

# Positioning students as game journalists: Transforming everyday experiences into professional discourse

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present findings from a study which is part of an ongoing Design-Based Research project which explores how students can transform their everyday experiences with and attitudes towards games into game journalism within the context of Danish as a subject. Based on a theoretical framework combining domain theory with Ivanič's theory of writing as identity construction, we analysed selected student articles and student interviews from four secondary classrooms (Grades 7–9). The findings show that some students mainly positioned themselves through a *personal discourse*, which was highly influenced by their positive, negative or ambivalent attitudes to their chosen game journalistic topics. Other students mainly positioned themselves through a *professional journalistic discourse* by means of critical reflection and representation of multiple perspectives on their topics. Based on the students' high level of engagement in the writing process and the wide range of possible selves adopted by the student writers, we concluded that games and game culture represent a topic well-suited for transforming students' everyday experiences and attitudes into journalistic texts.

**Keywords:** *Student positioning; domain theory; games and literacies; journalism*

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## Introduction

Schools have been teaching students how to write in first language (L1) education within well-established genres for centuries. However, the massive development and widespread use of online digital technologies over the last decades has led to significant changes in children's consumption and production of text outside of school contexts. These changes are given limited attention in school contexts

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(Potter & McDougall, 2017). Moreover, there exists a gap or disconnect amongst the pedagogical approaches, genres and topics used to engage students in disciplinary writing activities and students' own online interests and repertoire of digital literacy practices, which form a core part of their everyday life (Jocson & Rosa, 2015). Researchers have attempted to bridge the gap between out-of-school and in-school literacies by exploring intersections between students' everyday and school-related funds of knowledge by creating a valuable 'third space' (Moje et al., 2004), connecting digital media and popular culture with literacy practices at school (Alvermann, 2010) or facilitating interest-driven writing for audiences beyond the classroom (Schmier, Johnson & Watulak, 2018). However, as Moje (2017) has argued, such initiatives to bridge the gap are relatively rare and have had little impact on mainstream L1 education, which is becoming increasingly oriented towards standards, tests and accountability in an era of global competition amongst educational systems. Moreover, the discussion of in-school versus out-of-school literacies tends to create (and recreate) a problematic dichotomy, which is important to transcend by acknowledging how 'both everyday and disciplinary discourses are socially and culturally produced and mediated' (Moje, 2017, p. 240). This brings us to the aim of this paper, which is to explore how Danish lower secondary students position themselves as writers within L1 education when producing journalism based on their knowledge of, interests in and attitudes towards games and game culture.

It is widely documented that children spend a considerable amount of time playing digital games. A comprehensive World Health Organization (WHO) study found that Danish children rank amongst the most frequent game players in Europe: 73% of the boys and 39% of the girls 13 years of age reported playing games for more than two hours each weekday (WHO, 2016). As the numbers suggest, there are striking differences between boys and girls' gamer habits in relation to how often they play, but there are also important gender differences in terms of what games are played, as well as in what contexts the games are played. A representative study of gamer habits amongst Danish children found that a majority of boys prefer competitive multi-player gaming, whereas a majority of girls use games as an individual pastime as a break or for 'zooming out' – e.g. from intense communication on social media (Thorhauge & Gregersen, 2019). Similar differences amongst boys and girls' gamer habits can be found in the other Nordic countries (e.g. Medietilsynet, 2018; Statens Medieråd, 2019). At the same time, it is important to avoid stereotypical player profiles, especially in relation to female players, who seem to feel more restricted by being categorised as 'gamers' (Gee & Hayes, 2010). Instead, we need to understand how children's individual game habits change over time with specific games trending for shorter or longer periods as a part of their everyday life (Gilje & Silseth, 2018).

Seen from the perspective of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Rowsell & Pahl, 2015), there are several good reasons to take a closer look at the literacy practices which surround game play. Players often spend time

searching for, navigating, reading, sharing and producing various types of game-related texts – e.g. by viewing Let’s Play videos on YouTube in relation to specific games, following live streaming by famous gamers on Twitch.tv, attending esports events, finding cheat codes, posting comments in gamer forums on Reddit or reading game reviews in newspapers and game magazines. In this way, gaming activities involve a broad variety of game-related *paratexts* (Consalvo, 2007), which are consumed and produced in complex ways and tend to serve different purposes for players depending on *what* games are played, *how* they are played, *where* they are played and with *whom* they are played. Paratexts may also reflect broader ideological discourses on gaming articulated by stakeholders, such as psychologists, journalists, researchers, policymakers, educators and parents, who tend to promote polarised positions on either the perceived benefits or drawbacks of gaming (Shaw, 2010). Examples of positive aspects include the development of friendships and 21st century skills through game play, whereas negative aspects include conflicts between parents and children when regulating game time or an increase of aggression when exposed to violent video games.

