

Tow Center for Digital Journalism
A Tow/Knight Report

**PLAY THE
NEWS
FUN AND
GAMES
IN DIGITAL
JOURNALISM**

**MAXWELL
FOXMAN**

Columbia
Journalism
School 

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I. We Have Always Played

Try to recall your earliest memories of a newspaper. What comes to mind? A hard-hitting exposé that shattered your preconceived notions? Reading the sports section? Laughing over comic strips? Conquering the crossword puzzle?

We have always played with our news. By necessity and by invention, news is consumed imaginatively in a wider context than just a tallying of events. This fact is especially evident in a digital environment, where news stories intermingle with disparate forms of communication, from social media networks to massively multiplayer online games. As much as the Internet and digitization have disrupted the business of news in countless ways, the growing multiplicity of information sources, games, play, leisure activities, and entertainment has expanded the daily news experience.

Despite stigmas and fads surrounding play and the news, we can draw vital lessons from their complex relationship. Many of the tools that online newsmakers use are similar to those applied in games. Even the fervor with which we share information on social media can be considered playful. While it might be surprising that British broadcaster Charlie Brooker put Twitter at the top of his list of the twenty-five most significant video games in the world, the notion that it is fun to compete for responses to tweets isn't astonishing to anyone using the service.

This report describes specific intersections between games, play, and journalism, highlighting strategies, products, and sites of playful activity in the current news landscape with the goal of elucidating this pervasive

phenomenon. Projects developed by the likes of *The Washington Post* and *Mother Jones*, and playful newsrooms like BuzzFeed, help illustrate some of the techniques journalists use to engage, inform, and educate readers through play.

The report also counsels journalists, developers, and editors about the best ways and means of incorporating games and play into the newsroom. Play, in this context, should be defined as experimenting, persistently “toying” with news products and production, primarily in response to user reaction. I have drawn prescriptions from interviews with journalists, editors, and developers at a wide variety of journalistic institutions, from *The Miami Herald* to ProPublica. This research also includes commentary from educators in journalistic institutions, who are experimenting with playful design, and a number of developers in the game industry, whose expertise helps bridge the gap between traditional games and the novel forms newsrooms are adapting.¹

Chapter 1: History and Discourses

This chapter scrutinizes the history of play and the news by tracing the origins of crossword puzzles in newspapers and exploring the fluctuations in popularity of those news products based primarily around video game-based elements, such as newsgames in the mid-2000s and gamification in the past five years. These historical vignettes expose some of the key motivations for newsrooms to use games and play—to engage and maintain users, provide support and richness to the news bundle, and modernize traditional news formats.

Chapter 2: Features of Play

The second chapter establishes some of the common attributes of games and play in current digital news products. Initially, it distinguishes between content-driven and situation-specific features—such as the MTV news-

game *Darfur is Dying*² and *The New York Times* “Dialect Quiz”³—and the use of stock formats and other elements from games and play to enhance user experience and participation.

Following this discussion is a glossary of existing game and play mechanics in journalism. Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each, the categories discussed are: “Badges, Points, and Prizes,” which have fallen out of favor after their brief stint of popularity at the beginning of the decade; “Quizzes and Questions,” which have seen increased acceptance, particularly due to their positive reception and their ease of production; “Situation-specific Designs and Packages,” which are often used as part of multimedia bundles to present particular content in a novel and engaging fashion; “Newsgames and Gameworlds,” which most closely adhere to traditional video games, but require significant effort in terms of both time and expense to conceive and build, and tend to appeal to specific niche groups.

Chapter 3: Newsroom Culture at Play

Certain digital newsrooms are becoming increasingly playful environments in which news producers and the products they create are both experimental and fun. Rather than snubbing play as merely childish, it inspires a variety of newsroom practices, from bolstering reader loyalty to encouraging improvisation. Little is taken for granted in this dynamic news environment, and empathy, fun, and novelty are continuously encouraged.

Using the entertainment and news website BuzzFeed—and specifically its game team—as a case study, this chapter analyzes some of the organization’s playful practices, the relevance of data and metrics, and the role of iteration and experimentation in news creation. It examines how play fits into developers’ digital toolboxes and how the infrastructure and space of the newsroom has changed in order to facilitate this agenda.

Chapter 4: Games and Play as Business Models

As the news industry struggles financially, the video game industry has become one of the most lucrative in the world—a seventy-six billion dollar industry in 2013.⁴ Furthermore, there has been a meteoric rise of independent, or “indie,” gaming both online and across game platforms. What economic lessons could digital newsrooms take from the game industry, even as both compete for views and clicks? This section breaks down different business models in the game industry and their applicability to news products. These include the AAA major studio games and freemium mobile game models, such as the trendy *Candy Crush Saga*.

Chapter 5: Challenges to Play

Even the most fervent newsgame advocates recognize that there are limits for when and how to use games in the newsroom. Certain types of content may not be best represented in game formats. Also, the culture of journalism, from graduate and professional schools to entrenched news organizations, seems to have become resistant to playful environments, which leads to the isolation of playful designers and developers in newsrooms. Furthermore, the use of games and play appears to have both negative and positive effects on the perceived brand of a news organization. Practically, the most significant deterrents in game usage are the skills, time, and financial resources required to create, deploy, and maintain these products.

Chapter 6: Getting Into the Game!

Advice and Recommendations for Newsmakers

The last chapter of this report dispenses practical advice and best practices for employing games and play within the newsroom based on the work of not only successful journalists, but also game designers and developers.

This research report advocates for a flexible newsroom, willing to tailor its products and departments to its readership and subject matter. Just as game designers espouse both user testing and continual tinkering in order to cultivate a truly immersive and fun game, similar practices can be instituted inside newsrooms. At the same time, the space in which people make news should be rethought, with fewer rigid departmental boundaries and a more diverse staff. Of course, there is no singular model or method that will work across all newsrooms, and constant adaptation must accompany these innovations.

While there are significant technical challenges to assimilating play into newsrooms, I suggest at the report's end that journalists take advantage of the skills in which they are already proficient—engaging devoted audiences and making use of written text and other traditional storytelling methods. While offering guidance about specific popular tools for game design, I support the development of open source and open access tools. This will not only allow new playful forms of storytelling to emerge, but also aid in the creation of standards for the further preservation of multimedia and interactive projects.

While games, play, and the news have a long history, we find ourselves at an exciting moment as newsmakers' strategies and efforts to playfully engage with users are beginning to see benefits. For digital newsrooms already built around much of the same technology and practices of game designers, a playful approach seems particularly attractive.



II. History and Discourses

Puzzling Circumstances

It was all the rage—mobile, inexpensive, and in almost every newspaper. Its checkerboard pattern adorned dresses and jewelry. There were Broadway songs written about it. Even as it was praised as a diversion and new form of education, some feared this contagious invention. *The New York Times* called it a “sinful waste” and described those who played as “get[ting] nothing out of it except a primitive form of mental exercise.”⁵ Long before the first video game had ever been imagined, there was the crossword puzzle.

Astonishingly, what now seems a staid black-and-white grid of fact and fancy has evolved markedly throughout its century-long history, and the reaction to it mirrors many of the concerns expressed about today’s digital games and multimedia.

The trajectory of the crossword puzzle epitomizes the relationship between games, play, and the news:⁶

- **Technology** – Despite its laborious production, the crossword quickly prospered due to popular demand. Print technology made the newspaper ubiquitous, affordable, and portable. This allowed puzzle enthusiasts to play almost anywhere at any time.

- ***User Feedback and Iterability*** – While it was professionals who designed and published puzzles, amateurs helped to shape them. Shortly after he printed the first newspaper crossword in the “Fun” section of *The New York World*, Arthur Wynne entreated players for suggestions about improving the puzzle’s design. The crossword subsequently changed its shape and structure, spawning a multitude of copycats and offspring. Similarly, the “grande dame” of crossword editors, Margaret Farrar, who edited for the *World*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, consistently solicited user feedback. Thus, the rules of crossword puzzles developed from the bottom up, not the top down.
- ***Incentivization*** – The crossword puzzle’s rabid fan base was not only instrumental in the crossword’s evolution, but was motivated to purchase newspaper subscriptions, dictionaries, and participate in contests and competitions sponsored by and profitable to news organizations.
- ***Limitations and Purpose*** – Crosswords accommodated a wide array of content, much of which was not the news. When *The New York Times* began publishing crossword puzzles in the 1940s, it did so with the dictum of designing some around news subjects. Farrar soon disregarded this edict, partially because she felt that current events, like World War II, were too depressing. The crossword did not suit every situation.
- ***The News Bundle*** – The crossword never replaced traditional news formats. Instead it was part of the bundle of information, entertainment, and advertising offered to readers who bought the newspaper for the comics or puzzle section as much as the news. It is worth noting that the crossword endured as part of the bundle even when distribution systems changed, and today remains conspicuous online. It has continued to adapt, as have its adherents.

