

## THE LIFE, DEATH, AND AFTERLIFE OF GAMESPY: AN AUTOPSY OF A DEAD PLATFORM

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### Research Question

In 2014, Glu Mobile announced that GameSpy, a platform that provided online connectivity and social features for hundreds of games would be fully shut down. The closure of GameSpy’s online services by its current owner Glu followed the closure of GameSpy.com—GameSpy’s news division—in 2013. GameSpy.com’s owner Ziff Davis’ cited his desire to “run a focused, efficient company” (Stapleton, 2013) as the reason. With its technology and editorial sides fully shut down, GameSpy was truly dead.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, GameSpy was an inescapable presence of the early interactive web, either in the form of the GameSpy Network— a collection of news websites dedicated to covering popular game franchises (e.g. Planet Quake, Planet Half-Life)—or by working with game developers and publishers to provide multiplayer capabilities for hundreds of PC and console games. Even in instances when GameSpy did not provide the online infrastructure for a game, services like GameSpy Arcade gave users easy access— through monthly subscription fees or watching ads—to multiplayer matchmaking, voice chat, and social features.

In its deliberate convergence of users, advertisers, publishers, and developers as multiple sides of a lucrative technology and content business, we see an early instance of a “multisided market” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) that is a distinguishing feature of today’s digital platform ecosystems. GameSpy’s extensive network of news, reviews and editorials were not an afterthought but a necessary part of promoting its technologies. This often underpaid and exploited journalistic labour supported GameSpy’s “financial value proposition” (Elmer, 2017) to investors, advertisers, and publishers looking to take advantage of the rapidly expanding internet. GameSpy might now be a “dead platform” (McCammon & Lingel, 2022) but in its death we find crucial insights about the past and future of digital platforms, and the labour necessary to support them.

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## Critical Frameworks

We situate our study at the intersections of journalism studies, platform studies and game studies to examine GameSpy as an early instance of platformization, digital journalistic labour (Cohen, 2015), and what Nieborg and Foxman (2023) call the “mainstreaming of games.” Platformization, or the “penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276), is now a defining feature of digital journalism: journalism is a “contingent cultural commodity” (ibid., p. 4287) highly dependent on digital platforms for circulation, views, and ultimately financial viability. Though GameSpy predates the intense platformization that characterizes contemporary digital journalism, the enmeshment of journalistic editorial work with commercial advertising and player connectivity function as early clues for how it would develop.

GameSpy built its reach by leveraging its technology in combination with personality driven labour. This potent combination of technology and enthusiast labour helped make its platform—and the games it supported—“normal” (Kirkpatrick, 2016). We ask how GameSpy represents a shift not just in the blurring of lines between enthusiasts, creators, and journalists, but also how this same blurring helped make content, audiences, and technology increasingly “platform ready” (Helmond, 2015). Unfortunately, such processes can become obscured in the course of regular operation. Following Kneese’s (2022) call to think of breakdown as a method, we consider what infrastructures—of platform and labour—become visible when we analyze GameSpy’s remaining traces: the news, reviews, and editorials of those contributors who helped GameSpy build its platform.

Our analysis of GameSpy is built on the following methods: first, archival research of GameSpy.com—specifically its editorials and personality-driven content—accessible through screen captures on the Wayback Machine. We focus on works by GameSpy’s network of employees and contributors. These contributors, such as Hellchick, PappyR, and CitizenC, used their gaming personas to delineate the appropriate boundaries for users of the GameSpy Network. Second, we combine this archival research with labour standpoint analysis (Mosco, 2009; Salamon, 2020) to learn what archived reviews, editorials, and posts on GameSpy.com, some of which discuss the website’s financial viability and tensions between the website and game publishers, reveal about the working conditions of gaming journalists, labour relations between contributors and the platform, and worker resistance in the study of platform economies. We focus on the agency of GameSpy journalists as (underpaid/unpaid) workers as the site underwent significant economic and platform upheaval, and eventual death. Further, we aim to focus on *how* the editorial side of GameSpy functioned within its ecosystem, with a particular focus on web hosting, linked or “related” posts, and other affordances that indicate how gaming journalism was used to drive users towards GameSpy’s technology.

## Conclusions

If, as McCammon and Lingel (2022) write, “problems within old platforms risk re emerging in old ones” (p. 5) as knowledge of dead platforms dies too, then GameSpy’s archives are a trove of new-old problems. As Nieborg & Foxman (2023) note, building on the work of journalism scholar Folker Hanusch (2012), these kinds of games journalists can be characterized as lifestyle journalists because they have a “strong market orientation” (Hanusch, 2012, p. 4) due to the ways that they “explicitly consider their audience as consumers” (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023, p.16). Our early findings demonstrate that contributors used their enthusiasm to codify specific values for the rapidly growing games industry and the GameSpy platform, even as conflicts grew between contributors torn between remaining “loyal” to the gaming companies that drew them in and attempts to conduct sincere, more objective journalism developed. What these often conservative/regressive values are, and how they contributed to the “mainstreaming” of games and their platforms, reveal that GameSpy’s editorial side was not only designed to generate ad revenue but was also intended to drive users to the platform’s gaming products, such as multiplayer servers, its game file download service Fileplanet, or the GameSpy Arcade. GameSpy would be “the closest thing to a control centre for 3-D action gaming on the Internet” (Lenk, 1998) and was driven by the dream of being “the ESPN or TV Guide of the gaming industry” (Musgrave, 2004). Yet the site’s ultimate goal of funneling its audience into its software meant that once the technology side was no longer useful, the journalism that GameSpy was built on became redundant.

The GameSpy Network was sustained by underpaid and free labour, with GameSpy functioning as a multisided market because they brought together users (of the site and GameSpy), advertisers on the service/their sites, and developers (who licensed GameSpy’s technology). Studying GameSpy reveals that platformization predates the rise of web 2.0 platforms and was sustained by precarious editorial labour that was designed to create a recursive cycle of revenue from advertising and platform subscription fees. This precarious position as a contingent commodity is, of course, the same position that journalists in other industries would increasingly find themselves in as news’ dependence on platforms such as Facebook and Google for visibility grew (Bucher, 2018; Poell et al., 2022). A study of GameSpy, we argue, unearths an early instance of platformization, consolidation, and fraught digital journalism that remains under-studied despite its significance in the formation of online gaming culture and early Internet history. As the lines between enthusiasts and employees continues to blur, GameSpy remains an early instance of when the stage was set for gaming sites, games, and the workers that sustained them to become increasingly ephemeral and vulnerable.

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