

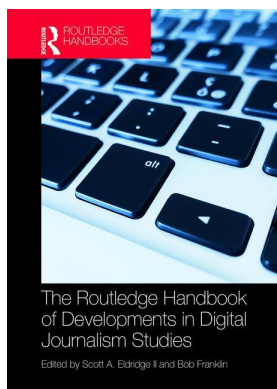
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RECONSIDERING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN DIGITAL JOURNALISM AND GAMES

Sketching a critical perspective

Igor Vobič

Throughout the last century the news industry has continuously introduced technological innovations in its attempts to bridge the private interests of news media owners in making profits and the public aims of journalists to meaningfully connect citizens with social life – often, however, at the expense of the latter (cf. Hardt, 1998: 173–190). In contemporary capitalist societies, meaningful journalism is in a “delicate moment” (cf. Schudson, 2017) as it tries to rearticulate itself as an acceptable and trustworthy production of knowledge necessary for a reflective and inclusive social life. At the same time, journalism’s institutional structures, practices, roles, and perceptions of the public are in flux, resulting in the emerging “new forms” that are “accompanied by much controversy” (Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016: 5–6), while journalism’s public character is being continuously disfigured by the pressures of private owners and financial investors (ibid.: 12). As the news industry aims to overcome the contemporary crises of economic viability and civic adequacy (Blumler, 2010: 439) by seeking and implementing new technologies and ways and forms of (re)connecting with people, paradoxically, as citizens, consumers, and workers, the questions of *what* is journalism, *how* it is done, and *why* are becoming more complex in today’s increasingly digitized environment. This calls for continuous critical attention from journalism scholars and others – especially in terrains lying on the borders of digital journalism but that could – if studied – shed new light on old problems of journalism and its research. One such terrain extends to the intersection between digital journalism and games.

“Journalism is not only becoming digital, it is also becoming playful”, write Ian Bogost et al. (2010: 178) in the final chapter of their seminal work *Newsgames: Journalism at Play*, where they indicate that the convergence between digital journalism and games touches on larger struggles behind the boundaries of knowledge production, social reality representations, and perceptions of and participation in political life. In this context, discussing the intersection of digital journalism and games is not an easy task. On one hand, in the digitized world it is “increasingly harder to pin down” the idea of journalism and its boundaries (Malik and Shapiro, 2017: 15–17), while, on the other, the growing variety of forms, functions, and domains of games makes the signifier “increasingly slippery” (Jagoda, 2017: 7–8).

As elaborated later, although scholarship at the intersection of digital journalism and games relates to larger issues of journalism as a social institution, profession, cultural practice, and labor, journalism's coverage of games, employment of the game-form and its rhetoric in news, and the application of game elements to established journalism practice remain under-discussed in digital journalism studies, which largely focus elsewhere (cf. Ahva and Steensen, 2017). As a result, this chapter closely reviews the various connections between digital journalism and games while aiming to develop a critical lens by grounding our materialist view in broader social theory in order to better understand certain historical problems of contemporary journalism as articulated through games.

Literature review: three marginalized areas

By reviewing studies that interrogate the intersection between digital journalism and games, this section attempts to chart this relatively marginalized terrain of digital journalism research. At least three areas of scholarship can be identified, each dealing with a specific phenomenon at the intersection of: (1) “game journalism” as a branch of journalism dealing with the coverage of novelties in digital games and gaming; (2) “newsgames” as a form designed to illuminate a specific facet of news by means of digital games’ particular rhetoric, with a goal to engage people in relevant social issues; and (3) the “gamification of journalism” as a strategy of applying game elements to digital journalism’s forms, production, and consumption.

Game journalism – journalistic coverage of digital games

One area of scholarship at the intersection of digital journalism and games deals with what appears as a special branch of journalism that covers digital games through previews, reviews, features, and other forms. Although games have been in our lives for about four decades and gradually have become an integral part of popular culture and a growing multibillion-dollar industry (cf. Jagoda, 2017), surprisingly little attention has been paid to game journalism by either game scholars or journalism researchers. Yet in the last decade or so, an increased attention is observable. Namely, scholars (e.g. Hall, 2003; Nieborg and Sihvonen, 2009; Carlson, 2009; Fisher, 2012; Ribbens and Steegen, 2012; Foxman and Nieborg, 2016; Perreault and Vos, 2016) have explored social, politico-economic, and cultural particularities of game journalism and argued that this branch is importantly shaped by the difficult, ambivalent ties with the game industry and audiences. At the same time, it continues to contribute to the development of game culture as well as the collective consciousness and complex tensions deriving from it, which have worryingly been manifested in the recent #GamerGate controversies and harassments (cf. Mortenstein, 2016; Cote, 2015; Fisher, 2015; Chess and Shaw, 2015; Braithwaite, 2016).

