

Bridging News and Play: The Concept, Characteristics, and Challenges of Newsgames

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Abstract

In the current era of technological transformation, media forms are undergoing cross-border integration. Newsgames are gradually emerging as a significant in-novative format within digital journalism. This paper examines two primary def-initional perspectives on newsgames—journalistic professionalism and non-fiction writing—and summarizes their core characteristics: a fact-based foundation, reliance on procedural rhetoric, and strong interactivity coupled with immersive experience. Concurrently, the study identifies structural contradic-tions inherent in newsgames concerning topic selection, the balance between authenticity and entertainment, and the coordination between timeliness and user retention. Furthermore, it proposes pathways for sustainable development by expanding narrative boundaries, adhering to the core principle of authenticity, and innovating product logic. This discussion aims to provide a reference for understanding and developing newsgames.

Keywords

Newsgames; Digital News Narrative; Procedural Rhetoric; Non-linear Narrative

1. Introduction

We live in a media ecology profoundly shaped by the logic of games. From the viral spread of Sheep a Sheep on social media, to the national gaming mythology constructed by Honor of Kings, and the cultural expression and technological ambition embodied by Black Myth: Wukong, games have evolved from a marginal form of entertainment into a mainstream medium for narrative, social interaction, and meaning generation (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2020). In this process, games, as open-ended narrative products, constitute a ubiquitous narrative means and unleash ample imaginative space for integration with other media forms.

In the early 21st century, to cope with increasing market competition and vie for audience attention, traditional news media outlets like The New York Times, The Guardian, and NPR introduced cross-disciplinary resources from game design to innovate news narratives. In 2005, game designer Gonzalo Frasca explicitly

proposed the concept of "News Gaming," providing a foundational reference for the study of newsgames.

However, the development of newsgames has been accompanied by controversy. The root lies in the fundamental tension between the narrative forms of news and games. Based on observations of these trends, this paper re-examines the framework for understanding newsgames by analyzing typical global journalistic practices. First, it aims to clarify their conceptual definition. Second, it systematically argues for their core characteristics and value as a unique narrative medium. Finally, it analyzes the inherent "news-game" contradictions and proposes feasible optimization paths, with the goal of exploring the future development of newsgames.

2. Conceptual Definition of Newsgames

Newsgames reside at the intersection of news narrative and game design, representing a typical cross-border format. Precisely due to this hybrid nature, academia and industry have not yet reached a consensus on their definition. This conceptual ambiguity reflects the fluidity and reconfiguration of boundaries between news and games in the digital age. By reviewing existing literature, two main perspectives can be broadly summarized.

2.1. Traditional Journalistic Professionalism Perspective: As "Serious Games for Public Debate"

This perspective stems primarily from mainstream Western journalistic professionalism, emphasizing that newsgames should first and foremost carry the core social functions of news. Within this framework, newsgames are defined as a sub-type of Serious Games. Prominent game scholar Miguel Sicart (2008) defines them as: "a serious computer game that aims to illustrate a specific and concrete aspect of news through its procedural rhetoric, with the purpose of participating in public debate." This definition highlights several key points:

- **Seriousness:** It distinguishes itself from purely entertainment-focused commercial games, possessing clear educational, persuasive, or social issue exploration intent.
- **Procedural Rhetoric:** This refers to conveying viewpoints and arguments through the game's rules, mechanics, and interactive processes, which is the fundamental characteristic differentiating games from traditional news carriers like text, images, and video.
- **Publicity:** Its ultimate goal is to stimulate and participate in public discussion, serving informed citizens and rational dialogue as required by a democratic society (Bogost, 2007).

Domestic scholars have proposed similar views, considering newsgames as "video games that strive to apply journalistic principles to develop the media functions of

games, usually based on real events and issues, providing players with virtual experiences based on real-world resources" (Huang Mingfen, 2016). Here, newsgames become a dynamic, explorable model of social theory, where players understand relationships between various elements through interactive experience, moving from understanding facts to understanding the logic of their evolution.

