

Journalism and games:
Just a spoonful of sugar for the news?

Irene Serrano Vázquez
Concordia University

Abstract

During almost two decades and due to the widespread use of the internet in Western countries, journalism has been adapting its format to the new medium, suffering changes at every level: from the way to tell and pack the stories, to the daily routines of newsrooms. Nevertheless, despite journalism having officially jumped into the waters of the World Wide Web, news corporations are still wondering how to take the most out of it, not only to make the business profitable again but also to successfully reach and involve audiences and communicate a message in the best possible way. In the middle of this quicksand, the question of the benefits and possibilities of telling the news through digital games has arisen in the last years. But is it possible to tell a story through a videogame while respecting the basis of journalism? In its first stage, this paper analyses the different ways in which games have been related with journalism and examines the advantages and disadvantages, from the point of view of the current challenges in journalism and the features of the different established genres. Secondly, it proposes a new object of study, playful journalism. A concrete example of what can be considered as playful journalism, a section of the Spanish news site *soitu.es* that called to the participation of the readers, is analyzed. For this paper some users have been interviewed in order to analyze if the game mechanic included in the news site increased their interest into the site and their participation.

Keywords: Digital games, gamification, journalism, user generated content, news, newsgames, audiences.

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During almost two decades and due to the widespread use of the internet in Western countries, journalism has been adapting its format to the new medium, suffering changes at every level: from the way to tell and pack the stories, to the daily routines of newsrooms. Nevertheless, despite journalism having officially jumped into the waters of the World Wide Web, news corporations are still wondering how to take the most out of it, not only to make the business profitable again but also to successfully reach and involve audiences and communicate a message in the best possible way. In the middle of this quicksand, the question of the benefits and possibilities of telling the news through digital games has arisen in the last years. But is it possible to tell a story through a videogame while respecting the basis of journalism? In its first stage, this paper analyses the different ways in which games have been related with journalism and examines the advantages and disadvantages, from the point of view of the current challenges in journalism and the features of the different established genres.

Secondly, it proposes a new object of study, playful journalism. A concrete example of what can be considered as playful journalism, a section of the Spanish news site soitu.es that called to the participation of the readers, is analyzed. The aim of the study of this example of what will be labeled as playful journalism is to discern if the introduction of game mechanics in a news site increases the interest, implication and participation of the audiences.

This section called 'One of us' permitted the users to get involve with the news,

by letting them to write their own stories. A kind of “play and be a journalist for one day”. The best stories were published in the home of the site and the authors were paid for that finished story. Moreover, the selected stories appeared in the profile of the user with a special mark that differentiate them from the rest. Thus, the profile of the users showed the number of times the user had reached the goal “to write a story as good as a professional journalist”, in a way that is reminiscent of the score page in the games. For this paper some users have been interviewed.

News and games

Games are not strangers to newspapers as they have appeared during a century in the pages of journals and it is possible to find them currently in most of the online news sites. What is more, as Jon Burton mentions (2005), “the first diamond-shaped crossword appeared in The New York World newspaper in 1913”. Apart from crosswords in both print and electronic versions of most of newspapers, it is also possible to find classic video games such as Pacman, Space Invaders or Prince of Persia embedded in news sites such as the Spanish elpais.com. Recently, the New York Times inserted the game Asteroids into an article about videogames¹. However, neither crosswords, classic video games nor the NYT example have educational/informational purposes. Rather, their function is to entertain and increase circulation or amount of pages/time consulted per visitor. They work like candies for the readers. Nevertheless, some of the online news sites (cbc.ca, bbc.co.uk, guardian.co.uk, etc.) include news quizzes that challenge readers, asking them about current affairs in a way similar to a class-exam. Despite being an interesting practice, news quizzes do not stimulate critical

1 Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/angry-birds-farmville-and-other-hyperaddictive-stupid-games.html>

and deep thinking or citizens participation and democratization of the news. Thus, crosswords, embedded classic video games and news quizzes have an incidental value in the journalism practices and intentions.