By tapping students’ existing knowledge and broader attitudes towards games, game-related paratexts, such as game guides, reviews and trailers, can be used as valuable inspiration for teaching activities in the L1 classroom (Apperley & Beavis, 2011). Working with analysis and production of paratexts enables students to engage in *critical reflection* when finding and evaluating online sources that relate to game activities. Moreover, paratexts represent authentic texts in the sense that they can provide students with the opportunity to produce meaningful texts that serve clear purposes and have readers in mind, and that may go beyond the teacher and the school context. In this way, paratexts can be an important gateway to bridging out-of-school game literacies with the school-based literacies of L1 education. However, in spite of the promising learning potential of paratexts, the transformation of students’ game experiences into recognized school genres is still relatively uncommon within mainstream L1 education.

In the current study, we analysed secondary students’ production of game journalism as a particular approach to working with game-related paratexts within the context of L1. The study is part of an ongoing Design-Based Research (DBR) project (Barab & Squire, 2004) with the Game Journalist teaching materials. The materials were developed in collaboration by researchers at Aalborg University and the National Centre for Reading, a publisher of learning materials and a provider of digital tools and blog solutions to Danish schools. Based on data collected from the teaching units using the teaching materials at three lower secondary schools, we explored the following research question: *How do secondary students position themselves as writers in relation to in-school and out-of-school domains when producing game journalism in Danish as L1?* As we will show in our analysis, the students became highly engaged in the writing process, but positioned themselves in quite different ways based on their attitudes towards and experiences with games.

## Teaching game journalism

The Game Journalist teaching materials were designed to be used for a teaching unit with 12–15 lessons aimed at lower secondary students (Grades 7–9) studying Danish as L1 to help students write journalistic articles about games and game culture. The teaching materials aimed to scaffold the students' writing process by gradually linking their out-of-school game experiences and attitudes towards games with the demands of writing journalistic texts. The teaching unit begins with a collective brainstorm in the class in order to map and select game-related topics. Next, the students are grouped into editorial teams with similar topics, where they conduct online research by searching for relevant sources and background information. The students must then find a journalistic angle on their topic and select a relevant journalistic genre for their article. They can choose between classic journalistic genres (e.g. game review, feature, background story and reportage), opinion-based articles (e.g. debate, commentary) or a podcast format where the students act as hosts for their invited guests in the 'studio'. In order to support teachers and students, the teaching materials include descriptions and example texts for each of the different journalistic genres. Based on their research, choices of journalistic angles, sources and genres, students produce their articles while receiving ongoing feedback from the teacher and their classmates before they finally publish their journalistic articles in an online game magazine that collects all the articles from their class.

## Theoretical framework

In order to analyse how students position themselves towards writing game journalism, we have used two theoretical sources of inspiration: *scenario-based domain theory* (Hanghøj, Misfeldt, Bundsgaard, & Fougst, 2018) and Ivanič's (1998) theory of *writing as identity construction*. By combining these two perspectives, we have been able to both describe the overall cultural transformation of student experiences across in- and out-of-school domains, as well as focus more specifically on different identity aspects of the student writers. We will now outline the two complementary perspectives.

When students write works of journalism about games, they take part in a specific *educational scenario* (Hanghøj et al., 2018). The scenario requires the students to imagine and perform domain-specific journalistic practices, such as angling their topics, locating sources and representing their ideas in specific journalistic genres which address potential readers outside of school. In this way, the students participate in an open-ended challenge, which involves an interplay of knowledge practices across in-school and out-of-school domains. According to NLS (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000), a practice involves recognizable ways of doing things for shared social purposes which may involve literacy practices such as reading and writing texts at home or at school. Domains represent clusters or families of different literacy practices. Moreover, domains involve different validity criteria for what counts and does not count as legitimate knowledge (Hanghøj et al., 2018). In this way,

students writing journalism about games involves a *transformation* of experiences and knowledge practices across four different domains: the domain of everyday life, the pedagogical domain of schooling, the disciplinary domain of Danish as L1 and the scenario-based domain of producing game journalism.

The *domain of everyday life* concerns students' lifeworlds, such as their life at home with family or with friends. This corresponds with Gee's notion of 'primary Discourses', which concerns the students' 'culturally distinctive way of being an 'everyday person', that is, a non-specialised, non-professional person' (Gee, 2007, p. 156). In this way, the everyday domain concerns the students' feelings, habits, beliefs and affinities, which may or may not involve participation in specific game domains. In this study, we found that the students had quite different game experiences and different ways of positioning themselves towards games as a *cultural phenomenon*, which both created and challenged social relations with their classmates, friends and family members.

The second domain is the *pedagogical domain of schooling*, which relates to the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student and the norms and expectations of what it means to participate in classroom teaching. These institutional and communicative practices are 'school only', as they only occur in school contexts, but are always locally defined. The pedagogical domain has not been the core issue in this study, but it surfaces in the students' texts and in our interview data in relation to the students' habit of playing games in classroom contexts – e.g. when playing games on mobile phones under the teachers' radar. In this way, several of the students have explicitly contrasted game activities with school activities.

