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# Playful approaches to news engagement

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## Abstract

From crossword puzzles and quizzes to more complex gamification strategies and serious newsgames, legacy media has long explored ways to deploy playful approaches to deliver their content and engage with the audience. We examine how news and games fit together when news organizations, game creators and news audiences welcome gameful forms of communication and participation. Moreover, we reflect on the theoretical and empirical significance of merging news with games as a way to reformulate normative assumptions, production practices and consumption patterns. As a result, the boundaries between journalism and game's logics start to erode, and they begin to find new ways of converging.

## Keywords

Engagement, games, gamification, institutional logics, journalism, ludic, news, newsgames, playful

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## Of news and games

We often hear that news is a serious business. In addition to informing and educating citizens, journalism performs multiple functions that are necessary for society to thrive. Certain fundamentals have never really changed: commitment to seeking truth, holding power to account, verified information and explaining to the public how to make sense of politics and the economy (Deuze and Witschge, 2020: 4–5). Indeed, most professional journalists prefer hard news over softer topics, politics over sensationalism and informative content over entertainment. However, central to journalism's purpose are storytelling and audience engagement.

There are many examples that bridge the serious/fun dichotomy observable in journalism. From crossword puzzles and quizzes to more complex gamification strategies and serious newsgames, legacy media has long explored ways to deploy playful approaches to deliver their content and engage with the audience (Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Foxman, 2015). The efforts of journalists and news outlets are not operating in a vacuum. At a societal level, new communication methods over the past two to three decades, especially social media platforms, are suffused with mechanics drawn from games and play, challenging legacy publishers and broadcasters to engage in new ways with their audiences, especially millennials, a generation accustomed to digital interactivity. This 'ludic turn', as we may call it, does not change the fact that the quality of public discourse is contingent upon the capacity of news organizations to adapt to and adopt new technologies and new formats in their journalistic distribution. The overwhelming growth of digital media promises the power to reinvent engagement with the public sphere through playful, social and immersive encounters. Such approaches have the potential to both enhance and diminish the importance of the content. For example, 'newsgames', a 'broad body of work produced at the intersection of videogames and journalism' (Bogost et al., 2010: 6), emerge as a viable form of news consumption.

This *Convergence* special issue entitled 'Playful approaches to news engagement' examines how news and games fit together as news organizations, game creators and news audiences welcome gameful forms of communication and participation. The articles assembled here demonstrate the theoretical and empirical significance of merging news with games as a way to reformulate normative assumptions, production practices and consumption patterns. As a result, the boundaries between journalistic and ludic means of communication start to erode, and they begin to find new ways of merging and converging. In addition to descriptive words like 'playful', 'game-like' and 'gameful', we use the adjective *ludic* and the concept of *ludicity* (from *ludus*, 'game', in Latin) to refer to the 'gamelike-ness' of the products and phenomena discussed (see e.g. Mukherjee, 2015).

In this introduction, we present an overview of the environment that has facilitated the emergence of playful and game-like approaches within journalism, from its roots over a hundred years ago to its future implications. We begin by discussing the historical evolution of the use of games and playful features in journalism. As a natural extension of the long-term trend of seeing news 'as entertainment', as well as seeing it as public deliberation, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the apparent separation of logics between news and games. We also examine how we can understand the implications of wilfully transgressing their boundaries. We argue that while journalism and games carry conflicting norms, their guiding logics can converge and complement each other.

Beyond the theoretical discussion, one of the practical implications of gamifying news is the increasing use of technology in the newsroom, and most importantly, the need to have the technical ability to create game-like solutions. Here, we analyse the promises and challenges these

'solutions' face when newswriters decide to create a gameful journalistic product or service. We also discuss the form and shape of the output these approaches produce. Such content, distributed virally, can easily influence younger audiences, further marginalizing conventional gatekeepers. Audience engagement is the prize that these playful strategies seek alongside the serious business of reclaiming the professional high ground, supporting the economic and societal relevance that audience and platform fragmentation has eroded.

