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What Motivates the Authors of Video Game Walkthroughs and FAQs? A Study of Six GameFAQs Contributors

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What motivates the authors of video game walkthroughs and FAQs? A study of six GameFAQs contributors

by Michael J. Hughes

Abstract

Walkthroughs, also known as FAQs or strategy guides, are player-authored documents that provide step-by-step instructions on how to play and what to do in order to finish a given video game. Exegetical in their length and detail, walkthroughs require hours of exacting labor to complete. Yet authors are rarely compensated for work that markedly differs from other kinds of fan creativity. To understand their motivations, I interviewed six veteran GameFAQs authors, then inductively analyzed the transcripts. Open coding surfaced five themes attributable to each participant. Together, these themes constitute a shifting mix of motivations, including altruism, community belonging, self-expression, and recognition — primarily in the form of feedback and appreciation but also from compensation. These findings increase our understanding of the motivations that drive fan labor, even as they complicate assumptions about its exploitation.

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Introduction

“If you’re trying to find a reason why we waste so much time doing this, I was going to have to give you the bad news that we still don’t know ourselves.”
— Participant 5.

Walkthroughs, also known as FAQs or strategy guides [1], are exhaustive documents that provide step-by-step instructions on how to play and what to do in order to solve puzzles, find hidden items, overcome formidable foes, and generally progress through a given video game. Initially written by professionals and sold at retail, walkthroughs emerged in tandem with the golden age of gaming, helping players top the leaderboards of their favorite games. In 1982, readers could browse *The Player’s Strategy Guide to Atari VCS Home Video Games*, learn how to *Break a Million at Pac-Man*, and survive an *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, a book distinguished not for its advice, but rather for its author, an up-and-coming Martin Amis. Today, official (*i.e.*, licensed, authorized) guides are still produced by the likes of Piggyback and Future Press, but the task of helping players has largely fallen to gaming Web sites, of which GameFAQs is the largest source of fan-authored walkthroughs.

Since 1995, when it began as the Video Game FAQ Archive, GameFAQs has collected and published reviews, cheats, and walkthroughs from more than 100,000 contributors (GameFAQs, 2017a). Over the years, GameFAQs has changed hands — its current parent is CBS Interactive — but its mechanics are mostly unaltered. Fans voluntarily submit content for which they retain ownership but little else [2]. Most are unpaid.

Some of their submissions are short, as taxing to write as a long e-mail message. For example, Chris McCullough’s “Death Punch Guide” for *Mortal Kombat II* is about 400 words long. But other walkthroughs are longer by orders of magnitude, approaching encyclopedic complexity as their authors expound on every piece, part, and pixel of a given video game. Consider Alex Eagleson’s *Star Ocean 3* walkthrough. In Microsoft Word, the guide’s nineteen chapters run to an astonishing 383 pages, about 94,400 words. For comparison, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* tops out at 85,141 words according to one estimate (Michel, 2014). This paper, including its references, falls short of 10,000.

You can guess at J. K. Rowling’s motivations, or mine for that matter. Less obvious are the motivations that drove Eagleson to his ambitious task and sustained him throughout its completion. For him, there was no book deal in the offing, nor even the creative pleasures enjoyed by authors of fan fiction. While guide authors are like fanfic scribes in their devotion to a given text or genre, they differ in the nature of their work. Unlike stories, walkthroughs are strictly instrumental, meant to be used and applied in the manner of technical writing, as recognized by a professor who uses

walkthroughs to model the genre's rhetorical principles (Vie, 2015). Effective technical writers prize clarity, striving for unvarnished concision over extravagant prose, and placing the needs of the audience before self-expression. Given such constraints, technical writers are typically paid employees. A novelist may write in her leisure time without hope of another soul ever reading her work, but the technical writer earns a wage to render instructions to your toaster — and whether you read or enjoy them is no matter to him.

To understand, then, why a certain subset of gamers voluntarily undertake work that many would find tedious and dreary, this study discerns the dynamics that create and sustain motivation over the course of many years, during which time the most dedicated GameFAQs contributors write not one or two but dozens of walkthroughs, driven by intrinsic motivation arising from a deep intersection of hobbyist devotion and service to others.

Literature review

Daniel Pink (2009) once described intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as pugilists in a prizefight, the “Ali-Frazier of motivation.” [3] In his example, user-edited Wikipedia, with its intrinsic “autonomy, mastery and purpose,” squared off against Microsoft Encarta, created with conventional “carrots and sticks.” [4] Which of them won the purse? Let’s just say you can read about Encarta — on Wikipedia.

Many scholars have explored the motivations underpinning Wikiwork (Forte and Bruckman, 2005; Nov, 2007; Rafaeli and Ariel, 2008; Yang and Lai, 2010). Their studies follow investigations into the general motivations of all volunteers, such as Clary, *et al.*’s 1998 study. But while Flickr photo taggers, open-source contributors, and citizen scientists are the subjects of motivation inquiries, no study yet examines the motivations of game guide authors. At present we are limited to what we can learn, and indirectly at that, from the meager literature on walkthroughs, which largely restricts its focus to how guides are encountered and used by readers.