Thirdly, the *disciplinary domain of Danish as L1 subject* concerns how the students are 'doers of Danish as a subject', i.e. how students participate in and experience the L1 subject. When interviewed, the students in this study were generally quite positive towards writing game journalism compared with their everyday experience of Danish as an L1 subject, which they mainly related to working with spelling, grammar and reading books. However, it is important to stress that the students valued quite different aspects of the teaching unit – e.g. being able to write about their favourite game, working with different journalistic angles on their chosen topic or learning about journalism in order to prepare for their final exam in the ninth grade. The teaching unit appealed to the students as an engaging alternative to everyday teaching in Danish as a subject, but for various reasons.

The fourth domain is the *scenario-based domain of game journalism*, which refers to the students' assigned role in the teaching unit. Even though all the students in this study had experience playing games, they were rarely familiar with reading or producing professional journalism about games. Thus, they evidenced limited experience or knowledge of what it means to work as a journalist and produce journalistic texts. Eventually, the articles they produced differed widely in journalistic quality and address a rather mixed audience, which not only involved their teachers and classmates but also potential readers outside of the classroom – e.g. fellow gamers, siblings, parents, friends or an even wider audience.

The dynamic relationship amongst the knowledge practices of the four domains involved in the students' game journalistic writing activities is illustrated in Figure 1:

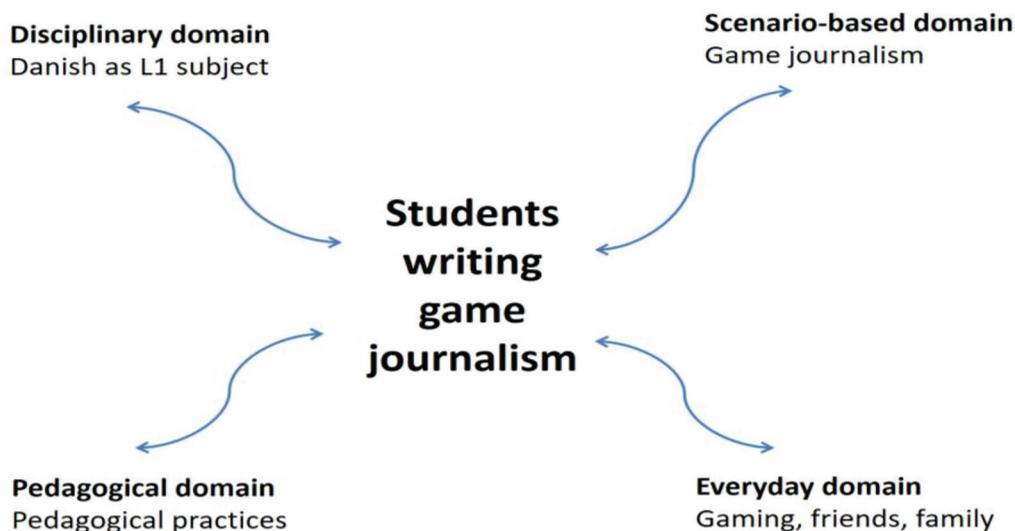


Figure 1. Interplay of knowledge practices across domains

When the students wrote game journalism, they positioned and expressed themselves through multiple *voices* in relation to the different domains (Bakhtin, 1986). In this way, the students' texts became multi-voiced as they represented both their own personal voices (e.g. their subjective experiences, interests and values in relation to playing games), as well as more objective or generalised voices in relation to what it means to be writing journalism for a potential public audience. In this sense, the voice of each student's article involved both an *individual* aspect and a *social* aspect, related to his or her social sense of broader discourses (Sperling & Appleman, 2011).

We will now introduce the second theoretical perspective, which we have used to analyse the students' positions and use of voices across domains by focusing on different aspects of their *identities as writers* (Ivanič, 1998). According to Ivanič, writing is primarily a process of identity construction which involves four aspects. The first identity aspect of writing is the *autobiographical self*, i.e. the writer's unique self. This is the sense of who the writer is as a person, a sense s/he brings to the act of writing. This aspect draws on the students' pre-existing knowledge and experiences with games and with writing. Returning to the previously mentioned domain theory, this aspect of writer identity relates closely to the students' experience of their everyday domain. As our analysis showed, there were considerable differences in the students' game habits and their attitudes towards games, which also emerged in their writing identities.

Ivanič's second identity aspect is the *authorial self*, which refers to how writers assert authoritativeness in their texts. In our study, this mainly referred to their journalistic use of sources and their use of arguments, having strong or weak validity. The third aspect is the *discoursal self*, or how the students represent themselves through their writing in relation to their perceived audience. This includes the students' use of words, phrases, beliefs and ideologies when producing text within a specific journalistic genre, such as commentaries, reviews, podcasts or features. Again, this resonates with the domain theory as these second and third identity aspects both relate to the disciplinary domain of Danish as L1, as well as to the scenario-based domain of producing game journalism. In other words, the ways in which the student writers asserted authoritativeness and represented themselves as journalists both related to their values and experiences of what it means to be 'doing' Danish as an L1, as well as writing game journalism for an audience, which could extend beyond the classroom. Finally, Ivanič also mentions a fourth aspect, which is the *possible self* that the writers represent themselves through in their writing by combining the three other identity aspects. This ever-present potential aspect of writing is related to the focus on educational *scenarios* presented in the domain theory. More precisely, the process of writing game journalism requires students to combine different identity aspects as writers, but also be able to imagine, enact and reflect on what it means to be doing game journalism as a domain-specific practice – e.g. by conducting online research, finding an angle, locating and evaluating sources, writing drafts and getting feedback before publishing an article.

