

# Critical Alternative Journalism from the Perspective of Game Journalists

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates from a game studies perspective the potential of alternative online game journalism for a more critical and honest coverage than established game journalism. Following the notion that journalism is defined by journalists through their practical work and discourse (Zelizer, 1993:222) the authors conducted 11 in-depth focused semi-structured interviews (Minichiello et al., 1995) with alternative game journalists and established game journalists. The results show that the social media logic of Youtube forces alternative journalists to adopt entertaining personas which undermines their authenticity unless they can afford to work for free. Alternative game journalists do not understand themselves as journalists but instead see themselves as critics or reviewers. They see established print-media game journalists as journalists. Neither do interviewees from established game journals. This means that nobody understands themselves as game journalists and takes the role of the watchdog in a democratic society (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009:8).

## Keywords

Game Journalism, Game Studies, Alternative Media, Digital Media, Journalism

## INTRODUCTION

Game journalism has been an area of conflict as of late. While on the one hand game journalism struggles with a reputation of being uncritical and too closely tied to game publishers on the other hand there are claims that games journalism has been too closely related to independent game designers and there have been calls for a discussion about ethics in games journalism from the side of a movement in game culture with #gamergate. It seems as if game journalism has become a site of ideological struggle about what the medium of digital games is or ought to be.

This discussion comes at a time when games journalism is changing. Online content providers (youtubers) are taking a bigger role in reporting about digital games while at

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the same time also being utilized to a bigger degree by game publishers as advertisers. The conflicts around game journalism also often evolve around these new practices of reporting on games and play out nearly entirely online on websites like [www.theescapist.com](http://www.theescapist.com) or [www.gamasutra.com](http://www.gamasutra.com). There are also offline sites of this struggle like economic consequences to organizations and journalists or the regrettable cases of harassment (typically of women) that the #gamergate movement has become infamous for. It is therefore important to investigate game journalism, its impact on game culture, game business, and society at large. This paper contributes with an investigation into the way alternative online game journalists understand themselves and their work in comparison to established game journalists. The broad question is if and how these new forms of game journalism can offer a more independent, critical, and authentic perspective on games as culture than the established journalists. The line of division between what would be established games journalism and new disruptive online journalism will be discussed from a number of theoretical perspectives which informed the data collection and supported the analysis of the interviews.

This paper is aimed at the scientific discourse of game studies. While not directly dealing with #gamergate it is relevant for discussing the movement. The paper uses concepts and theories from journalism, media studies, and game studies in order to understand the role of alternative grass-roots games journalism.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. In what ways can online alternative game journalists be more critical and honest than established (print-media) game journalists?
2. How does digital media infrastructure and economy influence and limit critical game journalism?

## **THEORY**

Commercial pressure on journalists in news media which is economically dependent on advertisers is nothing new (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The situation of game journalists has been described as even more problematic because advertisers are often from the industry that the journalists are supposed to be critically reporting about. Game journalists are even dependent on the games industry for early access to games that need to be reviewed which creates a “balancing acts between a perceived loyalty to the reading public and a dependency on industry material” (Nieborg and Sihvonen, 2009:1).

This has consequently led to lack in journalistic legitimacy of game journalism. It has most often been identified as a prolonged arm of the video game publishers marketing apparatus. As such, video game journalism has traditionally fallen in the category of “brand journalism” (Bull, 2013). Cases such as the termination of the contract of a writer for Eurogamer who criticised the practices of the game industry exemplify the nature of the control the industry has over established games journalism (Eurogamer, 2014).