- *Booms and Busts in Popularity* – While perpetually fascinating, there have been definitive cycles of interest in crosswords, especially through the craze of the 1920s and a smaller echo in the 1940s.

The Novelty of the Newsgame

A similar orbit can be traced around journalism's enthusiasm for video games. While puzzles and quizzes have invaded newspapers, television, teletext machines, and the web, newsmakers have regarded the inception of the video game and its popular ascent somewhat skeptically. Although alluring, video games can be challenging to assimilate into a news organization's workflow.

Nonetheless, there have been attempts to incorporate the theory, practices, and design of video games into journalistic products. Perhaps the most extensive efforts emerged in the development of "newsgames," an amorphous term for video games based upon journalistic principles and topics.

The rise of newsgames began in the mid 2000s. In an outstanding example, *Darfur is Dying*, produced as a joint venture between mtvU, the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, and the International Crisis Group, users played at experiencing daily life in a refugee camp.⁷ Another often-cited collaborative newsgame, *Budget Hero*, asked players to balance the federal budget and collected data on their responses.⁸

Difficult and expensive to design, many of the newsgames of the 2000s adhered to a model of collaboration between journalists and game designers with investment from philanthropic foundations and civic-minded partners. At their prime, renowned game designer and academic Ian Bogost released the book *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* with Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer.⁹ The book highlighted the potential benefits of games as media for conveying the news, and included a wide variety of content and potential platforms that could be supported by games, including

interactivity and play within multimedia and infographics. The book also emphasized the experiential, embodied quality of games and their ability to simply and clearly articulate systems rather than chronological or narrative-based stories.

After a surfeit of investment in the second half of the 2000s, newsgames lost favor with producers and financiers. As to why, those interviewed pointed to the lack of a truly successful newsgame that could compete with AAA video game titles (high-end and often console-based ones like *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*), the paucity of fun newsgames, the insularity of serious newsgame designers within the game design world, and the ubiquity of independent games which could address news subjects, but didn't necessarily abide by journalistic principles.

Gamification and Its Discontents

As newsgames' acclaim declined, "gamification," or the "use of game design elements in non-game contexts,"¹⁰ increased in popularity, not only within journalism, but also across institutions ranging from healthcare to education. Gamification became the subject of criticism and curiosity in both the game design world and the news community, propelled by the idea that game elements such as leaderboards, points, and badges could incentivize digital media users to participate more ardently in an activity.

Game designers lambasted the use of game elements as little more than a corporate ploy, including Bogost, who called them "bullshit" in a blog post.¹¹ Undeterred, a variety of enterprises added gamified features to their websites and applications to stimulate user participation. Google News, the Huffington Post, and Mashable appended badges and points to their web pages. In an article about Huffington Post's Social Badge program, Arianna Huffington described the badges as a means to make the already active "HuffPost community even more dynamic and rewarding," allowing users to "actively participate" in the processes of the site, such as moderating comments.¹²

The fervor over gamification in the newsworld quickly cooled, and many organizations soon dropped badges and prizes. In interviews, the general consensus blames gamification's failure on poor implementation. Critics discounted the idea that some uniform game element, such as a badge, could work universally in any kind of news distribution. At its worst, such attempts seemed crass, as when the Israeli Defense Force attempted to gamify its news-oriented public relations blog with badges shortly before an invasion into Palestinian territory. More essentially, gamification's ability to increase and sustain user interest ultimately proved ephemeral.¹³

Understanding Games and the News

This brief history of games and the news showcases how little has changed in the process of integrating the two. Fundamentally, crossword puzzles, newsgames, and gamified elements rely on effective user engagement. All three innovations can educate and inform, as well as entertain the public through new and imaginative experiences of play. Each endured waves in popularity and persisted despite ebbs and flows. However, these patterns also expose the arbitrary nature of incorporating games into news products. Many news innovations fail—and why Wynne's crossword puzzle remains in vogue is a mystery.

In each case, games are never meant to be the sole vehicle for relaying a story or comprehending the news. As senior editor for Data News at WNYC John Keefe stated, "It's not like a driving force for us. If we feel like we can tell a story using a game we might do that. It's just one of the possibilities that we might have for a particular way of presenting a project."



III. Features of Play

Renowned game designers and academics Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call the rules of the game their “formal identity.”¹⁴ This chapter presents an overview of the rules for game usage in current newsrooms. Such use generally falls into two camps: In the first, producers design a particularly playful interactive feature for a specific piece of news; in the second, journalists employ stock formats, or specific reusable frameworks, for content.

Designers also apply gamelike elements—from simple reward systems to full gameworld environments where players are fully immersed—to particular news stories. This chapter also evaluates these different game “mechanics.”

Features vs. Stock Formats

The decision to make a playful or gamelike product often originates from the content itself. This was the case with *The New York Times*’ “Dialect Quiz” published in the winter of 2013.¹⁵ According to *Times* graphics editor Wilson Andrews, a data set on pronunciation helped shape the quiz. “I think what we did that really made it so successful is used some really solid actual academic research that really pinpointed people. And people were shocked and surprised and excited about how accurate the quiz was.” Other playful projects which focus on specific data or events include WNYC’s snowfall map,¹⁶ NPR’s Tetris-like election coverage,¹⁷ Slate’s fiscal cliff interactive,¹⁸ and *The Guardian*’s “Could You Be a Medallist?” Olympic racing game.¹⁹

Features like these can bring attention to specific news events in unique and engaging ways, particularly when executed well. Jason Rzepka, former senior vice president of public affairs and brand communications at MTV, noted that “the value of just having that attention that you wouldn’t have had otherwise is as important—or more important—than how many people actually played the game.”

Content-driven design can also supplement coverage of major news events. *The New York Times* appropriated a “Spot the Ball” game from British newspapers for its 2014 World Cup presentation.²⁰ Andrews commented, “It’s really a good example of capturing something that has a lot of news value at the moment and making it really accessible to anyone while still being able to tell a story.” While only one part of its World Cup coverage, the game potentially exposed the Times to more playful audiences.

Features are not without drawbacks, especially since they require investments of time, funds, and skills. That’s why many media companies use programs and code developed previously; or some are conceived by retained developers with specialized knowledge and expertise. In addition, audiences should be able to play features repeatedly. An attractive and well-made product can have a long shelf life, like the Times’ “Gauging Your Distraction,” a driving-while-texting game;²¹ or *The Miami Herald* and WLRN’s “Tallanasty” quiz.²² According to *Herald* and WLRN public insight analyst and web producer Stefania Ferro, its Florida quiz was so popular that the outlets reused it in subsequent political coverage so they could provide a unique window into the state’s perplexing legal and political system.

On the other side of the spectrum are a variety of game templates and stock formats, which often require simple user and journalistic input. BuzzFeed’s enormously popular news quiz is built into the company’s content management system (CMS) so multiple departments within the organization can use it. As a consequence, writers can publish quizzes without needing technical skills.

These stock formats, whether designed in-house or with third-party software, are meant to accommodate multiple stories and content. They demand less initial time and effort from designers and can be released quickly. As is the case with BuzzFeed’s quizzes, they’re tweaked over time based upon user play and feedback. The goal is to optimize the format to maximize audience response.

Although stock formats cost little to assemble and deploy, publishers who want to build them may need to seat design-oriented developers in the newsroom. Furthermore, the success of stock formats depends upon an organization’s great awareness of its users. Metrics on audience participation become imperative. Stock formats are discarded or shelved if they don’t receive early positive response. “You look at it, you share it or not, and then you go on to the next one. I think we’re just thinking of them [games] as articles for now,” said BuzzFeed game developer Michael Hansen. Ideally, a good format will seamlessly integrate into news production and can be a low-cost alternative to more time- and skill-intensive features.

What qualifies as gamelike, playful, or fun runs the gamut across news institutions. While a few may employ specialized developers, most hire staff (not specifically trained in game design) to be multi-tasked members of their multimedia and development teams. *The New York Times*’ “Times Haiku”²³ and *The Washington Post*’s “The Depth of the Problem”²⁴ infographic reflect the diversity of playfully designed products from both editorial and development sides of the newsroom.

Glossary of Game Mechanics

The following glossary of playful mechanics highlights and exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of products newsmakers have already devised. These categories are only key points in a spectrum of game use and not a full disclosure of every playful possibility.

Badges, Points, and Prizes

Almost as quickly as gamification rose in popularity at the beginning of this decade, it has now fallen out of favor. News organizations, like the Huffington Post and Google News, no longer dispense virtual rewards to their audiences. When they did, elements like badges, points, and leaderboards represented some of the most facile stock formats. Easy to deploy and design, they were intended to motivate readers and garner brand recognition. University of Nevada, Reno journalism professor Larry Dailey credits games for providing a better experience to news consumption through incremental rewards and a sense of winning: “And when’s the last time that you read a news story and had that ‘Yes!’—that epic win because it helped you understand something that you didn’t understand?” he asked. According to Jeremy Gilbert, *The Washington Post’s* director of strategic initiatives, these “game mechanics as well as games themselves can be useful tools” for conveying news and information that is critical to users’ lives.