Traditional journalism has predominantly framed games as a social threat since the 1970s (cf. Williams, 2003). Only in the new millennium has this changed in legacy media, when the artistic merits of games started to be celebrated with the simultaneous rise of their economic and cultural relevance (cf. McKernan, 2013). Writing about games, however, has evolved from “consumer press” produced by large game developers (Cote, 2015: 1) to “a flood” of specialist game magazines in printed forms or as e-zines (Fischer, 2015: 2). By considering its dubious relationship with the game industry and gaming communities, Carlson (2009: [4.1]) refers to game journalism as “enthusiast press” that produces “consumer-oriented publications that focus on publicizing specific categories of goods, often high-end technological products” and carries a connotation among “mainstream journalists” of not being “real” journalism (ibid.). Other scholars also find it difficult to position game journalism in terms of the journalistic field. Some see it as part of “entertainment journalism” that is chiefly concerned with the “reveal/preview/review cycle” associated with new products (Fisher, 2012: 224–225); others understand it as “lifestyle

journalism”, a market-driven form of journalism that blends information, advice, and guidance for consumers (Perreault and Vos, 2016: 4). In this context, Foxman and Nieborg (2016: 4) report on ambiguous self-understanding in the field of game coverage and critique. As they place game journalism somewhere between “arts criticism” and journalism, their study reveals the “network of ambivalences” in this sphere (ibid.: 35), where game journalism

not only is connected economically to the industry [as a] critical source of information about upcoming releases, but also has been complicit in establishing and representing the culture of games. The fallout of their coverage, although it may not have been their intent, is an environment rife with ambivalence and tension.

(ibid.: 36)

Similar findings are provided by Ribbens and Steegen (2012), who explore the difficulties game journalists encounter when writing game reviews. According to the authors, game reviewers face uncertainty as they stress that issues of “subjectivity” are exacerbated in game journalism, boundaries of the editorial-business divide are being blurred, and the recent diversification of game audiences brings a variety of conflicting factors into game journalists’ conduct (Ribbens and Steegen, 2012: 216). In this setting, the genre of game reviews has evolved into an online genre with great variation, as gamers in large numbers discuss games in online forums and on social media platforms, digital distribution sites that sell games, and game journalism websites (cf. Thominet, 2016). This domain of a sort of *gamer journalism* mixes together facts and opinion, debates and gossip, news and reviews, and the deceptive and the insightful while employing different semiological forms and platforms. Although hardly discussed, this example of the heterogeneous “citizen journalism” blurs the traditional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism (cf. Vobič and Dahlgren, 2013: 16), deepening tensions in the intertwined networks between game journalism, its audiences, and the game industry, while calling for additional scholarly inquiry.

In scholarship exploring game journalism, two prevailing perspectives can be identified: politico-economy and cultural approaches. An example of the former is Carlson’s (2009) article, which argues that game journalists are “mediators of commodity value” by performing “immaterial labour” shaped by the conditions of capitalism. While the functioning of game journalism depends on the game industry as its prime advertisers and those that give newsrooms privileged access to novelties in the market, game journalists “stand between consumers and producers as fulcrums, spinning and molding the knowledge that each has (access to) about the other, impacting consumption habits as they simultaneously shape production practices” (ibid.). A study that adopts the cultural approach is by Perreault and Vos (2016), who reveal that game journalists undertook “paradigm maintenance” in the midst of #GamerGate, a viral campaign that has both questioned the ethics of game journalism and badgered women involved in game production and game criticism (ibid.: 1). The authors state that game journalists “decisively broke with the old paradigm of an enthusiast-press and claimed their place within the paradigm of traditional, public-minded journalism” (ibid.: 13).

