpoints presented
- Balanced viewpoints omitted

Letters to the Editor

- Balanced perspectives printed
- Unbalanced / one-sided perspectives printed
- At least 50% response rate from Editors?

B Appendix B: Games Journalism Genre Definitions

Game Previews

The single most common and prominent genre in any game magazine is the game previews section. Games journalism is an inherently forward-looking industry, and though game magazines often cover current events and will almost certainly review games, previewing upcoming games and driving consumer excitement for the industry as a whole is one of games journalism's most critical functions. Almost all cover stories in game magazines are game previews.

Previews can be written a number of ways, with information gathered from a variety of sources. Some serve as information aggregators, with data about a game collected from other publications and condensed for the readers' easy consumption. Showcase previews and cover stories often present information that is exclusive to the magazine, gathered directly from a game's developer or publisher. Other previews might serve as speculative articles, written in response to developer teaser videos or publisher press releases.

In a game magazine, previews typically present one or more of the following pieces of information. I will note which of these pieces are or are not included in each of my chosen magazines on their respective coding sheets in Appendix A.

- **Vital Stats.** Often presented in a stats block—a small sidebar containing the information in bulleted or list format—a game's vital stats include its developer, publisher, system format, and projected release date.
- **Content Description.** Though it varies depending on the amount of information currently known about a game, content description comprises the bulk of a preview article. It

usually includes rundowns of everything that is known about a game's story and anything unique to its gameplay that sets it apart from other, similar titles—in other words, the game's core selling points.

- **Strengths and Weaknesses.** The body text of a preview article will commonly incorporate the perceived strengths and weaknesses of an upcoming game. Since previews are only rarely written by a writer with first-hand knowledge of gameplay, weaknesses are not usually identified, and strengths are pointed out with a measure of hope or expectance. Conversely, first-hand accounts of unreleased games often discuss their strengths and weaknesses at length.

Game Reviews

Though second to previews in terms of their presence and prominence, game reviews can nevertheless form the heart of a game magazine's content. While cover stories will rarely highlight game reviews, a magazine's credibility is intrinsically tied to its review system. It allows the magazine to act as buyers' guides to games, providing readers with informed, critical opinions on the quality of recently-published titles.

The most recognizable element of any game review is its rating: the score or grade a magazine will give a reviewed game. Ironically, games journalists generally revile the practice of rating, since it requires boiling a wide variety of positive and negative factors down to a single score that rarely reflects true quality or entertainment value. The systems remain because of reader demand—gamers expect to be able to compare the overall value of two or more games by comparing their scores.

All reviews in game magazines are based on first-hand gameplay experiences, and are usually only written after a game has been completed in its entirety. They contain one or more of the following pieces of information:

- **Vital Stats.** Like previews, vital stats for reviews are often presented in condensed stats blocks, though their content varies slightly. Stats include a game's developer, publisher, system format, and ESRB* rating. Release date may also be present, though they are just as often omitted, since most magazines only review released games.
- **Minimum Playable Requirements.** The sales box of most games will often state what is required to play the game other than the game itself, including any additional hardware or software necessary to run the game on a given system. Thusly, system requirements blocks are most common in PC game magazines.
- **Magazine-Recommended Requirements.** Almost exclusively found in PC games magazines, recommended requirements are suggested by the magazine as what is needed for the player to enjoy an optimal gaming experience. These requirements are never put forth by a game's developer or publisher, and are only ever presented as recommendations.
- **Content Description.** All game reviews will include some discussion of a game's overall story and gameplay. While plot discussions are usually limited so as to not convey potential spoilers to the readership, gameplay discussions can be quite in-depth, depending on the extent to which a game is innovative and distinct from other, similar titles.

* The ESRB, or Entertainment Software Rating Board, is a self-regulatory subsidiary of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) that rates games according to their content, in much the same manner as the MPAA rates films.

- **Strengths and Weaknesses.** All reviews will touch on a game’s strengths and weaknesses, as those elements will have the most direct influence on overall quality ratings and help readers choose whether or not to invest money in a title.
- **Secondary/Tertiary Opinions.** Since reviews are inherently opinionated, some magazines employ several writers to review the same game in order to provide a more balanced perspective on its strengths and weaknesses.
- **Rating.** Almost all game reviews contain a final game rating that scores the entire experience on some sort of scale. While a select few publications do not rate reviewed games, they are the exception, not the rule.

