THE VIDEO GAME CRITIC: PROFILE, PROFESSIONAL ROUTINES AND ROLES

Ángel Gallardo-Agudo: University of Málaga. Spain.
angelgallardo@uma.es

How to cite the article:

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The growing development of video games as an industry and form of cultural expression has generated increasing interest from mainstream media, which now joins specialized outlets in covering the sector through news, reports, and reviews. Video game journalism has become a subfield of cultural journalism, similar to film or literary criticism. This study aims to provide a preliminary approach to the role of the video game critic in Spain, with the goal of understanding their profile, functions, and routines. **Methodology:** To achieve this, the study employs semi-structured interviews as research method. The sample consists of nine critics from both mainstream and specialized media, all with extensive experience in video game criticism. **Results:** There is a disparity of opinions among critics regarding their role, though most agree on the importance of evaluative function. There is also no consensus on the use of ratings in reviews. However, most critics agree that their role influences both the industry and its users. **Discussion and Conclusions:** The video game critic is perceived as a professional with extensive knowledge beyond their field, following specific routines for crafting a review, from the gameplay phase to the writing process. Furthermore, video game criticism is evolving into a more rigorous and well-argued form of writing.

Keywords: Cultural criticism; journalistic criticism; new professional profiles; video game journalism; specialized journalism; journalistic profession; professional routines; video games.

1. INTRODUCTION

The video game industry is the most important audiovisual entertainment industry, with an annual turnover greater than the revenues of cinema and music put together. It is estimated that, in 2023, this market invoiced around 180 billion dollars worldwide (Newzoo, 2024) and 2.339 million euros in Spain, an increase of 16% over the previous year (*Asociación Española de Videojuegos* [AEVI], 2024). The latter figure is expected to rise to 5.5 billion in 2028 (*Asociación Española de Empresas Productoras y Desarrolladoras de Videojuegos y Software de Entretenimiento* [DEV], 2024). Meanwhile, the consulting firm PwC (2022) points out in a report on the evolution of the entertainment and media industries that video games is one of the sectors that will gain most relevance by 2026.

In Spain, the video game is one of the favorite options of citizens within the context of cultural consumption. The number of Spanish gamers exceeded 20 million in 2023 (AEVI, 2024). However, despite its social penetration, video gaming has historically been subject to a widespread negative perception. Juul calls it the "exceptionalism of the video game" (2010, p. 151), as it is a prejudice that affects only this medium and leads it to be considered a superficial entertainment without further transcendence. Morales-Corral (2014) associates the phenomenon to the lack of knowledge that still exists about it.

Video games have achieved a higher status within the academy thanks to certain approaches from different disciplines. For example, serious games which are games designed with a purpose beyond entertainment (Abt, 1970, as cited in Calvo-Ferrer, 2018) and with various applications in areas such as healthcare, training or even the military (Susi et al., 2007).

Despite this stigmatization, the growth of the industry has fostered the emergence and development of a whole media layer around the video game. Although it took some time to penetrate the agenda of the general media, during the early days of video games, specialized magazines were the channels responsible for meeting the needs of users in terms of information and prescription (López-Redondo, 2012). These specialized media have evolved to our times and still have a presence in the industry.

Video game journalism is a sub-area of cultural journalism, so it is a journalistic specialization, a content area that covers a specific area of information in a specific and coherent way with the public (Fontcuberta, 1997). A specialized journalist, in this sense, has extensive knowledge of his or her area of specialization and his or her specific sources, thus guaranteeing an adequate treatment of the message (Esteve, 1997).

Although scientific research on video game journalism or the video game as an area of journalistic specialization is beginning to appear (López-Redondo, 2021), there are still very few in relation to the importance of this entertainment industry. On the other hand, there are endless studies on film criticism or literary criticism, but hardly any research has been done on video game criticism or the professional individual who practices it, despite the global turnover of the video game, its penetration in society and its growing presence in the media.

This paper aims to be a first approach from the academic research to the video game critic in Spain, and its purpose is to understand the profile, functions and routines, i.e.: who is the video game critic, what does the critic do and how does the critic do it.

1.1. Video games as an area of journalistic specialization

Over the last 40 years, the video game has undergone a constant evolution closely linked to technological development (García-Sedano, 2017). This progress has been accompanied by a great economic expansion of its industry, despite the crisis it experienced in the 1980s (Codón, 2016).

The video game press appeared in the United States in 1974, with the launch of *Play Meter Magazine*, a publication strictly oriented to the technical aspect of arcade machines that barely dealt with home consoles. Later, in the eighties, the first user-focused magazines began to appear.

In the context of video game popularization and market saturation, one of the functions of this type of press was to guide gamers about the most outstanding products to pay attention to. This role was enhanced during the crisis that the industry suffered in 1983 because of a slow technological evolution. The quality of many of the games that were published was questionable, and there was a certain lack of creative innovation (López-Redondo, 2021).

In Spain, the first magazine about videogames was *ZX*, published in October 1983 and named after Sinclair's 8-bit computer, ZX Spectrum. The publication was aimed at users of this support and its content was mainly technical, very computer-oriented. *ZX* shared with its readers lines of code and commands that they could use on their computers to take advantage of all the possibilities of different programs, including video games. In fact, it was not a magazine specialized in video games, although it gave much of its space to these products (López-Redondo et al., 2021).

From its beginnings, the video game press has been contaminated by a high amateur component, since many of the editors of the first specialized media were first and foremost amateurs (López-Redondo, 2021). This has generated a distance between video game journalism and the rest of the areas of journalistic specialization, since, for much of its development, the video game press has ignored the practices and principles of journalism. Both readers and journalists have harshly criticized this reality, demanding greater professionalism in the sector (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009).

