Présentation Leipzig

Hello everyone,

I’m Boris Krywicki, I’m a Phd member of the Liège Game Lab, founded in Liège, Belgium. I study specialized press about videogames, printed and online. More particularly, I’m interested about journalists writing for these medias and techniques, various skills that they use in their daily work. My hypothesis is that nowadays specialized journalists writing about videogames are sensibilized to traditional investigative journalism automatisms and keep them in mind as they do their job, using them not daily but only when a case presents itself. I think this empowerement of video game journalists’ occupational ideology might be the result of a shift in their way to produce value-added work : in the late twentieth century, games were the only thing that mattered, and the journalists were nearly the only ones who had information about them. Today, *Youtube* and *Twitch* have taken that role, leading game journalists to talk about things external to game themselves (such as game developers’ work conditions, creators’ life…)

To explore that field and develop how game journalists see and use investigative techniques, I use mostly sociological and ethnographic tools : comprehensive interviews (Kaufmann, 1999) with contemporary video game reporters. These interviews are then analyzed in the frame of grounded theory to qualify the subjects’ daily experience : do they consider themselves as investigative reporters ? Within which economic and professional context are these articles written ? How do specialized journalists investigate (How much time is allotted? For how long? ) and how this deeper work is integrated in their daily professional routine ? I study also a bunch of stories from video game press, analyzing their model reader and specialized media’s reading contract. I search content that steps out the promotional cycle. Basically, I’m trying to build a genealogy of these practices : when did they start ? How have they been spreading in this particular press ? How are they seen and used today ?

Asking these questions might have seemed strange a few years ago because video game press has always been one of the subfield most closely in touch with the industry. In french specialized press we could see lately several publications editing investigative stories concerning the video game industry. They’re written, for the most part, by specialized journalists. The best example seems to be Quantic Dream’s affair, which started in january 2018 in 3 different newspapers : Mediapart, Canard PC and Le Monde Pixels. Mediapart and Le Monde are generalist medias (Pixels being the subdivision in charge of informatics in Le Monde) while Canard PC only treats video games.

This work harassment affair required investigative techniques of the journalists who worked on it such as sources’ identity protection, multiple and long interviews or working and verifying information secretly. Netsabes and Maria Kalash from Canard PC worked hand in hand with journalists from Mediapart whereas William Audureau learned investigative techniques from generalist journalists from Le Monde. Other french specialized journalists wrote several investigative reportings aiming to reveal some hidden informations about the industry and telling how games are made internally. Some french journalists have been investigating on how games were designed from creators such as Shigeru Miyamoto, Yoko Taro, Yuji Horii and so on. During my interviews, these reporters told me that videogame industry is particularly hard to infiltrate and how important it is to have good contacts working in the industry. This goal of bringing some previously unknown information – to reveal something to the readers – feeds these specialized reporters’ work. Exclusive information are a way to materialize time and effort spent in research by journalists, eventually justyfing and legitimating the price readers always need to pay to access investigative stories. Eventually, using investigative techniques is a way among others to make value-added journalism.

We might observe there a paradox : however exclusive and new this hidden information might be, specialized medias consider it as cold news – meaning not prioritary. In Canard PC, investigations are lead only when video games’ daily news are slow and when hot recent titles don’t take much space in the magazine. On the website Gamekult, it’s extremely rare for the core writing team to investigate : this role is more often taken by freelancers (meaning external journalists). Specialized medias’ headlines are rarely teasing investigative stories but rather reviews of well known awaited video games. On another hand, video game press websites are sometimes originally made specifically to publish hot news, short stories. In this web architecture, longer papers, made from investigative work, are not as exposed to readers as they should be. A french journalist from *Jeuxvideo.com* explains it to me during an interview :

« *It’s a big issue we have with the the website, which is currently being renovated on a bunch of webpages, and the technical team is working 300% on it. Sometimes, getting a little upgrade for a tiny issue doesn’t fit in their plannings, and then we get, in 2019,* Jeuxvideo.com *offering more and more deep journalism and we have nothing to push it, to make these contents viewable. We don’t have any dedicated section and, on our side, it’s true that’s kind of frustrating…*» (interview with Loïc « Epyonzilla » Ralet, journalist for *Jeuxvideo.com*, 14th january 2019)*.*

We can explain today’s investigation’s lack of presence in video game press regarding its economical history and the tight links it has been maintaining through its development with the industry. This close relationship might be observed within two different spaces : in the journalists’ texts on the one hand ; in their direct interactions with workers from video game companies on the other hand.

