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# Writing Game Journalism in School

## Student Voices on Games and Game Culture

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we explore how students engage in journalistic writing activities relating to video games and game culture. The paper is based on a pilot study with student texts and interviews relating to the development of the online learning resource *spiljournalist.dk*, which allows Danish secondary students to publish journalistic articles in terms of game reviews, columns, and feature stories. The analytical findings indicate that students position themselves as writers through 3 different voices. The “gamer” students primarily based their articles on their own knowledge and experience as gamers. By contrast, the nongamer students tended to write more critically about games and game culture from an outsider’s perspective. Finally, a third group of students primarily positioned themselves as journalists.

### Introduction

It is widely documented that children spend a considerable amount of time on playing games. As an example, Danish boys between 11 and 13 years play games for an average of more than two hours each day (World Health Organization, 2016). As a part of their game activities, many players spend time navigating, reading, and producing various types of game-related texts. In this way, gaming activities involve a broad variety of literacy practices, which are often related in quite complex ways and tend to serve many different purposes depending on what games are being played, how they are played, where they are played, and with whom they are played (Gee, 2003). Empirical studies have shown valuable findings when extending game-related literacy practices into formal school contexts—especially by letting students read or produce different types of paratexts such as game guides or wikis (Apperley & Beavis, 2011; Hanghøj, 2017; Steinkuehler, 2011). However, in spite of this promising learning potential, game-related literacy practices have not (yet) become a part of mainstream first-language (L1) education.

One of the major reasons for using game experiences to develop new literacies in formal education is that students are rarely given the opportunity to produce meaningful texts, which serve clear purposes and have readers in mind who go beyond the teacher and the school context (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). The scope of these challenges has recently been documented in a Danish context through a large-scale mixed-methods study of student assignments and student texts (Slot, Hansen, & Bremholm, 2016). According to this study, students in Danish as L1 subject primarily spend their time on filling out skill-oriented assignments as well as analyzing literature through premade templates. The students’ texts primarily address their teachers and follow predefined assessment criteria with little or no reference to out-of-school contexts. In this way, these writing assignments can be understood as “schoolish” as they primarily exist and are carried out within the norms and values of the school domain.

In this paper, we report early findings from a design-based research (Barab & Squire, 2004) project, which explores how secondary students in Danish as L1 subject engage in writing game journalism across different genres such as game reviews, columns, or feature stories. The Game Journalist project is based on the assumption that games may provide a meaningful context to students when writing

journalism, regardless of their game preferences or level of game experience. Based on our pilot study, this paper addresses the following research question: How do students position themselves as writers through different voices across in- and out-of-school domains when writing game journalistic articles?

### Case: Game Journalism

The pilot study was conducted by using a WordPress blog prototype for the spiljournalist.dk (gamejournalist.dk) concept, which is currently under development. The aim of the spiljournalist.dk concept is twofold. First of all, the website will serve as a learning resource, where secondary teachers and students in Danish as L1 subject can find relevant inspiration and concepts, which can help them to write journalistic articles about games and game culture. The articles must be written in different journalistic genres such as game reviews, feature stories, or columns/commentaries. These genres reflect established modes of writing game journalism, which involve a wide body of different types of journalistic paratexts relating to games that are produced by both a broad mix of dedicated gamers and professional game journalists (Nieborg & Shivoren, 2009; Zagal, Ladd, & Johnson, 2009).

Second, teachers using the website are invited to submit student articles of broader journalistic interest and sufficient quality to the editorial team at spiljournalist.dk. Based on the teachers' recommendations, a selected number of student articles are then made publicly available on the spiljournalist.dk website to other potential readers of game journalism. In this way, the spiljournalist.dk concept both represents a formal learning resource and a potential gateway for students to reach a broader audience of children and young people interested in games and game culture.

As a part of the concept, students should be allowed to produce and publish journalistic videos or podcasts instead of writing traditional texts. This reflects the ways in which many gamers do not necessarily read traditional game journalistic texts but gather information about games and game culture through game videos, which are mediated through social media such as YouTube and game-streaming channels such as Twitch (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2016). However, the video journalism and podcast formats were not explored in the current pilot study.