### **Methodological approach**

The current study is part of an ongoing DBR project (Barab & Squire, 2004) which aims to develop game journalism teaching materials and conduct research on the students' journalistic articles. In this way, the Game Journalist project involves an ongoing series of design interventions, aiming to generate local theories and refine design principles for the use of the teaching unit through iterations amongst design processes, implementation of the concept in classroom settings, students' writing processes and publishing journalistic texts and data analysis.

The students' texts were collected from five classes (two Grade 7, one Grade 8 and two Grade 9 classes) located at three different schools over a period of two years. The three teachers for the classes were recruited through a snowballing method by announcing the project in the Facebook group 'Spil i skolen' ('Games at school'), which hosts more than 2,000 members, most of them teachers interested in teaching with games. Several other teachers showed interest in the project, but due to lack of resources for the project, we decided to include only five classes. After each class had completed the Game Journalism teaching unit, we reviewed the students' journalistic articles and decided which students to interview about their texts. The students and teachers all agreed to participate and were, for ethical reasons, anonymised.

Early on in our process of analysing the journalistic texts, it became clear that the students chose widely different ways of positioning themselves as producers of game journalism. We therefore decided primarily to select texts for analysis and subsequent interviews in order to explore *variation* in the students' positioning towards games and game journalism. The selection criteria involved variation in terms of the students' grade, gender, level of game experience, choice of journalistic genres, overall attitude (positive versus negative) towards games and the journalistic quality of their articles. Based on these criteria, we selected 22 articles across the five classes from 35 students (15 girls, 20 boys) for further analysis and subsequent interviews.

The student interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews usually within a week after they had completed their journalistic articles (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews involved questions about the students' game habits and game experiences, their experience of working with their game journalistic articles (e.g. the production process and their choice of ideas, angles and sources), their positioning towards their chosen topic and how the teaching unit related to their overall experience of studying Danish as their L1. The semi-structured format allowed for additional questions to explore during the interviews.

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as our framework for coding and analysing the students' texts and the transcribed interview data in order to identify key patterns and analytical themes in the students' positioning as game journalists. The thematic analysis was carried out as a two-step process across the two data sets. First, we categorised all the students' texts and interview data according to the students' grade level, gender, game experiences and game profile (non-gamer, casual gamer or active gamer), choice of format (article or podcast), choice of journalistic topic and choice of journalistic genre (feature, review, column, commentary or reportage). In the next step, we used Ivanič's four categories to code how the students and their texts represented different identity aspects in terms of their autobiographical selves (the students' personal game experiences and opinions in relation to gaming), their authorial self (their use of sources or arguments) and their discursive selves (how they addressed a potential audience through their chosen journalistic genres). During the coding process, we also identified different student voices in the texts and in the interviews – i.e. how the students positioned themselves towards different domains and different audiences (e.g. other gamers or non-gamers). In this way, the coding involved both etic codes based on theory and emic codes, which were more sensitive to the students' own experiences.

By comparing patterns across the codes, we identified two overall analytical themes, which we have termed *personal discourse* and *professional discourse*. In line with the domain theory mentioned earlier, the first theme referred to those students who primarily positioned themselves in relation to everyday experiences with game play (everyday domain). Similarly, the second theme referred to students who primarily positioned themselves as producers of professional game journalism with a more generalised audience (scenario-based domain). We then expanded the analysis of the

two overall themes by differentiating their corresponding sub-themes. Each theme described general patterns, but also highlighting on one or more student/s, where we used both text examples and interview data.

### Theme 1: Personal discourse

The first theme concerned those students who mainly positioned themselves through a personal discourse on games and game culture. In their articles and when interviewed, these students expressed strong opinions on games, reflecting either a positive or a negative attitude towards the topic. There were also students who found it difficult to balance the positive and negative aspects of the topic and positioned themselves through adopting an ambivalent approach.

#### Fascination with game culture

Not surprisingly, several of those students who were active gamers positioned themselves positively towards the topic through a clear *fascination* with games and game phenomena. Examples included reviews of favourite games, podcasts about gamers earning money through donations on Twitch.tv, features about game technologies such as virtual reality, and reportages from gaming events. Even though several of the girls had considerable game experience, it was mainly boys who played games regularly and identified themselves as ‘gamers’ who wrote positive articles about game phenomena. These students were insiders, who expressed themselves through a *gamer’s voice* by drawing on their extensive game experience from their everyday domain. Consequently, they often represented their autobiographical self (Ivanič, 1998) in their texts by drawing directly on their personal game experiences. A telling example was Tobias’s review of the online multiplayer survival game *Fortnite*. His review was entitled ‘The development of *Fortnite* and their [sic] communities’ and begins like this:

*Fortnite* was released for the first time on July 25, 2017. Since then, it has developed a lot and the organisation is called Epic games.