When not attuned to readers’ interests, points and badges can appear arbitrary or even frivolous additions to content. BuzzFeed is more subtle: It uses numerical incentives by quantifying audience reaction with stickers displayed at the bottom of its articles. Similarly, the aggregation site Reddit creates playful competition with “upvotes” and “downvotes.” Said communications director Victoria Taylor, these are part of the site’s larger ecosystem of playful content. Voting and polling, for instance, have even changed the direction of Reddit’s well-known “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) interviews. So while flagrant gamification may have faded, incentives remain a convenient way to captivate particular audiences.

Quizzes and Questions

News organizations can implement these quickly, effortlessly, and continually. Their ephemeral quality, along with a focus on primarily written content, makes quizzes and trivia formats attractive. BuzzFeed has a few different quiz- and question-based formats, including trivia and graphically

rich name generators. *Mother Jones*, according to editor Tasneem Raja, has also built tools to animate provocative and controversial topics. Its quizzes have taken on immigration²⁵ and politics,²⁶ while its calculators have broached subjects like birth control.²⁷ “We’ve had a lot of success in finding ways to take wonky, in-the-weeds, policy-heavy topics and [present] these to our audience in a way that feels more personal, like they have a stake in it,” Raja said.

The strength of the quiz and question model is its flexibility. The more integrally they are built into the CMS, the more widely they can be repurposed. Similarly, they are uncomplicated and do not require players to learn new rules for play.

The results of the quiz or questionnaire can become fodder for audience discussion and social distribution. A personal stake in the results may contribute to the virality of particular content or help recontextualize serious arguments like those taken up by *Mother Jones*. Users’ ability to enter personal data and then reveal some aspect about themselves lends to a quiz’s virality—and helps explain why companies like BuzzFeed are so interested in how users share its content.

However, the transience and simplicity of the quiz can also deter from exploring content in depth.

Situation-specific Designs and Packages

There is no shortage of examples of situation-specific playful designs in the newsroom. *The New York Times* has quite a few packages with gamelike elements, from the “Spot the Ball” game and “Dialect Quiz” to an interactive that helps users build their own households.²⁸ Elections seem potent for extra playful treatment. *The Guardian*,²⁹ *The New York Times*,³⁰ *PBS NewsHour*, *MTV*,³¹ and *The Washington Post*³² each augmented their coverage of the 2012 election with whimsical and fun visuals.

Situation-specific designs appropriate unique data into playful modes. Game elements can help fixate on specific aspects of data and uniquely present it to consumers as they interact with the material. NPR fashioned its 2012 election page to present a quirky view of the electoral college. Likewise, its coverage this past year assumed an election party theme. Since situation-specific designs require more effort, in terms of both composition and code, those that produce these schemes tend to be larger institutions with the necessary resources already in place.

Newsgames and Gameworlds

What distinguishes a specific design or package from a more holistic game? In some ways, the game producer's intent defines that boundary. Gameworlds are autonomous spaces that provide an immersive and unique user experience. Andrew Phelps, director and founder of the Center for Media, Arts, Games, Interaction, and Creativity at RIT, wrote in an email that “[g]ames tell stories, but they do it very differently. They give the player an agency and nonlinear approach they don't have in reading the written word.” He added:

Think carefully about what you want to do, what story you are telling, what information you want to convey: For some things, games are great tools, particularly if you are trying to get people to understand a particular system, a particular relationship between multiple pieces of conflicting data and how they interact, or to role-play and experience from a particular point of view.

For game designer Tomas Rawlings, who works at GameTheNews.Net and has designed a variety of newsgames, this approach is particularly important in the current media environment because “news is in competition with more than just other news providers.” In an email, he explained, “On a tablet if you are reading a newspaper site, you can easily close that and open Facebook, *Candy Crush*, *Clash of Clans*—or a newsgame.”

Many classic newsgames might fall into this category. These games are built explicitly with journalistic subjects and principles in mind, and are often collaborations between journalists, game designers, and philanthropic organizations. Others include commercial video games with a news focus, such as *Papers, Please*—an independent game made to relate the immigrant experience³³—or *Democracy 3*—a game explicating the intricacies of world democracy.³⁴ Newsgames and gameworlds are usually more sophisticated than those found in the other three categories and their construction mostly takes work from experienced game designers. They may also tackle more endemic issues, such as the game *Spent*, which focuses primarily on poverty in the United States.³⁵

Graphically rich and more complex than their counterparts, gameworlds are novel and state-of-the-art. However, creating gameworlds can be a gamble, particularly as they require significant financial investment. They can result in marked success or failure. For instance, the Florida *Sun-Sentinel's* *Hunley Simulator* now seems quaint and is no longer available online.³⁶ Hopefully, *The Des Moines Register's* impressive *Harvest of Change*, which plunges the viewer into the world of Iowa farmers using 360-degree video and virtual reality, will have greater longevity.³⁷

Conclusion

This section spotlights some of the play styles newsrooms deploy. There is a wide spectrum of possibilities for injecting games into current affairs. This glossary attests to both the ubiquity of play in news production and the ambiguity in defining it. One can detect fun and games in everything from the tone of an article to the explicit use of gamelike mechanics. Perhaps, however, instead of thinking about introducing play into particular news products, it should be considered in the overall news practice. This idea will be explored more deeply in the next chapter.



IV. Newsroom Culture at Play

Fun is endemic at the entertainment and news website BuzzFeed. As in many tech startups, its office is filled with amusements. Staff play ping-pong or human-sized Connect Four, and go through an abundance of drinks and snacks during breaks. Editorial's elongated tables are festooned with a legion of Mac laptops, Play-Doh, and toys. One staff member called work "adult daycare." Conference rooms are named after cats. Employees sign emails with animated GIFs. In short, the fun of the website, which some laud and others denigrate, emanates as much from the culture inside the company's Fifth Avenue headquarters as it does from the content the organization originates.

Still, even advocates of playful news mechanics and products recognize the obstacles of economics, know-how, and effort in implementing game-based strategies. This chapter will analyze how to overcome these hurdles through the spirit and practices of a more playful newsroom, which ultimately shapes the content newsmakers create.

BuzzFeed may not entirely embody the potential of such a newsroom, but it tends far in that direction. With editors like Jack Shepherd, who utilizes game theories in his management; a development team of game designers mandated to create playful products; and a focus on content that treads the line between entertainment and news, BuzzFeed is exploring how play can influence journalists' practices and relationships to their audience.

What is Play?

Before examining a playful newsroom, a working definition of play is necessary. The term has many applications, ranging from performance to frivolity. Game designers and educators like Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman contextualize “game play” as “the formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game.”³⁸ However, they more generally define broader forms of play as “free movement within a more rigid structure.”³⁹ As this encompasses an array of activities, the boundary between games and play can be considered more pedantic than practical.

While play may be perceived as childish or trivial, the fields of psychology and education consider it very seriously. Psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith recognized it as not solely the purview of children. He classified a wide variety of play including contests (traditionally associated with games), audiences’ vicarious engagement with entertainment, social play among friends, and generally playful behavior.

In education, play is subsumed into many contexts—from one of the founding principles of kindergarten to a training aid through embodied simulation. Salen capitalizes on game and play concepts throughout the curriculum of her Quest to Learn school in New York City, which promotes systems thinking, new forms of criticality and literacy, and “situated learning” within the context of a student’s life, neighborhood, and disciplines. While still in its infancy, the school has shown promising results.⁴⁰

More significant here is what comprises an ethos of play in terms of practice and commercial design. Play and game design require an attitude of experimentation, where designers incessantly test their products based on audience feedback. In fact, most interviewees for this project, be they designers, editors, or writers, emphasized the increasing value of engaging users. NPR Visuals editor Brian Boyer identified a personal work goal as “harnessing the love” of his followers. “There’s a relationship that we have with our audience that frankly is different than a lot of other news organizations. I mean,

nobody puts a *Chicago Tribune* bumper sticker on the back of their car, but everyone's got NPR stickers," he said. Unlike other forms of user-centered design, play is a more continuous, reciprocal process. In an age of perpetual beta, maybe such a playful exchange has become or should become the norm. In addition, forms of play, when done well, are mutually exciting and fun for content creators and consumers.

The Playful Newsroom

When BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti left the Huffington Post to start his own website, his business model, referred to as the "Reverse Mullet"—party in the front, serious business in the back—was both fun and user-centric.⁴¹ Jack Shepherd, one of BuzzFeed's original eight staff members and now an editorial director, said that when BuzzFeed started its objective "was to try to figure out why certain things spread socially on the web and to then see if we could take some of those principles and actually make things ourselves that had a high chance of being shared." The company, from its inception, evaluated content via user reaction.

