Let's Play News

The gamification of journalism

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research report
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The views in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Polis or the LSE.
Introduction: Let’s Play News

Follow today’s hot topics and get your score in a knowledge tracker. Answer questions about current events and see what others think. Try being a hard-working gig economy driver in a role-playing game. Or pretend you are an investigative journalist who must navigate hackers and viruses in Syria’s cyberwar.

These are all examples of how games and gamification can be used in journalism. They are fun and innovative, but can it be more than that? Could gamification help meet one of the biggest challenges in digital journalism today: to build audience engagement and loyalty?

For journalists, our work will only have impact if we reach out with our reporting and investigations. For the marketing departments, the relationship with the audience is the most vital part of the business model. If games seem like a fun way to reach the audience, they can also be deadly serious.

There is evidence from other fields that it could have a positive effect on journalism. Gaming companies have seen a dramatic increase in sales and time spent online, especially during the pandemic. Game-inspired marketing methods have long been used to target users with offers, advertising and subscriptions. Many apps use gaming techniques, whether it’s for learning or keeping up a workout routine, as with Duolingo or Strava.

Meta (formerly Facebook) says it will spend about 10 billion dollars over the next years developing the technologies required for building a "metaverse", a shared virtual reality that takes the idea of “gamification” to another level.¹ The world’s second largest economy China is experimenting with a gamified social credit system, closely related to mass surveillance systems which incorporate facial recognition, big data analysis, and artificial intelligence.² Those cases show the potential for forms of gamification, but also highlight the potential risks.

In this report, I have collected case studies inside and beyond journalism, and analysed their effectiveness. I want to open a wider discussion about the ethical and practical considerations of gamification. Can confidence in journalism be improved or damaged by playful elements? Can it increase dialogue and attract new audiences, or will it discourage some people? What ethical dilemmas are there to collecting users’ data through games?

This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive summary of the topic. It aims to stimulate debate and so we would welcome any feedback.

Anna Thulin, February 2022

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¹ Rodriguez, Salvador. "Facebook changes company name to Meta". CNBC. 28 October 2021, cnbc.com/2021/10/28/facebook-changes-company-name-to-meta.html

² Ma, Alexandra; Canales, Katie. "China’s social credit system ranks citizens". Business Insider. 9 May 2021, businessinsider.fr/us/china-social-credit-system-punishments-and-rewards-explained-2018-4
1 Gamification in journalism increases engagement and loyalty among users, which benefits both editorial and advertising. Users read more articles and stay longer on the page. News games are often shared on social media and are valuable for news branding. When it comes to storytelling, news games have the potential to create deeper engagement by depicting a more complex reality, and strengthen empathy.

2 Gamification leads to a number of ethical and practical considerations. One of the main considerations is how to collect and draw on user data. Journalists should always be included in the process, even when you collaborate with external partners.

3 Not all journalists and media companies should necessarily invest in gamification. Gaming itself is a multimillion-dollar industry with huge potential and funds. It would be a shame not to take advantage of the interactive technology and storytelling that exist. But for news organisations with limited resources it depends upon their strategy for users’ needs and the specific audiences they want to reach.

4 Interviewees said more cross-disciplinary cooperation is required for digital innovation, including gamification. We need to collaborate between departments such as editorial, marketing and technology or product development. And outside news organisations with specialists. Content and product should be seen as two sides of the same coin. All the case studies in this report happened thanks to collaboration and an openness towards innovation.

The Gaming Economy and the Purpose of Playing

From classic 70’s arcade games such as Computer Space and Pong, the gaming industry has grown at incredible speed and is now bigger than Hollywood.³ The global market value for the gaming sector was 155.9 billion US dollars in 2020, with a prediction for 268.8 billion US dollars in 2025.⁴ There were 2.69 billion video game players worldwide in 2020. That number is expected to rise to 3.07 billion in three years.⁵

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⁵ Finances Online. “Number of Gamers Worldwide 2021/2022”. financesonline.com/number-of-gamers-worldwide/
Mobile gaming makes up around half of the total gaming market, while immersive VR/AR games are among the most fast-growing in the sector. Female gamers are on the rise, and make up 40-50 percent in Europe, US and Asia.