Here, and in the rest of the review, Tobias used his authorial self to convey several facts and in-depth knowledge to the reader about *Fortnite* in imprecise language (e.g. ‘their’, ‘it’, ‘a lot’), close to everyday speech. Later on in the text, he included his own game experience:

I myself am a member of several *Fortnite* groups on facebook. Where you always have the option to ask somebody for help or to play with.

This shows how Tobias made no distinction between his autobiographical self as a player and the discursive self of being a reviewer. Overall, the article lacked a clear journalistic angle and offered no interpretation or evaluative judgement of *Fortnite*, which is a key requirement for a game review. In the interview, Tobias explained how he spent a lot of time playing in various online game groups, asking questions and

looking for specific information on *Fortnite* in order to write his review. However, there were no explicit links or references to this information in his text. In summary, Tobias primarily positioned himself through his fascination with his chosen topic, and the discursal self in the text mainly referred to other players and not to a broader interpretation or more critical discussion of the game.

We found similar positioning patterns to game journalism amongst other students who were active members within different game cultures and identified themselves as ‘gamers’ in the interviews. They expressed a positive experience of producing game journalism, which allowed them to choose a specific topic and write about a key interest in their lives. At the same time, it was also difficult for them to view their chosen topic from more critical or generalised journalistic perspectives, and their texts mainly represented a personal discourse on games.

### Rejection of game culture

In sharp contrast to the previous sub-theme, the second sub-theme concerned texts written by students who clearly positioned themselves through a negative attitude towards the topic and explicitly rejected various aspects of playing video games. These students, who were almost all girls, had relatively limited game experience, but they had all witnessed how their classmates or siblings became engrossed in game activities. They mainly described the topic from an outsider’s perspective in columns and commentaries where they distanced themselves from game culture and questioned the amount of time and money spent on playing games. An example of a student rejecting game culture was a commentary by Freja (ninth grader) entitled ‘Computer games turn you into a bad person’. It begins as follows:

It cannot be right that young people nowadays spend all their time playing computer games in front of a screen. Young people need to get out and socialise with others instead of sitting with their heads buried in the screen all day long.

The authorial self that was expressed in the commentary went on to argue that violent games make young people develop less empathy and social competencies, how playing games makes players lose their focus and, based on the author’s personal experiences, how gaming disrupts dinner time when family members leave the table abruptly in order to continue playing. In this way, the text clearly represented Freja’s autobiographical self and personal opinions as an author. Apart from the writer’s own experiences, there were no references to specific sources in the text to support her claims on the negative effects of violent games. In the interview, Freja stated that she liked journalistic writing, which she had never tried before. However, it had been difficult for her to find reliable sources to support her critical opinion as most of the articles she found emphasised the positive social aspects of gaming. Impressed by what she had read, she was on the verge of flipping her focus to a positive angle, but eventually settled on the negative angle as her starting point.

Freja's text was written from an outsider's perspective, as she did not see herself as belonging to a game domain. By writing about the negative behaviour of 'young people' and using somewhat dated terms, such as 'nowadays', the text marked a clear ideological distance from her peers. We saw several other examples of texts criticising 'young people' for their gamer habits. This negative criticism was often gendered, and several of the girls explicitly wrote and talked about problematic gaming as a phenomenon amongst boys, addressed to boys in their class or siblings at home. As an example, one of the girls wrote a provocative commentary on gaming and described it as a 'waste of life': 'I would be lynched if the boys in my class read this'. The students who rejected games tended to write in an *adult voice*, connecting gaming with being immature and unable to live up to social norms for self-regulation. In summary, the students' negative attitudes towards gaming reflected broader identity issues regarding the transition from irresponsible child to mature adult.

These two students were clearly more critical in their texts than the students were in their ideas related to previous sub-theme. Still, their criticism was also primarily written in a personal discourse based on their own opinions and not upon journalistic exploration and reflection. By distancing themselves from their topic and making limited use of sources to support their arguments, their texts did not qualify as professional journalistic articles.

### **Ambivalence towards game culture**

This sub-theme relates to those students who were ambivalent in their positioning towards games as a journalistic topic. Their texts shifted between representing positive and negative attitudes without finding a consistent journalistic angle. Examples included commentaries that bundled positive and negative aspects of gaming, a philosophical essay on gaming as existential escapism and a parodic radio show on games and conspiracy theories. On one hand, these texts demonstrated more nuances in their coverage of the topic than those written about the two previous sub-themes by trying to convey both positive and negative perspectives. On the other hand, these students were not able to establish coherent journalistic angles and ended up mostly positioning themselves through personal beliefs about games.

