Reviews

Newsgames: Journalism at Play. Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer. MA: MIT Press. 2010. Hardcover: 235 pages. £17.95. ISBN 978-0-262-01487-8. English.

*N*ewsgames: Journalism at Play proposes that a new way of promoting good journalism is through the medium of videogames. Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer suggest that 'journalism can and will embrace new modes of *thinking* about news in addition to new modes of production' (p. 10). Their recommendation that gaming systems and platforms can help influence journalistic practices is a refreshing approach to the troubled field of print media. The title of the book stems from a term coined by game designer Gonzalo Frasca; the book describes him as saying that 'newsgames' are 'simulation meets political cartoons' (p. 13). However, the authors develop this definition to include 'any intersection of journalism and gaming' (p. 13), allowing for a wide range of interactive media to be included in their study. The authors state that 'newsgames...represent a real and viable opportunity to help citizens form beliefs and make decisions' (p. 10). What *Newsgames* contributes as a book is the idea that play, as directed through the medium of journalism, can not only save financially-disadvantaged news media such as newspapers, but also help influence the knowledge and political understanding of players of such games.
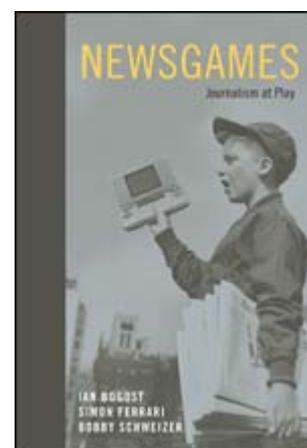
The purpose of the book is outlined in the first chapter, 'Newsgames', where the authors draw on previous scholarship (Bogost 2007:85-86 and Frasca 2003) to create a clearly defined starting point for their project. The use of a real example of a newsgame developed from an infographic from *Wired* magazine called *Cutthroat Capitalism*, allows the player to comprehend the economics and strategy of Somali piracy 'as a system' by playing the game (p. 2). The authors emphasise that games and news media can and should be viewed as *systems* whose platforms share mutually beneficial methods of conveying information to readers or to videogame players.

The second chapter, 'Current Events', focuses on how current news events are used in gaming in order to inform users or players of events as they happen. Their intended effect is similar to that of a newspaper article in that they convey information about an event through their platform (p. 13). The wide-reaching implications for current events games such as *September 12*, which explores the possible effects US foreign policy has on the rise of religious

extremism, is that players develop a sense of 'ethical reasoning' about the portrayed situation as opposed to simply trying to win the game without thinking critically about its message.

The third chapter, 'Infographics', focuses on the development of graphic representations of data in print journalism, and its effect on how users and reader consume and synthesise data and information found within these infographics. The appearance of digital infographics as a system which can be manipulated by the user creates an opportunity for 'free-form exploration' of news information (p. 37). Ultimately, 'playable infographics' can even help situate data and information in their context (p. 60). In the case of large amounts of data or sums, this can be crucial for reader comprehension. One example of this idea is the game *Budget Hero*, which encourages the user to develop an understanding of how government spending works by using an easily manipulated bar graph format. This format resembles a cityscape that allows the user to adjust (theoretical) government spending on public services, or lets them make decisions that affect the national budget over a given period of time.

The fourth chapter, 'Documentary', focuses on how the simulation of recorded events or phenomena in gaming can 'engage actuality' by enabling the players of a game to 'navigate' an event (p. 64). Instead of focusing on realism in terms of graphics, here realism is used to recreate events such as the JFK assassination (*JFK Reloaded*) or the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (*Freedom Fighter '56!*). Drawing on previous scholarship on realism in gaming (Galloway 2007:76), the authors posit that the use of documentary games facilitates a sense of 'social realism' similar to that found in representations of events in print media (pp. 62-63). In doing so, the players learn about the facts surrounding events; further, the way in which the games are set up influences their understanding of the dynamics behind the 'spaces or actions' of their respective situations (p. 75).

The chapter entitled 'Puzzles' demonstrates how puzzle games and quizzes about current events use news content as a source for materials (pp. 88-89). The popularity of these puzzles means that they are a good medium for conveying news content through play, which influences users' perception of events. One such example is *Scoop!*, a digital crossword puzzle which uses headlines taken from internet news articles to create its answers to the crossword (p. 83). Instead of relying on more general knowledge to create crossword answers, this format encourages the player to consume news articles in order to complete the puzzle. The potential use of quizzes, Sudoku and crosswords as a means of making 'civic decisions' (p. 97) represents an exciting possibility for the future of newspapers and news media (pp. 99-100).