There is a strong argument that games and gamification are now part of people’s media experience. Could it engage users and bring revenue to journalism? From a behavioral science view, there is also evidence that games and playfulness engage both youth and adults.

Playing is at the core of being human, according to Mikael Jensen, senior lecturer at University of Borås and a researcher on play and communication. It’s a necessary part of our development. For example, play helps develop our linguistic and social skills. Young children are estimated to spend 70 per cent of their time awake playing, and even for adults it occupies 10 per cent of our time.

“The need to play still exists in adulthood,” says Jensen. “We engage in betting or go to a soccer game because it’s a relief or recreation. Playing is needed as a valve, as procrastination, and for processing information.”

Researchers believe that it’s easier to learn in a state of joy or a state of play, because you don’t notice that you’re making an effort.

When it comes to playing and gamification in journalism, the biggest misconception is that news games are only entertainment based, says media professor David O Dowling, author of The Gamification of Digital Journalism: Innovation in Journalistic Storytelling.

“It’s the stereotype of it being a video game escapist product. You can see the norms in editorial newsrooms. Pitch a gamified project, and you’ll see eyes rolling.”

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7 Yokoi, Tomoko. “Female Gamers Are On The Rise”. Forbes. 4 March 2021, forbes.com/sites/tomokoyokoi/2021/03/04/female-gamers-are-on-the-rise-can-the-gaming-industry-catch-up/
8 Interview with Mikael Jensen, senior lecturer at University of Borås, September 2021.
9 Interview with Mikael Jensen, senior lecturer at University of Borås, September 2021.
10 Interview with David O Dowling, professor in the University of Iowa’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication, October 2021.
He considers open-world games, like *Walden* (2017) that create a virtual environment that can be explored by the gamer, to have a lot in common with literary journalism, in their social realism and how they portray a more complex world. For this reason, he believes gamification improves engagement:

“It’s more interactive and immersive, and makes a greater impression on us and our empathy. We get closer to people and understand them easier.”

That is the general case for gaming as a positive activity that could be a useful paradigm for journalism to engage with all parts of its audience, not just people who already enjoy online games. Now let us look at some specific examples.
Online news games have a relatively young history, but have developed significantly in the last decade. The New York Times' *Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek* (2012) is often highlighted for “revolutionizing digital storytelling.” The six-part story, interwoven with interactive graphics, animated simulations and aerial video, won a Pulitzer Prize and inspired a more interactive narrative technique for journalists worldwide. It was not a “game” as such, but it had many elements of interactivity that allowed the reader to enjoy “playing” with the narrative.

Since then, The New York Times has experimented with several game-inspired stories, for example during the US election and the coronavirus pandemic. In one piece they used augmented reality (AR) to show how social distancing guidelines can apply in real life: at the grocery store, on the pavement, or elsewhere.

News games are “a broad body of work produced at the intersection of video games and journalism.” Today, there are a number of genres, from open-world games, documentary games, and social media games. We will explore some examples below.

**Al Jazeera: Pirate Fishing and Hacked**

A lot of investigative journalism can come across as a bit dry, written by a white male audience for a white male audience. That was Juliana Ruhfus’ experience when she decided to tell her stories in a different way. She’s a British reporter and film maker, and a pioneer in interactive investigations. She created Al Jazeera’s award-winning *Pirate Fishing and Hacked – Syria’s Electronic Armies*.

“The idea with gamification was to take the investigations to a broader audience, in a more fun and accessible way,” she says.

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15 Interview with Juliana Ruhfus, investigative reporter, October 2021.
16 Ibid.
*Pirate Fishing* (2014) takes to the seas off Sierra Leone to investigate the multi-million-dollar illegal fishing trade. By watching short videos, the user follows the journalistic process, from the first sight of the trawlers until their arrest. At the end of each clip, the user can click to see what information has been collected, such as destroyed nets, photos of ships with hidden names, and snapshots of crew members. The gamification was "somewhat superficial", Juliana Ruhfus says, since the outcome didn't change. For her second project she wanted to go further.

In *Hacked* (2016), the user must navigate hackers and viruses in Syria's cyber war. It is based on real-life experiences, and includes links to real hacktivist profiles in social media. It's important that people realize it's not fictional, she points out. People have been arrested and tortured for things portrayed in the story.