Consalvo’s (2003) landmark study, for example, concerns the ways that gamers use walkthroughs to “maintain narrative integrity or cohesiveness.” [5] But the reasons for writing walkthroughs fall outside the scope of her inquiry except where personal expression can be construed as a reason for writing.

For Wirman (2009), walkthroughs are a species of fan labor that she describes as instrumental productivity. Like tools, guides are meant to be used, not merely enjoyed or appreciated. But in reading a *Final Fantasy VII* walkthrough alongside fan fiction, poetry, and artwork, Burn (2006) finds evidence of motivation in the public nature of the work, the pleasure derived therefrom, and the attainment of social standing. He also ventures that the work “seems to proceed from an idealistic desire to serve the fan community.” [6]

This community includes not a few academics, or “aca-fans.” But while gamer-academics are doubtless acquainted with walkthroughs as a result of their own progression woes, few have done more to bring player-authored guides into the academy than Daniel Ashton and James Newman. Across six articles, the two provide a comprehensive analysis of walkthroughs, namely their features and conventions, the role they play in documenting “ludic opportunity,” [7] their function in the management and presentation of identity, and the archival uses of such texts, which capture the “deliberately investigative, exploratory acts of gameplay enacted by players.” [8] Except for glimpses of motivation in guide excerpts, however, or inferences from their analyses of same, Ashton and Newman are largely uninterested in the motivations that undergird guide authorship. Nevertheless, you can identify several kinds of motivation in their articles, including:

- Altruism, or writing guides to help other gamers (Newman, 2008).
- Membership within an interest-based community (Newman, 2008).
- Demonstrating expertise to gain recognition from peers (Ashton and Newman, 2011).
- Inventing new ways to play a game in order to extend gameplay (Newman, 2008).

The sturdiest account of author motivation, however, comes not from academics but from game journalists. Both *Eurogamer* (Teti, 2011) and *Edge Magazine* (2006) have interviewed FAQ authors to learn more about this overlooked corner of video game fandom. Of the two, the *Edge* feature reveals the most about motivation. In it, three authors describe their reasons for writing FAQs, which *Edge* characterizes as “fame and philanthropy,” “an impulse to fill in the gaps,” “ownership and identity with a given title,” [9] and the inherent challenge of the work. When asked about compensation, the aforementioned Alex Eagleson told *Edge* that most writers “simply do it for fun, and some even frown on the idea of profiting from it,” [10] an attitude shared by early fanzine authors who took umbrage when some of their order began selling their stories (Jenkins, 1992).

When considered in whole, the literature on walkthroughs provides a picture of motivation, but a hazy one, a composite sketch gleaned from the interstices of related investigations and decade-old interviews. Establishing the extent to which this sketch accounts for the motivations of all authors requires a methodical investigation of testimony given by the authors themselves.

Methods

According to Allen Tyner, Product Manager for GameFAQs, the site hosts 64,844 guides by 19,753 different authors, many of whom are casual contributors. Because I wished to speak with committed authors, those with standing in the GameFAQs community, I located participants by browsing a list that ranks authors according to their total submissions [11]. I learned whether authors were active on the site by visiting their user profiles, which list their contributions and the date on which they last accessed the site. Discounting authors who top the list but appear to have stopped writing

guides, I contacted 16 authors through private messages or by writing to the e-mail addresses in their guides. To encourage participation and reward authors for their time, I offered a US\$40 gift card to the retailer of their choice. I continued recruiting until I secured participation from six authors for a response rate of 37.5 percent. The number of participants was set at six pursuant to the findings of Guest, *et al.* (2006), which conclude that six interviews are enough to yield meaningful interpretations.

Participants included four men and two women, each of whom has spent at least seven and not more than 17 years as registered users of GameFAQs (average = 12.3 years). Each participant has written a minimum of 21 complete guides, with one participant claiming nearly 17 times as many. This figure is misleading, however, since some guides are as brief as memos while others stretch into hundreds of pages. Accordingly, GameFAQs measures a contributor's submissions in kilobytes (kb) in order to properly credit authors for in-depth guides. Participants averaged lifetime contributions of 15,033 kb of text, with minimum and maximum contributions of 4,807 and 25,588 kb.

I interviewed five authors over Skype according to a semi-structured protocol containing questions that emerged from my review of the literature (see [Appendix](#)). These questions were organized into six categories, each designed to probe for authorial motivation by inquiring into different aspects of a contributor's experience, from background and process to community norms. Interviews ranged from 90 to 120 minutes in length, and each was fully transcribed. Transcripts were lightly edited to remove verbal fillers and personally identifiable information. A sixth author requested a written interview because English was not her first language. Though fluent in reading and writing, she felt it would be "very hard to keep up with a speaking interview." Accordingly, I sent her the interview protocol which she returned with written responses. When necessary, I followed up for clarification or additional information.

I coded each transcript inductively, following an approach to qualitative data analysis in which findings emerge from the ideas and beliefs that recur throughout and across participant statements (Thomas, 2006). I constructed themes by excerpting text that evinced motivation. The following snippet, for example, illustrates the pleasure of achievement.

P1. In college I said, 'I wanna write, but I'm not one of those writing majors who are real experts at it.' But this was writing without, you know, *really* writing or the fear of being rejected. So that was big for me.