## From early approaches to contemporary use

To some degree, publishers have always had a playful relationship with the news, particularly in the United States where the need to entertain readers was tied to journalism as a business. In 1889, when the famous muckraker Elizabeth Cochrane (aka Nellie Bly) took on her second major assignment – flying around the world in 73 days – *The New York World* published a game so readers could track and play along with her journey. Papers needed to be sold, and fun and novelty values were key means to engage and expand readership beyond hard facts. However, technological innovations between the 19th and 20th centuries helped normalize the inclusion of information, entertainment and advertising in newspapers. It was during this time, in 1913, when Arthur Wynne began placing the now ubiquitous crossword puzzle into the 'Fun' section of his papers. At the same time, comics and other graphic commentary started to become a weekly norm. Even in these early years, news and play were intimately entwined. In fact, during the last century, 'the trajectory of the crossword puzzle epitomize[d] the relationship between games, play, and the news' (Foxman, 2015: 7). Puzzles and crosswords earned space in print because the 'press is a composite, omnibus vehicle carrying a variety of loads' (Poynter, 1942: 83), and their popularity became a key component to boost paper sales and reach target groups as consumers of news.

In scholarship, there have also been early attempts to theorize using games in journalism. In 1964, Stephenson's 'Ludenic Theory of Newsreading' called for serious journalism to draw from play and games to establish a stronger relationship with the audience. In this effort, Stephenson suggested that 'a newspaper should lend itself freely to the attributes of play', while paying attention 'to the newsreader's play, and to the encouragement of developed newsreading habits', and finding 'reasons for concern about the format of a newspaper to suit the play of its readers' (1964: 374–375). To Stephenson, 'newspaper reading, in its subjectivity seems to be play, mainly "pure play attitude" but with the attributes of a game in the rules and self-consciousness it deploys' (1964: 370). In other words, how news organizations, journalists and game developers incorporate aesthetics and conditions of play in the news storytelling has a strong impact on the news reading experience (Glasser, 2000).

In current times, the growing popularity of digital games has presented an interesting and ongoing set of challenges and opportunities for newsmakers, who have tended to either demonize or praise the medium, without illustrating a clear awareness of its nuances (Williams, 2003). Enthusiasm for the potential power of games to make news was typified in a series of works promoting the value of games to make particularly complex ideas digestible through play (Bogost et al., 2010; Sicart, 2008). On the one hand, they present a novel set of storytelling tools and means to engage readership that at face value promise to capture young audiences who are increasingly turning toward non-traditional platforms for news consumption, such as social media platforms. On the other hand, journalists are hardly game creators, without the background, time or ability to devote to such laborious production.

This tension came to a head in two distinct movements in the 21st century. The emergence of ‘multimedia journalism’ and the growth of ‘serious games’ opened the space to new storytelling techniques to capture new news consumers and help them explore news stories on their own terms (Jacobson, 2012). In the early 2000s, a movement towards newsgames began with now much cited examples like *Darfur is Dying* and *Budget Hero*, which attempted to create full, interactive and, most importantly, game-like virtual environments to express endemic societal issues like war and economics (respectively). A similar movement rose in the 2010s when in journalism, as well as many other fields, there were attempts to gamify news production and consumption by adding points, badges, and other competitive elements drawn from games onto news websites and apps. Like newsgames, gamification approaches showed early promise, but in general, failed to gain major presence in the news (Ferrer-Conill, 2016; Ferrer-Conill and Karlsson, 2015).

To this day, game-like elements continue to be used tactically throughout newsrooms. Every year, new newsgames appear, enhancing traditional journalism by aiming to generate ‘experiential engagement’ to new audiences (Plewe and Fürsich, 2017: 2470). Beyond companies like *BuzzFeed* normalizing news quizzes and comparable material which is now built into content management systems across the world, it is common to see a regular publication of newsgames particularly at the largest news outlets, whether it is the award-winning *Uber Game* from *The Financial Times* or *A World Without Chocolate*, an independent Spanish–Italian collaboration that was published in *El Periodico*, *Al Jazeera*, *Tages Anzeiger* and *La Repubblica* at the same time. The capacity of newsgames to engage their audiences has been impressive, at times. The *New York Times*’ *How Y’all, Youse and You Guys Talk* was their most popular piece in 2013 (Meyer, 2014). In the end, the more things change, the more they stay the same: games and their inherent tension with journalistic norms continue to persist in the business, long after the hype around them has faded. As new formats appear and try to infuse playful approaches to journalism, such as augmented reality, virtual reality and some forms of AI, journalists and game designers need to grapple with the distinct internal logics that guide them.