Occurrences like this one draw into question the ability of game journalism to fulfill its role as a watchdog of the ones in power in the service of the people of a democratic society (e.g. McNair, 2009:239). This perspective on the aim of journalism is debated specifically in the context of online journalism. In the genealogy of perspectives on online journalism of Borger et.al (2012) this paper tries to take the next step in between “enthusiasm about new democratic opportunities” and “disappointment with economic motives to facilitate participatory journalism” (Borger et.al., 2012:117) The focus on the democratic possibilities of game journalism is related to the role of journalism as a

watchdog of cultural production. Another way of looking understanding critical game journalism is seeing it as cultural journalism instead of service journalism (Kristensen, 2010; Riegert, et al., 2015; Kristensen & From, 2015; Eide, 2007; Eide & Knight, 1999). Service journalism understands the audience as customers and offers a service like advice for gardening. The implied relationship between the journalist and the reader is one of customer and service personal. Reviews of games that exclusively aim at giving a buying recommendation would be classified as service journalism. Cultural journalism understands the audience as citizens and offers a critical perspective on contemporary culture and cultural commodities. This should on one hand enable them to engage with said cultural commodities on a deeper and informed level and on the other hand understand the influences of the production for profit on these commodities and culture at large. A critical game journalism should be cultural journalism. Research question 1 asks if online games journalism lives up to this expectation.

In order to investigate the potential of a new or different kind of journalism through a comparison with the previously existing one it is important to discuss the line of separation between the two. The first step towards facilitating this comparison is a definition of the journalist. As Borger et.al. (2012) explain a focus of journalism studies has been to investigate and develop journalism as a profession. Correspondingly a journalist is defined as somebody who works professionally as a journalist, belongs to a professional organization, and has certain legal rights and protections based on her work (e.g. a press pass, a right to protect sources). This definition has been challenged already before the advent of online journalism Zelizer (1993:234). points out that vocational training or the membership in groups like worker organizations is not typically regarded as central by journalists. She proposes an alternative understanding of journalists through interpretative communities that are defined by journalists themselves and do included codes of conduct and professional ethics even though they might be unstated and implicit in good practice.

Sociologists have found that journalists work via a distinct sense of their own collectivity (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978b; Fishman, 1980; Roshco, 1975; Tunstall, 1971; Roeh, et al., 1980)(Zelizer, 1993:221). We need a frame that might explain journalism by focusing on how journalists shape meaning about themselves (Zelizer, 1993:222). This theoretical perspective motivates an inquiry into the way online game journalists understand themselves and their work. Until now we have been using the term “online game journalists” in a somewhat loose way. However, the line of differentiation between new kind of games journalism and the established one is not necessarily the line online/offline.

Especially with the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies consumers themselves rejuvenated the role of video game journalism leading to a number of concepts and theories with different foci. Participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008) and in extension participatory journalism have been argued to have significant potential to impact traditional means of journalistic practice (Vobič and Dahlgren 2013). While prior attempts to classify citizen’ oriented journalism and media production have been somewhat fruitful, the notion of participatory journalism has become the consolidated term for conceptualizing all of the non-professional activities of journalistic conduct that captures the notion of a collaborative audience and collective action. The relationship between traditional journalists and what the audience, has already started to change rapidly, were member of the audience now have started to operate as co-producers to traditional journalists in a greater extent (Vobič and Dahlgren 2013: 173). However,

online game journalism is not exclusively citizen journalism any longer. Professionalization of online game journalists could then lead to similar economic dependencies to those that can be found in traditional games journalism. Simultaneously with the professionalizing of the online part traditional journalists are getting pushed out of stable employment and have to take over more risk in precarious freelance positions (Deuze, 2007; 2009). However, for the purpose of this study precarity on the side of established game journalists which is an established concept will be compared to the insecure income and the economic pressures on the side of online journalists and the difference between them might allow for a more critical perspective of online journalists.