There are many ways in which BuzzFeed defies traditional newsrooms—even with its physical layout. Occupying a wide rectangular floor, the organization is split into equal-sized divisions (including business, editorial, and technology) whose boundaries are difficult to distinguish. Staff sit along out-sized desks, however, many employees roam, taking their laptops to work alone or sometimes in small groups in communal spaces. There are also a handful of standing desks where employees can stretch their legs. BuzzFeed's floor plan promotes freedom of movement, collaboration, and experimentation.

Despite a propensity for silliness and fun, BuzzFeed does not fully conform to the freewheeling stereotypes associated with tech campuses. Play merely contributes to an environment built around the dissemination of sharable information. BuzzFeed game developer Michael Hansen said he prefers

to walk around and check out messages on the internal Slack chat service rather than play ping-pong or Connect Four. He usually works on projects daily, often in conjunction with game development partners. The playful attitude members of BuzzFeed assume is more organic than dictated.

The Game Team

BuzzFeed's most blatantly playful unit is its six-person game team, many of whose members have backgrounds in the world of game and entertainment development. Nicole Leffel, for instance, did game design work at NBC Universal.

Despite traditional work experience, the team has produced few products that resemble the video games found on consoles and computers. Given relative autonomy to construct what they want, they primarily “experiment, try something new and see what gets stuck on the wall,” as senior product designer Jacqueline Yue put it. With products ranging from trivia questions to name generators and randomizers, their work is nonetheless decidedly playful. Yue stressed the difference in build time. Six months would be a short cycle in traditional game development, but much longer than the team spends at BuzzFeed. “It’s good to know we can sort of stop everything and work on one thing for one day and then put something out there that’s topical,” added Hansen. The members of the team take the principles of game design and apply them to BuzzFeed’s content. For instance, Yue described many of their games as “single action, single level.”

A young department, its work is situated within the general culture of sharing at BuzzFeed. Hansen described their products as “in the same space” as articles, in that a reader looks at them once, hopefully shares them with friends, and moves on. This balance between freedom to create and responsibility to the user seems ideally suited for gameful design.

The team still has relatively small exposure, or a “little knot of awareness,” as Leffel put it, to the internal BuzzFeed community. Presently, they work with specific staff members, with word-of-mouth increasing recognition of their existence and usefulness. The team has neither produced work for the investigative news wing of BuzzFeed, nor were its members hired with an explicit edict to do so. This doesn’t imply they never will. “We definitely are interested in doing more serious games, but it’s a question of how to do that,” said Leffel, after confessing that the group’s level of journalistic risk is fairly low—and hasn’t extended significantly beyond assuring it doesn’t misspell character names from *Game of Thrones*. Yue added that creating games about more serious content could materialize as BuzzFeed continues to legitimize a more serious brand. “I think right now we focus on things we’re really good at, which is entertainment, hav[ing] fun, and then over time, hopefully, our audience will also grow with us.”

The game designers have instead developed relationships with editors who are receptive to their ideas and, as a consequence, their attention revolves mostly around popular culture and entertainment products. The game team’s relationship with their colleagues is not dissimilar from those at other newsrooms, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* where multimedia teams described a similar organic evolution between design and editorial.

Playful Content

While the game team is in the nascent stages of defining its role within the company, play has been part of content generation for some time. When Jack Shepherd joined BuzzFeed as a community manager, it was the users who sparked his interest in games and play. “My goal was to try to get community involved with BuzzFeed, and have people making [and] commenting on posts, and that was a very playful thing.” Shepherd started to read game literature and think of himself as a designer, a perspective he retained when he moved to editorial—where he now heads the “Buzz” section of the site.

For Shepherd, the way to “engage users wasn’t to sit around [and] assign stories based on what we thought were the important stories of the day, but instead to kind of delve into what was going on on the Internet and try to come up with original stuff that would spread socially.” This didn’t mean ceding editorial authority: “Editorial judgment, in terms of my team, is in some ways just another way of saying ‘empathy,’ to be like, ‘Oh, this is something, it’s a reaction that a lot of people are going to have, and I’m going to build something out of it that sort of creates that emotional experience.’ And being good at that means that you’re going to have a high hit rate, in terms of things that people share.”

This philosophy is evident in a number of writing exercises Shepherd uses, including brainstorming and games, as ways to stimulate more content. For instance, he asked writers to list emotions and identities as a collective group and use those terms as the building blocks for new content.

His view of content is also design-oriented. He described it in terms of frames—or a lens through which to see content differently—and formats, which are any of BuzzFeed’s standardized means of publishing. Not unlike the stock formats mentioned in the previous chapter, these range from quizzes and games to listicles and checklists. No format is particularly better than another: “A list, like an article, is just one tool to tell a story, and there were good lists and there were bad lists. And I kind of think the same way about games,” he said.

Shepherd sees play and games existing outside of the products the game team creates. It shapes his way of thinking about content: “I’ve been interested for a long time in trying to do posts that are games, without using technology,” he said, describing a particular gamelike post he called “Can You Make It Through This Post Without Saying ‘Awww’?”, in which he escalated the level of cuteness to entice and challenge the reader.⁴² Play has even affected his hiring practices. Ideally, to him, job candidates should be enthusiastic and possess “a sense of play”—traits particularly felicitous for the personal and celebrity-focused content of his section.

This outlook, according to Shepherd, keeps content fresh, prevents repetition, and, ultimately, provides some structure in the relatively structureless environment of the company. He highlighted how “from that point of view creativity can be fairly paralyzing. You kind of come in and sit in front of a computer and your mandate is just to make something.” It is through total experimentation that he meets this challenge.

Playful Products

In addition to fostering specific practices in the newsroom, BuzzFeed creates exclusive products that take the ethos of play into account. The game team has fashioned interactives (which they call “formats”) that can be used across content and eventually incorporated into the website’s content management system (CMS), as are the long-standing and ubiquitous quizzes that editorial employs even in its more traditional “News” section.

One example of the team’s more popular interactive formats was a name generator created for the television show *Game of Thrones*, which allowed a user to input his/her name and be dubbed with a moniker rewritten in the fantastical style of the show. They fashioned a similar generator to enable a user to compose a BuzzFeed-esque headline. Other creations include a chatbot written to simulate an obdurate worker during a 2014 Comcast scandal, a tattoo-generator based on the show *Orange Is the New Black*, and a more traditional game entitled the “Sleepy Sloth Sprint.”⁴³

Once a product is developed, it is first released internally—one of Leffel’s favorite parts of the process. Anyone can give feedback. Yue described the benefits of an internal release: Editorial, which usually has more of a casual games bent, provides different type of criticism than the more “savvy” tech group.

Formats are quick to build and easy (as well as inexpensive) to produce. Without significant investment, the group is willing to move on if something doesn’t appeal to its audience. “Each version [which is published] is

like a chance to test something else. So that's kind of like where we're iterating, but we don't go back and fix [formats]." said Leffel, who added later that they work with live versions of their new formats in conjunction with an editor to create a post, and later tweak and improve upon the product for future articles.⁴⁴ Hansen provided further insight into the motivations behind these expeditious releases: "It's better to get the idea out there; you make assumptions and [those] glaring problems, the hundred thousand people that look at it are going to find those instantly and that informs what is actually important and the direction you should go. So, it's okay if it doesn't work because you learn stuff about it and then you can do better next time."

A similar mindset informs Shepherd's vision of the content he generates:

And so the thing that I talk about a lot is the Venn diagram of "It's Good," "I Liked It or It Was Meaningful To Me," and "It Was a Hit." And the center of that Venn diagram is awesome when you get there, but as long as you hit one of those three circles, you're [doing] a good thing and if you keep making things that hit one of those, you're often going to hit the center.

To achieve this, Shepherd encourages a constant state of creation in terms of what can qualify as content. This is evident in the sprints that Shepherd imposes—in a fixed amount of time, he and other editors make as many types of a particular format as possible. The game sprint he did with the team netted, among other things, the headline generator. Shepherd utilizes the playful and competitive nature of the sprints to overcome the pressures of content creation. Thus the attachment to form and content are in constant flux and their value is not judged solely by editors, but by the key metric for audience interest—shareability.

Playful Attitude

Sharing informs the overall attitude of the company. “People at BuzzFeed are hardwired to think that way,” said Shepherd, adding later that if a piece isn’t getting shared then it’s not resonating with the audience. While not everyone embraces the practices and products of the game team, and they don’t augment some of BuzzFeed’s most serious news content, they contribute to shareable content, which is, by its nature, more playful than traditional journalistic output. Sharing constitutes the reciprocal relationship between BuzzFeed and its users. As Shepherd put it, “We do the equivalent of play testing with our posts. We’ll try a bunch of different things and then the stuff that is doing well and getting shared is the stuff that we start showing people more, and the stuff that isn’t really working, we won’t show people as much.”

While staff is implicitly expected to reshape work based on user response, BuzzFeed’s experimental culture means that not every piece is necessarily a direct reaction to user demands. Said Shepherd, “You’re not going to be censured for doing something that didn’t work because in fact you’re supposed to try to do a bunch of things that don’t work.” Success is measured by how well journalists attune to users. Electronic displays exhibit the most currently read articles and pieces—something other companies, like Gawker media, do.⁴⁵ Staff members also have access to metrics about posts, especially seed and social traffic. While seed traffic registers unique visitors to the BuzzFeed site, social traffic—or the traffic from sharing via social media—matters more to members of BuzzFeed and represents not only a wider spread but a successful article for the company.