2.2. Non-Fiction Writing Perspective: As "Fact-Based Interactive Narrative"

Another approach steps outside the framework of traditional news values (timeliness, proximity, impact) and understands newsgames within the broader framework of non-fiction creation. From this perspective, newsgames can be seen as a type of non-fiction writing in the digital age (Jiang Xiaoli & Jia Ruiqi, 2018). Non-fiction writing itself is a flexible concept, whose core lies in narrating events that have actually occurred or phenomena that exist, pursuing in-depth exploration and presentation of facts and truth. It requires the author, while remaining loyal to facts, to employ literary narrative techniques to reveal the complex context, human depth, and social significance behind events. From this viewpoint, newsgames share the same spiritual core with investigative reporting, features, documentary literature, and even political cartoons: they are all committed to exploring and presenting the complex truths of the real world, and inevitably carry the creator's perspective and value judgments. Western scholars Treanor and Mateas have analogized newsgames to political cartoons, suggesting both "convey editorial opinions with value stances through persuasive visual and textual metaphors" (Treanor & Mateas, 2009).

The non-fiction writing perspective greatly liberates the thematic and temporal dimensions of newsgames. It does not emphasize being bound to "reporting recent facts," but rather focuses on issues with enduring social significance, historical reflective value, or universal human concern. Whether recreating traumatic historical events or exploring long-standing social structural problems, as long as the kernel of truth and the purpose of realistic concern are maintained, they can become subject matter for newsgames. This makes newsgames more akin to an interactive documentary or a playable non-fiction work, whose lifecycle and intellectual depth may far exceed newsgames based on single hot events.

The two definitional perspectives have different emphases but are not diametrically opposed. Their main difference lies in the requirement for timeliness, which directly leads to differences in creative modes and topic selection (García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2020). Newsgames from the traditional perspective can serve as a dynamic interpretation of major breaking news or complex policy issues, enhancing the engagement and depth of understanding of the report. Newsgames from the non-fiction perspective can serve as an interactive extension of in-depth reports, features, or commentaries, or independently become an artistic expression form for

exploring long-term social issues.

3. Core Characteristics of Newsgames

Newsgames inherit the fundamental pursuit of authenticity from journalistic professionalism while employing methods unique to the gaming medium, such as procedural rhetoric, non-linear narrative, and immersive experience, to construct a unique form of experiential cognition. Specifically, newsgames exhibit the following characteristics.

3.1. Based on News Facts

Currently, newsgames can be broadly categorized into two types based on their presentation form and relationship to news facts. The first type is serious games adapted from news events, released as independent products where the news event provides the background or inspiration. These works, such as *Bury Me, My Love*, which reflects the Syrian refugee crisis, are often released by game studios. Their core is to let players experience emotional and ethical dilemmas, rather than strictly reproducing all details of a specific event (Plewe & Fürsich, 2018). They are essentially creative interpretations, where the requirement for authenticity leans more towards emotional truth and situational credibility.

The second type is newsgames deeply embedded in the news reporting process, serving as native news products. These games simulate or construct scenarios by creating interactive models that users can engage with, helping them achieve a deeper narrative understanding (He Tianping, 2024). For example, *The Hidden Corners of Marriage*, where users role-play as a judge adjudicating divorce cases adapted from real court documents. By selecting evidence and questioning directions, users influence their understanding of the cases, thereby gaining a deeper comprehension of marriage, family, and social jurisprudence. This type of newsgame carries a clear news information function; its design and logic must be based on and serve the rigorous presentation of core facts, thus sharing the professional pursuit of truthfulness and accuracy with traditional news reporting (García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2020). Although both types share a foundation in news facts, their different emphases on authenticity and different production entities determine their complementary yet distinct roles within the news ecosystem.

3.2. Procedural Rhetoric for Persuasion through Process

The key for newsgames to transcend traditional narrative lies in their unique capability for procedural rhetoric. Game scholar Ian Bogost provided the foundational explanation, defining procedural rhetoric as "the practice of persuading through processes... arguments made through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models" (Bogost, 2007). This means that in

newsgames, viewpoints and arguments are not merely directly stated by text or image, but are encoded into the game's rule system. Players, through operation and decision-making, personally experience the outcomes brought about by the operation of rules, thereby discovering and internalizing the designer's intended message.