Apart from the ethics, there were many practical lessons on the way. One of the more obvious mistakes for *Hacked* is that the website was named syhacked.com. When the link was sent out, many thought it was malware. Another issue has been hosting the game. While *Pirate Fishing* is still online on Al Jazeera’s website, *Hacked* had to be taken down because the private company hosting the game raised its fees.

From idea to publication, *Pirate Fishing* took about 8-10 months to create, while *Hacked* took 6 months. Juliana Ruhfus doesn’t know how many people played them, but she still gets interview requests about the games, which speaks for their longevity. She also sees a crossover potential. For example, *Hacked* has been used in schools to teach cyber security.

An investigation is in itself similar to a game, Ruhfus says. There is a task and an element of completion, when you’re nailing a thesis:

"There is an opportunity in gamification that I have not found in any other form of storytelling, where the game format is part of the story."

She is now freelancing as a journalist and doing training for Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, and says she was lucky to explore new formats as an employee with a salary. You have to invest in time and dare to experiment, she says, and compares it with a Silicon Valley mantra: When you try and fail, you’re part of trying to make something better.

"I think the beauty of *Hacked* was not only the content, but also that how it was delivered was part of the message. If I would do a new project, the ultimate goal would be where the message and medium come together."

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19 Interview with Juliana Ruhfus, investigative reporter, October 2021.
The Financial Times: The Uber Game

To make the message and medium come together was also the goal for the Financial Times’ The Uber Game (2017). It is based on interviews with dozens of Uber drivers, where the player experiences a typical week in a driver’s life. Dilemmas include if it’s worth repairing a minor scratch in the window, or if you should get home early for your child's birthday.  

Robin Kwong was a special projects editor at FT at the time, and wrote the script, while collaborating with reporter Leslie Hooks. They wanted the players to realize that what you pay for an Uber trip doesn’t go straight into the driver’s pocket, but will cover lots of things: fuel, insurance, cleaning, and repairs. The actual income for the driver often doesn’t go above the minimum wage.  

"The engagement in the game was very surprising, even for us. At least half a million people have played it, and two thirds finish the entire game," says Kwong.  

People play an average of 20 minutes, multiple times longer than the average time for a conventional FT article. The Uber Game was also used in classes as teaching material, which helped to reach new audiences.  

Kwong says the real-life Uber drivers were generally very positive about the game, that they thought succeeded in sharing their collective experience:

"They recognized the interface and saw Uber a bit as a game themselves, since the company gamifies their work by giving challenges and time limits."

From idea to publication, The Uber Game took about a year to develop. The second FT news game, US-China trade war: Can you dodge Trump’s tariffs, took 2-3 months. The third one, Purpose vs profit: The Trade-off Game, took around 6 weeks. The lesson is that it takes longer to develop the first game. However, the second and third games had fewer users, maybe partly because the novelty of a game wasn’t as strong.  

Robin Kwong says it’s often time consuming and expensive to make news games, but that they are still important to develop:

"Games shrink the complexity of our world, creating a safer arena to put ourselves into. They give permission for us to reconnect with our sense of curiosity. They engage our imagination."

20 Interview with Robin Kwong, New Formats Editor at The Wall Street Journal and former Head of Digital Delivery at Financial Times, October 2021.  
21 Ibid.  
22 “News games by the Financial Times”, ft.com/content/f5428e88-f4b7-11e9-b018-3ef8794b17c6  
23 Kwong, Robin. “Games and Empathy”. 22 April 2017, robinkwong.com/newsgames/
CNN: Steer through the Suez Canal

So, do news games always take months to develop? Sarah-Grace Mankarious says not. She is the senior visual editor of features at CNN, and the mind behind Steer through the Suez Canal (2021) – which was made in just three days. It went on to be the most successful feature on CNN for a whole week, where people stayed an average of 7 minutes on the page.24

"It was really, really popular, and the top story on CNN at the time," says Mankarious. "Digital interactives can engage the audience in a personal way that 2,000 words, or a 2 minute video can't. It could also help create a reputation for the news brand by being more innovative."25

In March 2021, the Suez Canal was blocked for six days after the grounding of container ship Ever Given. Sarah-Grace Mankarious made the design for the interactive, her colleague Marco Chacón developed it, and they also called experts – master mariner Andy Winbow and captain Yash Gupta – to find out exactly how to navigate. In reality, one of the factors that caused the Ever Given to get stuck was a strong gush of wind, and this also happens in the game.