A more intriguing and beneficial relation between games and news can be found in those known as 'serious games' or 'persuasive games'. Serious games or persuasive games, as Ian Bogost (2007) called them, try to use the attractiveness and entertainment side of games to communicate serious messages, as news is supposed to. According to some studies (Gee, 2003; Lieberman, 2006; Ritterfeld and Weber, 2006), serious games help during the learning process increasing motivation and when acquiring expert knowledge. For instance, Gee asserts that “video games are particularly good examples of how learning and thinking work in any semiotic domain when learning and thinking are powerful and effective, not passive and inert” (2003). For that motive and following this reasoning, certain games were created in order to deepen into current events, explaining facts, contexts and possible interpretations of a given circumstance.

In *Newsgames*, Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer affirm that “videogames can do good journalism, both as an independent medium for news and as a supplement to traditional forms of coverage” (2010). They believe that videogames are a good media to explain the news, since they can simulate reality. In their book, they analyze the different types of serious games that have been produced to inform about an event in a way that can be considered as a complement for journalism. They divide what they call *newsgames*, a term that they borrow from Gonzalo Frasca, into different genres, but not all of them belong to the category of 'serious games' –they include infographics or the previously mentioned crosswords and news quizzes. Among their classification, just four types can be considered as 'serious games': editorial games, tabloid games, reportage games and documentary games.

In their opinion, editorial games are used to make a statement about a current event, in the same manner as editorials columns or cartoons in newspapers. One of the clearer example that Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer mention is *September 12th*, a declaration against the war on terror. It is a very simple game where the player has to shoot some terrorists in an apparently Arab city. But while trying to kill a terrorist, the player always kills some innocent citizen and the number of terrorists keep on growing until almost the whole population of the city is one of them. It is easy to play and the message is very clear: in the war against terrorism, many guiltless civilians have been killed. And there is also an explicit assertion: it makes no sense, no-one win in this game, this war should be stopped.

Reportage games can be compared with factual reporting in television or a newspaper/magazine. And as an example, Bogost mentions the game *Food Import Folly* that his company Persuasive Games created for The New York Times, as part of a project that did not end well. In this so called 'reportage game' the player is a FDA inspector in a bay, who has to check the food that arrive and “try to protect the country from contaminants in foreign food imports using extremely limited resources”. As the game advances, more and more ships arrive into the bay, and no more inspectors appear to help the player. Every game level represents a year from 1997 to 2007 and in an initial screen shows how many shipments arrived every year. The player suffers the overwhelming number of ships that arrive into the bay and that are impossible to check.

According to Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer, tabloid games are “playable versions of soft news” (2010) and they mention a couple of examples, *Hothead Zidane* and *So you think you can drive me, Mel?*. *Hothead Zidane* was created after the Zinedine Zidanes head butt to Materazzi during the World Cup final in 2006. The game consists on a football pitch where the player can move a picture of Zidane and hit

multiple images of Materazzi that appear in the screen. After hitting him several times, Zidane receives a red card by a referee and he is sent off. Despite being extremely simple and not especially fun, the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere* hosted it in its online version. In *So you think you can drive me, Mel?*, the player has to drive Mel Gibson's car trying to grab as many tequila bottles as possible, and dodging Stars of David and Troopers on the road.

Documentary games are those that “seek to record an event, its space, and its stakeholders for posterity” (ibid: 61). Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer, mention as an example the controversial videogame *JFK Reloaded*, which recreated the John F. Kennedy assassination. The player is a first person shooter who has to emulate the way that, according to the Warren Commission, Kennedy was killed. The inherent idea of the game seems to be to question the report that explained how the three different objectives were reached with three bullets. It is not available online anymore because after some controversy, the developers decided to remove it from the web.

I argue for the necessity of every kind of experiment regarding how to improve the way to package and deliver the news. Since the appearance of the Internet, a world of new possibilities to tell stories and engage the public has been available for those in charge of transmitting the current events. For their inherent features, games can seem to be a good tool to engage audiences in important and complicated news stories while entertaining. But this 'spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down' point of view on the actual problems of journalism and its audiences is quite commercially focused, simplistic and dangerous. And it misunderstands the basis of journalism. Engaging audiences does not mean to maintain their interest using a funnier media to deliver the news, but to include audiences and their interests by letting them to interact with the information. It is about a more democratic participation, not about entertaining while

telling the news. In an epoch when infotainment is gaining more importance and space in the media, the challenge is not to entertain anymore.