Another problem that is often blamed on video game journalism is its commercial relationship with the major distributors, which compromises its independence from the industry to make an honest criticism of the works it covers (López-Redondo, 2012). According to López-Redondo (2012), this phenomenon tends to be reproduced in specialized media, but not in the general press, which has a greater diversity of advertisers.

Following this line, Morales-Corral and Gayo-Santacecilia (2021), note that "the twenty most successful video games in Spain during 2016 show a higher average critical score than the average critical score of the twenty most successful movies during the same year" (p. 178). Apparently video game critics tend to rate the products they analyze more positively than film critics.

From a critical approach, García-Borrego et al. (2022) also denounce the huge gender gap that exists in specialized newsrooms. The authors point out that the role of women in these spaces is highly conditioned by gender stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated.

The journalistic genres in which video game journalism manifests itself can be textual, in the case of written media, or audiovisual, in the case of channels on video platforms (Paredes-Otero, 2022a). Among the latter, according to Paredes-Otero (2022b), colloquialism is predominant. Criticism, commonly called analysis, is one of the most prominent genres within the video game press and finds space among media such as Twitch or YouTube (Gallardo-Agudo, 2024). In its textual form, the review is usually accompanied by a rating that numerically values the video game being analyzed. In Spain, this trend was established by the aforementioned *ZX* magazine, which also established the main technical elements to which the author should pay attention to in a review (López-Redondo et al., 2021).

Globally, video game reviews have fulfilled a prescriptive function, recommending certain titles to users, but also leading the public debate around the video game. It is a more complex and extensive text than a review. Zagal et al. (2009) identify nine predominant elements in video game reviews: game description, personal experience, user advice, design suggestions, media context, video game context, technology, game hypothesis and industry.

However, within the video game specialization, this genre has been the object of numerous criticisms by different authors. Some of the most frequent have to do with the poor quality of its writing, the lack of analytical perspective and context or the absence of explanations about how the game experience feels (Zagal et al., 2009).

On the other hand, with regard to its treatment by the general press, López-Redondo (2012) determines that video games do not have their own section in the main newspapers, so that content related to the medium is published either in the Technology section or in the Culture section. However, in the last decade there has been a growth in the presence of video games in the generalist media, which has also contributed to a greater penetration of the medium in society (López-Redondo, 2021).

4

In addition, in order to cover this area of news and include video games in their agenda, some of the major media are forming alliances with certain specialized portals, which also benefits the specialized press in a context of precariousness of their business structures. A paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is the partnership between *El Español* and *Vandal* (Canovaca & Navarro-Remesal, 2023).

1.2. Criticism in cultural journalism

Criticism is the genre par excellence of cultural journalism, as well as of most of its sub-areas of specialization, including video game journalism. It is a text of opinion that analyzes, explains and judges a certain cultural artifact in order to guide users in areas such as music, film, television, theater or literature. This genre is also used to analyze other products or activities related to the world of leisure (Cantavella, 2007). For Vallejo-Mejía (1993), criticism should be a deep, rigorous, creative and intelligent text, but also entertaining, in order to build a bridge with the user and, in the best of cases, help him/her to raise his/her cultural level.

According to Gutiérrez-Palacio (1984), this genre differs from the chronicle in that, in general, it does not cover a field in time but a work of artistic creation. For this reason, the author argues that one can speak of bullfighting chronicles and not of bullfighting criticism. Nor should it be confused with a review. The main distinction lies in the fact that criticism contains a high subjective component, while the review is mostly informative, although it may contain a slight dose of subjectivity.

The functions of this genre are multiple and extensive. According to Armazañas and Díaz-Noci (1997), its role depends in part on the public that consumes it. Although criticism has its own specific values, it is the reader who, depending on his or her interest, expectations and cultural background, enhances or diminishes them.

Among the main functions of criticism are to orient the user by highlighting the works or products that deserve his/her attention, to facilitate an approach to a certain means of expression and to provide a well-founded evaluation of a specific cultural artifact (Esteve & Fernández-del-Moral, 1999; Vallejo-Mejía 1993). Therefore, the role of criticism can be summarized in a triple function: orientative or prescriptive, mediating or educational, and evaluative.

Regarding the profile of the author of the criticism, at least in the case of film specialization, Fernández-Heredero (2019) stresses that a critic is not necessarily a journalist, nor the other way around. Although sometimes both occupations may occur alternatively or successively.

According to Cantavella (2007), although in its beginnings and during a good part of its development, criticism was not exercised by journalists, to the point of considering it unnecessary to train journalism professionals for the production of this genre, this situation has changed significantly in recent years.

In any case, the author of the criticism must have a clear liking for the chosen form of artistic expression, be it cinema, music or literature, as well as a deep knowledge of that same field (Gutiérrez-Palacio, 1984). This knowledge must be updated from

5

time to time to keep abreast of the latest aesthetic and critical currents. In this sense, it is also essential to have a certain perspective and a solid and well-defined point of view, since criticism is essentially an informed opinion.

Finally, the critic is required to be incorruptible, since his or her work has a potential influence on the success or profitability of a given cultural product. Behind the field of criticism there are commercial interests that are sometimes expressed through pressures against its professionals. It is common for a company to withdraw advertising from a media outlet following the publication of a negative opinion about one of the products it develops or distributes. When the media does not have sufficient economic backing to deal with these movements, they tend to publish more lukewarm, ambiguous or less forceful criticisms (Armazañas & Díaz-Noci, 1997).

2. OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this exploratory study is to know in depth about video game critics, as well as their work both in general media and in specialized video game media. From this general objective, three specific objectives are proposed for the research:

O1: To define the profile of the video game critic, identify his or her training and skills.

O2: To describe the professional routines of the videogame critic.

O3: To describe the video game critic's perception of his/her activity and their role in the medium.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to meet these objectives, the semi-structured interview was selected as the research technique, so the methodological instrument of this work is the questionnaire. According to Igartua (2006), the questionnaire is a basic instrument for obtaining information that allows conclusions to be drawn about perceptions, behaviors, intentions or knowledge, among other aspects.

