

News-Game Journalism: History, Current Use And Possible Futures

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Abstract

As electronic computer and console games gain a larger share of the entertainment industry, more communications organizations are turning to this new form to promote, advertise and inform their audience, particularly through online delivery. Within the online news industry, interactive graphics are becoming a viable way to explain complex information and to contextualise reporting. At the same time, several games developers have produced games that reflect real world events, using elements of journalistic practice to inform their game design. This paper examines possible uses for games as news delivery systems used alongside current online journalism practices, exploring the similarities between games and interactive news graphics. The discussion then turns to current newsroom practices and possible futures for using games as news delivery tools.

Keywords: online, journalism, games, docu-games, interactive, news-games

Introduction

News media have had a long tradition of offering their readers puzzles and games. The first diamond-shaped crossword appeared in the *New York World* newspaper in 1913 (Wikipedia 2003).

Throughout the history of the printed puzzle the notion of these word games being more than a distraction has been claimed by the press. In the edition in which Britain's *Daily Mail* first printed a crossword, the newspaper warned its readers that puzzles "are not only a game, they have considerable educational values" (Engel 1996).

As well as providing general educational value, some puzzles and games in the news media actively require an understanding of news events to complete successfully. News quizzes and news-based crosswords can be found in publications across the world, e.g., *The Age* in Melbourne presents a number of news-based quizzes throughout the week.

The Internet has also allowed an expanded role for interactive presentations, particularly games. As with puzzles, the use of games to complement news information is not without precedent. Traditional media outlets have long run interactive games as part of their normal coverage. Some of these games have a clear educational element, because to play them successfully requires a good knowledge of current events. An example of this is the limited interactive game play found in the fantasy football and baseball leagues started by news outlets such as *The Sun*, The BBC and *The Guardian*.

With the rapid growth of online news as a preferred news source, particularly in the 18-34 demographic (Brown 2005), web-delivered news-based games have the potential to offer the online audience an additional way of exploring news stories in their own time and on their own terms.

Despite some cultural and technical hurdles, online journalism and online journalists are well placed to create news-based games that complement and enhance current news delivery practices. Indeed, web journalists already have a precedent to draw on when creating such games: web journalism is generally exploratory, inclusive and user-centric, and production techniques can include the creation of interactive presentations – which themselves can have game-like qualities.

For games to be journalistic documents however, several issues around how journalism can be presented in game form need to be addressed. Most importantly, the question needs to be asked: are games an appropriate medium for the news?

Documentary Games

In this discussion, I will break news-themed computer game elements into two categories;

1. The use of current or historical news information as background to game play.
2. Explaining a news story or system through game play.

The distinction is worth making as it influences both the style of game and the type of information communicated. A number of games discussed in this paper include and use both of these elements, while others employ the first element to some degree.

Many commercial games use historical events as a backdrop. *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Raven 2001), *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* (Gearbox 2005) and *Rome: Total War* (Creative Assembly 2004) among others are

underpinned by historical events. In many respects the historical references these games make are most noticeable in the backdrop of the game: scenery, choice of weapons, enemy types, language use and pre-scripted animations are all designed to refer to a particular historic place and time. For several of these games, this superficial appearance is where their affiliation with historical re-enactment ends. (Try as I might, I couldn't pin down a historical reference to the zombies and demons that populate the hallways of *Castle Wolfenstein*.)

Some of these games, however, go further and model real-world locations for game play. One of the most acclaimed achievements of level design occurs in the beach assault level of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, in which the player 'takes part' in the D-Day landings in Omaha Beach. Though the level design is problematic both in the design of the beach and the player's ability to survive it, the game garnered significant praise for its efforts. One reviewer describes the level as "quite likely the most intense and well-executed set piece in shooter history. It's the perfect implementation of *Medal of Honor's* apparent design philosophy: the heavily scripted level that somehow feels alive and completely spontaneous" (Wolpaw 2001).

Other games take this historical accuracy a step further. *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* not only recreates parts of the French countryside as it appeared in the 1940's, but bases its battles on actual events and its characters on actual soldiers who fought in the Normandy invasion.