Not all game journalism can be easily understood as participatory. There are different approaches to participatory media that focus on meaningful influence on decision-making (Carpentier, 2011) or that stress ownership of media content and means of production (Fuchs, 2014). An online journalist might have more control over the means of production. The paper with its editor and its institutionalized relations to game publishers as advertisers as well as sources of information is replaced by an infrastructure of digital social media (Castells, 2009; 2010). However, instead of participating in established journalism online journalists can run their own organization and work outside of established journalistic organizations. They are not participating in established journalism; they are creating an alternative journalism. The perspectives on alternative media can be useful here. Alternative media are understood as media with a different production and distribution model from capitalist mainstream organizations (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002). Since the concept originated from studies of radical media there have been competing definitions of alternative media. While Downing (2001) and Atton (2002) stress the importance of the organization of production and distribution (non-hierarchical) Fuchs (2010) and Fuchs and Sandoval (2010) argue from a perspective that is mainly concerned with the actual societal impact of alternative media that the alternative message is the deciding factor. The need and even possibility of an exact definition of alternative media has been questioned by Rodríguez (2001). After all the one recurring element of alternative media is the "challenging of structures of power" (Downing, 2010: 296). For the purpose of this study alternative media is a useful concept because online game journalists typically produce their own content and have full editorial control over their work. The extent of their control over the distribution of their content is more problematic. Bloggs and Youtube allow alternative game journalists (this term will be used from now on) to control the distribution of their work inside the parameters of the medium which in its design follows the paradigm of profit maximization on the side of the social media platform.

This limited control over the distribution system brings the danger of re-inserting limitations into the work of alternative game journalists that remove the possibility to challenging of structures of power" (Downing, 2010: 296) or at least make it more difficult or precarious. Besides being designed for profit blogs and Youtube are following the logic of digital social media and social networks which rewards people in the centre of a network with even more influence (Castells, 2009; 2010) and potentially leads to a power distribution of audience and material income among alternative game journalists. However, it is not clear how these limitations effect alternative game journalists and if a different kind of production of game journalism can lead to a more critical, independent, and alternative journalism that reports on culture in a democracy (Gauntlett, 2011) instead of reviewing commodities on a market (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Fuchs, 2007; 2010). Research question 2 aims at understanding the influence of the production online on alternative games journalists.

## METHOD

This paper is interested in the perspective of alternative game journalists on themselves which is why in-depth qualitative interviews with alternative game journalists were the method of choice. Qualitative interviews allow interviewees to use their own words and concepts and make it possible for the researcher to enter the *hermeneutic circle* (Bourdieu och Wacquant 1992, s. 108) of the interviewee and to gain an understanding of it "which do(es) not depend on delineated categories and the numbers of 'hits' in them, but rather on thematic strands extracted from the material by dint of researchers' interpretive and conceptual efforts." (Crouch & McKenzie 2006, s. 488) The paper also includes interviews with established game journalists to allow a comparison which was particularly useful not only because the interest into this comparison came out of the research question but also because the alternative game journalist interviewees compared themselves to the established journalists. The focus of the interviews was guided by the research questions. However, as suggested by the discussion of alternative media and the influence of the distribution channel in the theory section it was not clear what effects and pressures were to be expected. This suggested the use of semi-structured interviews that left enough space for interviewees to bring up important points that the interviewer was not aware of or asking for. Named "unstructured interviewing" (Fontana & Frey, 2005:705), or "focused semi-structured interviews" (Minichiello et al., 1995) these interviews do keep the same topics but ask more flexibly. Minichiello et al. the topic of the interviews remains constant over time.

An interview guide or schedule is developed around a list of topics without fixed wording or fixed ordering of questions. The content of the interview is focused on the issues that are central to the research questions, but the type of questioning and discussion allow for greater flexibility than does the survey-style interview. (Minichiello et al., 1995:92)

During the interviews the researcher becomes more informed about the subject matter which allows the interviews to become more dynamic and more focused on salient points (Kvale 1997; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). The result of this process is that the interview guides become less standardized and resembles focused areas for discussion.

Furthermore, without the constraint of a pre-determined grid of specific questions or issues to be discussed, the very scope of the inquiry can broaden or even shift in response to the emergent interview material. (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006:486)

While economic issues and questions of precarity were important the interviewer bracketed these as much as possible in order not to influence the interviewees. The same is true for questions about the journalistic ethics and practices of alternative game journalists which were addressed in a way that was not influenced by the normative stance towards the role of journalism that the paper is taking. The paper uses a transcription method that Fairclough (1995) describes as "a fairly minimal type of transcription which is adequate for many purposes" (229) because this kind of data was sufficient for the analysis which did not depend on micro-readings of pauses or stuttering.