As indicated earlier, game journalism is in a complex social milieu where digital games are emerging as an increasingly complex contemporary form and where the game industry is growing globally (cf. Jagoda, 2017). Since this review indicates that this branch of journalism reflects larger difficulties of the field, further scholarly attention would be valuable – with a particular focus on the porous boundaries between game journalism professionals and gamer-generated content on games. One possible route would be to tackle the phenomena, processes, and relations interrogated in this area of research by trying to supplement the prevailing perspective focused on subjectivist agency and identity with materialist epistemological stands. This would allow scholars to comprehensively explore cultural tensions that – as the reviewed studies indicate – are

importantly based on the politico-economic logics of game journalism and to better understand its ambivalences and implications.

Newsgames – bringing news into digital games

Another area of studies focuses on a form of digital games that is designed to illuminate a particular side of news through the specific rhetoric of rule-based involvement with an aim to meaningfully connect people to relevant social events or issues. A review of discussions in the last decade or so suggests that scholarship initially primarily focused on defining newsgames and discussing their distinctive features. Nevertheless, as elaborated here, very early on scholars (e.g. Burton, 2005; Sicart, 2008; Treanor and Mateas, 2009; Bogost et al., 2010) shifted away from the “ludology vs. narratology” tension in game scholarship (Anderson, 2013: 295) and through case illustrations explored – to put it simply – “how games act as journalism” (ibid.) in order to discuss their social relevance in a transforming communication environment.

The term newsgame was reportedly introduced by the game developer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca in the early 2000s (cf. Bogost et al., 2010: 13). On Newsgaming.com, Frasca and his colleagues described the notion as “simulation meets political cartoon” that can be “a great tool for better understanding our world”. As argued in more detail elsewhere (cf. Vobič et al., 2014: 126–127), later studies have related to but also departed from Frasca’s narrow understanding of newsgames by discussing the notion theoretically and trying to map the empirical terrain in the news industry and outside it (e.g. Burton, 2005; Sicart, 2008; Treanor and Mateas, 2009; Bogost et al., 2010). Although differences in understandings of newsgames can be identified in the literature, there is a common discussion on how this particular form of knowledge operates to create meaning and spur engagement. “Procedural rhetoric” (Bogost, 2006) is profoundly examined as “the way that a videogame embodies ideology in its computational structure” or, in other words, how meaning is conveyed through the dissection of a rule-based system of newsgames.

It is argued that a “paradigm shift” is at play here, as newsgames offer journalists an opportunity to shift from “stories” to “systems” in their conduct (Bogost et al., 2010: 179) – “to share raw behaviours and dynamics that describe a situation” (ibid.). Others, however, are more hesitant as they identify “issues with procedural rhetoric” (Treanor and Mateas, 2009: 6) and suggest that a “hard design problem” of newsgames lies in the “unintended rhetoric” that might manifest through gameplay (ibid.: 7). Yet little is known about how people relate to newsgames and their knowledge claims. Teixeira and her colleagues (2015a, 2015b) only provide small insights in their studies of “usability and gameplay” into the documentary and simulation genres by conducting experiments involving users. They do not go further than saying that pursuing these features of involvement in the development is crucial for a newsgame to illuminate a certain aspect of news as well as to become “fun and rewarding for players” (Teixeira et al., 2015a: 6067). In this context, the all-encompassing definition of a newsgame as “any intersection of journalism and gaming”, introduced by Bogost et al. (2010: 13), leaves much ground to tackle in future studies – not only with respect to the notion of procedural rhetoric but also regarding larger material and subjective aspects of technological innovations in journalism.

What appears common in this area of scholarship is understandings of the notion of news in line with the “hegemonic” Western model of journalism (cf. Nerone, 2013), while scholars take it for granted and hardly consider its historical roots and ideological underpinnings. It is thereby difficult to explore newsgames as “an empathetic and immersive experience or mimicking a real-world system” (Foxman, 2016), and – as it seems – it is becoming even harder and more complex. While there are observable shifts to “transmedia strategies in journalism” (cf. Gambarato and Tárca, 2016), the “most significant deterrents” in newsgames production remain “the skills, time, and financial resources required to create, deploy, and maintain these products” (Foxman, 2015: 4).