Gonzalo Frasca (2007) is right when he says that it is possible to “deliver 'serious' messages even through mediums that are popularly regarded as violent and sexist time-wasters for teenagers”, and he compares the potential of videogames as storytelling tool with comics. But the fact that videogames can deliver serious messages does not mean that they can inform objectively about something of public interest, in a balanced way and taking into account the points of view of different actors. The various informative genres in journalism try to tell a story not only based in true facts but also with the sound bites of the different actors implicated in the story (2002). The informative genres in newsgames examined before (reportage newsgames, documentary newsgames and tabloid newsgames) do not include real voices of the people affected or involved in the story they are supposed to tell. For instance, the statement made in *Food Import Folly*, a so-called reportage game, can be synthesized in one sentence. It is not an analytical piece about a topic, as journalism must be, and it is not factual, as simple reportage is. The message that can be learned by playing *Food Import Folly* is very simple: it is pretty obvious that if the number of FDA inspectors has not increased during the years and the volume of imported food has, it becomes very complicated to check all the goods that arrive into the port. This can be understood by just looking at the numbers offered in a screen at the beginning of the game. It does not add any substantial information to the topic. What is more: some people can be attracted by the game, play it, enjoy it and not even think about the topic. One does not need to know anything about the topic to have success in the game. As Celia Pearce (Pearce, 2002: 112) said once: “Games are fundamentally about play, so a play-centric framework is needed in order to look at the function of narrativity in games”. The first objective in

games is to play them; possible messages can come (or not) afterwards.

The argument developed in *Newsgames* about editorials, an interpretative/opinion genre in journalism, misconceive the term itself. The authors claim that “journalists embrace objectivity by including all the reliable facts, whereas editorialists pick and choose in order to persuade their readers”. The aim of the editorials is not to “persuade their readers” but to express the opinion of the head of the newspapers about a topic as a form to position themselves and being honest with the audiences regarding the treatment of certain topics (2002). In fact, the idea of “persuade” readers is closer to propaganda rather than to journalism. Editorials normally cover hot topics in a deep and thoughtful way and are written by the editors in chief or an editorial team. They are not signed, since they are supposed to represent the opinion of the newspaper. At some point, Bogost compares the editorial games with the political cartoons. It makes more sense, since political cartoons are the graphic counterpart of the opinion columns. They express graphically the opinion of a well-known cartoonist. But in this case, their argumentation in favor of the editorial games would change completely. Political cartoons normally have a satirical component that sends a shot to the brain of the reader via a clear message. They do not develop an idea or add any context or background to their statement. It can be definitely a good niche for videogames. Nevertheless, the costs of production in a videogame are higher and the time needed to program them, longer. The question here would be what kind of benefits these types of videogames can bring to journalism, since their facility to “persuade” readers, mentioned by Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer, runs counter to the basis of journalism. Perhaps, the so-called editorial games can attract young audiences and engage them with current events, but further studies have to be done with regard to this.

The same critique previously done to the informative genres can be applied to

documentary newsgames. Simulating the scenario where John F. Kennedy was assassinated cannot be compared with a documentary where witnesses are consulted and different versions of the crime are discussed. As a matter of fact, the videogame *JFK Reloaded* received numerous critiques² that accused it of provoking conspiracy theories. There are, of course, documentaries that can be similarly blamed, but no authors will present them as a paradigm of the genre in a study about the field. In any case, *JFK Reloaded* is just a simulation of an event, which can be part of a documentary but never a documentary itself. Finally, alluding to 'tabloid newsgames' in order to validate the uses of videogames in journalism is as referring to paparazzi when discussing the importance of photography in journalism. I cannot think of other but than commercial reasons that will make a news enterprise embrace tabloid games.