11 different game journalists were interviewed. The interviewees were experienced and well-known in their area, most often editors-in-chief and producers of game reviews and magazines online. Nine of the interviewees produced exclusively online content while two of the interviewees published a printed magazine. The interviewees agree to appear with their real names. The following individuals were interviewed:

#### Alternative Game Journalists:

- Editor in chief Anders Brunlöf and editorial partner Tommy Håkansson from the Swedish video games reviews and entertainment site *Svampriket* who are specialised in original content on their site. (Svampriket 2014)
  - David Boström and Emelie Karlsson, producers of the video game blog *Gaming Grannar*, who's also affiliated with the Swedish video game portal and forum Loading. (GamingGrannar 2014)
  - Victor Clausson and Björn Pantzar from the retro gaming and video blog site: Revansch! (Revansch 2014)
  - Editor in chief David Meyer Trap of Swedish video games reviews and entertainment site Ctrl Alt Elite. (CtrlAltElite 2014)
  - Editor in chief Alex Löfberg and editorial staff member Joakim Dahlbäck at the locally produced student radio show; *Gejm* (Studentradion 98,9 2014) in Uppsala.
- Established Game Journalists:
- Oskar Skog, famous Swedish video game critic and journalist who has been working with the biggest and oldest printed magazines in Sweden since the early 1990s. He was the first interviewee and his inputs were central for the development of this grounded study. ("Forum Bokförlag" 2014)
  - Tobias Bjarneby, editor in chief for Sweden's largest video game printed magazine Level. Tobias has been an industry pioneer as he began his journalistic video game coverage in the Swedish version of Nintendo Power (in Sweden Nintendo Magasinet) in the beginning of the 1990s. He was also part of the creation of contemporary video game coverage in Sweden, as he was one of the founders of the printed publication Super Power (that later became Super PLAY). Today he is considered to be *the* video game journalist by many video game enthusiasts. ("Loading.se - 20 År Med Tobias Bjarneby" 2014; "Svenska Spelpionjärer I P3 Spel" 2014)

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of the interviews structured after the topics that came out of the interviews but also offers the analysis of these topics in the light of the theoretical framework and the research questions. The analysis will show as much interview data as viable to allow the data to speak for itself. Often times the interviewees expressed nuanced perspectives and negotiated contradictions and conflicts which is made as visible as possible.

### Need for Critical Investigation

Research question number 1 focuses on the critical perspectives and honest reporting of alternative game journalists. The interviewees expressed a need for critical games journalism in a number of ways and even pointed towards negative examples of games journalism that did not owe up to this expectation. An example was the reporting about closing of the studio Irrational after the successful release of a prolific game. Instead of critically examining the practices in an industry that closes down a successful studio and

fires workers right after they have finished a lucrative product game journalists focussed on the next project of the well-known game designers who had led the studio.

Just now when Irrational [video game producer] shut down [...] He [the executive producer] said in a press release that he was going to start up a smaller studio, and develop games in lesser extent. But that also meant that the developers and the publishers had fired everyone else. But no one talks about that, there is no one that investigates this further [...] (Joakim Dahlbäck 2014)

[...] Several journalists just identifies games as entertainment, and this was very obvious when Ken Levine left Irrational games, most news were all about “oh my god, what cool things will Ken Levine do now?” and less about the human factor. Why it happened and stuff like that. It’s still to centred around entertainment. (Tommy Håkansson 2014)

However, together with the recognition that games journalism as a whole did not fulfil its role as critical and investigative journalists the interviewees also mentioned possible reasons for the why this might be the case. One mentioned reason is negative feedback from readers which also can be related to misogyny. Another reason is the fear of not receiving any more reviewing material from publishers. This problem of established games journalists has been one of the central factors that discredited the established games journalism in the first place and seems to recur here. However, the interviewees also point out that they should be and are resisting these pressures. The normative point here, that they should ask inconvenient questions and investigate, shows that alternative game journalists do have a sense of journalistic ethics and best practices.