The industry has thus been “hesitant” to integrate newsgame design into workflow and develop firm *modi operandi* that would guide the production of knowledge (Treanor et al., 2012: 1). Although newsgames lost favor with producers and financiers after the initial experiments in the 2000s, there are traces of an “organic evolution” of design and editorial in multimedia teams across the industry (Foxman, 2015: 25) and a “wide spectrum” of game-based products that can be identified in media and journalism, such as puzzles, quizzes and “gameworlds” (ibid.: 16–19).

The recent employment of immersive technologies to journalism (cf. de la Peña et al., 2010), automation in news (cf. Carlson, 2017), and game development (cf. Nelson and Mateas, 2007; Treanor et al., 2012) as well as larger changes in relations between newsmakers and users both inside and outside the emerging “playful newsrooms” that increasingly employ game-based operations (Foxman, 2016) make it difficult to predict the future of newsgames. What is evident is that newsgames as a form and production of knowledge as well as public acceptance of their producers’ claims are being interrogated, similarly to other areas within journalism (cf. Ekström, 2002). To further interrogate the notion and phenomenon of newsgames that is also defined by the creative boundaries of the profit-oriented news industry (cf. Nerone, 2013), critical scholarship with historically and contextually informed studies are needed in order to explore the limits of more inclusive mechanics and rhetoric of news provision, the constrained contestation of conventional journalistic constructions of place and time, and the boundaries of experimentation in individual and collective public engagement. A close critical study of the materiality of newsgames would allow us to not only better understand newsgames as a form and production of knowledge but also the broader difficulties of and tensions in journalism as a social institution.

Gamified journalism – employing games in journalism

A distinct area of research explores the strategy of gamification that applies game elements, such as points, badges, and leaderboards, to journalism production, news formats, and user engagement. Although gamification has received substantial attention in other contexts – both celebratory appraisals and more reserved considerations (cf. Waltz and Deterding, 2014), a review of studies dealing with gamified journalism appears quite underexplored. Only recently have scholars, most notably Raul Ferrer-Conill (2016, 2017), started to explore how the “playful logic of gamification” (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 49) is articulated in journalistic representations of social life, people’s connection with and participation through journalism, and the production process by professionals and nonprofessionals.

While newsgames as specific game-forms of contemporary digital journalism rest on procedural rhetoric in their illustrations of news, gamification as an innovation strategy brings a “game-like experience” (Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson, 2016: 367) not simply to established and evolving news forms but also to the production and consumption of news. To simplify the distinction, Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson (ibid.) suggest that newsgames “bring news to games” and that gamification “brings games to news”. Similar to other innovations in the century of modern journalism, gamification spurred quite simplified initial celebrations that were later countered by more sober, even critical assessments (cf. Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 49). Advocates of gamification stress the potential of gaining engagement, loyalty, and productivity, while critical perspectives translate that into surveillance, control, and exploitation (ibid.). For instance, newsgames designer and researcher Ian Bogost (2011) provides a vivid and often cited critique of the strategy: “[G]amification is marketing bullshit, invented by consultants as a means to capture the wild, coveted beast that is videogames and to domesticate it for use in the grey, hopeless wasteland of big business, where bullshit already reigns anyway”.

Although it appears that problems with implementing gamification mean it has at least slightly fallen out of favor in the news industry after its stellar rise in popularity in the early 2010s (cf.

Foxman, 2015: 9, 16), explorations of gamified journalism remain valuable for digital journalism studies, as this strategy touches on the core of the perpetual conflict in journalism – the one between the private interests of news media owners and the public goals of journalists (cf. Vobič, 2015). According to Raul Ferrer-Conill (2016), gamification is implemented within digital journalism in four ways.

By employing gamification in news stories, the experience of news shifts as users are turned into players who engage with playable multimedia narratives and their immersive elements (ibid.: 53–54). While capturing the nuances of meaningful journalism, such gamified news stories come close to what Ian Bogost and colleagues (2010: 47) understand as “playable infographics” that, as a special newsgames genre, “adopt infographics principles but add layers of gameplay around them”. Nick Diakopoulos (2009) defines this approach as “process-oriented journalism”, which has later been identified and explored in sophisticated multimedia and interactive packages of legacy news media, such as the *New York Times* (e.g. Jacobson, 2012) and Al Jazeera (e.g. Ferrer-Conill, 2016).