In the case of the structured interview, the questionnaire is composed of a series of preset questions and the interviewer is hardly free to change their order or improvise additional questions. It is one of the most flexible methods, which also allows for greater depth in the subject matter (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996).

Once the method had been selected, a questionnaire was designed and organized into three blocks: profile, routines and functions, and evolution (see Annex). The first includes questions related to the videogame critic's skills and preparation. The second covers the entire process of producing the review, from obtaining the copy of the game to writing the text, including the routines for recycling knowledge. The last block focuses on how critics perceive their role and influence in the industry.

6

Almost all the questions in the questionnaire are open-ended, so that respondents could answer in their own words. According to Vinuesa, the main advantage of this type of question is that it "provides broader and more accurate information expressed in the respondent's own terms" (Vinuesa, 2005, p. 191). As for the nature of the questions, according to Igartua's (2006) classification, blocks 1 and 3 were mainly composed of opinion questions, since they sought to extract the respondent's perception of a specific topic. Block 2, on the other hand, consisted mainly of action and motive questions, i.e., it sought to collect the interviewees' behaviors or actions in specific circumstances and, in turn, to understand their motives or reasons.

To determine the sample, the following criteria were used to select 13 individuals: they had been working as video game critics for at least five years and had published reviews relatively frequently in specialized or general Spanish media, regardless of their genre or age. Of this sample, nine critics agreed to answer the questionnaire, that is, 69%. These are the critics who responded: Enrique Alonso (*Eurogamer* España), Alejandro Castillo (*MeriStation*), Manuel Delgado (*Vandal*), Albert García (*La Vanguardia*), Rubén Márquez (*Vida Extra* and *Xataka*), Juan Manuel Moreno (*Nivel Oculto*), Daniel Quesada (*HobbyConsolas*), Marta Trivi (*Anait*) and Borja Vaz (*El Cultural*).

This selection was carried out according to the information power criterion (Malterud et al., 2016), used in other communication studies of the same nature (García-Jiménez & Herrero, 2022). According to this criterion, the more valuable the information provided by the participants for the research field, the smaller the minimum sample size needed for the results to be relevant. In this case, the population of video game critics in Spain is very small, so the specificity of the sample is a relevant factor to justify its size. In addition, this is an area that has hardly been addressed by research, so that the sample selection was considered appropriate and representative (given the variety of specialized media it covers) for an exploratory approach to the profile of the video game critic.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Characteristics of the video game critic

Most of the interviewees agree that a video game critic, in order to perform his or her job properly, must have both communication skills and experience with video games. Daniel Quesada believes that "one must be a gamer before being a videogame critic" (personal statement, March 1, 2023). In this sense, Marta Trivi specifies that "you cannot only play commercial things or only independent things, you must have experience in a broad spectrum within video games" (personal statement, February 17, 2023).

The most recurrent opinion is that the video game critic must have experienced video games across as many genres, styles or mediums as possible, in order to have a thorough understanding of all the aesthetic possibilities that comprise this artistic medium. However, other critics differ from this opinion; this is the case of Borja Vaz:

> I don't think it is fundamental to have a total and absolute experience with the history of videogames to be able to analyze a modern videogame from a cultural point of view. I don't think it is a prerequisite to have played all the games in the world. (B. Vaz, personal statement, March 8, 2023)

The other essential quality most highlighted by critics is communicative skill. According to Marta Trivi, "part of the function of criticism is to socially conceptualize what you think about video games and for that you have to communicate with a series of readers or viewers" (personal statement, February 17, 2023). Like her, most interviewees point to the skill of conveying the feelings of gameplay to users. As Enrique Alonso summarizes,

> being a competent writer is a core skill. If one understands that the work will be developed mainly on a written medium, although this is changing, I believe that the most evident quality is a certain skill when it comes to writing and a certain feeling when it comes to writing. (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023)

4.2. Relationship with other critics

Almost all the interviewees consider that, essentially, the profile of the video game critic is very similar to that of other cultural critics. However, there are some differences on which there is a certain consensus among the opinions gathered. One of the most frequently mentioned is related to the timing of the work. Given that the duration of video games can be much more variable and extensive than that of other types of works, the critic must dedicate in most cases much more time to the game phase, as Rubén Márquez states:

> Our job is usually quite a bit more complicated because of the hours involved in it. The television critic, at the most, what can take to consume the play is the 10 hours that the season of a series can last. (R. Márquez, personal statement, March 26, 2023)

Other differential features that are repeated in the sample is the absence of a long tradition of specialized criticism in the video game environment due to the early age of the videogame as a medium compared to others such as cinema or music. As Enrique Alonso explains:

> criticism in other media has a much longer history. In videogame criticism there is a much more important base of amateurism that I think has an impact on the role of the critic him/herself. That is why the profile of the pure critic hardly exists. (E. Alonso, February 20, 2023)

4.3. Training

Most critics are of the opinion that there should be no formal training strictly oriented to videogame criticism. Marta Trivi argues that formal training would not be necessary because, for her, "everything is developed in practice, writing, playing and reading videogame criticism" (personal statement, February 17, 2023).

In addition to these arguments against it, some of the interviewees would consider it beneficial to have a greater presence of this discipline in university degrees such as Journalism and others related to communication. According to Enrique Alonso, "within specialized journalism, perhaps video gaming is not taken into account as a possible approach" (personal statement, February 20, 2023). The Eurogamer critic believes that, given the growth of the medium itself, "this job opportunity should be more prevalent" (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023).