This rhetorical method holds unique advantages when revealing systemic, structural issues. Uruguayan game designer Gonzalo Frasca created the game *Kabul Kaboom!* based on real news reports, a classic example applying procedural rhetoric to express anti-war sentiment. The game contains no textual commentary, merely presenting a simple scene where "hamburgers" (symbolizing aid) and "bombs" (symbolizing war) alternately fall; the player controls a character trying to catch hamburgers to survive. However, the game mechanics doom the player to inevitable failure. This procedurally designed failure is itself a powerful critique of the inherent contradiction and absurdity of so-called humanitarian wars (Treanor & Mateas, 2009). Procedural rhetoric transforms abstract political analysis into tangible, operable embodied experience, allowing persuasion to occur naturally within interaction.

3.3. Non-linear Narrative

Newsgames represent a cutting-edge practice of dialogic journalism theory in the digital age. Dialogic journalism views news as an open, pluralistic discourse construction, inviting public participation in the negotiation and co-creation of meaning (Robinson, 2020). Newsgames embody this concept through their non-linear interactive narrative structure. They deconstruct and reorganize the linear, solidified information flow of traditional news reports into a tree-like or networked structure, granting users the power to choose and explore information.

For instance, when reporting complex social issues, a newsgame can allow players to assume different roles, gathering information, making decisions, and witnessing consequences from their respective standpoints. Each narrative path reveals different facets of the event, with the overall understanding completed through the player's active exploration. This concept was practiced in the game *Heaven is Dark, Please Close Your Eyes! Can You Find the Spy Hidden Around You?* produced by Chengdu Business Daily. Mimicking the "Werewolf" game mode, it sets players as detectives who must identify a spy among suspects by examining clues. Players are no longer passive information receivers but active investigators, thereby experientially learning about national security. This design transforms news from unidirectional expression into a bidirectional dialogue. The meaning of the narrative is no longer a given conclusion but becomes a process dynamically generated through interaction (Sicart, 2008). In this way, newsgames can cultivate the public's media literacy in processing complex information and understanding multiple perspectives.

3.4. Immersive Communication

By constructing virtual scenarios that simulate reality and utilizing first-person perspectives and interactive mechanisms, newsgames create a sense of presence and immersive experience for users. This shift from a third-person to a first-person perspective significantly shortens the psychological distance between users and news events, effectively promoting emotional investment and empathetic understanding (Plewe & Fürsich, 2018).

Frontier technologies like VR and AR further amplify this advantage. The New York Times' VR news piece *The Displaced* places users into the real-life scenes of children in war-torn areas. This immersion transforms refugee statistics into unforgettable embodied memories. However, this powerful capacity for emotional arousal also comes with ethical challenges: whether immersive sympathy might oversimplify complex socio-political contexts or lead to emotional exhaustion and numbness (Plewe & Fürsich, 2018). Therefore, newsgame design needs to seek a balance between creating immersive experiences and maintaining necessary reflective distance, guiding users from feeling towards deeper critical thinking. This innovation not only reshapes the perceptual dimension of news but also poses new propositions for journalistic ethics.

4. Contradictions and Future of Newsgames

Newsgames expand journalistic genres through communicative advantages like procedural rhetoric, immersive communication, and non-linear narrative, enriching the pathways for news dissemination. However, current practices of newsgames, particularly in China, are still in their infancy, and their development is persistently accompanied by inherent, fundamental contradictions stemming from the fusion of the two heterogeneous logics of news and games. This constitutes the key to understanding their challenges and future development.

4.1. Challenges in Content, Authenticity, and Timeliness

Firstly, there is a natural tension between news content and game mechanics. Newsgames are essentially the gamification of news, their operation rooted in gaming paradigms. This imposes specific requirements on their subject matter: not all news facts are suitable for adaptation; only those with relatively clear storylines, character relationships, or simulatable processes are feasible. Consequently, many important but abstract political and financial news items may be excluded due to misalignment with game narrative rules, turning the richness of news types into a potential limitation. Furthermore, the potential audience for newsgames highly overlaps with casual or core gamers. If the news theme itself is mismatched with the typical interests or information needs of these demographics, even skillful adaptation may fail to achieve the intended impact.