Digital outlets as well as news aggregators, such as Google News, have also introduced gamification to strengthen the loyalty of users by offering points, badges, leaderboards, and gifts to “engage” them with the platform and “habitualize their visits” (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 56). Ultimately, gamified loyalty programs are one of the unprecedented ways “to track, measure, and quantify audience activity” (Cohen, 2015: 108), with the ultimate goal to boost advertising revenues and standardize the decision-making process by “accelerating the feedback loops between media organizations and their audiences, and changing the value of the information that goes into editorial decision making” (ibid.: 109). Several media outlets make use of these and similar “playful products” to “further integrate and reward loyal readers”, but also by way of a “check and balance” on journalistic practices (cf. Foxman, 2016).

Through gamification users are also brought closer to news production with an aim to engage them in “crowdsourcing” as a free workforce that – at least that is the idea – has fun through a game-like experience (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 52). An example of such gamified engagement was Huffington Post’s introduction of badges for “key areas of activity” in 2010 that included sharing stories on social media, commenting on content, and moderating comments and was presented as a “fun new way of recognizing and empowering our community” (Huffington, 2010). A year earlier, the *Guardian* employed gamified crowdsourcing to speed up the analysis of a large set of leaked documents and data concerning the UK’s parliamentary expenses (cf. Daniel and Flew, 2010) by using a “progress bar” to visualize the data so far covered and a “leaderboard” to show the most dedicated workers among the users (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 51).

There are also examples of employing gamification in the production of news by using various types of digital tokens as incentives to motivate newsmakers according to their writing and publication metrics based on their contribution to the overall digital news output (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 54–55). A case study of the sports news website the *Bleacher Report* and its gamified production system indicates that good performance in the game has little to do with journalism but more with labor control and exploitation (cf. Ferrer-Conill, 2017). By considering professional and expert debates, Ferrer-Conill discusses how “an open representation of journalistic performance based on metrics can provide a reward that is not necessarily connected to journalistic values” (ibid.: 5) and shows that respondents involved in gamification “do not make an assessment about the quality of their pieces in terms of the metrics, but they do seem to do it for their careers”. Some of the journalists involved were in precarious labor relations and engaged in gamified production on the assumption that one day they will become employed (ibid.).

Within the larger “quantitative turn in journalism” (cf. Coddington, 2015; see also Coddington, this volume, Chapter 17), gamification exemplifies the short-term dangers of favoring immersive game dynamics rather than the larger public aims of journalism. Through particular features of some sort of instrumentalized gameplay, the four interrelated ways of gamifying

journalism indicate complexities in how contemporary journalism ideology is being rearticulated and, as such, call for a broader study of how existing power relations and dominant business concerns in the news industry are reflected through these specific game-based dynamics between production and consumption in journalism.

Journalism – games: convergence and commodification

This review of the scholarly terrain found at the intersection of digital journalism and games indicates contemporary articulations of historical contradictions within journalism – as a form and production of knowledge. However, existing scholarship provides valuable empirical insights into the multifaceted convergence of digital journalism and games but rarely tackles it critically by reflecting on its materiality to reveal the limits of the emancipatory potential of these innovations to provide inclusive and reflective accounts of journalism and news. Therefore, this part attempts to provide a basis for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomena that emerge at the crossroads with journalism and by focusing on the theories of the audience commodity and digital labor. The following paragraphs dissect the commodification processes in the convergence between journalism and games, where the exploitation of digital labor constrains the noninstrumental, reflexive, and emancipatory potential of play within game journalism, newsgames, and gamified journalism.

From Marx to Smythe: audience commodity

According to Karl Marx (1859/1904: 19), a “single commodity” is a crucial precondition for the reproduction of capitalist societies. The commodity is “simultaneously embodying both use value and exchange value” (ibid.: 54), where the former is the purpose of the entire system of production, while it becomes a means of exchange “when their supply exceeds the measure of consumption” (ibid.: 53). The exchange of commodities constitutes the “social metabolic process” in which “the exchange of the special products of private individuals is the result of certain social relations of production into which the individuals enter in this interchange of matter” (ibid.: 55–56). Accordingly, commodities embody the dual character of work (cf. Marx, 1867/1887: 30–33). As discussed by Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani (2013: 240), this special character can be conceptually and semantically separated into: (1) *work*, which is in contrast “a more general concept” that encompasses processes of making use of technology to “transform nature, culture and society in such a way that goods and services are created that satisfy human needs” (ibid.); and (2) *labor*, which is “a necessarily alienated form of work” characteristic of class societies where workers do not control and own the means and results of production (ibid.). In capitalist societies, people often have their access to the means of production prevented and are forced to sell their labor-power as a commodity to capitalists and to engage in an exchange that is essentially unfair (cf. Prodnik, 2012: 279). The exploitative character of production rests on the aim of the buyers of the labor-power commodity to extract value through the labor process – not only exchange-, but surplus-value (ibid.).