I grouped like snippets together and assigned each a preliminary code (*i.e.*, a category label) derived from the participants themselves. These codes were revised, deleted, or merged in a recursive process to more accurately describe emerging phenomena. For example, the working codes "productivity," "creativity," and "demonstrating expertise" were eventually merged into a final theme that I described as "creation and the pleasure thereof." I continued this process until I was left with only the major themes of the study, factors that every author identified as motivators of his or her work. To verify the consistency of each category, an independent coder was given a sample transcript and asked to code text snippets using the themes I described. Her analysis produced typologies similar to mine, differing only in the extent of each excerpt. Our conference resulted in minor syntactical changes to some categories, but this consistency check did not otherwise alter my findings.



Discussion

The results of this study suggest that veteran authors are motivated by five common factors: altruism (*i.e.*, helping others by sharing knowledge); the social benefits of community; self-expression; and recognition of their efforts, primarily from feedback and appreciation, but also from compensation. The following sections describe these themes in greater detail.

'Finding gaps' and 'sharing knowledge'

Every participant mentioned helping others as a reason to write walkthroughs. For some, it is *the* reason, a straightforward and uncomplicated altruism.

P4: I've always been one of those people that it's more about helping as many people as I can versus getting the most money or getting the most recognition possible.

In other cases, however, helping was described as a debt to be repaid.

P3: I like to think that I'm giving back to the hobby in my own way. I hope that many of these guides will be here long after I'm gone, so it's kind of a mark-on-your-hobby type of thing. Longevity.

In the last conception, helping is less about the here and now, helping players with the latest game before moving on to the next one. Instead, helping is oriented toward a future where today's games will still entice and challenge players. But writing for future readers delays recognition in the present. One author recalled his first contribution, a guide to an obscure computer game.

P1: *We knew we weren't gonna get a ton of fame out there*, but we were just thinking, here's a place that accepts this sort of thing and lets us show it off to the next person who's really curious about the game. (emphasis mine)

Helping "the next person" is as much about completing or improving the cultural record as assisting the individual, and it offers a different sort of pleasure [12]. As one participant put it, "I do like saying, ok, I pulled this game out from nowhere [...] from relative obscurity."

Not coincidentally, GameFAQs sponsors efforts to provide a walkthrough for every game on a given platform, regardless of merit or popularity [13]. Authors believe their work has lasting value, a rejoinder to publishers who treat their games as technologies subject to the memory hole of obsolescence (Ashton and Newman, 2011). The satisfaction of “finding gaps,” to use one participant’s phrase, is another aspect of the helping motivation, one based less on compulsion than on the desire, akin to that of librarians and archivists, to preserve knowledge and make it widely available.

P2: Early on it was about finding gaps in the documentation of games, and then it turned into hitting games that I really liked. I actually had that in my signature for the longest time: “38 game guides for games never covered before at GameFAQs” [...] I guess it was a point of pride that I was covering stuff no one else was.

Moreover, the licensed strategy guides that pass for official documentation are often incomplete. Written under deadline while games are still under development, they contain only information that the licensor agrees to publish. Ashton and Newman (2012) argue that such guides “legitimize a limited range of ways to tackle the game, demonstrating only ‘approved’ tactics, strategies, and approaches to gameplay.” [14] A participant confirms their account, describing official guides as a “double-edged sword.”

P5: [Official guides are] sanctioned by the publisher or the developer or both. But that also means you’re saying what they want you to say, right? [...] You can’t talk about this awesome glitch that you can use to get infinite money [...], you can’t talk about these bugs, you can’t mention some of the quirks about the game that every gamer will find out and will be interested in. So they have more legitimacy, but that doesn’t mean they’re better guides necessarily.

Crucially, official guides lack the incremental improvements born of experimental play as crowds of curious gamers test the boundaries and possibilities of a given game space. Their myriad discoveries are regularly incorporated into walkthroughs, which are living documents as long as authors care to update them. These iterative improvements are dutifully recorded in version histories, which mimic software versioning in their scrupulous notation of changes (Newman, 2008). Acknowledgement sections, too, credit readers who contribute to a document’s success by pointing out errors or contributing newly unearthed techniques and strategies. The resulting quality is not lost on readers.

P5. I’ve been told many, many times, “I bought the official guide and it was a waste of money, so I’m going to send you \$15 via PayPal because you deserve it more than they did.”

‘We’re part of something big’

People join virtual communities for the same reasons they join off-line ones. Belonging to a community, virtual or otherwise, promotes self-identity, facilitates information exchange, and satisfies the needs of social support and friendship. In this respect, GameFAQs authors are little different from the pet owners, programmers, and Pearl Jam fans surveyed by Ridings and Gefen (2004). A sense of belonging and the gratifications thereof are key components of an author’s decision not just to write but to keep on writing, to see a video game not as an experience unto itself but an opportunity to join or expand the network of relationships that make community possible. It begins with the discovery of mutual interest.

P2: I owe a lot to GameFAQs, to my looking up guides there and then getting into the message boards and just finding someone who had the same passion I did.

For one author, this discovery arrived as an epiphany.