These students' ambivalence towards the game topic was exemplified by a commentary written by Magnus, a self-confessed ninth grade gamer who used to play from 'when he came home from school until he went to bed, every day, all week long'. As the title, 'Video games steal both your time – and you', suggested, his commentary was framed with a negative angle, which was initially supported by nuanced arguments on how gaming may have a negative impact on school performance and even lead to video game addiction. However, his authorial self then emphasised several positive aspects of gaming in terms of improving friendships and how games can be used to achieve educational aims and support low-achieving students if teachers take

the time and effort to learn about games. The text ended on a far more optimistic note than what was suggested by the assertive negative title, and the reader was left confused as a result of the ambivalent journalistic angle.

When interviewed, Magnus, at first, confirmed the negative aspects of playing games too often, which he agreed could impact school work and limit access to other activities outside school. However, further into the interview, Magnus suddenly changed his perspective on his article:

I think that ... it is perhaps a bit wicked ... I am betraying my own friends by writing that article. Because it is incredibly fun and exciting and instructive and social to play video games, and we all do it ... and as long as you do it with others and keep your consumption a bit down then it's actually extremely healthy!

When asked about why he, in spite of his highly positive experiences, chose a negative angle, Magnus replied that his main reason for being 'extra critical' was that video games are seen as a 'problem' within the school context. He mentioned how students tended to play games in class, even though they were not allowed to, and how teachers often failed to acknowledge the valuable aspects of games. In his own words: 'If games were not a problem at school, I would by no means have been so critical about it'. In summary, Magnus's ambivalence towards the topic reflects a *transitional voice*. On one hand, he wanted to meet his own, his teachers' and his parents' expectations of what it means to be a responsible youth heading for his final exam and where video games are seen as a 'problematic' activity. On the other hand, he also felt like he was 'betraying' his friends and the thousands of hours he had put into gaming by writing so negatively about his main passion.

Ambivalence is also present in Jasal's philosophical commentary, 'Is our existence not enough?', on how playing the open-world game *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* can be seen as a form of existential escapism. Before entering ninth grade, Jasal had played *GTA* a lot with her friends, but just like Magnus, she did not play games so much anymore. Instead, she was quite fond of writing experimental texts. In her commentary, Jasal's authorial self lists a broad range of everyday demands, ranging from chores, emotional distress and broader societal norms humans have to adapt to in a 'democratic welfare state'. In response to such demands, she argued, it was only understandable that many people want to escape their existence and flee into the world of *GTA*, where 'you are free to do whatever you please', such as working for the mafia, driving fast, selling drugs or renting a prostitute. Inspired by Sartre, Jasal's text offers thoughtful reflection on the tensions between living up to real-world demands and escaping into imaginative worlds devoid of consequences. Jasal's philosophical take on the topic was highly original, but her overall argument was rather cluttered with no clear angle and no references. In this way, the commentary was primarily a personal reflection on the topic and less of an objective or professional journalistic text. In the interview, Jasal admitted that she was not particularly interested in writing journalism, but was thrilled with writing about games from a philosophical perspective. For her, it was quite unusual being allowed to write on this topic in Danish,

which was far from her conception of the subject: ‘when you think of games, you don’t think of Danish, you simply don’t’.

Both Magnus and Jasal produced ambivalent texts without clear journalistic angles, which in different ways expressed transitional voices. Magnus ended up writing a primarily negative text in order to follow what he perceived as legitimate critical norms for writing journalism about games in a school context. At the same time, he also felt that his article, to some degree, betrayed his friends and his passion for games. This marked a transition from a gamer identity towards an identity as a more serious learner, while still trying to acknowledge the value of games. Similarly, Jasal also expressed this ambivalence between living up to societal norms and escaping into the world of games. However, she decided to create her own experimental goals as a philosophical writer, and deliberately ignored the formal requirements for writing journalism. In this way, she was primarily occupied with transitioning into a more experimental writer and used games as a new and original topic for philosophical exploration.

In summary, the students described in the three sub-themes above primarily positioned themselves through a *personal discourse*. Their texts mainly expressed the students’ autobiographical selves through personal attitudes and personal experiences relating to games. Their authorial selves were dominated by their own emphasis and interpretation, often without detailed arguments or with arguments pointing in several different directions with few references.

## **Theme 2: Professional discourse**

This analytical theme concerns students who primarily positioned themselves as professional journalists through their articles and subsequent interviews. In comparison with the students who were cited in the previous theme, these students, to a large degree, put their subjective experiences and opinions aside in order to produce more objective journalism aiming for a generalised audience.

### **Critical journalism**

As mentioned, several students adopted ‘critical’ positions, mainly reflecting their negative attitudes towards games and game culture in respect to the norms of the school context and being a responsible youth. However, we also saw examples of students conducting critical journalism in a more professional sense, where they openly explored and reflected upon a game topic through objective approaches. A good example was Jennifer’s (seventh grader) feature titled ‘Women ALSO know how to play’, which explored stereotypic gender views on gaming.