Secondly, the principle of journalistic authenticity conflicts with the entertainment

imperative of games. Although newsgames are based on facts, the need to engage players inevitably involves techniques like scene immersion, visual impact, and dramatic tension. This process can involve subjective framing and selective emphasis. Newsgames must find a balance: they cannot abandon the interactivity and appeal essential to games, or they lose their communicative effectiveness; nor can they deviate from journalism's rigorous pursuit of factual accuracy, or they lose their credibility and social function as news products. Improper handling can easily result in an awkward hybrid that satisfies neither standard.

Finally, journalism's pursuit of timeliness contradicts the cultivation of user retention in games. Timeliness is often the lifeblood of news, seeking the minimal delay between event and report. However, games—especially those requiring significant user engagement—depend on long-term investment and cultivated user retention. Their design and dissemination cycles often aim for a long-tail effect, forming a sharp contrast with the short lifecycle of most news stories. Finding an organic integration point between these two different temporal scales is key for newsgames to avoid becoming ephemeral or irrelevant.

4.2. Coping Strategies and Conclusion

Faced with these core contradictions, this paper argues that the future development of newsgames should not aim to eliminate these tensions entirely, but rather to manage them through a targeted, selective, and layered approach to integration, as reflected in the following three aspects:

First, regarding thematic limitations, the narrative and mechanical boundaries of newsgames should be continuously expanded. Not all news is suitable for adaptation into character-driven stories. As an explanatory method, the core advantage of newsgames lies in the operable simulation of complex social processes (Zhang Chao & Zhong Xin, 2016). For major political and economic issues difficult to represent through direct storytelling, newsgames can move beyond event recreation to simulate underlying logics and decision-making systems. For example, the game P-Cube, jointly developed by the EU and the University of Luxembourg, guides players to role-play as policymakers, using real policy tools like referendums and white papers to promote policies under constraints. This transforms abstract macro-issues into understandable, operable interactive models.

Second, newsgames should adhere to a core of authenticity while navigating the spectrum between entertainment and seriousness. For independent games using news events as background, authenticity lies in emotional truth and situational credibility. Here, engagement serves the goal of fostering deep empathy, with the ethical requirement being to avoid exploitative depictions of suffering and to clearly indicate the work's interpretive or fictionalized nature. Crucially, newsgames must not deceive or materially mislead players regarding basic facts. The viewpoints argued through their 'procedural rhetoric' must be grounded in real, verifiable

information or sound logical foundations.

Third, product logic should be innovated to develop newsgames on multiple levels with different lifecycles. For short-term trending news, developers can create lightweight, standardized, quickly reusable interactive modules (e.g., choice-based scenarios, simple simulators). For long-term, evolving issues, the focus can shift to constructing continuously updated, sustained newsgame platforms (Quan Yan, 2023). These platforms would not merely report 'an event,' but rather track 'a process.' User retention in this model no longer depends solely on replaying a static game, but stems from ongoing interest in an issue's progression and the sustained engagement of testing one's understanding within a dynamic simulated system. This aligns with the long-tail potential of games while also extending the 'freshness' of news from the novelty of events to the novelty of evolving insights and perspectives. In conclusion, newsgames are by no means a mere trendy embellishment or a stopgap for the news industry. They represent a profound effort by journalism to reshape its narrative authority and public dialogue capabilities in the era of interactive media. They challenge the traditional role of news as the announcer of "finished facts," embracing instead the potential of news as a facilitator of "explorable reality." Although the road ahead faces many tensions between reality and representation, seriousness and engagement, guidance and openness, these very contradictions are the source of its vitality and creative potential. The future of newsgames depends on whether journalists, game developers, and researchers can, with greater creativity and shared responsibility, collaboratively refine this new type of social cognition tool, allowing it to truly become a unique medium that illuminates complex realities and fosters public rationality amid the clamor of the digital world.

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