P1: I guess there’s a quote from C.S. Lewis that each friendship begins with the words, “You too?” And in this case, it was like, “These people too?” [15]

Notwithstanding this invocation, the author is careful to distinguish the intimacy of friendship from the weaker ties of social support, which more accurately describe his GameFAQs relationships.

P1. When I was younger my mother said, “You shouldn’t stare at that computer screen, you need to get out and see people.” Well, I am seeing people, talking to people through games. Maybe it’s more apparent when we have, say, a multiplayer shoot-em-up or *World of Warcraft*, but when we’re writing a guide and figuring the best way to do stuff, that’s a pretty cool way to link up and do things. [...] I guess that’s part of the reason why it’s neat to have a part [of my guides] saying this is my, not necessarily group of friends that I know really well, but I spent time with these people and I’ve been better for it.

Here, community connections fall short of friendship’s complexity, but friendship is not a goal toward which GameFAQs authors necessarily strive. Social needs are gratified by other means. If we imagine social support as a road that joins three villages, then some authors settle in Acquaintanceship, where support might be gleaned from disagreement and the demonstration of expertise.

P5: Some of [the e-mails I get] are pretty aggressive and combative. I’ll say that their path, ability, skill, or class sucks, and they’ll disagree, and they’ll make their case and we’ll get into a, you know, scholarly debate about the merits of this class or race or item or whatever.

Others continue to Collaboration, located somewhere along the road’s middle. Here the population is a shifting mix of acquaintances, friends, and tourists.

P1: I have a bunch of people who've helped me write in general and who were fun to be around and who kept me going, whether it was with reviews or guides or whatever. It's a reminder that you can't do it all yourself and that, to me, it's ok to ask for help.

P2: People would often work together, and you would try to work with someone you liked, you would try to do at least one guide with them. [...] I even did a couple with younger-generation guys who, I maybe didn't like a whole lot, but it was a way to get to know them.

Some authors arrive finally at Friendship, which spills beyond the bounds of GameFAQs.

P3: Over the years I've made several friends that started as people e-mailing me saying, "Hey, good work on this." It's fantastic how those relationships began with a simple thank-you e-mail.

Not that every e-mail ends in friendship, of course. GameFAQs is not a commune in which harmony is a default state, even if harassment is uncommon. Indeed, if GameFAQs authors are "a big family," as one author told me, they are vexing in the way family members can be. In describing her relationships with other contributors, one author began to use the word "respect," then caught herself.

P4: As much as we're all a community and we all, like, respect and ... we don't even respect each other. As much as we all like our community and we all hang out on the same board, that doesn't necessarily mean we all get along. You have very distinct personalities. You have to enjoy doing what you do as much as we do.

"We all like" our community, but the work draws people together in the first place. Work provides its own gratifications, which motivate future work, which in turn create or strengthen community bonds. And so on, one into another, in a cycle that nourishes the ecosystem of fan labor.

'They don't want a robot'

Because of the way they are used and written, some scholars describe walkthroughs as they would an instruction manual, a species of writing enjoyable only so far as it is useful. According to Wirman (2009), players stuck on puzzles or humbled by powerful enemies make "tool-like use of information and means-to-ends rationality in order to gain efficiency in a game." [16] Her description accords with the definition advanced by Seth Giddings (2006), which describes the walkthrough as a "determinedly non-literary work, dispassionate, stripped of non-instrumental description and of most subjective reflection on the writer's part." [17] When given his definition, however, some authors found it wanting.

P5: A lot of the guides that I read, and certainly all the ones I write are ... they're not a set of stereo instructions, right? It's not an IKEA, you know, assemble-this-crappy-furniture kit. You try to entertain the person reading it, and the feedback I get for that, it's probably the thing that's most wanted in my work. So yeah, I definitely wouldn't call it "dispassionate, stripped of non-instrumental description." Not at all.

Which is not to say that readers want *Anna Karenina* instead of advice on the challenges that vex them. "There's making your guide interesting," an author explained, "and then there's just padding it with useless information. You can go too far." For some, any deviation from a Giddings-like approach is too far. Another author acknowledged that "some people appreciate [a personal touch] and there's some people that don't." But in his experience,

P3: ... most people appreciate it. They don't want a robot. Some of the best comments I get is that, "Hey, I enjoyed your guide. It really felt like you were playing through the game with me, like we were sitting side by side and we were playing through this game together." And that's really, you know, that instantly puts a smile on my face.

This personal touch appears in the jokes, lore, and other asides that benefit writers as much their readers. In fact, a reader's enjoyment of them is almost incidental to their role in keeping a writer on task.

P5: I write jokes in my guides and try to include lore and flavor, mostly to keep myself entertained when I'm writing. And I do like going back and remembering some of the silly things I wrote. Because if you just say, "Go west, unlock door, kill enemies" eight times in a row, I don't know how you could do that without just switching up the words or getting a little snide with it.