Even though Jennifer had considerable game experience playing *The Sims* and *GTA*, her main interest in writing journalism was not directly related to games. In fact, she would have preferred a different topic. However, Jennifer’s overall aim was primarily to write a good feature story. Together with two other girls from the class, Jennifer visited a local game store to explore how the store appealed to male

and female gamers. At the store, she interviewed a sales clerk about his views on games for girls and for boys. The interviewed sales clerk was quoted for saying that only a few girls (about five percent) come to the store, whom he categorised as ‘tomboys’. Similarly, he categorised the boys who buy games mainly preferred by girls (e.g. *Just Dance* and *The Sims*) as ‘girly boys’. The authorial self in Jennifer’s article was quite critical of the clerk’s stereotypical views and also criticised how the game merchandise in the store was mainly aimed at boys. Similarly, Jennifer’s discorsal self posed questions such as ‘What does it take to break this division?’ in order to make potential readers reflect on the gender stereotypes. In contrast to most of the other students, who did not put much effort into the visual aspects of their articles, Jennifer spent a lot of time laying out her article and creating a fact sheet about gamer habits. Moreover, she also inserted one of her own photos from the store, where she added a ‘STOP – NO GIRLS’ sign in order to highlight the lack of appeal to girls.



Figure 2. Jennifer’s photo from the game shop (manipulated image)

In the final part of her feature, Jennifer further expanded her topic by emphasising the YouTuber Cupquake, who aims to serve as a role model for gamer girls, i.e. girls who want to identify with gaming; hence, the title of her article was ‘Women ALSO know how to play’. In this way, Jennifer’s feature had a clear journalistic angle and was able to use different types of sources (interview and online research), which made the article stand out as being quite ambitious.

In the interview, Jennifer expressed a strong interest in becoming a journalist and described herself as a ‘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. In addition, she made sure to involve several of her classmates by soliciting their

feedback on her article in order to improve the language. In this way, Jennifer clearly expressed herself through the voice of a professional journalist who wanted to write a critical article.

### Guests in the studio

The final sub-theme involved professional podcasts about game-related topics. Most of the students who chose podcasts staged a studio format, where they acted as radio hosts and invited actual guests for open discussion. The guests typically included classmates, siblings or parents, often with quite diverse opinions and attitudes towards games and game culture. This allowed different perspectives to emerge in a professional journalistic discourse, where the hosts tried to put their personal opinions aside in order to record an *interplay of personal voices* based on a specific journalistic angle. A recurring topic in the podcasts was whether eSport should be considered a ‘real sport’ or not. Several of the students in this study were either quite fascinated with or critical towards competitive gaming as a professional sport, which has also been an ongoing debate in the Danish media.

The students’ ability to orchestrate this topic as a journalistic discussion can be exemplified by Tom and Martin’s podcast for which they invited three classmates, where one of them was a gamer and the other two were not. After having introduced his own and Tom’s different opinions on the topic, Martin turned to his guests and made this remark: ‘We’ve some guests here ... to hear what their opinions are instead of just ours’. Jakob, an avid gamer and who said he plays for ‘five to six hours each day’, considered eSport a sport and thought that an eSport player should be described as an ‘athlete’. One of the other guests disagreed and argued that the right term is ‘gamer’. In spite of their disagreement, the students respected each other’s different points of view. Similarly, the following dialogue shows how the hosts tried to represent different opinions and how the two guests were quite open to discussing professional eSport as a potential career for their future children:

- Martin: Signe, what would you do if you had a child, who came home one day and said he or she wanted to be either a professional soccer player or a professional esports player?
- Signe: Err ... I kinda think that I would try to support as much as I *could* ... and then they should choose and their own ... Because you should be able to live out your dream, I think ... and then you learn from your mistakes. So if things go wrong, then you’ve learned ... when there’s a next time.
- Martin: Okay ...
- Oscar: What about you, Henrik, what do you think?
- Henrik: I also think it’s the child’s decision when it comes to these games. After all, it’s kinda them, who decides.
- Martin: Would you advise your children to go for soccer or for eSport, if you were to give them advice?
- Henrik: It’s hard to be professional in any of them ... but it’s their decision, and then you just have to support them all the way.

In contrast to several of the students mentioned earlier, the hosts in this podcast did not assume fixed negative or positive positions regarding their topic. Instead, they were able to include their guests in an open discussion, touching upon several different aspects of considering eSport as a sport. When interviewed, Tom said how working with the podcast increased his understanding of journalists, whom he thought ‘just talked a bit about the game and then awarded some stars’. He now had an understanding that journalists both ‘talk arguments for what is good’ and ‘arguments for what is bad’ about games.

This example shows how the podcast format often worked well in terms of representing multiple voices and different points of view on game-related topics. The oral modality allowed the guests to take part through their vernacular tongue, and this often created interesting discussions, where the guests participated by offering several different and often opposing points of view.