## Converging institutional logics

When news organizations, journalists and game developers decide to create a newsgame or gamify a news item, it is not by chance or as a result of a spontaneous burst of playfulness. Games and news production require intent, know-how and the utilization of specific technologies. This is true in traditional production processes of news and games individually, but it is perhaps even more true when trying to combine news and ludic systems. The reason for this is that both journalism and games production carry their own institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), or patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, socially constructed over time. They include assumptions, values and norms by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity. In other words, journalism and games’ logics organize the expectations the public has of journalism and games in a particular time and place. What matters here is that, as boundaries change with alternating periods of fluidity, rigidity and porosity, there is a conflation of how the public identifies journalism and games. This is because both journalism and games carry their own distinct logics that shape them.

## *Journalism logics*

The duality between serious news and other forms of journalism has been on a decline since the turn of the century. Contemporary journalism tries to be more popular by incorporating entertainment-oriented approaches, blending news and information with advice and relaxation (Hanitzsch, 2007). In fact, broader forms of journalism, such as sports, entertainment or lifestyle journalism, have made their way into mainstream news media (Dubied and Hanitzsch, 2014; Hanusch, 2012). However, to claim its own institutional jurisdiction, journalism establishes institutional boundaries to demarcate interactions with other institutions and professions (Carlson and Lewis, 2015).

Scholars have identified several logics behind journalism practice. Professional, commercial, participatory and technological, among others, are some of the most common logics behind journalism (Ekberg, 2017; Lewis, 2012; Lewis and Westlund, 2015). These logics are not mutually exclusive, and they normally coexist, often trying to impose their normative assumptions. The combination of different logics' strength is dependent on sociocultural and organizational factors. What that means is that if, for example, the professional logic is the overpowering logic of an organization, its news should prioritize traditional journalistic norms and values, such as truth, verification, independence and informing the public. These, argues Zelizer (1993), constitute the set of professional values that distinguish journalism's practices from those of other groups of information workers. Instead, if an organization prioritizes a commercial logic, then the primary goal is to sustain a viable economic operation, sometimes at the expense of producing a quality product, in favour of sales (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014).

## *Game logics*

Games, and especially digital games, carry their own set of logics. Just like journalism, they have strong commercial and technologic prerogatives. The former relates not only to the lucrative entertainment industry which the medium has fostered but also to how the internal dynamics of games work. The latter refers to technological innovation, such as advanced interfaces, algorithmic power, extended internet connectivity and networked devices that all support the spread of video game culture (Zackariasson, 2016).

However, games also operate with logics that diverge dramatically from journalistic norms. A good example of this is their persuasive logic, or procedural rhetoric – 'the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures' (Bogost, 2007: ix). While journalistic professionalism is how news media establish their epistemological authority, digital games use computational power and procedural rhetoric as their unique and essential mechanism to create meaning. Moreover, when looking at gamification as a practice, Hamari (2015) identifies two major logics, the hedonic and the utilitarian. A hedonic interface focuses on creating enjoyable experiences for users that are based on entertainment-oriented motivation. It prioritizes different motivations for implementation, such as gratifications, enjoyment or value, to foster user engagement. The utilitarian logic, on the other hand, prioritizes achieving the system's intended goal and enabling maximum productivity of users to reach its intended purpose.

## *Overlapping goals, conflicting norms and audience engagement*

Bridging the boundaries between news and games means that these logics interplay and shape the look of these hybrid news pieces. On the one hand, there are overlapping goals that journalists and

game developers share. Digital games and news are ritualized forms of interaction (Mäyrä, 2008) that often can inspire forms of participatory civic action (Quandt and Kröger, 2013) and represent the public sphere with the intention of explaining or commenting on current news (Sicart, 2008). Making the news popular is a matter of ‘mobilizing publics and creating new forms of feedback between news outlets and their publics’ (Nadler, 2016: 15) and is a prerequisite to fulfil its democratic duty (Costera Meijer, 2001).