Yet there are numerous guides that fit Giddings's description, some of them written by this study's participants. One author found it "a good basic definition," even as it reminded him of a counterexample, a guide written in the first-person perspective of the game's protagonist. Another author repeatedly described her style as dry: "It's usually like, here's where to go, here's what to do, and I don't add a lot of humor." [18]

But whether a writer's style is austere or embellished, all authors enjoy the pleasure of creation and the sense of achievement it engenders. This is seen in the anecdotes above, but also in straightforward declarations, like the author who told me that she "always loved to write" and found a "sense of fulfillment" in writing FAQs. Or the writer who self-consciously admitted that his work "might not change Western civilization" but that

P3: What made me write my first guide? I guess to see if I could do it. I think it just dawned on me one day that these were individual people, as crazy as it sounds. These are individual people making these huge efforts to write up these text files and there's no reason I couldn't do that.

So recognition may not have built motivation's generator, to use Herzberg's metaphor, but it supplies the fuel that keeps the generator working. And when enough recognition accumulates, it can evolve, Pokémon-like, into popularity. Some authors have fans, regular readers who seek out their walkthroughs and even help to improve them, which partially explains the acknowledgements section found in many guides [22]. Readers "will tell us problems," an author explained, "and you want to make sure that when you do a big update you can say, 'I fixed this,' and then give credit to the person who told you." This interplay between author and reader creates reputation, which offers its own rewards — some of them financial. One author described the outcome of an accusation of plagiarism.

P4: When [my guide] got taken down there were numerous posts all over the Internet, not only on GameFAQs but on Reddit and other places, where people were like, "Where did that guide go? I was using that guide, it was great." Got to the point where people had literally saved it and posted it on file-sharing things. Like somebody saved it as a PDF and people were basically file-sharing it because the other guide was not up to their standards [...] And after that, I realized how many people backed me, loved my work.

But notes of gratitude or the occasional donation are only two means by which recognition is bestowed. GameFAQs confers symbolic recognition based on a guide's performance. For example, the site counts page views for each guide. Readers cannot see these figures, but authors can, and for some these numbers are a valuable source of extrinsic motivation. The same goes for a guide's size as measured in kilobytes. Each update bumps the number upward, providing a visible and seemingly objective record of accomplishment.

P1: I like those numbers, and that's part of a big reason I write the guides [...] It's nice motivation to see, okay, I sent in the guide, how many hits will it get over a month? Or how many hits does it get when I update it? That's just neat to see.

Guides are also adorned with status symbols — dots, trophies, and stars — that indicate something about a guide's quality (see [Figure 2](#)).

The screenshot shows the 'Grand Theft Auto V' page on GameFAQs. The navigation bar includes Home, FAQs, Cheats, Reviews, Images, Videos, Answers (marked as 'New'), and Board. Below the navigation is the 'GENERAL FAQS' section, which contains a table of guides. Each row in the table represents a guide, with columns for a symbol, the guide title, the date, the author, a rating, and the number of page views. The symbols used include a star, a hollow star, a trophy, a filled circle, and a hollow circle.

Symbol	Guide Title	Date	Author	Rating	Page Views
★	FAQ/Walkthrough <small>HTML</small>	02/15/17	sokkus	0.95	618K
☆	FAQ/Walkthrough	01/01/15	RARusk	2.8	1046K
☆	FAQ/Walkthrough	10/23/13	Bkstunt_31 / Absolute Steve	1.60	696K
🏆	FAQ/Walkthrough	09/24/13	Andrew Testa	1.3	260K
●	FAQ/Walkthrough	04/24/14	Phillinas	2.0	1028K
●	FAQ/Walkthrough (PC)	05/18/17	glenster	1	1088K
●	Video Walkthrough	10/07/13	Bkstunt_31	40 parts	18h43m52s
○	FAQ/Walkthrough	09/21/13	Foppe	0.37	108K

Figure 2: Symbols denoting various guide achievements.

Dots denote a guide's level of completeness. Hollow dots indicate barebones guides that lack walkthroughs, whereas filled dots promise comprehensive coverage. Other symbols recognize a variety of achievements. Trophies indicate FAQ of the Month winners, a contest that carries a modest cash prize. Hollow stars signify guides that readers recommend, while full stars are awarded only to top-rated guides, the very best the site has to offer (GameFAQs, 2017b). In practice, these symbols are little different from a classroom's grades and gold stars, but some authors find them irresistible in the same manner as in-game trophies and achievements, now *de rigueur* for PlayStation and Xbox games.

P4: I think I have one guide that has a really low rating because it was poorly written and still won FAQ of the Month. You know, I went back and redid that entire guide because it actually drove me nuts that it was only a little trophy when I knew it should have been a star. I knew that it wasn't quality enough, not only from ratings but from not getting a star, so I knew I needed to revamp it. And so I basically rewrote it from scratch. So it's a motivator.

Even so, the site's symbols are divisive. For three participants, the dots and stars are meaningless as best. At worst, they can actually mask a guide's flaws.

P5: If you know a guide is subpar — and I'm not going to name guides or names — and GameFAQs paid for it, it makes sense for them to [...] make that their top guide. But that doesn't mean it's any better. And when they kinda take merit out of it like that, I don't know how you can care [about the symbols] anymore. So I don't think it matters like it used to, but I assume for a lot of people it did, at one point.