### Theoretical Perspectives

We understand the process of writing journalism about games at school through the theory of scenario-based education (Hanghøj, Misfeldt, Bundsgaard, & Foug, in press). The aim of the theory is to conceptualize educational activities and scenarios, which enable the interplay of knowledge practices across in-school and out-of-school domains. According to this theory, domains can be understood as clusters, or families, of different literacy practices, which involve different criteria for what counts and does not count as valid knowledge (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). More specifically, it may be argued that students writing about games involve interplay of knowledge practices across four different domains: the pedagogical domain of schooling, the domain of disciplinary knowledge (Danish as L1 subject), the domain of everyday life (e.g., game activities), and the scenario-based domain of game journalism, which primarily exist outside school contexts.

The dynamic relationship among the four domains and knowledge practices involved in students' game journalistic writing activities is illustrated in Figure 1.

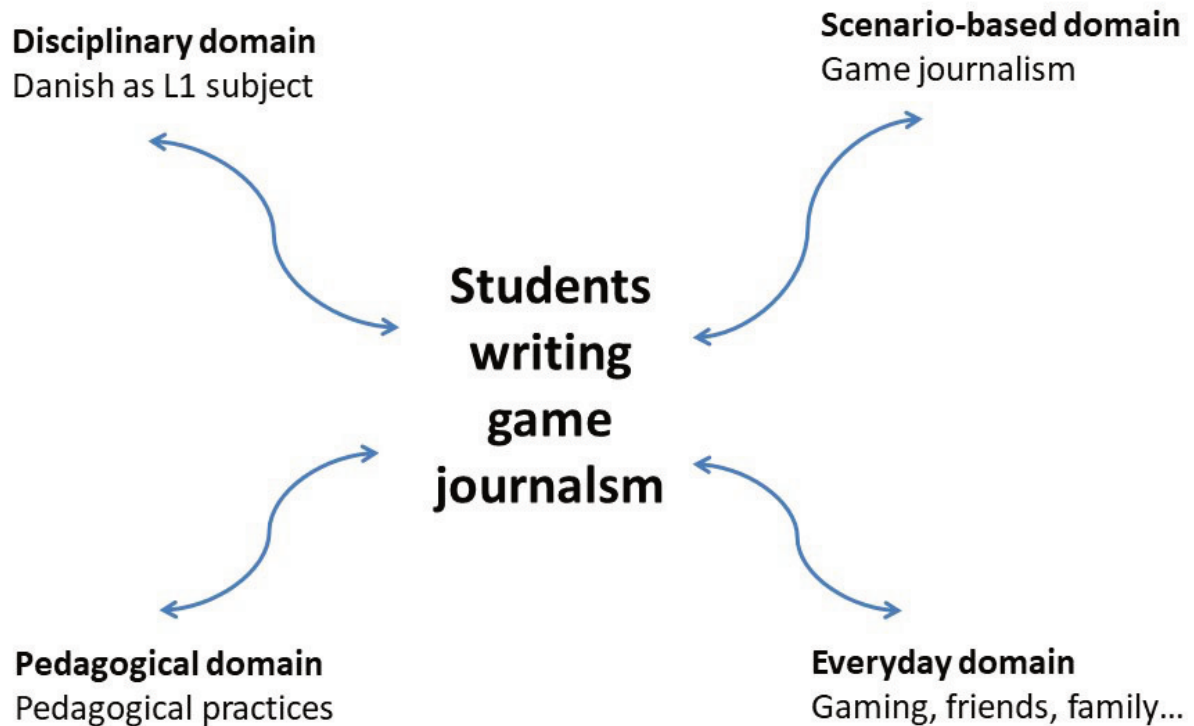


Figure 1. The interplay of knowledge practices across domains.