Accordingly, news organizations and news producers should be invested in adopting digital games and playful approaches to attract and maintain new news consumers. At the same time, game developers could use editorial content as a conduit to engage with the public and civic life. Serious games, newsgames, the gamification of news and other playful approaches are a new iteration of the tradition of popularizing journalism.

The problem, however, is that these new forms of journalism may create a paradox that resides in the ‘dissonance between ideal and pragmatic, informational and entertainment’ roles of journalism, and the friction between the dominant theses about the distinctiveness and seriousness of journalism (Conboy, 2010: 412). The logics of journalism and digital games often prioritize conflicting norms. The persuasive and hedonic logics of digital games often clash with the professional logic of journalism. This occurs because journalism still heralds professionalism as the moral compass that legitimizes journalists and gives them the authority to make the news (Karlsson, 2011).

We can also see these conflicting norms in the practices and reasons for merging news and games. The goal seems to be predominantly geared towards technological experimentation with the objective of attracting the public, rather than making significant advancements in journalistic or game advancement. This is in line with an overarching trend of audience orientation (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018) and can be seen when newsrooms create playful products, audience reception is only intuited or evaluated by abstract metrics (Foxman, 2017). This is because even after producing newsgames, traditional occupational ideologies remain anchored within the journalists and game developers’ identities (Deuze, 2007). It is the technical solution and its promise that seem to be the main drivers of interaction.

## **Practical implications**

So we know that games and news carry overlapping and conflicting norms. Why does it matter? We believe that studying the interaction of news and games is important for what it represents: news organizations experimenting with new technologies, usually foreign to their professional domain, with the hopes that they will play a role in recovering their economic viability and their social relevance. Studying ‘playful approaches to news engagement’ serves as a mechanism to understand wider discussions in journalism and game studies. It brings forth the tendency in journalism to constantly explore and try out the ‘shiny new things’ in the evolving media landscape (Newman, 2019).

From interactive games to virtual/augmented reality, from automated journalism to news delivery via smart assistants, this constant undercurrent of change offers possibilities but also exerts demands and limitations to people working in journalism. Quite simply, the number of human and other resources does not easily keep up with the ever-changing technological environment, which easily leads to a zero-sum-game when making practical decisions. Designing and implementing a truly interactive newsgame, for example, may be significantly more challenging and time-consuming than producing a VR video reportage of a current event. The question, then,

becomes whether and how much is true interactivity and gamefulness worth? And more importantly, what happens when a genre struggles to take off and provide short-term results? The dominance of technology and the ways that journalists and news organizations interpret innovation are key to understanding the dichotomy of fun versus seriousness.

Additionally, the question of who produces gamified news and what logics are infused in newsgames needs to be raised. The average journalist does not have the skills nor resources to produce a game, and without the help of a technical team, newsgames will not be produced. Journalists generally do not know how labour-intensive it is to make a fully operational game, and how it differs from the deadline-driven tempo of news production. At the same time, when journalists are not the driving force introducing playful approaches to news, the tendency is to give way to logics other than the professional logic of journalism. Similarly, game producers often do not know how to attune news items to the standards of quality journalism.

Moreover, issues of access also directly influence the logical trajectory of newsgames. Given the cost to produce high-quality work, local and smaller operations simply do not have the funds to hire or support the novel staff used to make digital games. As a consequence, it is the world's largest organizations who are driving the conversation and collaboration in games, even while their smaller counterparts struggle for regular news coverage, which has even further pushed games into the realm of novelty over being part of everyday news production.

Thus, practitioners eager to use games on their news, or news on their games, should consider a stronger and more cohesive collaboration between editorial, design and technical profiles. They should keep in mind the intricacies and requirements of such an endeavour, and know whether committing to it is worth the effort. A partial commitment tends to deliver non-satisfactory results and push towards discontinuing the practice, encouraging to keep chasing the next shiny innovation. This requests an honest acknowledgment of their distinct internal dynamics and how they interact with each other to shape the final product. Whether the goal is experimentation, attracting new users or industry recognition, journalists and game developers need to understand that eventually, it is the users who experience and make sense of these products. A much better understanding of their engagement is required to understand the success of game-like approaches to the news.