It seems that the nature of these two objects, videogames and journalism, differs from each other. As Nolan explains (2003), “journalism emphasizes the timely provision of reliable information about reality, while gaming values distraction and unreality”. What is more, they are not only different with respect to their relation with reality but also regarding their correlation with narrativity. While it is more than evident that the aim of journalism is to inform through storytelling, there is an open discussion in game studies with reference to the idea of games as storytellers. Sybil Nolan summarizes in a paragraph what has been said previously in this article:

Games appear to offer the news media a popular and commercially successful model for delivering news online in a more immersive format. On closer inspection, there are major disparities between the purposes, structure and ethics of these games and online narratives. Such a model is not only problematic, but potentially harmful to journalism's ethical conduct and public credibility.

2 For more information:
http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2004/11/a_view_to_a_kill.html ,
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2006/feb/17/jfkreloadedfi>

Games are a medium with enormous possibilities that still have to be explored. Yet they have very specific qualities and features that prevent them from being used simply as substitutes for traditional media. On the other hand, the type of engagement that the videogames empower is more related with the absorption of attention, while the engagement searched by journalism is linked with political participation and civil concerns. Nevertheless, Neys and Jansz study (2010) asserts that “the construction and expression of a ‘political self’ through the act of playing a political game -another name for the serious games that address political issues- may have consequences in the real world”. The consequences they refer to in their study are basically to show more interest about a topic or share their comments/knowledge with other people. The engagement that journalism has been trying to motivate for decades is deeper and is related to active participation in the construction of the news. Public and citizen journalism, discussed below, are good examples.

Public and citizen journalism and the needs of participation in journalism

The general objective of public journalism is to help news corporations to “reconnect to their communities so they can engage their citizens in dialogues that lead to problem solving” (Fouhy, 1996). Public journalism was born in the 90's as a response to the disconnection between the public interest and the journalist, in an epoch when journalist were focused in political candidates, forgetting about other matters. Or as Eksterowicz (2000) points out:

Public journalism is also a reaction against the perceived inadequacies of representative government and its institutions. (...). Public journalism emphasizes civic action and the acquisition of information from different sources -in other words, the community that is served by journalist. Public journalism emphasizes citizen participation as a virtue that

eventually enhances representative government. It is a democratic and participatory movement.

Public or civic journalism has been one of the big challenges for journalist in the last decades, and is not free of critiques and disagreements. These challenges have been amplified with journalism's trip to the Internet and with the arrival of online citizen journalism. The World Wide Web and mobile technology have opened new possibilities of collaboration between citizens and journalists that make plausible some of the ideals of public journalism. New technologies such as the Internet and smart mobile phones give an opportunity to citizens of reporting about current events that they have witnessed. Their relevance is so remarkable, that citizen participation have been included in newsroom routines as a reliable source of information. According to the BBC's director of news Helen Boaden (2008):

It is not just a “nice to have” -it can really enrich our journalism and provide our audiences with a wider diversity of voices than we could otherwise deliver. As well as voices we might not otherwise hear from, there are stories about which we would never have known... For many of our audiences, this has opened their eyes to something very simple: that their lives can be newsworthy that news organizations don't have a monopoly on what stories are covered. Indeed, that news organizations have an appetite for stories that simply couldn't get to themselves and they value information and eyewitness accounts from the public -as they always have done.

Different experiments have been taking place around the world in respect with citizen journalism the last years, with more or less successful results. As Mark Deuze comments (2009), some may claim that citizen journalism is an open door for free and precarious labor and a practice that leads into an unprofessional journalism that privileges individual opinions. But despite the these skeptical views, another perspective would be a “more optimistic note on a participatory media culture, civic

emancipation, and an emerging new humanism in media professions, where we can focus in the efforts of professional news organizations to genuinely collaborate with their constituencies”. For that last reason and without forgetting the critiques, citizen journalism is an interesting path to explore and test from disciplines with a long more experience in digital and interactive environments such as game studies. Applying game mechanics in participatory journalism can lead into a type of playful journalism that reinforces the interest of citizens in contributing with the media without falling in the dark waters of infotainment or ethically questionable practices. A model of what can be called 'playfull journalism' could be found in the pioneering Spanish news site Soitu.es, which closed in 2009 due to financial problems.

