

## Cartridge Critics

# The Newest Entertainment Reviewers Are Making Their Living by Praising, Panning Video Games

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They work at home, often late into the night. Their assignments come in plain brown wrappers, and the instructions are handwritten. They complain of eyestrain and limited social contacts but still say their jobs are great fun.

These are the newest entertainment critics: video-game reviewers. Although their names aren't exactly household words, hundreds of people are reviewing games for magazines and newsletters, as well as writing syndicated columns used by scores of newspapers. The critics assess things like how long a game is likely to remain interesting, its graphic design, and how realistic it is.

At present, they are reviewing the products of a crowded industry sorely troubled by such factors as big inventories and extensive price cutting. In the past few months, several video-game companies dropped out of the business. Last week, one of the giants, Warner Communications Inc.'s Atari Inc. unit, reported a third-quarter operating loss of \$180.2 million on sales that plunged to \$187.7 million from \$528.8 million. Predictions for Christmas are bleak.

But notwithstanding all the problems, about 16 million households across the country are equipped with video-game consoles; there are another 2.5 million game-playing home computers. Industry analysts estimate that \$1.5 billion of game cartridges were sold last year alone. With as many as 30 new games a month appearing on store shelves, at an average price of \$30 each, consumers need help in deciding what to buy.

"At computer stores, you could test the games yourself," says Arnie Katz, the editor of Electronic Games magazine. "But now, games are sold in department stores, supermarkets, and other places where buyers aren't given the opportunity to play before they buy."

### Turning a Hobby to Cash

The critics, mostly young men in their 20s and early 30s, have found a way to turn an addiction to the games into cash. Some write one or two reviews a month as a sideline to a regular job, earning just a few thousand dollars a year from their hobby. Others do it full time, and some claim annual earnings of as much as \$60,000.

They got into the business in a variety of ways. Craig Kubey, a 34-year-old former Ralph Nader lawyer, was introduced to the classic Space Invaders game by his younger brother in 1979 and was hooked. When he couldn't find a public-interest law job he liked in California, Mr. Kubey turned to video games. He wrote two strategy books before starting to write reviews.

**Michael Blanchet, 23, took a somewhat more direct route. He previously worked in a game arcade in a Morris County, N.J., shopping mall primarily wiping off machine tops and handing out change. Now, he says, his game reviews provide him with an annual income of between \$40,000 and \$60,000 a year. His syndicated column is published in more than 80 newspapers.**

Then there's 11-year-old Rawson Stovall, whose syndicated column "The Vid Kid" appears in more than 25 papers nationwide. He started playing video games with his mother; a friend who owns a video store suggested he write about the games.

### The Number Increases

The number of critics appears to be increasing, despite the industry's recent financial woes and a resulting uncertainty about the future. The reviewers are helped by the recent proliferation of video-game magazines, which have names like Video Review, Vidiot and Videogaming Illustrated. The largest, Electronic Games, claims a circulation of 300,000. Several others say they reach more than 100,000 readers. There also are newsletters with circulations of a few thousand or less.

Television soon will get into the act, too. One show about video games, which will include reviews, will begin appearing on cable TV this fall. Two others are scheduled to be syndicated for distribution to broadcast stations around the country starting in January.

Still, it isn't certain how much influence the critics have. Christopher D. Kirby, a video-game industry analyst with Sanford C. Bernstein & Co., notes that the audience these critics reach is small compared with the total market. Besides, says Ira Mayer, the managing editor of Video Marketing Game Letter, "It's really word of mouth that sells games."

Roger Sharpe, a former editor of GQ, the men's fashion magazine, who has been writing a video-game column since 1975, agrees. "Regardless of reviews," he says, "you're still going to have somebody in the neighborhood buy the thing, everybody is going to go over and look at it, and then they'll go out and buy it." It also helps to have a licensed home version of a successful arcade game, like Donkey Kong or Ms. Pac-Man.

### 'Cheerleaders for the Industry'

The critics aren't immune to criticism themselves. Chief among the complaints is that they are too easy on the games, particularly those whose reviews appear in magazines filled with industry advertising. "They tend to be cheerleaders for the industry," says Mr. Kubey, the former Nader lawyer.

In fact, a random survey of one month's

editions of five leading video magazines shows that favorable reviews (three miniature joy sticks or better, on one scale) outnumbered the unfavorable by margins as great as four to one. Robert Borgon, a full-time technician with KABC radio in Los Angeles, who writes about one piece a month for Video Review, explains that with so many good games on the market, most critics don't want to waste time on the duds. "If it's not a good game, I'd rather cancel the whole thing," he says.

Nevertheless, some of the reviews have a certain caustic charm. Vidiot, for example, described the Atari home version of Ms. Pac-Man as no better than "a one night stand." And Video Games magazine recently called Oink, Activision's rendition of the Three Little Pigs story, "as exciting as a weekend in Cleveland."

Manufacturers clearly think the reviews have some impact. They send critics advance copies, even before the packaging is designed, so a game scheduled to be introduced for Christmas can be reviewed in July. "Video-game reviewers have been a godsend," says an Activision official. "They're the people who enable our products to get exposure well before they hit the streets."

### Skill vs. Luck

In evaluating games, most critics say their primary concern is whether a game will remain attractive to the dedicated player or will be played once and sit on a closet shelf forever. The reviewers also look for a challenging game, one that rewards skill rather than luck. And when free-lance critic Phil Wiswell talks about "thematic consistency," he isn't talking about existentialism and Jean-Paul Sartre. He wants to know if the cherries and doughnuts attacking his row of teeth in a game called Plaque Attack will be killed realistically by his canons of toothpaste. "The story must make sense, fit together," Mr. Wiswell says.

These reviewers rarely have 9 to 5 schedules. Most tell stories of all-night play sessions with a new discovery they couldn't turn off. In some cases, the individual games become an addiction; Mr. Blanchet says he has been playing a "fantasy-adventure" game called Wizardry for several months. (The game is designed to let the player become stronger as he survives each

of a series of adventures. Mr. Blanchet says his next step in the game is to survive a nuclear bomb.)

Life in front of a video screen can limit one's social contacts. Susan Prince, one of the few women in the field, married Mark Trost, another critic, in May 1982. They spent their honeymoon the following week at the Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago. "A great way to start a marriage," laments Miss Prince.

#### Drawbacks and Risks

There are other drawbacks to the job. Mr. Wiswell, for example, says he buys eye-drops by the case. Some reviewers, too, complain that the advance copies of games they receive sometimes still have programming glitches. Mr. Wiswell recalls the time the handwritten instructions told him he could blow up a hard-charging creature when, in fact, he was helpless—a cruel joke on a serious player.

The biggest risk, however, may be the uncertain future of the video-game industry. A number of game manufacturers, such as Warner Communications (the parent of Atari) and Mattel have been losing money recently; Activision said earlier this month that a "weakness in orders" could produce a net loss in the current quarter. Industry observers are predicting a decline in the number of consoles sold this year compared with 1982 and a sharp slowdown in the growth of cartridge sales. "They can kill themselves and take me right along with them," says Mr. Blanchet.

There also are those in the business who think the whole thing is a fad. Says a salesman for one of the syndicated newspaper columns: "We all made a bunch of money on CB radio columns, but that was short-lived."