## Inside this special issue

The articles brought together in this special issue explore the convergence of news and games from various angles. Our goal was to let contributors adopt critical approaches that advance our understanding of gamification and newsgames, suggesting novel ways in which producers create them, and how we can better understand them. As a nascent area of academic inquiry, we believe that the scholarship on the emergence of ludicity in journalism requires further theoretical and methodological investigation. While we welcomed close readings of particular cases, we challenged our contributors to think about how those cases visualized the dynamics that such boundaries create, both from the perspective of journalism studies and game studies scholarship. We aspired for a multidisciplinary set of studies, even though we knew the process would be complex and challenging. The studies presented here are the result of this endeavour, and we could not think of a better outlet than *Convergence* to publish them as a journal that encourages and welcomes research exploring new media technologies.

Our special issue opens with Tim Vos and Gregory Perreault's 'The discursive construction of the gamification of journalism' as a way to explore the mechanisms by which news media workers

justify the adoption of gamification and playful approaches within journalism. This article goes to the root of what it means to mix news and games and how journalists find a space for games within journalism's normative boundaries. Vos and Perreault situate their study within a theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism and metajournalistic discourse theory (Carlson, 2017), allowing them to explore the discursive, normative construction of gamification within the institution of journalism. This article identifies the first traces of discourse about gamification within news media's trade press and general articles from news outlets in 2006 and follows its evolution until 2019. What Vos and Perreault show is that, while early sceptical discourses delegitimized gamification discourses, over time, journalists who discussed gamification attempted to fit within journalism's moral framework, reinforced by a need to situate journalism as a progressive, forward-looking endeavour. More importantly, this article shows that the move to reframe gamified news from infotainment towards serious journalism anchored in norms of audience engagement implies that gamification does not constitute institutional change since it is construed as an extension of existing norms and beliefs.

In the second article 'Producing newsgames beyond boundaries: Journalists, game developers, and the news business', Christoph Plewe and Elfriede Fürsich explore the institutional boundaries of news and games at the level of newsgame production. The authors interview the producers of newsgames, journalists and game developers, in the German news media market. While studies on boundary work and interlopers in the newsroom (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018; Hermida and Thurman, 2008) suggest rifts among actors with different institutional backgrounds, this study shows that this group of pioneering newsgames producers avoided conflicts by emphasizing non-hierarchical decision-making during game design development. What is striking is that while these actors tread across boundaries, they still shared a set of norms. The shared journalistic discourse allowed game developers to adopt the professional language, as well as the civic and public idea of news that their journalistic counterpart producers have. Nevertheless, the authors demonstrate that the shared discursive approach to newsgames was not enough to make the genre more prominent. While individual producers are capable of bridging their differences by sharing a similar journalistic discourse, the lack of institutional change to adopt those changes into everyday production eventually led to reduced newsgames production. Adapting to significant contextual aspects, such as time, money, complexity and competition from other digital projects, hindered the innovation process.

In 'Gamifying fake news: Engaging youth in the participatory design of news literacy games', Ioana Literat, Yoo Kyung Chang and Shu-Yi Hsu explore a different aspect of newsgame production. Here, the authors argue that adopting forms of participatory design (Bell and Davis, 2016) in newsgames might increase youth engagement on the one hand, and news literacy to combat misinformation, on the other hand. This article proposes the *Learning by Participatory Game Design* framework as a conceptual instrument meant to facilitate user agency and provide systematic assistance to young newsgames designers. Moreover, this framework functions as a novel generative game design and research method, able to capture interactions that often escape other methodologies. This approach also enables a multilevel analytical understanding of the resulting design process structured along personal, social and cultural dimensions. Literat and colleagues used a hands-on, collaborative workshop in which young users were encouraged to use playful approaches to designing and prototyping a news literacy game. The results highlight that the interplay between news and games is not only a domain useful to news organizations but also to educators and scholars in search for optimal ways to increase news literacy against misinformation

by leveraging the engaging nature of participatory game design while supporting young users' roles as designers, and not just as news consumers.