While these elements give an indication of the history surrounding the games, they do not influence game play itself. Inattentive game players could completely disregard *Return to Castle Wolfenstein's* mis-en-scene in their quest to 'frag' another zombie. Indeed game designer Bruce Shelley (2001) sees the prime use of historical information in games as this backdrop to the action: "Realism and historical information are resources or props we use to add interest, story, and character to the problems we are posing for the player. That is not to say that realism and historical fact have no importance, they are just not the highest priority. Any education that follows from playing our games is a very positive, though secondary, benefit"

Many of these games do employ historical accuracy for more than a backdrop - several use their historical or news-based background as a core game mechanic. For example, at a very basic level, most World War II-themed shooting games, e.g., *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) give practical information such as how many bullets a particular wartime gun usually carried, as well as a simple indication about how accurate such guns were to fire.

Some games expand on this to include historical fighting tactics. In *Brothers in Arms*, the player must master the real-world military tactic of 'fire and manoeuvre' to successfully complete missions. Likewise the game *Rome: Total War* gives visual feedback as to good and bad real life battlefield tactics. As one reviewer explained: "if you see the Greek spearmen lower their long spears in formation, you'll intuitively recognize that a frontal cavalry charge against that would be ill advised." (Ocampo 2004).

Whether using historical or news information as a background, or through actual game play, these games seek to engender a sense of empathy from the player towards the people who participated in the real events the games are based on. Several games – particularly those presented in first-person – use this sense of empathy to heighten the drama of the game. As the voice-over of the player-controlled character in *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* (EA LA 2004) tells the player before one level begins: "My name is Tommy Conlin, and I was there."

As Gonzalo Frasca (2000) points out, this empathy is superficial. He argues the death of the player in the game is a far cry from the death of a real-life soldier in one of the conflicts depicted. However, this does not stop the player getting a sense of the context around the news event in question.

Appropriateness Of Games As A Form Of Journalism

Several commentators have questioned the appropriateness of video games as a way to present news. The name 'game' itself suggests a flippancy towards subject matter, and an inherent inappropriateness for hard hitting, investigative or sensitive subject matters.

Gonzalo Frasca has explored the possibility of 'serious games', games based on news or historical information. He cites the possible uproar he sees occurring if a digital game were made about the Auschwitz death camp (Frasca 2000). Interestingly, uproar did surround the release of one of the first games to claim the 'docu-game' label, *JFK Reloaded* (Traffic Management 2004a). The game, in which the player assumes the role of Lee Harvey Oswald targeting President Kennedy, was labelled as "despicable" (Thompson 2004) by a spokesman for the target's brother, Senator Ted Kennedy.

The controversy surrounding the game obscured the fact that it asked a question that many documentaries, news reports and other traditional journalistic media have tried to answer: was John F Kennedy killed by three shots fired by Lee Harvey Oswald from the Book Depository building? Instead of examining film, taking eyewitness accounts and examining reports, the game models distances, times and ballistics to allow the player to determine if it was possible for Oswald to have "the means and the opportunity to perform this horrible crime" (Traffic Management 2004b).

The game's publishers also ran a 'meta-game' separate from the actual software game, in which players were ranked in accordance with how accurately they could imitate Oswald's actions as found in the Warren Commission Report into the assassination. In this way the overarching purpose of the game is not, as some media at the time reported it, to 'shoot' the President, but to explore and ultimately adhere to a historical record. The game rewards the player for understanding the actual news events of that day. In order to gain a high rank in the meta-game, the player must not only understand the basic findings of the Warren Report into the President's death, but also become familiar with the atmosphere of the scene.

Obviously there are quite legitimate ethical concerns about the subject matter of the game, however if we separate the controversy surrounding the game from the delivery of the documentary evidence, then *JFK Reloaded* is quite successful as a journalistic document.

Some researchers see games as a particularly inappropriate medium for the transfer of news information. Nolan (2003) argues there are "major disparities between the purposes, structures and ethics" of games and online narratives. She asserts that "the idea of reward and penalties [in games] is obviously problematic for journalism, which values information as an end not a means."