In summary, the students cited in respect to this analytical theme positioned themselves as *professional* game journalists by drawing on their autobiographical game experiences, but putting their personal attitudes aside. The students used their authorial selves to present ‘objective’ journalistic arguments, which reflected their chosen focus and their journalistic angle. They were often able to involve other voices and references in order to address a more generalised audience. In this way, they used their discursive selves to produce professional journalism, which not only reproduced their own positions, but also represented and appealed to broader cultural norms.

## Discussion and conclusions

The overall aim of this study was to explore how students positioned themselves when faced with the task of producing game journalism. Applying the dual perspectives of domain theory and Ivanic’s theory of writing identities, we found that the students positioned themselves through two overall themes, involving personalised and professional discourse. These discourses reflected different ways in which the students expressed identity aspects as writers through their choice and use of journalistic genres, angles, sources, arguments and words aimed at different potential audiences. But, the discourses also referred to different ways of transforming experiences across in-school and out-of-school domains, according to the students’ interests and local criteria for what counts as legitimate knowledge. In this way, the analysis showed how writing game journalism appeals to and positions students for a variety of different reasons. Important variables included the students’ gender, gamer profiles, attitudes towards gaming and game culture, their interest in and familiarity with writing as a part of the L1 subject, as well as their conception of what it means to write journalism for a potential audience beyond the classroom context. In this way, the game journalist teaching unit opened up several approaches for the students to enact *possible selves* as writers – e.g. by being engaged positively or negatively by

game culture, by being able to freely choose and research their own game topic or by accepting the challenge of writing professional journalism. These findings also suggest that bridging the gap between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices requires careful consideration of how to identify, frame and assess relevant criteria.

One of the key findings to emerge from the analysis concerned the students' positioning towards games as an independent *cultural phenomenon*, which was often strongly associated with negative or positive social norms. When collecting and analysing the data, we were often surprised by the students' value based perceptions of gaming practices. Sometimes, the students described games as a positive gateway to having fun with friends, going to eSport events, sharing knowledge online with other gamers, and even considered a valuable tool for learning at school. At other times, the students clearly distanced themselves from the amount of time that their classmates and siblings spent playing games, how game culture perhaps excluded girls or how game playing at school disrupted concentration. In this way, the students mainly tended to view themselves either as insiders or outsiders of the game culture.

We suggest two explanations for why the students had such strong opinions about games as a topic. First, there were clear *gender differences* in the students' game experiences, which confirmed the different gameplay patterns amongst boys and girls mentioned in the introduction. Based on their different game preferences and game interests, it was not surprising that several of the boys became fascinated with turning their extensive game experiences into journalistic texts. Similarly, we found that the girls were more sceptical towards writing game journalism and tended to favour negative angles. However, we also saw several examples of girls writing nuanced and detailed articles on games. Thus, the negative attitude towards games found amongst some of the girls, to a large degree, reflected less about game experience or lack of identification with their game habits. Moreover, some of the girls felt uneasy with identifying with game culture in the school context, which tended to be dominated by the boys' game experiences.

The second explanation for the students' strong opinions about games concerned the students' gradual *identity transition* into adulthood and seriousness as learners. This was especially clear when interviewing the ninth graders, who mentioned the growing pressure from the school and their parents. Even though these students wrote detailed articles about their gaming experiences, they were still insecure about whether games counted as a legitimate topic or could be positively framed in Danish as a L1. Indeed, we saw several indications in the texts and in the interviews that writing 'critical' articles about games implied reproduction of negative cultural norms concerning games stemming from authoritative figures such as the students' parents or their teachers.

Even though the students' strong opinions towards games helped them to become engaged in their writing processes, their predefined attitudes also made it difficult for them to produce professional journalism, which involved both identification with and critical distance from the topic. Assessing the diverse quality of the students' articles, we found that many of the students could have benefitted from more feedback and

guidance to avoid simply identifying positively with their own game culture or interpreting game culture through the negative norms of their teachers and parents.

We are well aware that there are several limitations to this study. First, we did not observe how the students worked to produce game journalism in their classroom settings. Thus, it was difficult for us to learn how they participated in the various phases of the writing process. Moreover, we did not observe how the teachers scaffolded the different activities of the game journalism assignment. We do not know how the teachers introduced the topic, or how they presented the students with examples of game journalism. Based on email communications, meetings and phone conversations with the three teachers, we realised that they did not spend as much time on teaching the unit as they had wanted to. The unit was sometimes squeezed into their tightly filled schedules in order to become part of the current study. This may have influenced the journalistic quality of the students' texts, as several of the students mentioned that they did not get sufficient feedback from the teacher and their peers.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the findings presented here may inspire future studies on how the transformation of out-of-school experiences into a professional domain can be used to position secondary students through engaging writing activities. More research is needed on how to find the balance between acknowledging students' out-of-school knowledge and opinions about their 'local culture', such as game play, and challenging students to support their arguments and represent different points of view. This is essential because a key aim of literacy education is to create situations and scenarios, where students can engage in meaningful positioning towards recognisable topics, but also develop a critical awareness about the values and validity of their positions as writers with potential audiences outside of school.

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