The symbols, then, are only as powerful as your belief in them, and that belief is reinforced by community recognition. If the GameFAQs community believes that attaining a star is valuable, then a star has value. And if you never chased symbols in the first place, then stars, trophies, and dots are only so many Lucky Charms. But whatever their ultimate value, or lack thereof, recognition remains as important to authors as it was for Herzberg's employees. In summarizing the role of feedback on her work, one author could well have spoken for the group: "I prefer to receive a thank you from someone than seeing a rating for my guides."

Do authors 'care about a few pennies?'

When it comes to compensation, the question is not "Does money motivate GameFAQs authors?" but "To what extent does it motivate them?" Alex Eagleson contends that most authors write for other reasons (*Edge*, 2006), a view consistent with those expressed by this study's participants. Most authors identified other motivators to explain their efforts, ones that if ranked would place above financial incentives. But even as they admitted money's motivational power, some authors minimized its role.

P6. I wouldn't write a FAQ just for the bounty [23]. It also needs to be a game that I intended to write for in the first place and just happened to also have a bounty on it. If anything, it would just motivate me to write faster. [...] I think most FAQ writers just want to help other gamers, so I don't think any of them really care about a few pennies.

For these authors, money is a bonus, a *lagniappe*, a pleasant consequence of work undertaken for other reasons. Such a position evinces a desire to maintain the work's purity, adhering to the volunteer ethic from which GameFAQs grew and which underpins much of fan productivity. This ethic requires that fans endeavor toward higher aims, never spurning money necessarily, but keeping cupidity in check.

P4. I've never been one of those people who's like, "I'm going to write some information just to get attention," or "I'm gonna write a guide for this game so that I can get money from GameFAQs."

Nevertheless, money *is* a motivator. After all, this same author, on realizing she had loyal readers, encouraged them to support her work with donations. Yet even when money comes into it, her work is mainly about "helping as many people as I can versus getting the most money or getting the most recognition possible." She described the time a GameFAQs competitor hired her to write a guide in exchange for a generous sum. In return, the publisher required exclusivity; no derivative could be posted on GameFAQs. She turned down the offer, opting instead for a reduced fee and permission to share a free version of her guide, albeit one without "the images and all that stuff." Exclusivity means paywalls, and paywalls separate readers from information. Thus, accepting the competitor's terms would contravene the desire to "[help] as many people as I can," the motivator that chiefly sustains her work.

Such a decision demonstrates the author's intuitive understanding of the way extrinsic motivators displace intrinsic ones, a process Frey (1993) called the spillover effect, in which a person once rewarded comes to expect a reward thereafter.

P4. Originally, when [authors] first wrote a guide, they wrote it just to help people. But over the years their motivations have changed and it's no longer about helping people but about how much money they can get.

She implies that money need not change attitudes and behaviors, but guarding against that possibility requires self-knowledge and constant vigilance lest you cede "the moral high ground."

P4. Whether I'm getting a couple hundred dollars or I'm getting only a hundred dollars — or I'm not getting paid at all — at least I have the moral high ground, you know what I mean? At least *I never let money and compensation change my views as to why I write* (emphasis mine).

Her statement echoes the sentiments of Wikipedia's egalitarians, whose "politics of credit" require editors to hew to a philanthropic orientation (Forte and Bruckman, 2005) [24]. To do otherwise invites opprobrium.

P4. I detest the authors who I know originally might have started writing because they wanted to help people, but every time they get in a conversation it ends up being about money now. Those people kind of piss me off.

One of "those people" explains why he finds it impossible to ignore the question of compensation, and why he no longer writes for GameFAQs. He stopped contributing "the moment somebody started paying me to do it for them." The site is "a fine place to hone your craft," he explained, but CBS Interactive, GameFAQs' corporate parent, "isn't paying you dick, so I no longer feel compelled to give a mega-corporation huge amounts of my time and effort, and get them ad clicks, when they're not gonna give me anything." Was the relationship always so strained? Now disaffected, this author began his practice as many have before and since.

P5. When I was playing, I found myself taking notes anyway, so it kinda morphs into ... you start taking notes, you start telling your friends things you find, then it kind of fleshes out and you eventually say, well, this is the character I've built and these skills are awesome, and then you're like, well, I can do the whole damn game. And there you are.

But the inchoate motivations glimpsed in this anecdote — the sociability, the challenge — were eventually replaced by resentment, with money at its root. Fandom's gift economies depend on the free and voluntary exchange of transformed and derivative works without expectation of remuneration or even trade. These delicate arrangements arise when "writer and reader create a shared dialogue that results in a feedback loop of gift exchange, whereby the gift of artwork or text is repetitively exchanged for the gift of reaction, which is itself exchanged, with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity" (Hellekson, 2009) [25]. Such solidarity depends on community norms rather than the boundaries and sanctions of policy. When such norms are violated, when a party fails to produce or reciprocate a gift — or worse, when that party attempts to profit from another's labor — resentment curdles into rancor and the community loses its innocence.