In 'When journalism and games intersect: Examining news quality, design and mechanics of political newsgames', Alba García-Ortega and Jose Alberto Garcia-Aviles examine the distinct narrative logics behind the professional culture of journalism and the creative culture of games. The authors investigate how games can best reinforce journalistic content. They examine how carefully crafted newsgames that balance traditional journalistic components and informative content, with appropriate game mechanics, can be best enjoyed. They also describe how effective newsgame design can contribute to a better understanding of public interest matters and political knowledge. To do so, García-Ortega and Garcia-Aviles construct an analytical tool to study newsgames based on their formal parameters, content, quality and design. The authors use this framework to study eight newsgames from seven different countries, suggesting that, while the use of playful elements can coexist with journalistic quality standards, their effectiveness lies in the strategic choice of the mechanics and how users perceive and interact with the content. The authors conclude that the balance between journalistic and playful approaches does not require a successful narrative to convey information autonomously. They propose that an intricate combination of mechanics and dynamics are the primary enablers allowing journalists to convey information and complex arguments within traditional journalistic standards.

Allissa Richardson's 'Endless Mode. Exploring the procedural rhetoric of a Black Lives Matter-themed newsgame' provides a much closer reading of a single newsgame: *Easy Level Life*. Richardson engages with a highly emotional experience of a game designer's take on racial state-sanctioned police killings of African Americans as a thematic phenomenon, rather than one-off, episodic events. Using van Dijk's concept of 'news as discourse' (2013) and Bogost's procedural logic (2007), this study performs an in-depth multimodal discourse analysis to explore how this virtual mode of interaction uses situation-evaluation-conclusion model for a more personal and nuanced news experience. Richardson proposes that this type of newsgames grants the player an active role in the construction of an argument, strengthening the idea of newsgames as 'empathy machines'. The choice of news imagery and the highly emotional content establishes compelling gameplay sequences that offer a marked emotional connection between the player and the game designer. In the case of *Easy Level Life*, the unwinnable narrative, its 'endless mode' clearly depicts the grim 'reality' that the media have constructed while encouraging a point of view that challenges police brutality in a medium that requires interaction. Drawing from moralism and Critical Race Theory, Richardson claims *Easy Level Life* has a valuable place within the discursive sphere of other mediated discussions surrounding racially motivated killings.

In 'Rethinking framing and news values in gamified journalistic contexts: A Case Study of Al Jazeera's Interactive Games', Rana Arafat conducts a comparative case study of Al Jazeera's gamified news stories *Pirate Fishing* and *#Hacked*. The article investigates the generic news frames used in gamified journalism and how the game elements participate in the construction of those frames and the potential inclusion of innovative news values (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). To do so, Arafat employs an integrative qualitative framing analysis that investigates the multimodal frames present in each piece. Through her detailed and close reading of these gamified stories, the author demonstrates that the level of gamification and the type of digital components and tools offered by each game have a significant influence on the way news framing is constructed. The article further proposes a novel interactive personalized conflict frame within a gamified journalistic experience. Through this frame, news organizations offer a higher level of interpretative depth, emotional engagement, tactical involvement and visual closeness to news audiences. The

author suggests that the way in which these stories are constructed unveils the emergence of new news values such as adaptability, sequentiality, investigation and individuality. Here, Arafat raises further questions of how the structural characteristics of the gamified design facilitate a shared meaning within the news story.

Our special issue concludes with ‘Curiosity journalism, or the first decades of newsgames’, an opinion essay by Ian Bogost in which he revisits the promising early days of newsgames and reflects on the current reality of the form. As a pioneer newsgame developer and researcher, we invited Bogost to look back at the evolution of newsgames and give us his opinion. Ten years after *Newsgames: Journalism at Play*, the first in-depth analysis of the newsgames genre, the author calls for a moment of reckoning to journalists, game developers and scholars alike. As the newsgames trend fizzled, this piece proposes a reason for why newsgames failed to reach their promise, while proposing new roads ahead.

Taken together, these studies illustrate the complexity of studying news and games combined. They all exemplify the problem of studying a moving target. On the one hand, the industry, mesmerized with new technological constructs that ought to ‘save journalism’, follows a diverse set of unstructured practices and produces an even more diverse set of gamelike journalistic products. On the other hand, researchers have only started to understand the dynamics emerging from these playful approaches to journalism and the mechanisms by which they are produced, distributed and consumed. Understanding what this means for journalism or for digital games is an exercise that requires cross-boundary thinking from practitioners and researchers alike.