Soitu.es and the playful journalism

Soitu.es was one of the first online news sites in Spain that was not related with a printed version. It was launched in December 2007 under the slogan “no mass media” in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the rest of the strongly politicized Spanish media. It was very user-centered and open to citizen participation. “We have always believed in the socialization of information, but often when people comment on the news, it’s just pure noise. We wanted to capitalize on the whole flow of relevant information that society can contribute using tools that make this influx controllable.”, said once its founder Gumersindo Lafuente (Benett, 2010). The label soitu.es is also related with that philosophy. Soitu means in Spanish “I am you” and Soitu.es means “I am your .es”.

Over the years the project lasted, they were honored by the Society of News Design and awarded with two Online News Association awards. The ONA remarked

that “an underlying philosophy of sharing, linking and audience-focused engagement runs through its mix of original content and aggregated news and features material”³.

But despite all the recognition, innovation and a million and a half of unique users a month, soitu.es had to closed in October 2009, due to the cut of financial resources of its main backer and shareholder, the Spanish bank BBVA. Even so, they left an interesting legacy in terms of citizen participation that is still a valuable object of analysis.

Among all the tools for user participation, the section called 'Uno de los nuestros' ('One of us') is especially relevant for its function similarities with game mechanics. This section was announced in the home of the site, in a special column as 'Your news'. Every user could get registered and have her space where to write texts, in a similar way to blog platforms. But what differentiated this section from a blog is that users where called to be 'One of them', a journalist, and write about issues of common interest in a less personal way. Users were called to play 'the journalist role' with the audience eye. The texts that were considered relevant enough were fact checked and published in the home of the site, as the ones written by professional journalists. The author received a payment of 20 euros and the text appeared in her site, where all her texts were saved and accessible to other users, with a special mark that distinguish it from the rest of the text that were not selected. Thus, the user's personal page/site became a kind of a score page.

Notwithstanding it's not being a game, 'Uno de los nuestros' shared many features with Caillois's definition of games (2001). Apparently, it was meant to be a free activity, uncertain -since its course could not be determined beforehand-, separate -it took place on a certain space on the Internet- and governed by rules -the users had to

3 For more information: <http://journalists.org/awards/past-winners-2009/>

write *as if* they were journalists-. However, it could be differentiated from the Caillois definition of a pure game for having a 'productive' purpose -the information about an event-, and for being totally related with reality. In that sense, the 'reward system' can be understood both as a remuneration for a freelance job or as a symbolic recompense for 'accomplishing a mission', as points or score in a game. Attending to the first case, the game mechanics would have been press into the service of precarious labor, something that some authors (Kücklich, 2005) have defined as 'playbour'. The previous considerations for examining this case are that 'Uno de los nuestros' was not a pool for free labor but that it actually worked as a 'funny game' for its users. Having said that, some interviews were conducted with different participants in order to examine the possibilities of the so-called 'playful journalism' and both perspectives were taken into account.

For this paper, 14 users of 'Uno de los nuestros' were interviewed via email through open questions to analyze their perception of their participation in that section. The aim of this consultation was to look deeply into matters such as if users consider their participation as something they did in their free time or as a job? Did they find it playful? Did their participation increase their interest in the site and in the news coverage? The users were reached via Twitter after a public called for participants done by myself and retweeted by other people. It could have lead into bias since most of my followers and contacts in Twitter are journalist. It is impossible to determine if my sample is representative of the total of 10.093 users registered in soitu.es. But despite all these issues and considering that for further studies the 13 users must be contacted again to widen the questions, some stimulating findings arose in these pilot interviews, which served as a first contact with the subject. More interviews need to be done to complete the study.

The 14 interviewed are mainly males (just one female wanted to participate) between 20 and 38 years old, with a majority between 28 and 34. Five of them are journalists, one is studying journalism and the rest are not journalists but their professions are related in some way with creativity and writing. All of them except one have a degree. It draws a general picture that is not the ideal for citizen journalism - white men with a degree and some kind of background in writing is not very representative of the whole population- so, again, perhaps the sample is not the best. In any case, this data can lead into a general question about the nature of digital citizen journalism: who has the access/skills to participate and how would it narrow the perspectives and the possible stories.