By being concerned with the processes of commodification, Dallas Smythe (1977) discussed the logics of mass media communication by conceptualizing the “audience commodity” category. He argued that “the audience itself – its subjectivity and the results of its subjective creative activity – is sold as a commodity” (Fuchs, 2012: 704). Namely, advertisers buy “the services of audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times” to newspapers, radio, television, or other communication means (Smythe, 1977: 4). According to Smythe (ibid.), these audiences are commodities that are “dealt with” in markets by “producers” (mass media) and “buyers” (advertisers), while establishing prices “in the familiar

mode of monopoly capitalism”. The materials produced by the media and transmitted to audiences represent an “inducement” to “recruit” potential audience members and to maintain their “loyal attention” through reading, listening or watching (ibid.: 5). When, in this manner,

workers under monopoly capitalist conditions serve advertisers to complete the production process of consumer goods by performing the ultimate marketing service for them, these workers are making decisive material decisions which will affect how they will produce and reproduce their labour power.

(ibid.: 6)

From Smythe to Fuchs: digital labor

In recent years there has been a revival of the audience commodity debate through the discussions on the exploitation of “digital labour” (cf. Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013). In this context, the dominant capital accumulation model online is based on the exploitation of unpaid labor through the creation of data from users’ content production, locations, relations, networks, and activities, such as browsing and liking, which are sold as commodities to advertisers who then target these very users through advertisements on the basis of their presumed interests and behavior (ibid.: 237). In this setting, Christian Fuchs (2012: 707–708) reviews the digital labor debate and identifies three elements involved in the exploitation of digital labor: (1) the “coercion” of users to use commercial online platforms in order to engage in social life; (2) the “alienation” of users since enterprises, not themselves, own the platforms and collect the profits; and (3) the “appropriation” of users’ social relations, created content and other “prosumption” activities as the “data commodity” is sold by online corporations to other parties, such as advertisers.

“Another layer of digital audience commodity”, argues Nicole Cohen (2015: 100), is entailed by people’s engagement *with* and *through* digital journalism, which holds a “direct implication” for the form and character of knowledge being produced. As the commodification of journalism deepens, the “recasting of audiences as inputs for production signals” with the rise of crowd-sourcing and the use of metadata, analytics, and algorithms goes hand in hand with the creative demise of journalism through the precarization of labor. In a digital environment, the historical reciprocity of production and consumption in capitalist news enterprises therefore becomes only more apparent. Slavko Splichal and Peter Dahlgren (2016: 6) claim that it “not entirely correctly” seemed that a clear boundary existed in mass media journalism between professional producers and passive consumers, while “today’s digital media inexorably blur the boundary between mediated content production and consumption” (ibid.). Exploitation of digital labor in the news industry – from the appropriation of user engagement on news websites or mobile applications to more obvious ways of what is known as “participatory” journalism – has its roots in the historical process of the commodification of modern journalism, discussed more than a century ago by Carl Bücher (1901: 242–243), yet it also is being rearticulated and strengthened via what appears as a “qualitatively novel type” of commodification (cf. Prodnik, 2014).

Digitization has helped to extend and intensify commodification “throughout places that have hitherto been untouched by capitalist market”, argues Jernej Amon Prodnik (ibid.: 216), proposing the concept of a “seeping commodification” that is able “to more or less successfully mimic the activities that are distinctive of communication” and as such to “trickle down to all the niches and activities of society and human lives” (ibid.). The exploitation of digital labor is an example of commodification seeping through boundaries and into all pores of human existence – people’s subjectivity and the results of its creativeness. Christian Fuchs (2012: 734) argues we are witnessing the “manifestation of a stage of capitalism, in which the boundaries between play and labour have become fuzzy” and that the exploitation of “play labour”, also referred