During the nineties, video game magazines were full of what I call « celebrative reviews », meaning their authors try to federate using « a strong consensus on readership’s values transforming the buying/subscription/reading act in a communitarian gesture » (Bergala, 1996). In these times, video games were less legitimized and commonplace than nowadays and reporters let themselves write enthusiastic reviews building a fanatic video game-fan model reader (Eco, 1979). Here’s an extract from a french game magazine of 1998 :

«*With this new episode of Crash Bandicoot trilogy, discover what fun and ultime beauty truely mean ! Glory to Crash ! […] You think you’ve seen everything ? […] Well, open your eyes because Crash 3 might leave you amazed ! Naught Dog’s team decided to become Santa claus to fulfill you beyond all your hopes* » (Joypad n°81, french game magazine, December 1998, personal traduction)

These reviews also tried to be exhaustive and wanted to tell eveything about the games depicted, even if there wasn’t much to say about a specific caracteristic : graphisms, sound, gameplay, story, game length were always reviewed regardless of whether or not reporters had points to make. In one interview he gave me, french journalist William Audureau calls that systematic game proximity the « product culture » :

« *It’s, I think, a legacy from 1990’s press, back when first efficent PR grounded and magazine covers stopped to be centered on players or drawings to become more and more illustrated with upcoming games. It’s also the moment when the automatism « news – previews – reviews » setteled […]. This product obsession is completly brainless. Meaning, when you arrive in specialized press you don’t ask yourself what you’ll talk about. It seems obvious : you’ll talk about commercial products that are always there, ready and set* » (interview with William Audureau, journalist for *Le Monde*, 19th january 2018).

The most prevalent remains of this product culture's professional automatisms are most obvious when looking at the reporters' interaction with actors from the industry. An example of these automatisms would be the dependency. Video games publishers and specialized press have been creating a mutual dependency on each other : the industry needs reporters to talk about games as much as reporters need help from indsutry to get review copies and access early presentations of games. A few years ago game developers were listening to journalists’ requests or sending PR to negociate with them.

As internet and mostly Youtube grows, specialized media become less followed by large audience which is globaly more interested in entertainment and direct advice online videasts provide. Several reporters tired of being deemed unprofessional want to differenciate themselves from Youtubers and claim their journalistic role and function – for example by signing with their full name or reminding they work as professional journalists and have a press card. This is a huge contrast with 1990’s game magazines : in these publications worked many young fans. For some editorial teams, being a journalist was not a quality but a flaw, a sign you might know nothing about video games (Demoly, 2017).

In this mediatic context investigative stories are a way for video game journalists to claim their independance. That being said, there is no such investigative work as full-time deeply involving traditional style in this specialized press. Specialized journalists use investigative techniques intermittently – now and then – when they get the time, money and occasion to do so. This comes partly from a symbolic violence : in french, the term « investigative » is seen as a « model genre » of journalism, which « evokes genereally several valorizing images of the profession »[[1]](#footnote-1) (Marchietti, 2002 : 168). Since then, video game journalists, who have interiorized product culture, often have an inferiority complex and don’t dare to qualify their work as investigative… or even to use investigative techniques.

Professionalization in video game press seem recent and has yet to be described during my research. And, considering his symbolic violence, the term « investigative » must also be nuanced. There are many degrees of implications for journalists wanting to do more than passively receiving information from the industry and my work aims to analyze the various behaviours reporters can adopt :

«*“Investigation“, it’s too pretentious and overrated for what we do, we don’t use that term.* I’m wondering if we could call that practice ‘initative journalism. A sort of cold journalism versus a news feed. By ‘initiative journalism‘, I mean trying to create a subject, to build it rather than treating every piece of information that come to us » (Interview with Ivan Gaudé, Publishing director of *Canard PC*, 21st september 2017).

It might be interesting for me to compare french game medias’ dynamics with the ones leading german exchanges between game publishers and reporters. Can these investigative stories' features be observed in german game journalism field ? How dependent on the industry is video game press yet ? Do german specialized publications have distinct editorial lines and try to differentiate themselves from one another ? If you have response and pieces of the puzzle to answer these questions, I’d be delighted to hear them.

Many thanks for your attention.

1. « évoque généralement un ensemble d’images souvent valorisante du métier de journaliste » [↑](#footnote-ref-1)