This lack of training, added to other factors, has an impact on professional intrusion. Borja Vaz points out that this phenomenon "has done a lot of damage to the establishment of videogame criticism as an important and respectable current" (personal statement, March 8, 2023). Although he considers that "the market is still very small and it is not professionalized," he points out the difficulties of facing certain challenges of video game criticism without a background such as journalism:

> There is a constant relationship between us and the video game companies, and they have their interests, which do not necessarily have to be ours. There are people in this world who do things well and there are other people who do things terribly. I find it very difficult to deal with that without having certain concepts very well learned. (B. Vaz, personal statement, March 8, 2023)

Both specialized and general media interact constantly with video game development and distribution companies. The latter are responsible for providing information to journalists and, on numerous occasions, copies of the works that critics analyze. This relationship can be problematic when, in addition, there are commercial agreements or affiliations with these companies: "There are distributors that only give you a code when you have an advertising agreement and, as we don't have advertising, we don't receive a code" (M. Trivi, personal statement, February 17, 2023).

4.4. Knowledge of the video game critic

The opinions gathered are in agreement that the intellectual background of the video game critic should be broad and diverse, mainly focused on the different cultural disciplines and forms of communication. In the words of Juan Manuel Moreno, "it is very difficult to make someone understand why something seems interesting to you, if you lack references beyond the discipline itself" (personal statement, February 17, 2023). For this reason, the good professional must "be able to elaborate a discourse with literary, cinematographic and as far as possible, also musical references and references to the history of aesthetics and the arts" (B. Vaz, personal statement, March 8, 2023).

All interviewees agree that the critic cannot restrict his or her knowledge to the video game medium. Marta Trivi, for example, assumes this multidisciplinary knowledge consubstantial to criticism: "Knowing about a specific thing does not seem to me to be cultural criticism. Criticism is transversal" (M. Trivi, personal statement, February 17, 2023).

Another branch of knowledge highlighted by more than one interviewee is technology and the digital environment. This is the case of Enrique Alonso, who

9

states: "Video games are generally linked to platforms that are technological. You must have knowledge about resolutions, video formats, 3D graphics" (personal statement, February 20, 2023).

Finally, critics focus on the importance of being informed in detail about current events in the video game industry. This knowledge, according to Albert García (personal statement, April 9, 2023) can condition the coverage of a work. In addition to this, the most frequent reason related to the need to keep up to date with the latest developments in the sector is the absence of a professional dedicated exclusively to video game criticism. In Spain, the video game critic is usually also a specialized journalist.

4.5.   How critics play

According to the responses of the interviewees, most of the critics approach the work from approaches representative of the experience of an average user. This is the case of Enrique Alonso: "If the game has a story, I have to finish the story. If the game is multiplayer, I have to have played enough to have understood the game, its mechanics and have seen all its content" (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023). For this reason, the difficulty option most chosen by reviewers is standard or normal. "I always play on normal difficulty because I think it is the most balanced experience," explains Borja Vaz (personal statement, March 8, 2023).

However, Rubén Márquez acknowledges that he occasionally lowers the game's difficulty "because of the need to get to the embargo as quickly as possible" (personal statement, March 16, 2023). Reviewers are often faced with very short time margins between the delivery of the game copy and the embargo end date marked by the developers to publish the text. "The way you play the game changes a lot depending on how much time you have. I prefer not to play them fast. If I don't have time, I don't review in the embargo," says Albert García (personal statement, April 9, 2023). In fact, the professionals of the general press do not seem to follow the rhythms of the specialized critics. This is also the case of Borja Vaz:

> What I don't do is go on the binge typical of videogame critics. I try not to play more than four or five hours a day, because I think playing 15 hours a day completely perverts the normal experience of an average gamer (B. Vaz, personal statement, March 8, 2023).

Five of the nine critics interviewed claim to take notes while playing the video game they are going to write about.

> These notes are very important because they will shape your review and will allow you to bring to the final text those ideas you had while you were playing. You have to take notes, even if it is hard to stop the action of the game (A. García, personal statement, April 9, 2023).

Most of them jot down ideas that they will later develop in the text during the writing phase. In addition to this type of notes, Marta Trivi also writes cultural references:

I am also jotting down things not related to the game that come to my mind, such as movies or books, to keep them in mind when I do the analysis, in case I can go there to look for something interesting when writing (M. Trivi, personal statement, February 17, 2023).

However, other professionals prefer not to interrupt the game to take these notes, as is the case with Antonio Castillo: "I don't usually take notes because when I am engaged in a game my mind is a sponge. During that work time I dedicate myself completely to it" (A. Castillo, personal statement, February 19, 2023).

4.6. Documentation

The most common practice among critics is to carry out a documentation phase prior to the game session or the process of writing the text. However, not all of them research about the same aspects in relation to the video game to be analyzed. The most common thing among the interviewees is to briefly document themselves on issues such as the video game genre or the development study and their previous works. "It is fundamental above all to understand their motivations" (D. Quesada, personal statement, March 1, 2023).

Other professionals carry out research of a thematic nature or related to the ideas they intend to develop in the texts. This is the case of Enrique Alonso:

In my case it is a simultaneous documentation process. When I sit down in front of the paper, I usually have a main thesis and the writing process itself leads me to a parallel documentation process many times, in which I have to check whether certain ideas I am putting forward are valid paths or dead ends (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023).

The supporting materials for this phase can be very diverse. As Daniel Quesada points out, "depending on the game, you have to dive into a social network, the Internet or physical literature" (personal statement, March 1, 2023). Documentation also includes playing previous games by the development team, although due to time constraints this is not usually a recurrent practice.

Critics who omit this phase in the analysis process argue that, after a long time dedicated to video game criticism, they are familiar with most of the relevant studies. This is how Alejandro Castillo puts it: "I usually don't document them because I already know their trajectory. When I do, which is usually when I write about independent studies, I Google material in the international press" (A. Castillo, personal statement, February 19, 2023).