[...]we need to investigate the video game industry and mediate a wider critical perspective. It’s easy to think that you need to hand out high review scores, to continue to review games from certain publishers. Thus, I am very keen on reminding my editors that their review scores are their review scores. The honest and personal opinions need to be there. Otherwise, we could all write boring “A-Z reviews”, were the only meaning in the end, is to establish a certain score. [...] Whatever the reason, we as media producers must dare to ask inconvenient questions, and not back down. We must not be frightened. My good friend Kerstin Alex dares to cover these issues, even though she receives tons of negative feedback from immature readers that feel insulted, just because she is a woman that actually knows how the video game industry work, and dares to critique it. (David Meyer 2014)

However, this fear of pressure from game producers as an old problem needs to be followed up in order to see if alternative game journalism has more possibilities for critical investigation.

### **Precarity and the Cost of Freedom**

The interviewees pointed out the importance of their editorial freedom. A common topic here was that this control was defended against attempted influence from the side of the games industry. However, this also meant that alternative game journalists had to torn

down offers of financial rewards and possibly financial security. This means that the editorial freedom needs to be bought with unpaid labour.

Of course we can make a difference; the question is how great the impact is. [...] When it comes to creative space, both Tommy and me came to Svampriket because we wanted to be free: in general sense. And I think it's more of a benefit that we are not part of another editorial team, even though they may have better resources and funding. We tack a lot of our funding from own pockets. (Anders Brunlöf 2014)

We recently got an offer from IGN Sweden, to become part of their media network, but we turn them down. Because we had previous experience, we still sought to maintain our autonomous position, and “fly with our own wings. (Victor Clausson 2014)

One of the central problems of this situation is that it only allows people with enough income to be able to work without pay to become alternative game journalists. This is particularly troubling because cultural criticisms from the perspective of the very poorest that are excluded from it in such a system could be particularly insightful and disruptive. Alternative game journalists who want to professionalize need to live in precarity and financial insecurity unless they are willing to submit to the control of commercial publishers losing their critical edge or unless they can gather a large audience leading to financial security from income through social media sites like Youtube. This observation is somewhat qualified because there are also cases where commercial actors work with alternative game journalists without imposing on their editorial freedom. This means that the fears of repercussions from the side of the industry as a result of critical reviews might not be grounded in reality.

[...] The more important you are [to the community], the more the publishers will want to control your media productions. If you have a little shit-blog with 300 followers each month, maybe it doesn't matter what that person says about a game. But when a blog got thousands of followers, then it does matter. However, we have not gone into that field of coverage, so we are not part of that world. The only time we have reviewed something, is has been on our terms. That is something we have asked for through mail contact, and then they have replied, “if you think it's bad you may say it”, and then we have accepted. (Emelie Karlsson 2014)

However, the interviewees saw that the pressure of commercial actors was increasing. The connection of several alternative game journalists in an organization seemed to be another trend. Bigger actors were perceived to have better chances of attracting an audience and surviving.

I think that the situation right now, is that you as a blogger need to contact publishers and nag. But in a few years, the game publishers are going to start to make contact. [...] It feels like it becoming a trend, were different networks becomes one large network.(David Boström 2014)

In summary it can be said that alternative games journalism can be more critical and honest than established games journalism if the alternative journalists are willing to volunteer their work, are established enough to have economic independence from publishers, and share the journalistic ethics and moral principles that call for critical investigative journalism.

### **Network Logic and Economic Pressures**

The logic of digital social media and social networks which rewards people in the centre of a network with even more influence (Castells, 2009; 2010) leads to a power distribution of audience and material income among online content producers. This also holds true for online game journalists and incentivises very regular and frequent creation of content over investigative and critical journalism. This means that in order to achieve financial independence from commercial publishers alternative journalists have to adapt to the medium and attempt to become one of the few at the top.