P5. I can't question someone else's motivation for [writing as a hobby], but when it's somebody who is actively earning a paycheck, people who have a career off of this, and they're telling me, you know, "We need you, this is how we make our money, but don't you dare ask for a piece of the pie." That's when I get my dander up, that's when it bugs me. Because if no one was making money off of it, you know, *if it was a fan project for everyone, a hobby for everyone, fine.* (emphasis mine)

Although GameFAQs is forthright about this arrangement, as a dissenting author took pains to point out, the lopsided financial relationship creates friction between authors, administrators, and the powers that be [26]. Inveterate hobbyists are less aggrieved, for they draw a larger portion of their motivation from the factors described above. But as one-time hobbies become full-time careers, motivation is reordered accordingly.


P5. It's not just a hobby if you do it professionally, if you get paid, and if the workload is assigned.

In other words, voluntary labor becomes the paid labor of employment, changing its nature and meaning, as well as one's attitudes toward it.



Conclusions

Whatever the nature of their labor, walkthrough authors are fans first. We can surmise their motivations in part by looking to other fan creatives, such as fiction writers and filk singers. But fans are no more homogenous than any other group of people, and walkthroughs differ from other kinds of fan art in their instrumentality and especially in their rigor. While you and I are free, even encouraged, to lose ourselves in game worlds, to suspend our disbelief in the name of fun, guide authors approach games with the mindset of a medical examiner. They do not play games so much as dissect them, which erodes enjoyment of the hobby they like best. Rarely can authors "just enjoy the game;" instead they must "stop every 20 seconds to write something." [27] The reasons for such dedication, especially in the absence of a paycheck's motivation, are only partially answered by the scanty literature on walkthroughs. Even then, you must read across the literature and between its lines, melding morsels of meaning from a dozen scattered citations. In its place, this study provides a more complete and reliable account of authorial motivation as it operates in a largely overlooked culture.

Nevertheless, the study is limited in ways that call for additional research. Qualitative data affirms a respondent's experience, and provides an interpretative context that surveys would otherwise miss. But a factor analysis of survey data, such as the one conducted by Omoto and Snyder (1995), would establish incidence rates and permit findings to be generalized across the population of GameFAQs authors. Furthermore, this study underscores the need for more research on the unsettled questions arising from fan labor. On GameFAQs, the conflict over remuneration troubles reductive binaries. Walkthrough authorship resists easy assumptions about exploitation, even as some authors level that very charge. This disagreement supports Baym and Burnett's (2009) contention that what constitutes exploitation is determined in part by the views of fans themselves. We must heed such views, and examine the differing conditions under which fans work, if we wish to say with any certainty what does or does not constitute exploitation by media producers. Such work is newly urgent as each of us begins to resemble such fans. We may lack the singlemindedness of their passions, but the lines separating our work from play grow blurrier all the time [28]. As the Internet shrinks under the dominance of a few tech conglomerates, as we spend more time on their platforms, we are no longer mere browsers, but knowledge workers too. Our every tweet, review, status update, and photograph are scraped as data and stored in server farms that beggar the imagination. Such data are immensely valuable to those with the ability to process, package, and sell them. So what, if anything, are we owed for our contributions? Talk about a walkthrough worth writing. 

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Notes

1. A walkthrough is technically the portion of a guide that helps players navigate the “critical path,” the shortest distance between a game’s beginning and end. Guides subsume walkthroughs, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and other kinds of metagame documentation, *e.g.*, cheats, side quests, and plot summaries. On GameFAQs, as here, walkthrough, FAQ, and guide are used interchangeably.
2. According to its terms of use (<https://www.cbsinteractive.com/legal/cbsi/terms-of-use>), CBS interactive claims a “a non-exclusive, worldwide, royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, fully sublicenseable license to use, reproduce, archive, edit, translate, create derivative works of, make available, distribute, sell, display, perform, transmit, broadcast and in any other way exploit those User Submissions, and any names, voices, likenesses and other identifying information of persons that is part of those User Submissions, in any form, media, software, or technology of any kind now known or developed in the future, including, without limitation, for developing, manufacturing, and marketing products.” (CBS Interactive, 2017).
3. https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation/transcript.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Consalvo, 2003, p. 328.
6. Burn, 2006, p. 91.
7. Ashton and Newman, 2012, p. 226.
8. Newman, 2011, p. 121.
9. In this case, “ownership and identity” includes preservation work. Andrew Schultz explains: “Technology may be obsolete, but the good games that ran on obsolete technology never will be. I enjoy being able to write for a game and know I’m the first person to save that memory in detail” (*Edge*, 2006, p. 62). This supports Newman’s (2011) argument that walkthroughs play a crucial role in the documentation and preservation of gameplay.
10. *Edge*, 2006, p. 62.
11. Top 50 contributors as measured by complete FAQs as of October 2016, the month I began soliciting participants. Retrieved from <http://faqs.darkspyro.net/gfaqs/201610.html>.
12. For one author, motivation came not only from people “seeking help on the message board” but from “seeing a really bad guide for a game and thinking I could make a much better one to help people.”
13. The NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) Completion Project, for example, began in 2004 and is ongoing as of this writing.
14. Ashton and Newman, 2012, p. 238.
15. “The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, ‘What? You too? I thought I was the only one.’” C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960, p. 65).
16. <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/145/115>.
17. Giddings, 2006, p. 22.
18. Even the straightforward have their poetic moments, however. This same author described a guide in which she quoted dialogue from a favorite film, one that helped her empathize with the game’s antagonist — an introspective rupture in the second-person point of view that governs her writing.
19. FreeCell is a solitaire card game included with Microsoft Windows.
20. Forte and Bruckman, 2005, p. 4.
21. This disclaimer, found on AbsoluteSteve’s guide to *The Last of Us*, is typical of many walkthroughs on GameFAQs: “This may *not* be reproduced under any circumstances except for personal, private use. It may *not* be placed on any web site or otherwise distributed publicly without advance written permission. Use of this guide on any other web site or as a part of any public display is strictly prohibited, and a violation of copyright. Do *not* copy or alter information slightly from this guide, and do not present it as your own. The creation of this guide took a lot of time, please respect that.”
22. See, for example, peach freak’s *Doom II* walkthrough (<https://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/197142-doom-ii/faqs/27355>), which thanks readers who submitted information and corrections but also id Software for developing the game, Microsoft for creating the operating system on which the game runs, and CJayC, GameFAQs’s chief administrator, for his work on the site.