It is certainly the case that most of the games cited above use historical accuracy as little more than Shelley's "resources and props", while some of the more sophisticated games cited above use news information as a means to an end, not an end itself. The logical question that follows this is: can a game have information, or particularly knowledge as an end product as opposed to a means?

The answer can be found by examining games such as the aforementioned *JFK Reloaded* and other news games such as *Frasca's September 12th* (Newsgaming 2003), in which the

player is asked to ‘fight’ a war on terror. In *JFK Reloaded*, the bulk of the game play is relatively short. The player has less than a minute to line up their target and shoot. After the minute of interactive play is over, the game analyses the player’s ability to reconstruct the assassination as found by the Warren Report. The player is then awarded points according to their adherence to the Report. While the casual gamer may skip these ‘cut scenes’, the only way to ‘win’ the game is to understand how the assassination took place.

Likewise, *September 12th* uses knowledge as its ultimate goal. It states in its title screen that “you can’t win, and you can’t lose”. There is no traditional ‘end’ in this game. Instead, the ‘win state’ becomes the knowledge that the game cannot be won, and the knowledge of the reasons *why* the game cannot be won. The underlying message that Frasca puts forth – that the war on terror is essentially un-winnable – is clear. Shuen-shing Lee (2003) notes that this type of un-winnable game transforms the “in-game loser, to an off-game thinker”.

Another form where information is the key is the sort of adventure game exemplified by *Majestic* (Anim-X 2001). In this game, the active search for information was – at least initially – the game’s main purpose. The game asked players to decipher clues left in web pages and other internet-based media. Each clue would lead to more information. The fact that the game descended into a series of fairly ‘un-gamey’ puzzle-solving mini-games is immaterial to the fact that the game was grounded in uncovering and understanding information. A key activity in these games is exploration. In order to participate in the game, players must be active seekers of information. This active searching for information is also one of the hallmarks of the online news audience and, as discussed later in this article, this dynamic has changed the way online journalists do their job.

If information is to be used as the main end point for news-based games, and if the finding of that information is to be woven into the game play, news game producers have to be very careful to set parameters around the constructed reality they portray. Just as with any other journalistic work, one central question must be asked: how accurate is the depiction of reality in this document?

Notions of reality and ‘realistic-ness’ are obviously problematic in any news or documentary-based media. This is particularly the case in interactive environments that purport to be realistic, but cannot ever be totally accurate. Just as the addition or subtraction of a quote can leave a traditional news story open to bias, so the addition or subtraction of geometry in a ‘realistic’ game can also lead to bias. As a game becomes more realistic it also loses its essential ‘game-ness’ and the inherent player engagement that implies. As Alexander Galloway (2004) notes, “The more realisticness [sic] takes hold in gaming the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, being relegated instead to simulation or modelling”.

It is also important to note that news itself is mediated and constructed. There is an editorial process for the delivery of most news forms that involves the sorting of disparate information to find and present the most relevant factual information possible to the consumer. Games that present a seamless ‘walkthrough’ of a news or historical event from a single perspective (such as the first person perspective of many games), run the risk of misrepresenting or distorting facts through their perspective alone.

One way that some current news-based games address this problem is by simplifying and/or abstracting their content. Frasca’s *September 12* is subtitled “A Toy World”. Its graphics are simple two-dimensional representations. *JFK Reloaded* addresses this same problem by confining itself to one specific point in time and the player to one specific task.

Neither game can explain fully the events it is based on. Each relies on either supplied background information or the player’s knowledge of events to explain its significance in the

issue it is related to. Indeed, both of these games work best when viewed as supplementary material to more conventional journalism. These news games give a context to the player – an opinion or an exploration of a news story. This ancillary purpose for news-based games is similar to current uses for multimedia in online journalism.

Online Journalism And Games

One of the strengths of the Internet is its ability to weave context around content. In no other medium do both news creators and news consumers have such ready access to archive and background documents that help them examine and analyse the news. Online journalists have the freedom to link to material that has been critical to the formation of their reports. They have an unequalled ability to reference past reports on the same issue and documents created by organisations and individuals with a stake in the story.