By using the framework of scenario-based education it becomes possible to understand how students' game journalistic writing activities involve knowledge practices from all the four domains. More specifically, the domain of schooling refers to the institutionalized pedagogical practices recognized as "school only," for example, practices deriving from the special asymmetric relationship between teacher and student. This involves the teachers' everyday practices for giving overt instruction or guiding students through writing processes and providing them with feedback. The disciplinary domain refers to the subject-specific discipline of Danish, which implies specific disciplinary topics and genre-specific concepts relevant to writing game journalistic texts. Third, the scenario-based domain refers to the professional practice of game journalism, which involves specific criteria for what counts and does not count as journalistic writing—for example, whether a feature story is recognizable as newsworthy or whether a game review provides correct information about the game being reviewed. Finally, the everyday domain refers to nonspecialized knowledge practices that mainly exist outside school contexts, such as the students' everyday knowledge and experience with digital games.

In order to understand how students experienced the interplay of knowledge practices across the four domains when writing game journalistic texts, we follow the perspective of New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). This means that we are interested in understanding the students' writing

activities as *literacy practices*, which involve both the students' game journalistic articles as written texts as well as the students' reflections and social practices that relate to the students' texts.

We are particularly interested in how the students' *positioned* themselves and how their texts expressed different *voices*. According to dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2001; Ligorio, 2010), all human beings continually take up different *I-positions* as they communicate and interact with others. This means that students may position themselves and be positioned quite differently in different situations. Moreover, we also wish to analyze how the students' literacy practices become expressed through different *voices*, a concept inspired by the dialogical philosophy of Bakhtin (1981), which here refers to the students' "assimilation, reworking, and reaccentuating of other voices" (Sperling & Appleman, 2011, p. 74).

## Methodological Approach

The development and research related to spiljournalist.dk follows the methodological approach of design-based research (Barab & Squire, 2004). This means that the pilot study is a part of an ongoing series of design interventions, which aim to generate local theories and refine the use of spiljournalist.dk through iterations between web design processes, implementation of the concept in classroom settings, students' writing and publishing journalistic texts, data analysis of student texts, and redesign of the website. Moreover, the spiljournalist.dk concept is a part of a larger research project titled GBL21: Game-Based Learning in the 21st Century (2017–2022), which aims to implement the use of spiljournalist.dk together with other game-related learning resources at 20 different Danish schools (gbl21.aau.dk).

The data for the pilot study were based on use of spiljournalist.dk in two different classes (one seventh grade and one eighth grade) at two different secondary schools. After the students had written their articles, the two teachers were interviewed about their choice of student texts to be published. Moreover, interviews were conducted with the six students from the seventh grade about their gamer habits, their articles, and their experience of writing game journalism. The six selected students were interviewed in pairs. All interviews and student texts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to identify key categories and analytical themes relating to the students' voices as writers of game journalism.

## Analysis

Based on the thematic analysis of all the students' texts and the interview data, we have identified three analytical themes in relation to how the students positioned themselves through different voices as writers of game journalism. The first theme relates to writing about games as experienced from a gamer or insider perspective. The second theme relates to being able to write critically about games and game culture as seen from a nongamer or outsider perspective. The third and final theme relates to those students who explicitly identified with the process and identity of journalistic writing. The three themes are explored below through three examples with three different students.

### Analytical Theme #1: Writing Through the Voice of a Gamer

The first theme emerges in relation to those students who wrote articles from a *gamer perspective*. By this term we refer to students who had considerable game experience and were explicitly interested in

games and game culture. Going through all articles from both classes as well as the interviews with the six students from the seventh-grade class, the gamer voice was most strongly represented among boys, who often wrote enthusiastic columns or reviews about game technology and games they liked, such as *FIFA* or *Rocket League*.

Louis's column is a good example of a student writing journalism from a gamer perspective. In his column about "Game communities," Louis writes about how it can be fun to play multiplayer computer games and how this might evolve into friendships, where everybody learns and knows how to play the same game. At the same time, he emphasizes how gaming communities may also lead to negative experiences, especially when strangers become "nasty" and use toxic language toward newcomers in a game.