As with the game previews, I will check off which of the above features are contained within each of my chosen magazines’ reviews on their respective coding sheets in Appendix A.

Hardware Reviews

Rarely found in publications not specifically devoted to them, hardware reviews are still somewhat common in PC game magazines because of the popularity of PC upgrade parts like graphics cards, or peripherals like gaming-grade keyboards and mice. For those magazines that do have hardware reviews, they will often include one or more of the following pieces of information:

- **Vital Stats.** A hardware review’s stats block has only two core pieces of information: manufacturer and retail price. Because of the variety of hardware types that could potentially be reviewed, any additional information is relegated to the article’s body text.
- **Content Description / Intended Usage.** In addition to describing what the hardware upgrade or peripheral is, a review will often also describe the part’s intended use.

- **Strengths and Weaknesses.** Like software reviews, hardware reviews will always cover the strengths and weaknesses of a given product, as those elements are intrinsic to any buyers' guide and have the most impact on the hardware's final rating or score.
- **Comparisons.** It is common in hardware reviews to run comparative benchmark tests between the product being reviewed and similar products already on the market. This is especially important for PC gamers, who often pride themselves on having the fastest computers they can afford and who will upgrade their systems many times over its lifetime.
- **Rating.** As with most reviews, hardware reviews usually close with a ratings block scoring the product. This score is less subjective than those in software reviews, however, as it is often based on a comparison of the product's price, benchmark speeds, and ruggedness and usability tests.

On the coding sheets in Appendix A, for those magazines in my sample group that contain hardware reviews, I will check off which of the above components are included in each review.

Industry News

It could be argued that the quintessential component of any journalistic publication is its news section, but this does not hold true in gaming journalism. Only a small subset of gamers are deeply interested in the goings-on of the industry, and most readers get all the information they need from online news sources such as Kotaku.com and Joystiq.com. Most game magazines do have a news section of some sort, but it is often small and specialized, used to discuss industry trends and to reflect on semi-recent, groundbreaking events in the gaming community.

While I will note which of my chosen magazines contain news sections by marking their coding sheets in Appendix A, I will not further define on those sheets the types of news stories being covered. The subject matter of news stories can vary widely from issue to issue, making concrete codification difficult. However, I will do my best to describe the delivery of news articles in my analyses in Chapter 3.

Feature Articles

Every gaming publication has feature articles; they are intrinsic to the medium, responsible for grabbing the attention of newsstand buyers and being compelling enough to warrant a magazine's purchase. Despite often consisting of extended previews or reviews, cover stories are nevertheless classified as features because of their import. Of course, true features, like profiles of game developers or interviews with prominent figureheads, also exist.

Most game magazines tend to have recurring features that can be broadly categorized. I will mark which of the following categories appear as features in each of my chosen magazines on their respective coding sheets in Appendix A.

- **Cover Stories.** Be they previews or reviews, cover stories sell copies and make money. The popularity and notoriety of a magazine usually hinges on the regularity with which it gets exclusives on games. As a rule, cover stories are generally previews, but common and notable exceptions include annual "Top #" lists and awards issues.
- **Profiles.** As either stand-alone features or components of larger cover stories, profiles are common ways to provide readers with insight into the gaming industry. Ten years ago they were very popular, since many games were made in small teams and the heads of

those teams took on figurehead status. Today, most blockbuster titles are made in teams of dozens, and a lack of figureheads make profiles a comparative rarity.

- **Interviews.** In lieu of industry profiles, interviews with developers of upcoming or recently-released games are common. These interviews do not have to be with well-known developers to be interesting, but it is not unheard of for magazines to contact the gaming luminaries of the past in recurring monthly features.

Columns

A common component of all newspapers and magazines, columns allow writers to converse with readers in a “face-to-face” manner, providing forums for the discussion of any number of topics and ongoing issues. They can thusly serve a number of purposes for a variety of readers: columns can be humorous, serious, insightful, reflective, judgmental, opinionated, provocative, or any combination thereof. The only rule to them is that they be themed, either with the personality of their writers or with a general focus, such as a specific game type or component of the industry.