Another advantage of the online space is that this background and context can be woven into the form that is most appropriate to the content. While traditional media journalists must mould the news to fit in one given medium (such as television or print), online reporters, conversely, can choose the type of media that best suits the story they are reporting. A news event with a strong visual element can be reported through video or photo galleries, while a complex issue can benefit from the precision and depth of text-based reporting.

Amy Zerba's (2004) survey of online multimedia journalists found, "the main purpose of multimedia on news websites, according to these journalists, is to offer users different ways to process information, or that extra little bit of knowledge" and that "journalists described multimedia on news Web sites as vivid, real, amplified, rich, enjoyable, intimate, entertaining, easy to understand and packed with emotion".

Multimedia journalism also helps alleviate the problem of text-heavy websites. In an oft-quoted study, Morkes and Nielsen (1997) found online readers generally scan text looking for meaning, instead of reading text word for word. In his hypertext work *WEB Publishing Paradigms*, Tim Guay (1995) explains that judicious use of different types of media can allow news website users to understand information more efficiently. He suggests that multimedia triggers cultural archetypes that allow the user to quickly understand a piece of information. Not only is multimedia an 'amplified' way to consume news, it is an efficient way to consume news.

In this context, the question should be asked: what properties do games have that could best aid communicating news information? As stated above, games can educate. A user can engage with the complexity of a news event by trying to replicate parts of it, such as with the game play in *JFK Reloaded*. Games can allow a player to learn about a set of rules or procedures by trying to achieve a goal while adhering to those rules

Many news websites already employ highly interactive graphics to explain a process or set of rules. These graphics are often non-linear, allowing the user to explore them at their leisure and understand the information within them on their terms. While these graphics are not games, they do have similarities, such as being user-centric and giving the user the chance to explore a story on their own terms. Last year, the ABC (2004a) used interactive graphics to inform their readers of the rules and tactics used in Olympic competition. Likewise the Guardian (2005a) website chose interactive graphics to explain the workings of the Vatican Conclave to elect the Pope. The same site used a 'game' (Guardian 2005b) to explain recent European referenda.

Interactive graphics also expand on the notion of context. Many uses for interactive presentations in online journalism centre on explaining rules and processes or expanding on background information to large or persistent news stories. They are not however generally used as the primary means to report a story. This is partly to take advantage of the educative and exploratory value of these presentations, but also because of the time it takes to build a multimedia presentation (discussed below).

There is of course a clear difference between the interactive presentations listed above and games. For instance, there are no explicit ways of 'winning' an interactive graphic as there are in most games. There are examples however of presentations that blur the lines between interactive graphics and games. They are very similar both in format and content to information graphics, while adding goal-oriented game play.

An example of this is the MSNBC (2005) game *Strike Out!*. The game was produced by a news organisation and is displayed on the same page as their regular news items. It is fairly basic, in many ways more of an advanced interactive graphic than a game. It also has severe limits to its use as a piece of journalism. But it does have some of the hallmarks of a game, such as a 'win state' and defined goals, and it is presented within the context of a news website.

Another example *Prime Minister Forever* (Eighty Dimensional 2004) allows the player to take on the role of a political contender in an Australian federal election. The interface it uses is very similar to many of the news graphics produced by media outlets during the election (such as The ABC's (2004b) Interactive Election Map). In the game however, the player is free to make their own choices about where and how to campaign. In order to succeed, the player must familiarise themselves with the game's simplified version Australian political system. While the player fights their own campaign, they are governed by federal election rules as interpreted by the game. The player has freedom in the actions they take, but not the rules they need to adhere to.

Prime Minister Forever doesn't contain any news reportage, nor is it a game produced by a news organisation. It does, however, give the player a form of background briefing on the Australian political system. The game has flaws in how it goes about doing this (it is inaccurate in several ways), but it does show how a game could work as an adjunct to traditional online journalism.