4.7. Writing the criticism and ratings

Most professionals establish a basic structure before they start writing the criticism. "I try to cover a number of fields that I think are important: who the creators of the game are, a narrative premise and the arguments. Then I try to make a concluding paragraph in which I try to establish a clear verdict," explains Borja Vaz (personal statement, March 8, 2023).

In the case of *HobbyConsolas*, the audiovisual version can condition the outline of the written criticism: "In our case, as we have to do it thinking about the video analysis, we try to make the structure organized" (D. Quesada, personal statement, March 1, 2023). In media such as *Vandal*, the conclusion or verdict have a very clear format indicated in their respective style guides. "In *Vandal* we have a final conclusion section with negative and positive points, and a small summary" explains Manuel Delgado (personal statement, February 22, 2023).

However, although it is the most common, not all critics follow this archetypal structure in their texts and do not end the criticism with a verdict on the work. For Juan Manuel Moreno, "the verdict is the criticism itself" (personal statement, February 17, 2023). Another example of this way of writing is represented by Marta Trivi:

> In *Anait*, since a couple of years ago, we have started with the exercise of making the reviews around a powerful idea. I tend to have the structure of an introduction that, if it does not outline the idea, it gives the reader a certain tone that I want them to have when they come across that idea, then I usually make the idea explicit and explain how the game approaches it and, at the end, I talk a bit about the game in general and end up linking it to the opening idea. (M. Trivi, personal statement, February 17, 2023)

Others prefer to describe the game and provide context to raise ideas from their speech, as Albert García does:

> Sometimes it's hard for me to find those perspectives and those readings that many people see in games. I base everything on the mechanics, on the gameplay. Many times I am more descriptive. I like that more informative perspective. (personal statement, April 9, 2023)

Four of the interviewees publish in media where the criticism closes with a rating for the work. However, most of them are either against its use or are neutral on this issue, being only two critics who are strongly in favor of the notes in this type of texts.

Those who, whether they want to or not, are forced to add a rating to their criticism, take into consideration different factors to assess it. For Daniel Quesada, "the fundamental value is how much fun the game is, beyond the graphics it has or how long it lasts or how good the sound is" (personal statement, March 1, 2023). Similarly, Rubén Márquez considers that the technical aspects are not the most important aspects when evaluating the video game: "Above all, I take into account the sensations. If the objective of the game was to generate sensations and it has achieved it, it has done its job" (R. Márquez, personal statement, March 16, 2023).

For Enrique Alonso, both this method and the ratings detract from the value of criticism. "To say 'to this painting by Matisse I give a 6.4' is a ridiculous thing to say. We should stop using them" (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023). Marta Trivi, meanwhile, has no sympathy for the grades either: "I think it's something we should get rid of. I think that cultural criticism is part of culture, and I

think that readers who approach cultural criticism should approach it in an active way" (M. Trivi, personal statement, February 17, 2023).

Nevertheless, some interviewees consider these systems useful. This is the case of Antonio Castillo, who considers that the rating is "a good way of specifying your opinion about the game" (personal statement, February 19, 2023). Manuel Delgado gives ratings and, although he is not convinced by this system, he recognizes the following: "We are giving notes that go to *Metacritic* and that is where the commercial performance of a game is measured on many occasions. The grade, in the end, is a way of ordering games" (M. Delgado, personal statement, February 22, 2023). Many neutral voices, or those in favor of the use of ratings, mention the importance of this website for the medium. In the words of Borja Vaz: "there is a whole consulting industry dedicated to predicting *Metacritic* scores. These scores have a direct and real impact on sales in 90% of the cases" (personal statement, March 9, 2023).

4.8. Roles of the video game critic

Most of the interviewees agree that one of the main functions of the video game critic is to provide his or her own vision of the work and generate debate. "This can be done by anyone, but someone who is dedicated to video game criticism presupposes a background that makes that perspective well worked, a professionalism behind their work," points out Albert García (personal statement, April 9, 2023).

As for Marta Trivi, she thinks that the role of the critic is limited to "contextualizing video games both in the cultural panorama and in their historical moment" (personal statement, February 17, 2023), although she also believes that this professional person "serves as a link between the game and the audience" (M. Trivi, personal statement, February 17, 2023), an idea that she shares with other interviewees. In this line, Manuel Delgado considers it relevant that "he knows how to explain why the video game is important to people who do not relate to the medium" (personal statement, February 22, 2023).

However, there are different positions among the opinions gathered about the role of the video game critic as a prescriber. Some argue that this function should not belong to the critic: "We started as a shopping guide and, although many media follow that line a bit, for most of us criticism is already something else," says Rubén Márquez (personal statement, March 16, 2023). Enrique Alonso is also included in this group:

> That's not our goal because I think it's no longer necessary, now you're one click away from knowing absolutely everything that encompasses a game and that's what product sheets are for. The critic should serve as a firewall with the industry, which is the one interested in these products so that you only know the feature sheet that they are interested in transmitting. We must be the player's ally. (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023)

Borja Vaz, on the other hand, does believe in the role of the critic as a recommender: "I am the one who examines the video game industry and, with my criteria, I select what I think is interesting, even if it is not well known or goes under the radar of many people" (B. Vaz, personal statement, March 8, 2023).

4.9. Influence of the critic

Almost all of the critics interviewed believe that their work has some influence on both the video game industry and users. "I think that a good critic puts ideas on wheels for other creators to pick them up and for the medium to move forward. I like to think that we do our bit to make this happen," explains Enrique Alonso (personal statement, February 20, 2023). However, the author acknowledges that "the industry does not care about the video game industry as a cultural entity, its job is to sell games" (E. Alonso, personal statement, February 20, 2023). Something similar explains Rubén Márquez: "Our voice clashes with the companies' marketing and with what they have sold you so far" (R. Márquez, personal statement, February 16, 2023).

Other professionals offer clear examples of the impact that criticism can have, such as Manuel Delgado: "The way the marketing systems are structured, the ratings do establish orders in the sales lists of videogames" (personal statement, February 22, 2023).