Column writers may or may not contribute other material to a magazine every month. Some columns are written by a magazine’s editorial staff, while others are contributed by writers who have no other voice in the publication—as is often the case when gaming luminaries are tapped to contribute their thoughts on a given topic. It is of note that game magazines never syndicate; if they print columns, those columns are always exclusive.

For the purposes of this report, I will mark on each magazine’s coding sheet whether or not they include regular columns in their pages. However, because the content of these columns can vary so widely, I will save relevant discussions for the analyses in Chapter 3.

Letters

Always a favorite element of any magazine's readership, letters to and from the Editor allow fans to talk back to the staff on any number of issues. Thusly, a magazine's Letters section will often reflect its target demographic. Those that are geared for adult audiences may print letters with stimulating or insightful commentary on the validity of past articles, while those with more juvenile audiences might hold monthly hand-drawn fan art competitions, or use the Letters section to answer simple, straightforward questions about core gaming concepts.

Regardless of a magazine's target demographic, every Letters section is unique in some way. One might have a highlighted Letter of the Month that the editors find particularly astute or otherwise noteworthy; another might call for letters on a monthly topic in order to create a sort of forum discussion in its pages. Whatever the case, the section is inherently reflective of the style of an entire magazine.

C Appendix C: Quantifiable Components of a Magazine's Style

Genre Names

It is common in game magazines to rename genre sections to fit with that magazine's style. *PC Gamer*, for instance, calls its news section "Eyewitness," while *Edge* calls its previews section "Hype." Many magazines will mix-and-match creative titles with contemporary ones.

Narrative Perspective

While a magazine's voice can be difficult to code, identifying whether or not it uses a first-person perspective in its writing is straight-forward. Some magazines might give each writer the freedom to refer to themselves in their articles, while others might speak of their experiences in games as a collective whole, with opinions on games worded as though they come from the entire editorial staff.

Rating System

In some cases, a gaming publication will choose not to rate its reviews, but this is common only in online blogs and similar websites. Those magazines that do rate their games follow one of three systems: a grading scale from A to F, such as those found in schools; a star system, common online but less so in print; and a more conventional percentage/score system, where a game is given a score out of some maximum value.

D Appendix D: Quantifiable Components of Rhetorical Ethos

Authorship Attribution

It is common in magazines to attribute individual articles to their respective writers with bylines, allowing writers can be held accountable for their work. Some magazines, however, choose to forgo this practice, “anonymizing” articles and presenting all content as having come from a collective source. In such cases, the magazine as a whole is held accountable for what it prints, and contributors are simply listed in the masthead. With bylines, credibility is tied more to the writers and less to the magazine, but with anonymization, the opposite is true.

Skepticism in Previews

As in *GamePro*'s case, many game magazines present previews with a heavily positive slant, a practice that helps spur enthusiasm for the entire industry but runs the risk of promoting substandard games. While a certain amount of optimism in previews is expected, more objective previews may balance the discussion by bringing up worrisome issues in a game's design.

Average Review Score

It is critical to a magazine's credibility that its game reviews are not predominantly ruthless or forgiving. Average review scores are often indicative of a propensity to unfairly rate games one way or another. However, given that most magazines will only review finished products and such products often demand a great deal of funding to see completion, reviews do tend to average higher than 50% in most publications. Most games that see release are at least fairly decent.

Bias in News

As many game magazines have a voice that is much friendlier than their mainstream media equivalents, their news articles tend to show some level of opinionated content. This is especially true in magazines that trumpet their editorial staff, since that staff's opinion may carry great weight with the readership. The mark of a good news article, however, is to remain as balanced as possible in presenting all sides of controversial issues, regardless of opinion.

Letters to the Editor

It's a fair bet that, given almost any issue that arouses a readership's interest, disagreement will rear its head. A balanced Letters to the Editor section in a magazine will publish both sides of such issues, and respond to letters in a professional manner, especially in cases where the magazine's credibility is on the line.

E Appendix E: The Elements of Design

Cover Design

Vital when trying to attract new readers at newsstands, a magazine's cover design must reflect its style and personality. It does this via such factors as its choice of font and the design of its logo. While certain elements of a magazine's cover design are subjective in nature, many can be quantified. Those that can are detailed below, and appear on the coding sheets in Appendix A, where I will check them against each magazine cover and create an outline of each cover's design.