The sixth chapter, 'Literacy', makes a strong case for transparency as a shared quality of both game design and journalism (p. 122). The authors propose that by using simulation models, game developers and designers can influence how users play and experience games in the traditional sense, and how they encounter journalism in newsgames. The chapter also focuses on 'what journalists can learn from game design' (p. 122) by providing a system or structure which journalists can use to develop their skills (p. 126). For example, this is accomplished in the game *Crude Oil*, which encourages players to consider the consequences of oil drilling through the use of a simple interface and some mathematical equations. A game's system and its platform must be transparent, or easily readable and accessible, in order for the user to make the inputs which make the game work, just as transparency in journalistic reporting is necessary for that process to function.

The seventh chapter, 'Community', focuses on how community-based multiplayer games can shape players' perceptions about current events and issues and the portrayal of those events in the media. The authors' main example is the 2007 game *World Without Oil*, which encouraged nearly two thousand online players to keep blogs about a hypothetical global oil crisis. The authors propose that participation in these simulated events not only creates a sense of community within the simulation, but also outside it, which can encourage the development of new, more community-focused behaviours. The 'community' aspect of newsgames, due to its focus on how these 'alternate reality games' affect community behaviours in real life, 'bears much in common with the goals of good journalism' (p. 136), which in turn could create a better-informed citizenry. However, it can also create an 'amplification of difference and incongruity', which develops from what Bogost terms 'simulation gaps' between user representation and the source system of a game. This presents an interesting parallel to Russian formalism in its ability to cause a sense of defamiliarisation in the players, because it compels them to view social issues through the medium of a video game based on an aspect of real life (p. 138). This defamiliarisation, as defined by Viktor Shklovskii in his 1917 essay 'Art as Technique', is exemplified by the game *Airport Insecurity*, which could feasibly be played on a mobile phone while passengers are waiting in a security queue (p. 139).

The possibilities put forth in the next chapter, 'Platforms', are easily some of the most exciting of the entire book. Here, the authors propose that instead of using existing gaming platforms to create news content, journalists should create new platforms for news, which in turn will affect user engagement and expectations of what news should 'look like' to the user (p. 151). One example, an online prediction game called *Play the News*, is used by the authors to demonstrate that news stories can be used to construct gaming platforms that 'encourage potentially sophisticated discussion about the possible outcomes of an event or situation (p. 156).' What exists now is the potential for gaming platforms to change the infrastructure of journalism at a time when its own traditional platforms are being challenged to keep up with more open, hyperlinked platforms such as the Internet (pp. 156-157). The authors propose that the tools that gaming platforms use, such as middleware systems (pp. 168-169) that allow for the processing and management of data within a game, could be used within newsgames to create a game which mimics realistic 'political and economic conditions' (p. 169).

Newsgames concludes with 'Journalism at Play' in which the authors recommend a few guiding 'principles' that could help 'regulate the interaction between games and journalism' (p. 178). In 'Culture Computation' they propose that journalists focus on developing skills in coding and platform building, while in 'Choose Systems over Stories', the writers propose that newsgames be built upon a strong system or platform, a feature that makes regular puzzles, infographics, and videogames easier for the player to comprehend and process (p. 179). The section entitled 'Specialise' addresses the need for different forms and types of newsgames that are built upon strong, yet different platforms, suited for the content that the developers wish to address. The section entitled 'Scale Up' encourages the constant development of newsgames in order for them to eventually become a successful and viable part of news media on a larger scale. In the final subsection, 'Make Something', the authors propose that ideas are what constitute news, as opposed to the content and form those ideas might take (p.

180). They claim that the best way to 'advance the practice' of newsgames is simply to engage in the process of making newsgames (p. 180). They conclude by claiming that willpower, not technology, is what impedes the wider inclusion of newsgames in contemporary journalism (p. 181).

Perhaps the only major drawback of *Newsgames* is that it can become outdated as gaming technology improves and print media and news continue to tackle the challenge of remaining relevant to consumers of news media. Barely two years after the publication of *Newsgames*, many of the featured case studies are no longer available to be played or use platforms that seem rudimentary in light of advancing technology. However, the interdisciplinary approach that Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer apply to videogames and journalism, coupled with their focus on the consumer of news as a *user* instead of a *reader*, will ensure that it retains some importance over time. Ultimately, as a means of introduction to the genre itself, *Newsgames* is an exciting vision of the possibilities that gaming can provide to the field of journalism.

Works Cited

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