to as “playbour”, has become “a new principle”. At this point, it might be useful to employ the distinction between playing, working, gaming, and laboring that was introduced by Arwid Lund (2014, 2015). He criticizes the “ideological concept” of playbour by drawing on the dual character of labor and thereby argues that working and laboring are “distinguished into a trans-historical and a historical, capitalist category”, and likewise “playing” and “gaming”, where the former is the trans-historical category and the latter the historical one (Lund, 2014: 735). In this context, Lund (2015: 67–68) conceptualizes playing as a noninstrumental, capricious, and improvised activity with emancipatory potential, whereas gaming introduces rule-based competition into playing and through instrumentalization deforms its very essence. By considering conceptual dynamics, Lund (cf. 2014: 772–798) distinguishes exploitive and instrumental *gamebour* from emancipatory *playwork* as a possible “new form of anti-capitalist struggle” through communication, or journalism for that matter.

Playing, gaming, working, and laboring in digital journalism

The phenomena at the intersection between digital journalism and games touch on commodification processes and their manifestations through digital labor. Therefore, it seems a consideration of the dynamics between playing, working, gaming, and laboring might be useful when elaborating on commodification in digital journalism = games’ convergence and discussing how digital labor is articulated through the phenomena of: (1) game journalism; (2) newsgames and gamified news; and (3) the gamification of journalism practice.

Game journalism is a branch of journalism that for decades has been defined by commodities through the “reveal/preview/review cycle” of new games (Fischer, 2012: 224–225), its digital form presenting a prime example of deeply commodified journalism that relies on labor exploitation. As game journalists stand between the game industry (advertisers) and game fans (audiences), or as Foxman and Nieborg (2016) write, “between a rock and a hard place”, they perform as “mediators” in the production of commodity value by blurring the lines between producers and consumers but at the same time reconstructing these boundaries as clear lines (Carlson, 2009: [1.4]). When such production of knowledge, or put better, commodity value is interrogated, game journalism repairs its paradigm by breaking with the naïve traditions of the “enthusiast-press” and relying on the traditional journalism ideology (Perreault and Vos, 2016) in order to reproduce or reinforce existing social relations. The dubious practices and normative trade-offs of game journalism are the work of “immaterial labourers” (Carlson, 2009: [6.6]) who – “as they slip into, and help to widen, the notches created by the forces of late capitalism” (ibid.) – produce desires and values and participate in the exploitation of their audiences – as digital laborers. The mainstream game journalism sites aim, as Smythe would put it, to “recruit” game fans and try to maintain their “loyal attention”, while data from their online reviews, comments, and metadata of other online activities is on one hand used as inputs for future production decisions and on the other sold as a commodity to the game industry, which are both prime advertisers and main providers of information about game novelties. This circle of labor self-exploitation in game journalism is most vividly embodied in the “gamebour” of those fans “who are willing to submit game (p)reviews texts without any other compensation than perhaps the inspection copy of the title they were reviewing” (Nieborg and Sihvonen, 2009).

It seems that *newsgames* and *gamified news* reflect recent attempts by the news industry to respond to the “double-legged crisis” of journalism (Blumler, 2010), with the aim to both reinvent commodification models and reconnect with the public. Newsgames (cf. Bogost et al., 2010) and long-form gamified journalistic formats (cf. Ferrer-Conill, 2016) indeed contest conventional presentations of place and time and introduce more inclusive rhetoric and ways of engagement. An idea of constructing meaning through newsgamers’ dissection of the “inner

workings” (Sicart, 2008) or through a more straightforward “highly playful narrative” of gamified forms that captures “the nuances of a hard news story without needing to reduce the quality” (Ferrer-Conill, 2016: 54) relates to the notion of “gaming” as rule-based and goal-aimed “serious leisure” (Lund, 2015: 66) that, by facilitating a certain aspect of news, meaningfully connects people with public life. Newsgames and gamified news in this respect come close to the notion of “gamework” with its “focus on the quality of use value and gaming for prestige” (Lund, 2014: 784) and reflect the perpetual conflict in journalism – between its public character on one hand and the private interests of news media owners on the other (cf. Vobič, 2015). However, due to production costs and newsroom identity issues, the industry has mostly been hesitant to experiment in this manner, while some media players have opted to create forms that incorporate games and entertainment, such as puzzles and quizzes (cf. Foxman, 2017). Such game-based products embody what Lund (2015: 67) calls the “quantitative instrumentality” of “gamebour” – users are engaged in game-based activities that have little to do with public-minded journalism and are simultaneously commodified and exploited as digital labor.