Games As Background To News

The example of *Prime Minister Forever* also highlights one of the limitations of games as instruments spreading the news. Games are fundamentally a participatory medium where player action is of paramount importance. This makes them incompatible on many levels with the fundamental journalistic task of reporting about a news event that has already happened and cannot have its outcome affected by the player. Because of this, news-based games cannot readily supplant text reports as the preferred medium of breaking news. The value of interactive media such as games is instead to add context 'around' a story, to explain background and place of the news. Importantly, this context can be conveyed in a form that can be educative and engaging to an audience that increasingly expects their media to suit them.

Possible Audiences

In a recent speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Rupert Murdoch outlined his changing views on digital news delivery. Murdoch said that younger news consumers in

the 18-34 demographic “want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it”. (Murdoch 2005).

In a Carnegie Corporation report, Merrill Brown found that young news consumers were deserting mainstream and traditional news in favour of news “on demand, when it works for them” (Brown 2005). In the report’s findings, young news consumers specifically cite both ease of education and entertainment as factors for their news consumption habits. (Interestingly, this response echoes some of the findings of Zerba’s (2004) study mentioned above.) The report concluded that “News has to be produced specifically for and directed to the audiences for the future, and reach them in the ways they want”.

As the news media look for a way to interact with this younger audience, the younger audience is showing its preferences for the media it wants.

The Entertainment Software Association (2005) estimates the average American game player is aged 30. The same research found that 75% of the ‘heads’ of American households played games. The same survey found a high number of game players (92%) who regularly read books or newspapers. While these figures are problematic, they do point to an overall trend: clearly there is a possible audience for games that explore news information.

The gaming environment allows users to explore a news event the way they want to. It allows them to interact and understand a news story in an environment they are literate in. In this way news based games have the potential to bridge the gap between a news audience tired of traditional news and news providers desperate to connect with this younger audience.

Production Issues

There are a number of content producers that could benefit from the inclusion of news-based games in their news delivery. For the purposes of this article however, I will limit discussion to professional newsrooms, run – as most professional online newsrooms are – as adjuncts to a traditional media organisations.

Two major elements shape online production in this environment. They are the technical ability of newsrooms to create news-based games, and the social and cultural shifts needed to consider games as a viable and appropriate medium for news delivery.

The technical requirements for newsrooms to create news-based games already exist in newsroom environments. Game authoring applications, such as Macromedia’s Flash, are used widely in online newsrooms to create audio galleries and interactive presentations. Currently the production of these graphics is time consuming, both because of the level of journalistic research they require and because of the highly technical nature of the programs used to make them. News games will almost certainly require much more production time, because of the more complex programming that needs to be written.

Most commercial newsrooms run on a short ‘news cycle’. Once reported, news can stop being ‘new’ within a matter of hours or minutes. In Internet-based news in particular, the deadlines are tight and constant. Online news reports are often out of date as soon as they are published. For these reasons, as is the case with interactive graphics, news-based games would be best used in longer running issues-based journalism. In many respects, this is more akin to long-form journalism such as documentary, investigative and features reporting, where there is the time and space to give more context around the story.

While technical problems will need to be addressed, of more concern is the current culture of newsrooms, and their tepid reaction to online news. As Deuze (2001) notes, the move towards online news delivery requires a concerted effort, and in many ways a major shift in the culture of journalism. Indeed it has taken ten years for media operators to see the benefits of a more central role for online news. Several newsrooms including *The Age* in Australia and *The New York Times* are only now in the process of cautiously re-orienting themselves to give more emphasis to Internet reporting. While the addition of news-based games would be a smaller shift, it is likely there would be significant resistance to the notion of a 'frivolous' medium such as computer games being used to engage with the news.

The Online Journalist As Guide

One important cultural shift that has already taken place in online newsrooms is the role of the journalists themselves and how they relate to their audiences. Instead of a highly editorial, hierarchical approach to information delivery, the online news user is able to explore news with much greater freedom than a traditional media audience. Instead of stating definitively what the news 'is', online journalism can be thought of as a guided conversation in which the user is at the 'centre' of the story, not the journalist.