We don't want to compete with traditional media and conventional productions; we want to do our own thing. [...] As we mentioned earlier, we want to raise questions: definitely. [...] Because of the amount of media content online, it is required that you stick out from the rest in some way. We have tried to stick out by being creative and wayward.(Anders Brunlöf 2014)

Without this pressure and the need for financial results on the other hand social media seem to be a rather free environment. This means that critical alternative games journalism relies on unpaid labour and will lead to more precarity and limitations on who can be a culture critic.

The thing with our project, when we created Revansch! me and Björn, was that YouTube does not impose any kind of demands or obligations: more than copyright. And no one else either imposes any demands or obligations on us. We can say whatever we want actually [...] and we like it like this, to have this freedom to say "this was crap" or "this was awesome" without the chance that someone can oppose it with disapproval.(Victor Clausson 2014)

### **Angry Gamers, Acting and Personae**

An example for a way in which alternative game journalists adapt their content and behaviour to the logic of social media are angry gamers. Angry gamers are alternative game journalists that routinely bash or rage against games and game companies as a way of entertaining their viewers. From the perspective of the interviewees angry gamers are not to be taken at face value as it is not an honest reaction but acting.

Source criticism becomes more important as it feels like half of the grass roots media practitioners, are too kind to publishers to maintain good relations and not loose important benefits, while the other half try to make it "their thing" to be as angry at the publishers as possible, Total Biscuit and Angry Joe for instance. [...]At the same time, he [Angry Joe] uses his YouTube-celebrity and fandom, to get early access codes and betas. So he does have contact with publishers, and to pretend otherwise is not correct.(Tommy Håkansson 2014)

Those who wanted to professionalize and make a living from their work entered the same or similar relationships of dependency to the distribution channel of social media that were common for traditional journalists who were depended on game producers. The need to get early review copies to be able to provide content timely on a competitive market of alternative game journalists also still works as a mechanism by which the industry can influence alternative journalists. Another problem with this use of such a persona is that it draws into question the authenticity of the text. As game journalism becomes entertainment and raging gamers become common occurrences they lose the authenticity that is initially awarded to alternative journalism.

The impact becomes greater as the spread is instantaneous on social media. At the same time, it becomes harder to get your voice heard due to the amount of content online. That's why we see these over exaggerated characters. They become actors to their target audience, rather than presenting their own opinions. I see it as entertainment, but it is hard to find something real, something that matters.(Oskar Skog 2014)

The logic of the digital media production proves not to be too different from that of traditional media production. The control of online journalists over their means of production, online social media, is limited and they have to adapt their practices to requirements of that medium. This meant that online game journalists had to provide entertainment for their viewers or at least understood themselves as entertainers in competition with other similar content producers. Particular characters and personas seem to be somewhat common. The stereotype of the angry gamer is one example. While the angry gamer does criticize the industry and games to some extent the extreme negative and agitated persona is part of the entertainment and not serious. It is not necessarily critical and investigative journalism but might even reduce the impact of such investigations because they can appear as just another angry gamer raging for entertainment. It can thus be said that the digital media infrastructure and economy limit the potential of critical alternative game journalism because they force alternative journalists into an entertainment paradigm. The journalists need to assume a persona and act which undermines their reputation of honesty at the same time as it misrepresents even legitimate outrage over the games industry as insincere acting.

### **Journalistic Identity**

So far the results of this investigation are largely in line with the results of Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009). The final and most discerning result of this analysis was that alternative game journalists did not identify themselves as journalists; rather they identified themselves as game critics or reviewers. Alternative game journalists would name more established colleagues and call them journalists while not claiming this title and the responsibility that comes with it for them. However, these established writers publishing physical magazines would also not see themselves as journalists.

I have always associated 'video game journalism' with Oskar Skog and Tobias Bjarneby: they are industry professionals. [...] I associate the term with occupation and profession. (Emelie Karlsson 2014).

I wouldn't refer to myself as a video game journalist, because being a journalist is a profession and occupational training that I do not have. I prefer the term game critic or editor, and in that sense I consider myself as much as an amateur as the video bloggers online. (Oskar Skog 2014).