Gamified journalism practice embraces commodified phenomena that connect production and consumption by employing game elements to crowdsourcing or news production (cf. Ferrer-Conill, 2016, 2017), where users or journalists’ data from their analytical, writing, and other activities are commodified through a particular reward system with points, badges, and leaderboards. Gamification is a strategy to motivate users as providers of digital labor to further engage in production as a free labor force that “economises the amount of paid occupational labour in the journalistic production” (Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016: 10). Gamified produsage or users’ gamebour as an articulation of “unpaid labour” has become “central to media outlets’ cost-saving strategies, making it increasingly difficult to earn a living as a journalist, particularly for growing numbers of freelance writers” (Cohen, 2015: 113). At the same time, it has become normalized in the digital media sphere that those who regularly produce as digital journalists are often part of “a large network of unpaid contributors” (ibid.: 106). It is precisely in these highly commodified contexts that the use of gamified interfaces that are “sustained by datafication”, “turning behaviour into data and offering digital rewards” (Ferrer-Conill, 2017: 2), is strategically employed to intensify the control over and exploitation of (un)paid labor. In order to disguise the commodification of labor, “gamification adds to datafication the rhetoric of play”, while the qualitative understanding of news production is being renegotiated (ibid.: 11–12). In the wider context of digital labor, gamified journalism practice reproduces the understanding of journalistic labor in terms of, as Hanno Hardt (1998: 211) discussed two decades ago, “routinized technical tasks responding to specific commercial interests” such as the production of “non-idea” centered narratives or “non-controversial contextual material” to help intensify the processes of commodification.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has briefly discussed phenomena in the underexplored terrain of digital journalism studies and elaborated on the existing scholarship at the intersection of digital journalism and games – theoretical reconsiderations, analytical approaches, and empirical findings. Scholarship on game journalism, newsgames, and gamification in journalism shows that studying these multifaceted notions and phenomena appears useful for exploring articulations of historical problems of journalism in the digital age.

At the same time, the review of studies indicates that critical considerations of digital journalism–games convergence are rare where, in particular, the material aspects of these complexities are hardly considered. To supplement the scarce yet rich investigations into digital journalism and games, this chapter has sketched out a critical perspective by drawing on Marx’s

theory of capitalism, Smythe's category of audience commodity, and Fuchs's conceptualization of digital labour. The introduction of the dynamics between playing, gaming, working, and laboring introduced by Lund, however, calls for greater attention in future explorations of digital journalism and games in terms of deepening the theoretical argument and with respect to using it in original empirical research.

More theoretical and empirical explorations are required that would – at least try to – bridge materialist approaches and those that interrogate subjectivist agency in order to comprehensively grasp the peculiar but telling phenomena of journalism–games convergence. Attention needs to be given not only to the areas discussed here but also to journalism and media education, where games and gamification have become employed as new tools (e.g. Aayeshah, 2012) and strategies (e.g. Leaning, 2015) to motivate students, future journalists in the deeply commodified digital world.

Further reading

For further reading in this terrain, the monograph *News games: Journalism at Play* by Ian Bogost et al. (2010) provides a valuable scholarly account of newsgames and related pressing issues found at the crossroads of game and journalism studies. On gamification in journalism, Raul Ferrer-Conill has written extensively; particularly his recent article in *Television & New Media* (2017) is insightful. On game journalism, the contribution in the *Journal of Games Criticism* (2016) by Maxwell Foxman and David B. Nieborg provides a thoughtful discussion of material and subjective aspects of its network of ambivalences. In addition, those seeking to locate broader critical discussions on digital journalism's problems and their historical roots would enjoy Nicole Cohen's article in *The Communication Review* (2015) and the one by Slavko Splichal and Peter Dahlgren in the *European Journal of Communication* (2016). Further, those in search for profound theoretical accounts and critique in the larger field of communication to pinpoint pressing issues of digital journalism and its boundaries should look at the open-access journal *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*. Particularly useful for building arguments in this chapter were the critical essays on seeping commodification by Jernej Amon Prodnik (2014), on digital labor by Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani (2013), and on playing, gaming, working, and laboring by Arwid Lund (2014).

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