- **Logo.** Central to a cover design is the magazine title and logo. Since logos are meant to be iconic and make the magazine instantly recognizable in a sea of other publications, their design is of special significance. Many magazines elect to keep the logo dominant and consistent on the cover, but others change things up. Some allow parts of the cover art to “bleed” over the logo, partially obscuring it from view, while others vary the logo slightly from issue to issue, changing color palettes or text stylization to coincide with cover stories.
- **Font.** Because cover art takes up so much real estate, font is the only way to communicate a magazine's style to the reader, other than the logo itself. The font for the text on the cover can be serif or sans-serif, rounded or angular, plain or stylized, and can even change with the cover story to better match the cover art.
- **Internal References.** A common element of any magazine cover is the internal reference: short textual previews of content in an issue other than the cover story. Some magazines have numerous references to their various features and selling points; others

only point out the cover story, leaving it to the reader to discover what else is waiting inside.

- **Skybar.** A variant of the textual references common on many magazine covers, skybars are strips or blocks that appear either next to or above the logo. If they exist, they are always reserved for previews of feature articles with almost as much weight and notoriety as the cover article.
- **Barcode / Mailer Space.** A necessary evil for many magazines, the barcode space is a white block reserved for either a retail barcode or a subscriber's mailing address. Since they tend to take up valuable cover real estate, barcode spaces can be eyesores, and many magazines attempt to move them off the cover by either printing them on the back cover (if the back cover is not an advertisement) or printing them on the cellophane wrappers some are packaged in.
- **Back Cover.** In almost all cases, a magazine's back cover is sold as premium advertising space. Some magazines, however, elect to save the back cover for the barcode space and an extension of the cover art that appears on the front.

Internal Design

Good internal design is critical to a magazine's attractiveness and readability, and all magazine staffs have dedicated designers and layout editors responsible for placing editorial content on the page. While the editorial department might decide what gets printed, layout designers choose how.

Every magazine has a unique internal design. Font choice, color choice, graphics shape and style, and much more; all combine to impart a visual impact on the reader and make reading

the issue both easy and fun. Some internal design choices are made by a magazine's sales department (i.e. the ratio of editorial content to advertisements), while others are the exclusive prerogative of the design team. Many of the design elements are not easily quantifiable, but those that are are detailed below and may be found on the coding sheets in Appendix A.

- **Font.** Body text and header text in most magazines is almost universally sans-serif, but there are exceptions, such as *PC Gamer*, whose body text is made up of a serif font, lending articles a remarkably different character. Body text fonts are almost always chosen based on readability, and are often the result of a great deal of focus testing.
- **Columns.** Long a staple of newspapers and magazines, text columns help readability when font sizes are small, preventing long entries of text from blurring together and becoming virtually unreadable. Column width and the number of them per page can vary from magazine to magazine, ranging from two or three thick columns to four or five thinner ones.
- **Graphics Shape.** While the aesthetic qualities of graphics are largely subjective, many magazines prefer using rounded corners over angled corners in their graphics, or vice-versa. This choice is very much a stylistic one, and must fit with the overall graphical theme, but it can be easily coded.
- **Graphics Color.** Since different colors can affect different moods, a magazine's choice of color in its graphics can reflect its character and is intrinsic to its visual design. Colors can be numerous and varied or generally monochromatic with only slight shifts in temperature and hue. They can also tend towards warm or cool, depending on the feel the magazine is trying to achieve.

- **Navigation.** Visual design is as much about making things easy to find as it is about making things easy to read, and in the multi-genre world of game magazines, variations in visual design can help cue shifts from one genre to the next. Navigation tools are often found in the upper-outside corners of each page, and can help the reader when he or she is flipping through an issue, attempting to find a specific article or section.
- **Image Ratio.** Since gaming is a very visual entertainment medium, screenshots of games are key elements of articles. The ratio of imagery to text in a magazine is important, both in terms of the number of images per page and the percentage of the page covered in pictures.
- **Advertisements.** The only element of visual design that is under the complete control of the sales department, the ratio of editorial content to advertisements can nevertheless have a profound visual impact on a magazine. Multi-page articles that are broken up by ads may cause the reader some distress. Nevertheless, the decision is, first and foremost, a financial one, and placement decisions are almost always made out of necessity.