Marta Trivi, on the other hand, believes that the role of the journalist has a greater capacity to influence than that of the critic:

> I think the work of the critic and the journalist does affect the industry, especially if we decide to boycott a game because it exploits its workers or because we don't like its ideas. The industry does react to that. (personal statement, February 17, 2023)

4.10. Evolution of criticism

There is consensus among the interviewees that video game criticism is evolving. Many of the critics speak of the transition from a parameterized text that treats the video game as a product to a text with its own value that understands the work as a cultural artifact, as Enrique Alonso explains:

> In its origin, the text was something that could hardly be called criticism because it cornered as much as possible what is the personal experience of the final text. They were texts whose task was to overcome the user's lack of data, to bring the videogame closer to the people and which were focused on telling you whether the product was good or bad. Now video game criticism is becoming criticism. (personal statement, February 20, 2023)

Another aspect pointed out by some interviewees is that nowadays there are deeper reflections on the video game. According to Borja Vaz, "criticism is being loaded with arguments, it is moving away from simplistic, reductionist opinions, and little grounded in a knowledge about the reality of the medium" (personal statement,

March 8, 2023). This search for more complex discourses has led to the emergence of a more timeless criticism, away from instantaneity. "More value is being placed on long-term analysis of video games. The most interesting things finally come out five years after the videogame is published," says Manuel Delgado (personal statement, February 22, 2023).

However, many of the interviewees agree that this evolution is not happening in the same way or at the same pace in all the media that do video game criticism. "I think that *Vandal*, *3DJuegos* or *MeriStation* are not written now as they were 15 years ago. I don't think it is written in *Vandal* the way it is written in *Anait*, but I think it is getting closer and closer", says Enrique Alonso (personal statement, February 20, 2023).

Another axis of evolution, less mentioned, is related to the emergence of new media and spaces from which to exercise video game criticism in the digital environment, such as YouTube, Twitch or TikTok and other social networks (D. Quesada, personal statement, March 1, 2023).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The video game industry has become one of the most important industries in entertainment and audiovisual leisure, receiving more and more attention from journalism. Both general and specialized media cover this sub-area of cultural specialization through all kinds of genres, but criticism stands out as one of the main ones. This research was intended to be an approach to the practice of video game criticism and to the professional who practices it.

The first objective (O1) of this research consisted in defining the profile of the video game critic, identifying his or her training and skills. In this sense, most of the critics agree that the two most important qualities for video game critics are a developed communicative competence, especially at the writing level, and a long experience with video games. This second trait is in line with Gutiérrez-Palacio's (1984) assertion that a critic must show a clear liking for the form of artistic expression he or she is dealing with. Many emphasize that it is necessary to have played different genres and styles in order to know the medium and its expressive possibilities in depth. However, they do not consider it necessary to be proficient at the controls.

In the field of cultural journalism, the video game critic is presented as a figure very similar to those of other critics, such as film or literary critics. Unlike the latter, however, this profile does not have a long tradition, given that the video game is a younger form of expression than cinema or literature. However, given the eminently technological nature of the medium it covers, it tends to have more digital skills than other types of specialized profiles. This background, moreover, can be very useful in the face of the new demands of the digital environment. In this regard, it should be noted that video platforms such as YouTube or Twitch are increasingly present as alternative spaces from which to practice video game journalism in general (Paredes-Otero, 2022a) and video game criticism in particular (Gallardo-Agudo, 2024).

In terms of training, there is a majority opinion that there is no need for formal training focused on videogame criticism. The arguments to justify this idea are very diverse and range from the difficulty of defining a specific profile for video game critics to the inability of a traditional training system to transmit eminently practical skills. Nevertheless, some critics agree that it would be enriching if video-play criticism were more present in university degrees in the area of Communication, since degrees such as Journalism contain useful teachings to perform correctly in the professional world.

As a professional who covers an area of specialization, the video game critic is required to have extensive knowledge in his or her field, like any other specialized journalist (Esteve, 1997). Along these lines, all the interviewees consider that the intellectual and cultural background of the videogame critic should be as diverse as possible, and above all it should be oriented towards other forms of expression beyond the videogame itself, such as cinema, music or literature.

With respect to the second objective (O2), to describe the professional routines of the video game critic, the following conclusions can be drawn. When it comes to playing, almost all critics adopt approaches representative of the average user's experiences but making sure to know most of the possibilities offered by the work within the margins of time available to them. During the play session, some reviewers take notes that they will refer back to in order to recall certain ideas or details during the writing of the review, others choose not to pause the activity and tackle the analysis without notes.

Most of the critics document themselves before the writing process, either on technical issues such as the genre or the development study of the video game to be analyzed or on thematic aspects to be addressed in the text. Others, a smaller group, skip this documentation phase.

When approaching criticism, many of the interviewees start from a basic structure that organizes the key points of the text. In most cases, the criticism ends with a verdict on the work, either in a format predetermined by the magazine or with a free paragraph. Only a few critics do not add this verdict. In addition, some media include in the analysis a numerical rating about the game. Many professionals are against this practice, arguing that it detracts from the value of the criticism, while others emphasize its importance in terms of the commercial performance of video games or its usefulness to consumers.

The last objective (O3) consisted of describing the perception of the video game critic about his/her activity and role in the medium. In this sense, there is a disparity of opinions among the interviewees. One of the most repeated ideas is that they should provide their own perspective on the work based on their knowledge of the medium. Some professionals also talk about placing video games in their historical and cultural context or, simply, transmitting the personal experience of the game. There is also no consensus regarding the prescriptive role of the critic, highlighted by authors such as Esteve and Fernández-del-Moral (1999) and very present in the origins of the specialized video game press (López-Redondo, 2021): while many

believe that the critic cannot be a buying guide, others think that ranking and recommending is one of the key functions.