An example of this dialogue is the structure of web news stories, which often span several separate web pages, include multimedia, and even reference documents outside the control of the journalist, such as links to other websites. Web news stories are often written to take advantage of linked documents, photo galleries, multimedia and other aspects of news coverage that the reader may find useful.

Another example of this is the changing attitude of the news consumers themselves. As mentioned above, this online audience expects news to be delivered on their terms. They expect to be able to 'own' the news: to react to it, to discuss it.

Hall (2001) notes this new paradigm and suggests that because of it, the online journalist can be thought of as a navigator whose job when writing an online article is to 'guide the reader through it'. Just as the controller of a traditional table-top role playing game defines the 'world' of the game, so the online journalist defines the parameters of the news story – albeit for vastly different reasons. The journalist makes recommendations to their audience about how to understand the story by using specific writing styles and linking to relevant documents. They may also facilitate the user's interaction with that story by providing interactive elements such as the ability to react to or comment on the story.

This new role journalists find themselves in is in many ways analogous to the notions of authorship found in computer games, where a 'world' is created, and the player encouraged to interact with it. The journalist continues to influence the decisions of the user, but it is the user that ultimately decides how they will interact with the 'world' the journalist has created. It is the user that controls their journey through the story – deciding what aspects are of most interest to them and following the story at their own pace and on their own terms.

Future Delivery

The future could allow games to take a more central role in online news delivery. One widely acknowledged drawback of online news is that it is highly un-portable. Online journalism users usually read alone – quite unlike other media which can be viewed, listened to and read in social spaces. Advances such as the use of mobile phones as digital news platforms certainly aid the move of online news into the social space, but web journalism still is far from breaking the shackles of the office desktop.

The use of games as a delivery method could potentially open online journalism to the social space, particularly through the next generation of gaming consoles. These new gaming platforms – Sony's Playstation 3, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Nintendo's Revolution – will allow sophisticated Internet connectivity, and with that the possibility to connect with online news services. Games that take advantage of this could deliver news information in a social and participatory way – connecting to the same audiences that are currently abandoning traditional news.

Another area that news game delivery could promote is the citizen journalism movement. Citizen journalism, as explained by Bowman and Willis (2003), encourages news consumers to become involved in collecting and commenting on the news. Recently for instance, hundreds of mobile phone images and eye witness accounts were sent to news websites after the July London transport bombings. Games can help contextualise and educate about this new form of media. If, as outlined above, an understanding of the news itself becomes the 'win-state' of news-based games, this may encourage use of participatory media. Using games to encourage the understanding of news could empower more news consumers to engage with this new media form.

Conclusion

News-based games are still in their infancy, but they have the potential to add deep context to news stories and engage with news consumers who are looking for more interactive and entertaining ways to connect to the news. In order to achieve this, news game producers will need to be careful in their choice of subject and in the way they portray that subject. News games themselves benefit from an abstracted or limited view of their subject matter, as attempting a documentary reality in a game could lead to possible bias.

There is historical precedent in news organisations producing games to augment their traditional reporting practices. The online news industry itself has already made moves into presenting news information in non-linear fashion in the form of interactive news graphics. These graphics are labour-intensive to produce, but have the ability to give the user context to a report in an engaging way. While there are major differences between games and interactive graphics, the two share key features such as a user-centric educative environment for learning about aspects of the news.

Games are generally not the best medium to report the initial breaking news. This is both because of the long timeframe it takes to create to them, and because of the fundamental friction between allowing player freedom and reporting verified fact. Instead games have the ability to sit 'around' a news report – to give deeper context and understanding about the underlying issues involved in an issue or to explain the workings of processes or systems. In order to be effective, an understanding of the news should be the emphasis of the game. The 'win-state' of news games should be a deeper understanding of a news topic. Such games that help the "information impressionists" mentioned in the *Carnegie Report* (Brown 2004) understand, explore and be entertained by the news, would certainly find an audience in younger news consumers – an audience that, by and large, has grown weary of traditional reporting.

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