Play imbues the corporate climate as well. Yue described BuzzFeed as having a “play spirit” long before the game team was established. She added that she found experimentation to be an important asset of the company and one that separated it from the bureaucracy of both traditional newsrooms and perfection-oriented game studios. “At BuzzFeed we don’t always have the resources to get everything right the very first time. Our strategy

is to keep trying and experimenting. We roll stuff out, get feedback from user comments and sharing data, and then make improvements for the next game.”

This vision of content creation, along with user response, has even colored BuzzFeed’s fast-paced expansion. Such is apparent in its mobile platform, which for the game team has meant designing products that can be used transmedially, and the recent unbundling of its editorial divisions to allow for more autonomy between different content creators. BuzzFeed seems to unconsciously adhere to a basic tenet of game design—that a game is only as good as its player. If the player isn’t having fun, and BuzzFeed doesn’t abide by its audience’s interests, the best games are rendered useless.

It should be noted that the iterative and experimental quality of game design is just one potential avenue for exploring how newsrooms can adopt playful practices. Equally important is the ability to subvert and challenge norms. While BuzzFeed’s brand subverts traditional news norms, this quality can now be found in dozens of newsrooms where tinkerers and developers have devised many successful playful products in the last few years. An example can be found, somewhat uncharacteristically, at *The New York Times*. Senior software architect Jacob Harris created the “Times Haiku” as an afterthought. Harris said, “I tend to just sort of do these sort of silly projects at the *Times* sometimes because either I’m bored with something I’m working on or, you know I actually did the haiku thing because I was depressed. I had been doing elections, elections, elections, elections and then the elections stop.” The space and time to play, even if just between projects, can net unforeseen positive results.

Playful Problems

Still, this time and space is just one challenge newsrooms face when trying to incorporate iterative and experimental design strategies into their work and workflows. BuzzFeed is no exception and, like other newsrooms, still sees problems arise from its playful atmosphere.

As a brand, BuzzFeed is often dismissed because of its entertainment-centric model, and its playful content hardly disabuses readers of this perspective. From its inception, BuzzFeed was disinclined to become a traditional news site. While its “News” section might not produce the lighthearted fare of the “Buzz” division or the game team, the site as a whole maintains a playful attitude in service of its users.

There are also practical issues involving play at BuzzFeed. First are concerns about preservation, in which the organization is not overtly interested. For instance, Shepherd said, “Sometimes I’ll come across some old, beautiful thing that I was proud of that doesn’t really exist anymore, and that’s a bummer,” because, he added, “in terms of the site, it doesn’t really matter. It’s not like those things are getting traffic anymore. We’ve moved on.”

The preservation of content is less important than its immediate shareability. This contemporary viewpoint isn’t necessarily at odds with the event-driven focus of traditional news creation. How to both preserve and innovate within digital media remains problematic. Both the forms and content a company like BuzzFeed creates could be lost to time. Shepherd said that he has gone back to older posts on BuzzFeed that are available in order to review content. “Going back to old stuff that we used to do is often a source of new ideas. The web, in some ways, is cyclical. Things that were cool in 2007 that the web as a whole decided to stop doing sometimes will suddenly come back up.”

A second dilemma revolves around the spatial and organic quality of form and content creation. By its own admission, the game team is not utilized by the entirety of the organization, including the more traditional “News”

division, but works project to project. Furthermore, although BuzzFeed has a relatively horizontal organizational structure, boundaries between editorial, development, and advertising are still circumscribed. Company strategists are not particularly focused on finding ways to further integrate game design throughout BuzzFeed, a posture many of the advocates of game design interviewed for this report repeated.

However, this impasse is not insurmountable. For instance, *The Washington Post* restructured its newsroom starting in 2009⁴⁶ when it integrated its online and offline content and more recently moved embedded engineers inside the newsroom.⁴⁷ The *Post* has since continued to develop and innovate in a manner not dissimilar to BuzzFeed with a surfeit of content-specific applications for mobile devices, along with the use of quizzes and other formats. Both the *Post* and BuzzFeed demonstrate the importance of spatial and departmental dynamics, where, unlike traditional editorial, developers can impact the creation of novel forms of news and build upon user reaction.

Conclusion

This chapter portrays one particular type of playful newsroom. While BuzzFeed is renowned for its technological know-how and an expertise in digital analytics, its routines are additionally shaped by the tenets of play. In an age where metrics benchmark revenue and advertising, it is imperative to rethink not just the technology but the practices and spaces of journalists and their relationships to users. The playful attitude of organizations like BuzzFeed is hardly the only perspective that can be adopted, but it does provide a powerful lens for examining the relationships between journalists, the news, and the public at large.

V. Games and Play as Business Models

The business of video games and journalism may have more in common than first meets the eye. After all, both industries are in flux. Games' commerce hardly resembles what it was a decade ago. While journalism is having difficulty finding its place in the digital economy, the game industry has expanded and diversified, generating seventy-six billion dollars in revenue in 2013.⁴⁸ Games have proliferated beyond the AAA titles made for consoles and are now accessible on smartphones, portable game systems, computers, and even emerging platforms like the Oculus Rift and smartwatch.

This section delves into some of the prominent business practices of the game industry to provoke a discussion of how the strategies game developers and publishers adopt—from freemium to philanthropic investment—might be of potential use to journalists. Considering this multiplicity of business models the gaming industry employs could be useful to media companies adjusting to online content distribution. In any case, the game industry has evolved and adapted in ways few industries have.

A Multiplicity of Models

When exploring the business models game-makers have developed, a few salient points emerge. Foremost is that the game industry has perpetually spawned new means of developing, distributing, and monetizing its content. When game cartridges became obsolete distribution vehicles, the industry turned to compact discs. It then devised product codes to thwart piracy. New monetization measures were incorporated into the games themselves

when digital distribution made copying rampant.⁴⁹ Hardly complacent, the industry is currently making game play “ubiquitous”⁵⁰ across a number of platforms and services and expanding into non-game products, like children’s toys.⁵¹

Rarely is a single business model adopted unless it reflects a specific political viewpoint. A company may, for instance, decide to design games in an open source and open access environment, which ultimately limits the types of games it makes and its business model.⁵² Instead, developers might integrate innovative forms of monetization into products, while utilizing conventional methods. Developers constantly tinker with their products’ design, monetization, and distribution.

While some list as many as 29 different business models for game development and distribution,⁵³ there are applicable trends that translate to other industries, including news. Generally, however, game design comes first; finding an appropriate business model comes after.

Retail and AAA Games

As the prevailing format of video games in the United States and worldwide, AAA titles (pronounced “triple A”) are designed by major studios with substantial budgets. These games, such as *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*, built for gaming platforms like the Xbox and PlayStation consoles and often PC computers, require significant investment. Like big budget films, their number of annual releases are limited. AAA games traditionally required dedicated hardware, namely a console, which the manufacturer sells below cost and then profits through the sale of content. However, even this model is in decline with the advent of digital services like Steam, which sells both AAA and independent (or “indie”) computer games. Similarly, Microsoft and Playstation have digital stores which distribute independent and mainstream content, providing console players a wider spectrum of games to play.

Advertising in and Around Games

As games have moved from dedicated systems to mobile phones and web browsers, advertising has increased as an important revenue stream. The profusion of means by which games have integrated advertising into their products is remarkable. Examples range from in-game advertising, where advertisements are designed into the background of games; to around-game advertising, where promotions interrupt or surround gameplay; to advertisements that net specific user rewards in the game. Marketing campaigns, sometimes designed in collaboration with advertisers, even give games away as part of promotional tactics. Significant are the sophisticated analytics, based on thousands of clicks, views, and acquisition of new players, which game designers and publishers use to establish fees. Each advertising model affects the specific way a game is designed.

Freemium and Sharing

Perhaps the most consequential change to mobile games has been the inception of “freemium” models, which derive partially from the arcades of the 1980s and “shareware” created for early computer games. In the freemium model, typified by casual games like *Candy Crush Saga*, players are given the game for free but make in-game purchases in order to either continue play and/or master the game. Under this model, sharing the game with friends can often net rewards similar to a purchase. Players can purchase virtual goods for bragging rights or disburse them among friends. Even wagering can be part of the activity, particularly within gambling games.

The freemium model deviates from traditional subscriptions in several ways. Freemium purchases are voluntary, with an infinitesimal set of users known as “whales,” supporting the majority.⁵⁴ That is to say that half of mobile game earnings come from the 0.15 percent of users who pay. Premium content is meant to supplement, not replace, the experience of gameplay for players who may make infrequent, rather than constant, use of it. Content is also

carefully priced—usually not too expensively—and keenly monitored, while it's changed often to adapt to user activity. In other words, close attention to analytics informs and alters what and how people pay. Still, freemium games have been criticized for their inability to hold interest over time. At their best, freemiums sustain commerce among a minority of users who invest more time and effort into the product as compared to the majority of players.