23. GameFAQs offers cash prizes — bounties — in order to entice contributors to write guides for popular games that lack them. Only the first author to submit a finished guide may claim its bounty. As of this writing, GameFAQs had 11 active bounties, including a top prize of US\$300 for a comprehensive guide to *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*.

24. Forte and Bruckman, 2005, p. 4.

25. Hellekson, 2009, p. 115.

26. See, for example, this forum post (<https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/2000094-gamefaqs-contributors-faqs-and-guides/73719399?page=2>) from February 2016 in which author AbsoluteSteve asks, "Why is it fair that the boss of CBSi (not CBS, but CBSi) gets hundreds of thousands (if not a few million), but the people building the actual content on the bottom, for one of his 'products' he 'manages', are treated like expendable garbage?"

27. From my interview with participant four.

28. As succinctly encapsulated by 'playbor,' a portmanteau coined by Julian Kücklich.

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Appendix: Interview protocol

Background and process

1. When did you begin regularly visiting GameFAQs? What were the circumstances, to the best of your recollection?
2. How did you go from reader to writer? Why did you decide to write your first guide?
3. What about the first guide, or the last one, inspired you to write another? What keeps you going?
4. Think about the games you choose to analyze: what is it about a given game that makes you want to write a guide for it?
5. Tell me about your writing process. How does the guide take shape, evolve?
6. Generally speaking, how long does it take to write a guide?
7. What makes a guide good? How do you know it's good?
8. What is the most important consideration when writing a walkthrough?

Plain text and ASCII art

1. Do you write in plain text or HTML? If plain text, why adhere to a superseded format?
2. Is there a push, from administrators or community members, to use one format over another?
3. Do you create or use ASCII art? Functional (e.g., maps) or aesthetic (e.g., banners, footers)? Why adorn a guide with such art?

Guide structure and features

1. Game guides are highly and uniformly structured. What I mean is, the same sections tend to appear from guide to guide. Is it important to adopt a conventional structure? Are there conventions that, if missing, would annoy readers or undermine your credibility?
2. Why track updates and changes so meticulously?
3. What do you make of Seth Giddings's description of a typical walkthrough? He calls it "a determinedly non-literary work, dispassionate, stripped of non-instrumental description and of most subjective reflection on the writer's part."

Reader-author relationship

1. Does it matter that your readers may only encounter fragments of your guides, those parts that pertain to their problems?
2. What kind of feedback do you receive from readers?
3. One kind of feedback, the correction or reader contribution, is common, and GameFAQs authors are scrupulous about attribution. Apart from it being the right thing to do, why are authors so honor bound?
4. Is harassment a problem?
5. How do others, especially non-gamers, perceive your hobby?
6. Some gamers feel 'ego pain' or remorse after consulting a walkthrough. What do you make of this reaction on the part of some readers?

Competition

1. GameFAQs confers symbols of recognition on certain guides: trophies, stars, and filled dots. Do these symbols influence your work?
2. To what extent is competition a motivator?

Ownership, exploitation, remuneration

1. Have you ever received compensation for your guides?
2. To what extent do bounties motivate your writing?
3. In what other ways are you rewarded for your guide work?
4. Tell me about official strategy guides, such as those published by Future Press. 'Official' implies greater legitimacy; do you see it that way? Do you or did you aspire to this level of recognition?
5. Tell me about the copyright notice that accompanies your guides. How important is such a claim?
6. To what extent is infringement or theft a problem in the community?
7. Where else does your work appear? If exclusive to GameFAQs, why?
8. Guide authors are largely unpaid for their work, yet CBSi profits from it by selling advertising and product referrals on GameFAQs.com. How do you feel about this arrangement?
9. Have you read CBSi's terms of service?

Conclusion

1. Have you ever been doubtful of the activity, or was there a time when you considered quitting?
2. What is the role of walkthroughs in the age of YouTube?
3. Is there anything you wish I had asked, or anything I should know that was not covered by previous questions?

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What motivates the authors of video game walkthroughs and FAQs? A study of six GameFAQs contributors by Michael J. Hughes.

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