The interviewees categorised a video game journalist as an individual that report writes or edits video game news as an occupation, with formal journalistic training. However, since neither alternative game journalists nor industry veterans in general have journalistic training, nobody in the alternative scene picks up the mantle of the video game journalists. An interviewee even suggested that there should be an education for game journalists stating that game journalism is important but at the same time implying that he is not trained and able to do this.

If you are going to call yourself a journalist, you'd better have journalistic training: which I do not have. On my business card, my title says, "Game critic. [...] it is common that critics employ journalistic codes of procedure, but me: I am a game critic. (Anders Brunlöf 2014)

But I argue that, we need to create new journalistic training with special focus on video game journalism, and offer this kind of training course at school and universities. [...] It doesn't have to be severely different from journalistic training in general, but it is important to understand that this is a very young field of media, comparison to music, movies and news coverage that is done today. (David Meyer 2014)

Instead they assume titles like game critic and fan which limit them and their work to the realm of customer information on a market place. This perspective places alternative game journalists as reviewers of commodities to inform customers and does explicitly not frame them as watchdogs who work for the interests of citizens in the creation of a shared culture. This internalized limitation of the role of participatory game journalists (together with the market forces and the properties of networked media and online entertainment mentioned above) stands in the way of an investigative alternative game journalism.

## **DISCUSSION**

The last point about the journalistic identity of the interviewees was not anticipated before the data collection and emerged from the first interviews. It was then followed up on and made a topic in the later interviews taking advantage of the focused semi-structured interviews method. However, this perspective of the interviewees opens up the discussion about the identity and function of cultural journalists. Zelizer (1993) already points out that vocational training or the membership in groups like worker organizations is not typically regarded as central by journalists. However, our interviewees mention exactly these factors when explaining why they are not journalists. The alternative Zelizer (1993) proposes is understanding journalism as a discourse and interpretative community. Alternative game journalists do follow are journalistic ethics and stress independent and critical reporting which makes them fit into Zelizer's (1993) perspective. That said Zelizer (1993) also stresses the communal factor of building this discourse and creating practices together while defining journalism as journalists. Here it is highly problematic that alternative games journalists do not understand themselves as journalists. This means

that they do not participate as equals in the ongoing evolution of the journalistic practice, do not shape the definition of journalism, and do not necessarily recognize their role as critical investigators leaving alternative game journalism not only without a critical edge in comparison to mainstream journalism but potentially less critical. Ultimately, if game journalists do not conceptualize themselves as journalists they have no reason to engage with standards of professional journalistic practice (Zelizer, 2009) and the journalistic responsibilities and role of the watchdog in a democratic society (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009:8).

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion it can be said that alternative game journalism has the potential for a more critical perspective than established print-media game journalism. The limitations imposed by social media platforms business models are less strict than the limitations of advertisement-funded publishing in print media. That said, the dependence on game publishers for review copies and early access to games and beta versions persists.

The social media logic of Youtube forces alternative journalists to adopt entertaining (and often stereotypically angry) personas to stick out from the crowd and to entertain their viewers. This at the same time undermines their authenticity and honesty. These pressures do not exist if alternative game journalists do not rely on their journalistic activities for financial support but can work for free. In this case they do have full editorial freedom but need to pay for it with free labour. This limits the kinds of people who can become alternative game journalists and excludes especially people without an income high enough to permit them to work for free who could have the most interesting critical perspectives on the creation of culture.

Alternative game journalists do not understand themselves as journalists but instead see themselves as critics or reviewers. They see established print-media game journalists as journalists. However, the interviewees from established game journals also do not identify as game journalists. This means that nobody understands themselves as game journalists. It is thus questionable if alternative game journalists (or anybody) aim to live up to the role of a watchdog for democracy and if they will continue to maintain the journalistic ethics that they are exhibiting right now even though they do not participate in the ongoing discourse that defines journalistic practice.

A suggestion for further research is to put the results of this study in relation to the recent #gamergate controversy that on some level evolved around ethics in games journalism. Presenting the perspective of alternative game journalists on their role can contribute to a deeper discussion of game journalism.

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