A Profusion of Philanthropy

Just as in journalism, the role of philanthropic organizations can't be understated. Games tackling serious subjects, like climate change, or those supporting literacy, education, and skill development are produced worldwide with the assistance of governments, universities, and grants. These non-profit projects are meant to appeal to distinct market segments. Philanthropic support also integrates into software distribution. Initiatives like the Humble Bundle⁵⁵ have users pay what they want for a predetermined package of games. Part of the proceeds goes to the developers and bundlers, part to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and, sometimes, a portion to other philanthropic organizations. In constantly updating the bundles, this system brings together indie developers, philanthropists, and players in ever-changing configurations (and has generated quite a few clones).

Corollaries in Journalism

This diverse set of business models may seem alien to the practices of journalists, but corollaries do exist. AAA games have sustained similar challenges in terms of cost and infrastructure as they've adjusted to digital platforms. While the game industry radically reimagines its distribution systems every few years, adapting them to popular technology and demand, it's not always with absolute success.

Online advertising is the most obvious correlation between the gaming and journalism industries. Game developers incessantly pursue new means of embedding advertising into their content based on extremely detailed analysis of user response. And while embedded advertising may be most prominently showcased in the mobile game market, it is embraced throughout the game industry. AAA game designers have embedded advertising for years—subtly promoting products in the billboards and backgrounds of sports games, for instance. These efforts may provide important revenue streams for high-end newsgames, which need significant capital investment prior to release, and—similar to video games—can be graphically rich. Likewise, traditional embedded ads on media websites ranging from Kinja to *The Des Moines Register* are continuously modified. Sponsored stories and lists on a site like BuzzFeed highlight new avenues for inserting advertising into content. And the move to freemium content by game makers, as opposed to monthly pay-to-play models, is analogous to the increasingly ubiquitous practice of “leaky paywalls”—which allot readers free access to a limited number of articles monthly—by subscription-based news services like *The New York Times*.

Part of the continued success of the game industry is its careful consideration of the platforms that distribute games. The rise of casual games, played intermittently at home, in transit, or at work—and particularly the success of games like *Candy Crush Saga*, *Angry Birds*, and *Dots*—is that they were designed specifically for mobile devices and not made in the same manner as games for the computer or video game console. The news industry is beginning to assume similar endeavors, with apps like *NYT Now*, *The Economist's Espresso*, and even *NPR One* being designed with not just the web, but specifically mobile devices in mind. Furthermore, both the game industry and news industry seem to be aware of, if not concerned about, increasingly cross-platform experiences. Games like *Candy Crush Saga* need to be played on both smartphones and tablets just as BuzzFeed's con-

tent needs to be compatible with mobile devices, computers, and tablets alike. Different are the nuances between the business models in the news and games industries, but not the exigency of evolution.

Conclusion

New business models have affected the types of games being developed and their potential audiences. Casual games have escalated and exposed a diverse group of non-gamers to the world of video games. Few can glance at their smartphones, computers, or web browsers without stumbling upon a game.

Designers and publishers are perpetually adapting and innovating their products. No two games from the same studio necessarily use the same business model. Amalgamations abound and newspaper and media companies could benefit from similar product flexibility and incessant tracking of product effectiveness. As newsrooms continue to rethink revenue strategies and news bundles, they could consider taking a page from the game industry and attempt more dynamic and fluid means of monetization, based not only on their specific brand but also specific products they release. Adaptability, in times of great transition, may be key to the survival of the game industry and media companies of the future.

VI. Challenges to Play

With their networked technologies, physicality, and innovative distribution platforms, games represent some of the major shifting innovations in current media. Many are worthy of journalistic consideration; yet news practitioners and institutions are reluctant to adopt them. What causes such skepticism?

This chapter investigates the challenges of integrating games into news practices and instilling more playful design orientation into journalistic environments. Beginning with how the rhetoric of games and play conflicts with the work-oriented ethos of journalism, it delves deeper into the practical difficulties that arise when the two meet head on.

The Terms of Engagement

“The news is hard to gamify because it’s the news. It’s really not fun to play something where you know people are dying,” said Joey Marburger, director of digital products and design at *The Washington Post*. Many journalists stigmatize games. Interviews with them revealed a subtext that finds journalism to be a generally serious pursuit while gameplay a more frivolous one. Crime, war, disasters, politics, and breaking news stories—the essence of “hard news”—are considered incompatible with game-based products. Within the games community, a similar idea exists when the subject is news. Playability supersedes content and serious news simply isn’t much fun.

However, there are examples of this intersection. Users flocked to *The Miami Herald* and WLRN's "Tallanasty" game during election cycles, a scheme that underscores the entrenchment and corruption in Florida's capital.⁵⁶ The Syrian conflict inspired a choose-your-own-adventure-style game, *1000 Days of Syria*.⁵⁷

Because of the aforementioned tensions, a number of scholars and journalists have dropped the "play" and "game" monikers from their products, while still employing the tactics and skills of game design. Still, Heather Chaplin, Colleen Macklin, and John Sharp of the New School see some overlapping philosophies. Their objective is to make "Data Toys," a designation which emphasizes both the systemic and manipulatable quality of games. Chaplin explained, "Games may feel as if you're free in them, but they're leading you somewhere, whereas a toy, it's open exploration. I think [the word toy] maps well over what journalists are supposed to be doing."

Tasneem Raja, interactive editor at *Mother Jones*, surely incorporates fun into the news, as she and ProPublica news application developer Sisi Wei asserted during the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference in 2013. Such fun is discoverable within the *Mother Jones* website's reproductive rights calculators⁵⁸ and quizzes on the immigration system.⁵⁹ Raja's approach uses multiple modes of storytelling: "One thing we've put a lot of investment into here is a suite of storytelling tools," which make it "easier to more quickly zero in on which [tool] makes sense and which ones wouldn't, based on our history using these things" and "the general tone of the coverage."

Others have certainly incorporated games into broader journalistic processes without explicitly naming them as such. What qualifies as game use remains idiosyncratic. Interviewees, however, came to more of a consensus about what content could be approached playfully. Foremost for a playful feature is that it employs data or revolves around a benign subject. For instance, WNYC's John Keefe described an interactive map that asked users to take pictures of themselves measuring snow during a particularly bad

snowstorm as playful.⁶⁰ Playful features appeared within the coverage of major news events, like NPR's Tetris-themed map of electoral votes, embellished by an 8-bit audio version of "Hail to the Chief" to announce the winner of the 2012 presidential election.⁶¹

These examples point to another important area of unanimity among many interviewees—playful material is particularly useful in eliciting user response and data input. And yet, although play could be a vital tool for user input, few interviewees made extensive use of it. Instead, play is seen as a way for adding flavor to already existing multimedia coverage. Brian Boyer described trying to "create a shared experience between us and our audience" and creating a "personal experience with our audience," a feeling echoed by Marburger at the *Post* who talked of their continued interest in driving engagement: "More than just reading a news story, but interacting with that story basically leads to kind of a habit formed with our readers."

Bringing in Brand

The question then is, when and why label any journalistic activity as playful, gamelike, or fun? Jeremy Gilbert indicated that audiences have very different expectations for the types of games different game developers make. Those expectations change more when a game comes from a journalistic institution like the *Post* or *Wall Street Journal*. He added, "I think there may be suspicion about the authenticity of a gaming experience that comes from a non-gaming company." For most entrenched news organizations, using games is perceived, whether rightly or wrongly, as having an adverse effect on the brand.

However, for certain journalistic organizations, the appropriation of games and play is considered a benefit rather than a detriment. Raja indicated how a fun attitude actually worked well with the *Mother Jones* brand from an historical perspective. "We just have the benefit of the fact that *Mother Jones* has always had a punchy, highly conversational, very voice-y, voice."

She added, “This type of storytelling is sort of in the DNA of *Mother Jones*.” For other, less journalistically oriented organizations, play and fun are overt assets. Staff at BuzzFeed and Reddit take pride in their websites’ ability to entertain.

Play and games are viewed as a way to supplement the brand, enticing new audience members who otherwise might not engage with the products in the first place. Marburger described how the *Post* recombines and even reproduces different stories in different formats to potentially appeal to different members of a population. “That helps us with tackling new readers and sustaining current ones,” he said.

Costs, Skills, and Efforts

An important hurdle many interviewees acknowledged is the high cost of producing extensive game-centered projects, in terms of funding, time, skill, and effort. Many of the most successful newsgames are collaborations between different institutions, including philanthropic organizations. Large financial outlays are necessary for pulling together design talent, programmers, platforms, and distribution channels to successfully release a truly complex game. And even after construction, game designers and journalists admit to the difficulty in making a successful product. There is no formula for designing a popular commercial video game, let alone one with a serious or news-related orientation. Gail Robinson, former editor of *Gotham Gazette* who won a Knight Foundation grant to build a number of newsgames, seconded this in her critique of the price and costs of producing in the medium. Ultimately she remained ambivalent over whether or not the games had brought in and cultivated new audiences, as she had hoped they would.