On the other hand, almost all critics consider that their work has at least a minimal impact on the industry or gamers. Some mention the influence of the critics as a whole on sales. Others mention that the ability to influence is greater in the case of journalists.

They all agree, moreover, that video game criticism is evolving. The majority opinion is that it is moving towards a less parameterized or technical text and more concerned with the cultural value of the video game, although there is also a shift from a light or amateur opinion to an argued opinion. In this way, the genre is increasingly closer to that profound, rigorous and intelligent text of which Vallejo-Mejía (1993) speaks. Even so, the interviewees agree that this evolution is not being paralleled in all the media in which this type of criticism is published. In this sense, it should be noted that the role of the critic is conditioned by the public that consumes it, as indicated by Armazañas and Díaz-Noci (1997).

In short, the video game critic is a professional with extensive knowledge of both his or her field and other cultural expressions, who follows specific routines for the elaboration of criticism and who has a certain impact on the industry. This is an increasingly professionalized profile that is evolving towards that of an author of more in-depth and rigorous texts. Based on these conclusions, a new starting point can be established for the study of video game criticism as a genre and its distinctive features, as well as video game journalism in general and the journalists who practice it.

6. REFERENCES

Armazañas, E., & Díaz-Noci, J. (1997). *Periodismo y argumentación. Géneros de opinión*. Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco.

Asociación Española de Empresas Productoras y Desarrolladoras de Videojuegos y Software de Entretenimiento (2024). *Libro blanco del desarrollo español del videojuego de 2023*. https://bit.ly/4dE9FoG

Asociación Española de Videojuegos (2024). La industria del videojuego en España en 2023. https://tinyurl.com/42hysutd

Calvo-Ferrer, J. R. (2018). Juegos, videojuegos y juegos serios: Análisis de los factores que favorecen la diversión del jugador. *Miguel Hernández Communication Journal, 9*(1), 191-226. http://dx.doi.org/10.21134/mhcj.v0i9.232

Canovaca, E., & Navarro-Remesal, V. (2023). Las estructuras empresariales de la prensa española especializada en el videojuego. En *Libro de Acta del 2do Congreso Internacional de DiGRA España 2023 (DIGRAES23)* (pp. 49-52). Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Universidad de Alcalá y Digital Games Research Association. https://bit.ly/3XSTka0

Cantavella, J. (2007). La crítica: juicios sobre obras artísticas para orientación del lector. En J. Cantavella y J. F. Serrano (Coords.), *Redacción para periodistas: Opinar y argumentar*. Editorial Universalitas.

Codón, A. (2016). La industria del videojuego. En R. Rodríguez-Prieto (Coord.), *Videojuegos: la explosión digital que está cambiando el mundo* (pp. 73-96). Héroes de Papel.

Esteve, F. (1997). *Comunicación especializada*. Ediciones Libertarias.

Esteve, F., & Fernández-del-Moral, J. (1999). *Áreas de especialización periodística*. Fragua.

Fernández-Heredero, C. (2019). Periodismo y crítica de cine. En M. Garbisu y I. Blanco (Eds.), *Periodismo cultural* (pp. 247-290). Ediciones CEF.

Fontcuberta, M. (1997). Propuestas sistemáticas para el análisis y producción de información periodística especializada. En F. Esteve (Coord.), *Estudios sobre Información periodística especializada*. Fundación Universitaria San Pablo-CEU.

Gallardo-Agudo, Á. (2024). Perfiles profesionales en la prescripción del videojuego: el crítico frente al influencer gaming de las plataformas digitales. En R. Mancinas-Chávez y J. Sussi-de-Oliveira (Coords.), *La Comunicación ante el reto de las Inteligencias Artificiales* (pp. 683-700). Dykinson.

García-Borrego, M., Montes-Rodríguez, I., & Ruiz-Aguiar, A. (2022). Presencia y rol de la mujer en el periodismo de videojuegos: un análisis de las redacciones y la crítica cultural de los medios especializados españoles. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 80, 114-136. https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2022-1771

García-Jiménez, L., & Herrero, E. (2022). "Nunca lo lograrás, eres demasiado guapa": Voces de mujeres investigadoras en comunicación. *IC Revista Científica de Información y Comunicación*, 19, 385-410. https://bit.ly/3Zhym59

García-Sedano, M. (2017). Arte y videojuegos. Reflexiones sobre lo lúdico, el arte y la tecnología en Asturias. *Liño*, 23, 175-184. https://bit.ly/4giApwG

Gutiérrez-Palacio, J. (1984). *Periodismo de opinión*. Ediciones Paraninfo, S.A.

Igartua, J. J. (2006). *Métodos cuantitativos de investigación en comunicación*. Bosch.

Juul, J. (2010). *A Casual Revolution*. The MIT Press.

López-Redondo, I. (2012). *El tratamiento del videojuego: de la prensa generalista a las revistas especializadas. Análisis comparativo de las ediciones impresas y digitales de El País, El Mundo, Público y 20 Minutos* [Tesis doctoral]. Universidad de Sevilla. https://bit.ly/4454Yje

López-Redondo, I. (2021). El videojuego como área de especialización periodística. Rasgos distintivos y perspectivas profesionales para un sector en auge. *Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico*, *27*(1), 319-332. https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/esmp.72248

López-Redondo, I., Serrano-Martín, C., & Aramburú-Moncada, L. G. (2021). Orígenes de la crítica periodística en la prensa especializada en videojuegos en España. El caso de la revista ZX. En N. Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela y M. L. Cárdenas-Rica (Ed.), *La comunicación a la vanguardia. Tendencias, métodos y perspectivas* (pp. 2447-2467). Fragua.