## **A future of playing with the news?**

If newsgames and other playful approaches to journalism are to assume a more dominant position within mainstream news delivery, they should continue to provoke a wave of self-reflection within the industry. They should push journalists and game creators out of their comfort zones, requiring them to challenge perceived orthodoxies, philosophical assumptions and editorial, ethical and digital practices.

Balancing accuracy, impartiality and sensibility, combined with new moderation challenges of trolling and modding alongside the need to upskill into the realm of coding and digital design, may keep this mode of production a minority concern for the foreseeable future. But news organizations need to understand that, from the gaming perspective, employing cookie-cutter solutions tend to deliver cookie-cutter pieces. Ludic news will require time and resources. Instead of looking at them as a shiny new technology that will solve problems, a more constructive way of approaching them could be to consider them a legitimate and engaging form of telling stories.

This special edition mostly focused on newsgames and gamification that is created within traditional news organizations. This implies that journalism logics try to dominate production while bringing external know-how to aid the projects. As the *Easy Level Life* case shows, future research should do well to also focus on producers beyond legacy media to see how a games-led project imposes games logics and tries to accommodate journalism logics. Studying whether the creatives driving the output are or are not concerned with the established codes and conventions associated with traditional journalism practice could show whether actors at the periphery of journalism can create new journalistic norms. If not, there is a possibility that if the grammar of newsgames continues to reference the trivial and the pastiche (click-through fodder), then it will

remain a minority pursuit and will not evolve as a major force in news discourse. In order for this to change, journalists need to understand the medium and not treat it as a technical gimmick.

Establishing industry codes of conduct is a challenge for current practitioners and regulators. Still, as games emerge as a stable and conventional news medium, they will be required. There have been and will continue to be, outrage associated with this new format. The question is how quickly conventions will standardize. News outlets considering implementing newsgames and gamified strategies to attract audiences cannot walk blindfolded into this new journalistic adventure; there must be some degree of reflexivity to address the existing journalistic culture and to rethink the boundaries of editorial and ethical conduct.

For scholars, we are still in the early stages of this subfield. We hope this special issue succeeds in providing promising theoretical and methodological contributions to push forward news and games research, from understanding the discursive construction of the gamification of journalism to the creation of new analytical tools to study newsgames and their frames. It is time for researchers to move towards a broader spectrum of playful approaches to news production and to take a distance from specific, individual technologies. We encourage scholars to focus on what it means for journalism to follow a ludic turn and whether that creates more meaningful forms of engagement with the public.

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**Maxwell Foxman** is an assistant professor of media studies and game studies at the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, USA. His research focuses on the influence of games and play in non-game contexts and industries, including gamification, esports and immersive media. He is currently working on two manuscripts: one focusing on the mainstreaming of game journalism and another on early adopters of commercial virtual reality technology in New York City. His work has appeared in *Games and Culture*, *Social Media + Society* and *First Monday*, among other publications.

**Janet Jones** is a dean at the School of Arts and Creative Industries at London South Bank University. She was a BBC producer and journalist and series editor for programmes including ‘The Money Programme’, ‘Financial World Tonight’ and ‘Panorama’. An authority on the media industry, she has written extensively on the subject of journalism and democracy, the study of the internet and the public sphere, the future of public service broadcasting and public participation in multiplatform media. Her co-authored book, ‘*Digital Journalism*’ has become a core international student text.

**Tanja Sihvonen** is a professor of Communication Studies at the University of Vaasa, Finland. She is specialized in digital media, games and internet cultures. In her book *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming* (Amsterdam University Press), she presents a theoretical frame for the study of players and users creatively extending and appropriating computer games and other digital services. Her most recent work considers games and economy, role-playing games, trolling and astroturfing and the algorithmic agency of social media.

**Marko Siitonen**, PhD, is an associate professor at the Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. After his doctoral dissertation on social interaction in online multiplayer communities (2007), he has worked on a multitude of questions related to online cultures, games and emerging forms of technology-mediated communication. He has published on newsgames reception and use in journalism education, and he has extensive experience in using game-based approaches in higher education.