Robinson’s example underscores that games can not only be costly and of questionable benefit, but even successful ones may not remain relevant or useful for protracted time periods; especially with regard to the content

they convey and the technology used to make them. Some of the games at *Gotham Gazette* are neither featured, nor playable, due to changes to the website over time. Even the much-lauded game *Budget Hero* from American Public Media was retired after four years.

The biggest handicap to maintaining games is the changing relevancy of their topics. *Miami Herald* journalist Stefania Ferro suggested that the company designed “Tallanasty” as a game surrounding a recurring subject. “The point was to try to make a wonky subject more entertaining and informative and it’s something that we always link back to and play with again whenever the legislative session comes back, as well as a resource we can come back to whenever we have a politician in trouble,” she said.

A secondary and interrelated concern of many interviewed was the lack of skills within the newsroom for producing games. Chaplin, who is researching this subject and heads the New School’s program in Journalism and Design, specifies a few of the prerequisites for integrating systems-oriented thinking into newsrooms and news products. Those primarily include the need to listen and observe audiences’ desires and to experiment and iterate in product creation. For her, this perspective is mandatory today. “Systems thinking, play, and design are really to us kind of the core twenty-first-century skills.” Chaplin confessed that traditional journalists and even modern newsrooms are not currently equipped to handle the sort of projects she promotes. She and a few others attributed this, at least partially, to the general attitude of newsrooms, which favor a “No, but,” rather than a “Yes, and” attitude about innovation and experimentation. Her conclusion is to integrate the best game designers into news teams along with other systems thinkers.

While a potentially useful addition, the creation of sophisticated newsgames may require hiring or training specialists versed in this form of design. This is indicative of a general deficit of skills increasingly essential to digital journalism. Writers appear to have less of a connection, awareness, and skill set necessary to easily coordinate and brainstorm about more playful and

gamelike activity. Wei, along with others, commented “There is no place that journalism is putting more money into right now than trying to hire people with these technical skills to do this kind of thing, and those are the same people that would have the technical privilege to experiment and make games.”

Integration and Space

When digital news companies do have staff members with the skills necessary for design, programming, and game maintenance, the issue arises of where these individuals reside within the organization. Many work in either multimedia or development departments, and as a consequence don’t come from strictly editorial backgrounds. This is not problematic except that these departments often exclude writers and editors associated with traditional news production.

Chaplin recommended a team-based alignment consisting of a game designer, a system dynamics person, and a journalist, perhaps along with specific subject matter experts to manage newsroom information. She said it was increasingly “crucial” to have “interdisciplinary collaboration.” Her proposal has a corollary inside *The Washington Post* newsroom—after its significant rejuvenation over the last few years. Marburger described the innovation of “embedded developers,” who were hired and placed within the newsroom, first at desks and then as a centralized team. “Now they’re just completely ingrained in the whole newsroom process, just like design is,” he said.

Permutations like these seem to result in less a sense of hierarchy and more a “spider web” of potential people with whom to interact and produce news. Without seriously refiguring traditional news spaces and departmental structures, a disconnect can easily persist between traditional forms of

journalism and its multimedia counterparts. Such integration may allow journalists throughout a newsroom to utilize their strengths in the creation of a multiplicity of products.

Conclusion

The norms by which audiences receive and appraise journalism are clearly changing. Jack Shepherd, for instance, indicated that the manner in which users read news was a consideration behind BuzzFeed's model: "Think about what your Facebook feed is like. It has all sorts of different kinds of things in it. You'll get news about an Ebola case in Dallas in the same breath that your sister just got a cute new cat."

As serious journalism is clustered with a myriad of other web products, ranging from entertainment to personal posts and updates, it is worth reexamining the formats and practices by which news is disseminated. With this, serious journalists may need to reimagine their roles within this panoply of online information. However, as the industry adapts and struggles within these contexts, it is not surprising that the challenge of adopting a more playful attitude to news products has not been readily overcome.

When interviewing journalism professors for this report, all of whom supported the use of games and play in the news, an interesting phenomenon emerged. It was best expressed by Retha Hill, Arizona State University journalism professor and executive director of the Digital Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lab. As she put it, "It's been kind of weird and frustrating that I'll get these twenty-year-olds in, and it's like, 'What type of games do you play?' and only 5–10 percent of them raise their hands," she said. "And these other journalists are like, 'We can't even conceive of games because we don't play games ourselves.' You all are the oldest young people I've ever met." The good news, as evidenced in the following chapter, is

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that a playful attitude is not only a strength in the actual practice of news-making, but it's not too laborious to incorporate into everyday journalistic practices if done right.

VII. Getting Into the Game! Advice to Newsmakers

This chapter offers advice, culled from interviews with journalists, serious game designers, and academics about the practical steps for adding play into the news. It suggests thinking like a game designer, not solely as a journalist, to shape stories, and concludes with guidance on technical preconditions for the creation of playful news products.

Practices

Most journalists hardly possess the expertise to make conventional video games. As Jeremy Gilbert, director of strategic initiatives at *The Washington Post*, put it, “A gaming company as I understand it has some storytellers, but not a ton of storytellers, and there are a ton of developers and people who render things. A news organization is almost the opposite.” Still, journalists may profit from approaching their work with some of the same methods as game designers.

Think Like a Game Designer

What does it mean to think like a game designer? Lindsay Grace, director of American University’s Game Lab and Studio, highlighted that most professional game designers spend years building technical literacy and a critical eye. He highlighted his profession’s interest in “engagement, entertainment, [and] flow” and advocated a “nimble approach” to making games. Grace

suggested that the current media environment rewards first-to-market releases, which has necessitated that independent game developers adopt a minimally viable product approach—one that “gets something out the door” and iterates along the way and afterward. He suggested, for better or worse, that for “industries trying to find their place, if they move slowly they will move prudently, but they may not necessarily move fast enough.”

With this in mind, the following tactics may help engender a working playful mindset:

Flexibility: Any methods of newsmaking or structures of storytelling are open to a playful approach. Each story should be treated and evaluated individually for playability.

Formatting: Flexibility doesn’t necessitate starting from scratch. Some interviewees used a variety of recyclable and expendable tactics and stock formats. Editor Jack Shepherd described how BuzzFeed’s ubiquitous news quiz came to prominence: “We developed quiz technology in 2008 and [it] did okay. But we got tired of [quizzes] because they weren’t bringing in the hits,” he said, adding that “lists were really starting to take off so we kept quizzes quietly humming along on the back burner.” BuzzFeed still continued to toy with the quizzes to find their fit in terms of editorial, design, and usability. Having a variety of formats for the most appropriate instance is a major advantage.

Iterability: “Fear of failure is a terrible thing and we try to not have it,” said NPR editor Brian Boyer. “We want to do great work and great storytelling but always want to be trying.” Iterability is fundamental in game-making. No game is perfect initially but instead is reworked. Games designers count on versioning and low-cost prototypes that can be tested, upgraded, and perfected quickly and often prior to release. As with BuzzFeed, iterations occur over subsequent publications. If audience response can be measured with each release, incremental refinements result in advancements over time.

Testing: A game is only successful when people play it. Flexibility, formats, and iterations are contingent upon how users respond to particular models. Even the best story needs to be rethought if it doesn't live up to the expectations of its audience. Ultimately, user engagement and experience take precedent.

Rethinking the Story

A compelling reason to include games within the arsenal of journalistic tools is their ability to articulate complex systems through user/player interaction. This characteristic underscores that unimagined and varied possibilities for storytelling are feasible online. Many interviewees endorsed a diversification of storytelling methods, from different writing styles to employing interactives, infographics, and audio-visual material. “The question we ask is who are [our] users. And then we ask what are their needs and then we think, ‘What can be built?’” said Boyer. “We’re always trying to create the most audience-serving experience.”

Tasneem Raja, interactive editor at *Mother Jones*, stressed how the web browser creates unique modes of presentation—as seen in *The Washington Post’s* “The Depth of the Problem” infographic.⁶² The design was built to mimic the magnitude and depth of the Indian Ocean and the near impossibility of finding the black box from disappeared Malaysian airliner MH370. “It’s a graphic that takes advantage of the medium in which it’s presented because what you’re doing is you’re scrolling,” she said. “That act of scrolling endlessly really hits home for you; the sheer challenge of finding this black box that everyone was talking about.” A playful approach means constantly searching for new ways to tell stories and being unafraid to fail along the way.