Malterud, K., Dirk-Siersma, V., & Dorrit-Guassora, A. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by Information Power. *Qualitative Health Research*, *26*(13), 1753-1760. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444

Morales-Corral, E. (2014). *La nueva cultura multimedia en la era digital: el caso de los videojuegos* [Tesis doctoral]. Universidad Complutense de Madrid. https://bit.ly/3rQYcjq

Morales-Corral, E., & Gayo-Santacecilia, J. (2021). Análisis de la crítica especializada de cine y videojuegos desde la sociología cultural. Tendencias Sociales. *Revista de Sociología*, 7, 165-180. https://doi.org/10.5944/ts.7.2021.31234

Newzoo (2024). *Newzoo's Global Games Market Report 2023*. https://tinyurl.com/2d7s3j8u

Nieborg, D. B., & Shivonen, T. (2009). The new gatekeepers: The occupational ideology of game journalism. *DiGRA Digital Library*. https://bit.ly/3ZmEpFN

Paredes-Otero, G. (2022a). ¿Infoentretenimiento o coloquialidad?: la información de videojuegos a través del periodismo especializado desde YouTube. *Anàlisi: quaderns de comunicació i cultura*, 66, 81-94. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/analisi.3460

Paredes-Otero, G. (2022b). Aproximación a los géneros periodísticos en las redes sociales: Formatos del periodismo especializado en videojuegos en Youtube. En G. Paredes-Otero y I. López-Redondo (Coords.), *Cultura audiovisual, periodismo y política: nuevos discursos y narrativas en la sociedad digital* (pp. 318-347). Dykinson. https://bit.ly/4eyR4M7

PwC (2022). Enterteinment and Media Outlook 2022-2026. España. https://pwc.to/3OIVcil

Susi, T., Johannesson, M., & Backlund, P. (2007). *Serious games: An overview* (Technical Report HS- IKI -TR-07-001). University of Skövde. https://bit.ly/453Xa1N

Vallejo-Mejía, M. L. (1993). *La crítica literaria como género periodístico*. Eunsa.

Vinuesa, M. L. (2005). La encuesta. Observación extensiva de la realidad social. En M. R. Berganza y J. Ruiz-San-Román (Coords.), *Investigar en comunicación: Guía práctica de métodos y técnicas de investigación social en comunicación* (pp. 177-206). McGraw-Hill Interamericana de España.

Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (1996). *La investigación científica de los medios de comunicación: una introducción a sus métodos*. Bosch.

Zagal, J. P., Ladd, A., & Johnson, T. (2009). Characterizing and understanding game reviews. En *Proceedings of the 4th international Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (pp. 215-222). Association for Computing Machinery. https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/1536513.1536553

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS, FUNDING AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Authors' contributions:

AUTHOR:

Ángel Gallardo Agudo

Graduated in Journalism from the University of Málaga (UMA), studying for a Master's Degree in Research on Media, Audiences and Professional Practice in Europe. Scholarship granted by the Ministry of Education to collaborate with the Department of Journalism (2022-2023) and scholarship for research initiation (2023-2024) at the UMA. Member of the Group of Studies and Research on Journalism and Communication (SEJ067). He has published on video game journalism.

angelgallardo@uma.es

Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5189-3485
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=hdgXcNcAAAAJ&hl=es&oi=ao
ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Angel-Gallardo-Agudo
Academia.edu:https://independent.academia.edu/GallardoAgudo

ANNEX

Questionnaire sent to video game critics

Profile:

1. What skills do you consider a video game critic must have?
2. What do you think are the aspects in common and the differences between video game critics and other types of cultural critics such as film or literary critics?
3. Do you think there should be some kind of formal training to properly perform video game criticism? Why?
4. What do you think should be the cultural or intellectual background of the video game critic?

Professional routines:

5. How do you play the video game you are going to review? Do you take notes while playing?
6. Do you research the genre, the author, the development study or any other aspect before writing the criticism? How do you do it and why?
7. How do you write a criticism?
8. Do you rate the work at the end of the criticism? If so, what factors do you take into consideration in determining the rating?
9. What is your opinion of the use of ratings in this genre? Do you favor or oppose them? why?
10. Do you think that the video game critic should be informed in detail about the current state of the video game industry? Why?

Role and evolution:

11. What do you consider to be the main role of the video game critic?

12. Do you think your work influences gamers and the industry? If so, in what way?

13. In what direction do you think video game criticism is evolving, and how does this change the profile of the contemporary video game critic?

Revista de Comunicación de la

SEECI

ISSN 2695 - 5156

RELATED ARTICLES:

Bunbury Bustillo, E., Pérez Calle, R., & Osuna-Acedo, S. (2022). Las competencias digitales en personas mayores: de amenaza a oportunidad. *Vivat Academia*, 155, 173-195. https://doi.org/10.15178/va.2022.155.e1383

De Vicente Domínguez, A. M., Cea Esteruela, N., & Carballeda Camacho, Mireya Rocío (2022). La guía de expertos en las universidades privadas españolas: análisis de su presencia y gestión para la transferencia del conocimiento científico. *Revista de Ciencias de la Comunicación e Información*, 27, 77-91. https://doi.org/10.35742/rcci.2022.27.e247

Gomez, D., & Freire, J. (2023). La emergencia de los laboratorios ciudadanos: Un modelo para la creación de comunidades de innovación. *European Public & Social Innovation Review*, *8*(2), 65-79. https://doi.org/10.31637/epsir-2023-248

Guarinos, V., Ramírez-Alvarado, M., & Martín-Pena, D. (2023). Ficción sonora y creatividad verbodependiente. Microrrelatos sonoros sin palabras. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 81, 332-352. https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2023-1949

Micaletto-Belda, J. P., Martín-Ramallal, P., & Merino-Cajaraville, A. (2022). Contenidos digitales en la era de tiktok: percepción de los usuarios del botón COVID-19 en España. *Revista de Comunicación y Salud*, 12, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.35669/rcys.2022.12.e290