When interviewed, Louis described how his column was aimed at different aspects of multiplayer gaming communities. Louis regularly played shooters (*Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*) and casual games (*Hay Day*). However, he did not have much experience with communities and friendships surrounding multiplayer games such as *Counter-Strike*, which can create a strong sense of team spirit but often require players to deal with toxic language. He used the column as an opportunity to find out more about the topic by interviewing one of his classmates who played *Counter-Strike* a lot and he also conducted online research by searching for information to include in his column.

In summary, Louis's text is written through the voice of a gamer as he clearly identifies positively with games and game culture. In this way, he used the assignment as a welcome opportunity to write about something that interested him, that is, the friendships and communities of multiplayer gaming, and as a way to do research and learn more about the topic.

#### Analytical Theme #2: Writing Through the Voice of a Nongamer

The second theme concerns those articles written by students who either had limited game experience or did not identify with games or game culture. Writing from an outsider's perspective, the nongamer students often based their articles on experiences and observations of the gaming habits of their relatives, friends, classmates, or stories found on the Internet. Most of the students writing in the nongamer voice were girls. Their articles often presented a quite negative or critical attitude toward game culture—for example, by criticizing other students for their "hidden" gaming activities during class or interviewing their grandparents about the dangers and lack of meaning involved in playing *Pokémon GO* on the streets.

We will exemplify the nongamer or outsider perspective with Ása's column "Waste of life!," which presents a rather harsh critique of game culture. Her column is based on the provocative statement that gaming is basically "a waste of time" as it makes young people "sit in front of a screen all day." Ása is well aware that she is being quite provocative; as she sums up her criticism: "To most people at my age, this probably sounds like mumbo-jumbo. I would be lynched if the boys in my class read this!"

In the interview, Ása said that she did not play video games on a regular basis but had tried to play *Call of Duty* several times with her cousin. She was very critical about her classmates' collaborative game activities and her negative attitude had made it difficult for her to get started on her article. After being encouraged by her teacher to use the negative attitude for an article, Ása then decided to fuel her critical stance into a provocative column about game culture. She did see some positive aspects in playing in groups or "leagues," as this can be seen as a form of "group work" and "might even learn them

something, which can be used later on.” However, as she concludes in her column: “But in a workplace it won’t work to talk in acronyms or just keep flaming other people.”

In summary, Ása’s text is written through the voice of a nongamer, in which she mostly identifies with negative aspects of games and game culture. Moreover, she uses the column as an opportunity to express her own opinions and deliberately make fun at her game-playing classmates in order to position herself as a provocative writer.

### Analytical Theme #3: Writing Through the Voice of a Journalist

The third theme concerns those students who directly identified with the aim and criteria for writing journalism as a professional practice. These students were actively engaged in the various steps of the journalistic writing process—for example, by making sure to select an interesting topic and journalistic genre, finding the right angle, conducting valid research, quoting different sources correctly, and working with the language of their articles. Some of these students went on field trips to game stores or board game cafés in order to do research. This group of students involved both boys and girls and the group was not so divided in terms of gender as the two previous themes.

As an example of a student writing with an explicit journalistic voice, we will focus on Madison’s feature story “Women ALSO know how to play.” The feature is about the stereotypic views on gaming among boys and girls. It centers on a visit to the local game store and an interview with a sales clerk about his views on games for girls and for boys. The sales clerk is quoted as saying that only few girls come to the store to buy games and that he categorizes the girl gamers as “tomboys.” Similarly, he also categorizes the boys who buy “unisex games” such as *Just Dance* or *Sims*. The article critically discusses the gender gap by asking: “What does it take to break this division?” In order to emphasize the problem, Madison has included a photo from the store, where she has added a “STOP—NO GIRLS” sign (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Madison's manipulated photo for her feature story.

Madison's article further challenges the stereotypic view of female gamers by acknowledging that there are also girls who clearly identify with being gamers. The article mentions "Cupquake," who is a YouTube gaming commentator famous for her game videos on *Minecraft* and *The Sims*. The article describes how Cupquake acts as role model to many girls—for example, by communicating that it is unfair that girl gamers should necessarily be seen as tomboys.