The majority of those interviewed considered their participation in 'Uno de los nuestros' as part of their leisure time and those who do not (a total of two) are young journalists. All of them describe it at some point as a fun experience. This is an important detail since it is the basic characteristic of a 'playful experience': it definitely has to be fun. None of them did it because they needed the money but some think the monetary remuneration made it fairer and increased their sense of commitment. For them, money and the marks in their selected stories mean, in general terms, satisfaction and recognition. It is remarkable that a majority used these two words. This is also crucial in determining it as a playful activity. The scenario of an unemployed journalist writing just for the paycheck will totally change the nature of 'Uno de los nuestros'.

The majority of the non-journalists admitted to having tried to participate *as if* they were journalists. One of them responded “Participating in *soitu.es*? It made me put myself into a journalist's shoes not only in terms of writing, but also in terms of the immediacy of telling the news or the 'pressure' of the submission”. It confirms the theory that 'Uno de los nuestros' works with certain rules: the rules of 'you have to write

as if you were a journalist'.

Finally, all the interviewed say that their participation in 'Uno de los nuestros' had as a result an increase in their interest into the whole site. Regarding that matter, two interesting answers are: “The existence of a platform to write what you felt like and that they (the journalist in the newsroom) decided that some of the things that I wrote had a space in their site made me feel as if I belonged to soitu.es”. “‘Uno de los nuestros’ not only increased my fidelity as a reader, but also made me feel a participant of the project. This fact, obliged me to read assiduously other news, other authors and journalists, with the aim of knowing the current events from other points of view, enjoying different styles and trying to learn from everything and everybody”. Both quotes are a good example of how playful experiences can increase the interest of the audiences and their implication with the medium.

To sum up, the general picture shows an audience of young educated males with special interest in writing, which can question the whole idea of citizen journalism as a democratic practice. On the other hand, this critique can be applied to most of the online initiatives due to the special current characteristics of the Internet. Apart from this bias, it can be said that 'Uno de los nuestros' motivated participation through game mechanics that reinforced the idea of reward and belonging to the site. Paying a small amount of money for the best texts and give them the status of 'real news' resulted in feelings of satisfaction and recognition that augmented the sympathy for the site, the interest for the news and, ultimately, the reader's involvement.

Conclusions

In a text about the future of game studies, Crawford, Gosling and Light (2011)

say: “we have to be careful that we do not position gaming as absolutely, universally and necessarily central to everyone's everyday life”. The attempt of Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer to justify the use of videogames in journalism suggests what Crawford, Gosling and Light don't want for the future of the discipline. Despite this, more experiments are necessary and it hasn't been proven that videogames are not useful for journalism, as most of the examples that they use when describing the 'newsgames' are not valid for the purposes of journalism. Moreover, Bogost et al's analysis fails to acknowledge the aims of journalism and its genres. As one cannot analyze a game without playing it, one can not analyze the necessities and challenges of journalism nowadays without knowing the basics on the profession. For instance, persuasion and journalism do not get along well together and sensationalist news is not a genre.

Serious games are an interesting extension of videogames that can broaden their benefits from entertainment and socialization to education. But academics should try not to fall in naïve optimism when evaluating these new practices. In the case of journalism, it is important to first localize the present deficiencies, before presenting videogames as an alternative to something that is already working. Journalism can borrow things from videogames such as the game mechanics, in order to increase a type of participation that would lead into a more democratic and public-centered mass media.

As the case of 'Uno de los nuestros' shows, to apply a system of rewards in participatory tools can lead to feelings of satisfaction and recognition that motivates users to follow the news and actually participate in 'telling the news'. Although this model has some deficiencies as with the ones mentioned earlier, more experiments should be done in that way. Playful experiences in journalism can bring the public closer to newsrooms, democratizing the selection of contents and maybe bringing the worries of the citizens to the political arena.

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Games

Food Import Follies:

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Hothead Zidane:

http://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Sport/2006/07_Luglio/10/pop_zidane.shtml

September 12th: <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>

So you think you can drive me, Mel? <http://www.splashworks.com/pgame.php?id=5>