Lessons Learned in the Rise and Fall of Newsgames as a Genre

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INTRODUCTION: EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It has been more than a decade since digital newsgames received their substantiative research (Sicart 2008) and public attention (Bogost et al. 2012). Not only have the games experienced a season of blossoming and dwindling, but they've even been subject to the retrospective examination by one of their original champions (Bogost, 2020). Newsgames, for all their promised opportunity, were evidently swept in the howling wind of gamification (Deterding et al, 2011) and similar exuberance for games to address a variety of challenges in everyday society. As that dust settles, the heartiest elements of adding games to everything from workout routines (Oh and Yang, 2010) to scientific research (Von Ahn and Dabbish, 2008), have revealed some specific characteristics about what lasts in ludic explanations (Lopezosa et al, 2021) and what does not (Callan et al. 2015).

If the decade of newsgames and their related efforts can be examined as a season of innovation, this work aims to understand the characteristics of that season that help explain why experiences like newsgames persist. Is it an eagerness to make news a little less anxiety provoking? Is it the product of seeking a somewhat technological solution to an industry that is struggling to meet the demands of a quickly changing global society? Is it something simpler, a matter of a ludoliterate (Zagal, 2010) population looking to bring the real-world back to games? Or perhaps it is product of larger social trends and assumptions, such as the ebb and flow of mashup culture and policy (Brøvig-Hanssen, 2021) or movement away from the cultural philosophy of a work-play dichotomy (Primeau, 1996).

This paper examines the historical characteristics of newsgames as a case study in the subdivisions of games. It aims to provide heuristic evidence about the evolution of solutions that see both highly expansive blooms in production, academic discussion and result in a kind of steady production that neither meets their idealized state nor dwindles out of relative existence.

The history of game design is littered with the rise and fall of a variety of promises that never quite delivered. While this is common in technology, where solutions are proposed, sold, and deprecated, the case study in newsgames reads differently. In part this is because newsgames themselves are not a technology, but an approach to journalism (Bogost et al 2012), and theoretical subset (Treanor and Mateas, 2009). Is the problem in labeling a subset and establishing ontologies that aims to define evolving, pervasive practices for the convenience of academic study? Is it not that newsgames have failed to meet their promise, but instead that the labeling of such games hides the fact that they are thriving under another name? From one lens, there are still only a few nationally or internationally recognized newsgames annually (Grace and Huang, 2020). From the other perspective, the communities on Itch.io and Global Game Jam abound with thousands of games about current topics that read similar to the promise offered in 2010. To borrow an analogy, is it perhaps that disco's not dead, but instead littered throughout the musical forms that followed it? Are newsgame elements so dispersed throughout contemporary game design that they become invisible, in much the way that other ubiquitous elements and assumptions about games persist? Does anyone even question that a game is about something anymore?

This research looks to examine the promise of newsgames and their contemporary reality. Drawing from the dataset at JournalismGames.org of more than 70 such games, it aims to outline the challenges of demarcating domains and subsets in games, the ambiguity of newsgame success and the ways in which other similar definitions may harm or support innovation in game making.

Standing as a mix of content analysis and philosophical analysis, the aim of the work is to highlight a pattern in one domain that may prove characteristic of others. Are newsgames indicative of other game types and genres (Wiehl, 2014)? Are there risks in defining games by intention that differ from defining them in more concrete terms like mechanics, subject or production model? Could it be that the only true newsgames are made with journalists and news organizations, while everything else is hobby, experiment, or playable opinion?

This work aims to examine these questions and provide fodder for both ends of the argument's spectrum. It examines the logical cases for and against, the definition of game design subdomains, the ubiquity of game intent and meaning. It does so by drawing from a combination of content analysis and literature review in news and social impact games.

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