In the interview, Madison described how she used to play *The Sims* and *Grand Theft Auto*, but that she was not particularly interested in writing about games and game culture. Instead, Madison expressed a clear interest in becoming a journalist and describes herself as somewhat "perfectionist" when it comes to making a great article. It was very important for her to take her own photos for the article, create a great layout, and conduct thorough research through interviews and online searches. Moreover, she made sure to involve several of her classmates to give feedback on her article in order to improve the language. In this way, Madison clearly positioned herself as writing more through the voice of a critical journalist than either a gamer or a nongamer.

## Discussion

Following Bakhtin (1981), the analytical themes illustrate how the students' texts are "hybridized" in that the students' different voices bear traces of different discourses across both in- and out-of-school domains. According to Bakhtin, all texts are created out of borrowed language, but writers play a unique role in shaping their own words and texts:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (pp. 293–294)

In this way, the students' voices as writers of game journalism can be considered as a repertoire or a unique combination of different discursive resources. As each of the students takes on the new discourses he or she takes ownership of these voices by assimilating, reworking, and reaccentuating them into texts, which may serve both to position them as gamers, nongamers, or as journalists. The texts also show that the choice and affordances of specific journalistic genres was quite important. Thus, several of the students such as Ása and Louis chose to write columns as the least difficult choice, as they could directly express their own attitudes and opinions. It was clearly more demanding, but also satisfying, to write feature stories as Madison did, as this required field trips and nuanced reportage.

The analytical findings indicate that the students' voices as writers often developed around their interest in the social aspects of gaming. This sometimes involved the development of positive social relations such as friendships, knowledge sharing about games, and being able to work in groups. At other times, the students focused more on negative aspects around gaming, such as the use of toxic language, the risk of exclusion by other players, games as a disturbing element in class, or seeing gaming as a meaningless escapism. These findings indicate that games and game culture represent powerful affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2010), from which the students have experiences with both being included and excluded. Many of the students' articles can be seen as an exploration of positive and negative aspects of game culture, which are predominantly written through the voice of either gamers (primarily positive) or nongamers (primarily negative).

The findings also show a clearly gendered difference between how the boys and girls approached the task of writing game journalism. The boys generally showed more positive attitudes toward the topic than the girls. It is well documented that boys in this age group play games more than girls (WHO, 2016). At the same time, it is problematic to reduce this difference to a matter of gendered game preferences. The interviews with the teachers and the students made it clear that many of the girls had considerable game experience—for example, with playing casual games, *The Sims*, or *Grand Theft Auto*. The main difference was that the girls to a lesser degree identified themselves with gaming activities and game culture in the same way as the boys. As Madison's article and interview showed, the girls feared that a strong identification with games and game culture would make them be seen as "one of the boys." This finding corresponds with other empirical studies of female gamers—for example, of women who are dedicated players of *The Sims*, but who still do not identify with being "gamers" (Gee & Hayes, 2010), or female online gamers, who develop various coping strategies in order to respond or avoid being harassed by male players (Cote, 2017). Another explanation for why the girls in the pilot study showed more negative or critical attitudes toward games may be that they to a lesser degree viewed gaming as a "serious" or meaningful activity. In that sense, their articles focused more on meeting the aims of the disciplinary domain of L1 as well as the aims of journalism as a professional practice.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored how students' game journalistic writing is expressed through different voices, which refer to different knowledge practices across in- and out-of-school domains. The findings indicate that the students generally become engaged in writing about games and game culture, whether their engagement is based on interest in games, critical attitudes toward gaming, or an overall



identification with writing journalism. At the same time, the findings also make it clear that it is important to focus on social aspects of games and challenge gender stereotypes when working with the topic. These findings will inform further development and large-scale implementation of the spiljournalist.dk concept, which we hope can provide students with a meaningful context for their writing activities within Danish as L1 subject.

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