In addition, journalists might rethink what qualifies as content. What suffices as news and the role of newsmakers is evolving. Referring to the Ray Rice scandal, broken by TMZ, professor Heather Chaplin of The New School stated, “We have to accept that journalism is a bigger umbrella now and that

things we might not immediately think of as being serious journalism serve the purpose of serious journalism. TMZ is this celebrity site, but it's the one that got the video of this guy and now we're having this big national conversation about domestic abuse." A playful approach recognizes the wider context of storytelling within which journalism resides and encourages the experimentation and crafting of stories that aren't bound by the strictures of the past.

Find the Right Players

A playful sensibility pairs the right audience with the right content. Testing and measuring audience reaction is key. Making use of analytics and engagement metrics provides a wealth of information about users. BuzzFeed has taken a more granular posture, with an "obsession" for data. *Budget Hero* reporter Dave Gustafson asserted how the data he collected about players through the game, along with questions they answered through the Public Insight Network, helped him learn about users who he then might contact and interview. Gustafson had rarely experienced a data set where he could "zoom in or out" as much as he wanted. Generating these forms of measurement and their subsequent analyses can be long-term projects, not netting immediate results.

Additionally, it's advisable to introduce a wider group of people beyond the journalistic community into the creation of news. Chaplin discussed the inclusion of game designers and scientists in the newsroom, among other subject specialists. While these types of employees may not require a permanent place on staff, their influence may instigate more engaging content for specific audiences. If the installation of outside professionals into the newsroom seems too expensive or disruptive, making use of all current newsroom personnel is one alternative. Communication and transparency across departments may expose stories to new forms of expertise, while the larger organization can be playtesters for experimental work by offering initial feedback and aiding in the process of iteration.

Be Adaptable

Not every model is going to work forever. Certain forms, formats, and stories may be popular at different times and consequently need to be retooled or abandoned entirely. “Don’t assume that the first time is going to be the best time. So be prepared to try something and improve it,” cautioned Gilbert about project-building. Paradoxically, reviving old formats may lend a new perspective to current coverage. Reappraisal, both of the news and the means of measuring its effect, is recommended. Ultimately, this may also influence a company’s business model; Sisi Wei of ProPublica, for instance, indicated how games might yield new means of monetization. Being adaptable requires constant scrutiny, rather than complacency with particular forms or news content.

Technical Challenges

For those interested in producing gamelike news products, both traditional and new techniques can meet specific manufacturing challenges.

Utilizing Your Skill Set

Journalists aren’t necessarily the best game designers, but they are good storytellers. Gilbert highlighted that journalists are already proficient at utilizing game elements like leaderboards, however, he added, “We’re often really bad at making something fun in the way that moves you to want to keep playing.” Rather than trying to be something they are not, journalists should experiment with those inexpensive and plentiful techniques already existent in the newsroom. There are many gamelike formats that take advantage of traditional journalistic skills, ranging from BuzzFeed’s quizzes to the playful banter of *The New York Times*’ “4th Down Bot,” a real-time conversational analysis using statistics about NFL fourth-down conversions.⁶³

The audience provides yet another technical asset to journalists. User input gives audience members a stake in journalistic products. Some interviewees prioritize finding ways to capitalize on the loyalty of users. Former *New York Times* multimedia editor, who now chairs the University of Oregon SOJC's Agora Journalism Center, Andrew DeVigal suggested cultivating user engagement to find "where can journalism come from outside of just journalists."

Still, traditional games can really engage one type of user. Said Shepherd, "Games, with a capital G, that you actually play in some interactive way are going to reach one network of people and not another network of people." University of Nevada, Reno professor and Reynolds Chair of Media Technology Larry Dailey added, "Don't make it about 'how easy is it for me to produce it'. Make it about, 'What is my objective for [the game]?' And if a form helps you do that and you can verify that that's the best way to communicate, for God's sake, do it."

Tools for the Newsroom

While it is prohibitively expensive to design complex games—like the console-based AAA games that have budgets in the millions—prices for the design of applications and online games are dropping. "What I really hear out of it is fear of change," said Dailey. "The cost of production compared to what we're doing now is nothing. The real thing that's impossible to do is publish *The Miami Herald* every day."

The continued support and expansion of HTML allows for backwards compatibility and preservation, as well as increases transmedial opportunities. Game-focused applications, such as the Unity/Unity3d engine—an ecosystem of game development and animation tools⁶⁴—also seem promising for game design as they permit cross-platform and mobile media functionality. However, as witnessed by the current absence of many of the Flash-based games created at the height of newsgame interest, it is difficult to specify a

tool set. Unity could be a good route, despite its pricey license. Grace did not hesitate to recommend it, but also forewarned how rapidly development tools change.

Advocating for Open Source

The transience of engines for fabricating games, the prevalence and salience of HTML, and the improvements of HTML5 affirm that open formats can advance the longevity of digital products. This concept may be anathema to media companies at first; media makers have a history of closely guarding their innovations and proprietary software. However, despite the precautions, copying is rampant.

Open source material facilitates the collaboration and disbursement of new techniques, and has crept into the journalistic community. For instance, the NPR Visuals team freely hosts its code using the open source GitHub platform.⁶⁵ There are numerous open source tools available for digital journalists. Among them are MongoDB for database construction and Markdown language for web publishing. For those in the tech community, these sorts of open source initiatives are increasingly commonplace. For those in the journalistic world, they could augment the exchange of successful formats and prototypes.

In terms of games, open source initiatives fostered by journalists are fledgling, but growing. Director of innovations Adam Ingram-Goble and initiative coordinator at the Center for Games and Impact Juli James are creating open source game design tools for journalists at Arizona State University with the idea of embedding journalism practices into the fabric of the tools themselves. When journalism students tested these tools, they completed full games within six to eighteen hours exploring complex issues like Veteran's healthcare, and CIA interrogation practices. "We are looking at these kind of tool platforms as being successful to journalists in their newsrooms, on the schedules they need to operate them," said Ingram-Goble. Ultimately, open source and open access programs would reduce costs for developing

playful and gameful news vehicles. More importantly, open source formats could provide journalists with a repository of potential templates and tools. Journalists can then access, iterate, and tailor software to their own coverage and audiences. This is especially beneficial for those who do not have the budgets to build such products from scratch.

Furthermore, using open source software would, implicitly if not explicitly, assist in the problem of preserving digital formats. Having access to code would permit users to save and revive previous work with more ease than when created with proprietary applications. While this will not solve issues of digital preservation, it would enable interested parties to more aggressively pursue the issue.

As open source resources develop, using free commercial software is another avenue available to journalists. *New York Times* senior software architect Jacob Harris, responsible for *The New York Times* Haiku bot published on the Tumblr platform and one of the first guardians of the *Times*' Twitter account, discovered Tumblr and Twitter before their wider acceptance. His early adoption opened up unexpected possibilities for more playful activity. In general, the cultivation of free platforms seems opportune. For instance, Tasneem Raja of *Mother Jones* spoke about not only looking outside the company for quiz software, but also developing open source tools in-house.⁶⁶ So, just as amassing and playing with new methods of storytelling has been fruitful, a similar process might transpire with online digital media tools.

Conclusion

This section endeavors to dispense practical advice for assuming a playful approach to newsmaking, both in terms of practices and tools. It should be emphasized that none of these techniques supplant traditional news practices. Games and play may provide fascinating new means of disseminating news, but storytelling still lies at the core of the newsmaking experience.

This guidance supplements and enhances—rather than detracts from—the basics of journalism and attempts to stretch the canvas on which the industry can paint.



VIII. Concluding Thoughts

Thanks to emerging platforms and distribution services, the tried-and-true models of disseminating news are eroding. In an age where search engines are pervasive, being informed means looking beyond a cacophony of scrolling headlines. With an increasing focus on how information, not just news, can be tailored to the individual, the role of newsmakers must evolve. It must cater to personalization while retaining its edict of informing and educating the public. Games are one avenue for journalists and users to grapple with this new reality.

This report seeks to highlight how games and play currently manifest in the news landscape. As some of the most successful articles in the past few years have been interactives and quizzes, it is difficult to ignore the powerful effect of digital content that playfully engages readers.

To a certain population, this report may act as an update to those ideas espoused about newsgames five years ago. Its mission, however, is to discern how newsrooms are dealing with new technology, new personnel, and new practices that arise in a world where play lies at our fingertips—in our homes, on our phones, and, of course, online. It attempts to balance the precepts of game designers, the knowledge of journalists already making use of the medium, and the advocacy of forward-thinking academics in the fields of journalism and game studies.

Historical precedents show play as a compelling avenue for exploring the relationship between newsmakers and their audiences.

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The research here examines playful products and practices, discloses business opportunities from the game industry, and, ultimately, critiques the assimilation of play into the newsroom. In interviews, the term “game” remained ambiguous—interchangeable with “fun,” “play,” and “model.” No matter its label, games are present in most newsrooms, and a playful attitude seems beneficial in the production and distribution of digital content. However, while play and games provide a vocabulary and perspective, they are just a starting point—rather than a ready-made solution. Newsmakers stand to gain from approaching their work less seriously, in some capacity, in exchange for the openness to being stirred to experiment, iterate, and (obviously) play.

IX. Endnotes

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