"Actually, we never called it a game," says Mankarious, "it was more of a simulation. So there is a disclosure that says: 'This is a non-scientific simplified interactive experience intended for illustrative purposes only.'"

A risk with the Suez Canal project was judging the tone. If anything serious had happened on Ever Given, for example if someone had been injured, it might have been tasteless to publish "a fun little interactive".

"I'm not into gaming myself," Mankarious says. "But I think audiences are underestimated, we don't consider them enough and we don't offer them enough. The gamified experience can create more of a two-way dialogue."26

24 Interview with Sarah-Grace Mankarious, Senior Visual Editor of Features at CNN, October 2021.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
Gamified Elements on News Sites

The idea of improving dialogue with users is a driving factor for other sorts of gamified elements on news sites, and there are, of course, financial reasons for this.

Research by a team working as part of the 2020 JournalismAI Collab, a project of the Polis think-tank at LSE, explored how AI-driven gamification could provide deeper engagement and user rewards, as well as a driver of content discovery. The gamification platform itself would provide data to an AI system that could concentrate on user habits and behaviors.27

One of the members in the research was Alison Gow, audience and content director, North West, Reach Plc (UK). After the project, she and her colleagues started to look at their own media outlets to see if they could do something with gamification around comments. Many sites already have some interactive elements such as a simple “thumbs up or down” on articles. But they want to take it a step further with a Facebook “super fan” approach, that gives online rewards for active users of business Facebook pages. The thoughts are so far at the idea stage and haven’t been implemented yet:

“The idea is that if you are a logged-in user on our sites, what extra do you get? Maybe you could become an expert in Liverpool FC news?”28

Alison Gow says it’s easy to fall into the trap where you think of the audience as “one thing”, when it’s actually a whole range of different audiences and individual customers.

“Generation Z is just a title,” she says. “No teen would probably identify themselves as ‘Gen Z’. We should look more at the individual needs of people.”29

Here below are two examples of journalistic startups that are trying to do just that through gamification.

Opinary: Editorial and Sponsored Polls

Opinary is a Berlin-based startup, founded in 2016, that uses polls for users to share their opinion in online content. About 120 newspapers use Opinary, mostly in Germany but also in the UK and the US. In September 2021, they reached 98 million users and 10.2 million people voted in at least one of Opinary’s polls.30

Pia Frey, co-founder and co-CEO of the company, had worked as a journalist and found it frustrating that the user’s voice was so underrepresented in editorial teams:

27 “How can AI help build audience engagement and loyalty?”. JournalismAI Collab, LSE. lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/polis/JournalismAI/Collab-Team-5
28 Interview with Alison Gow, Audience and Content Director, North West, Reach Plc (UK), October 2021.
29 Ibid.
30 Interview with Pia Frey, co-founder and co-CEO of Opinary, October 2021.
I was thinking that there must be a better interaction and scalable dialogue between newsrooms and users.  

The idea is that embedded polls will drive better understanding of the readers, and improve loyalty and conversion. If you then want to sell offers, events or newspapers, it’s easier when you get someone engaged, Frey says.

The polls are placed in articles automatically and are created from a library of questions. Opinary’s editorial team scans the news at 5 every morning and writes a set of questions for the day. 70 percent of the polls from the editorial department and 30 percent are sponsored polls. It’s a tough balance to keep, Frey admits, since Opinary is an advertising-driven company:

There are other examples of companies that started off as publisher friendly, with great editorial products, but where the good content got cannibalized in the hunt for clickbait.

So does it increase engagement? She says around 10-15 per cent answer their polls, where comment sections usually have less than one percent of people interacting. When it comes to time spent on page, they claim a 20 per cent increase of time with Opinary. “Newsroom mentality is the biggest challenge when it comes to using gamification in journalism,” she says.

Frey says that digital micro publishers, with one or two people, are closer to their audiences and usually understand them better. Bigger companies tend to build their content around the audience, instead of with them:

“The idea and goal with gamification, in my view, is a closer engagement and dialogue with users. And the newsrooms have to allow for it.” To get there, strategy and business should be incorporated into the editorial work. A mindset of change needs to grow into the newsroom DNA, she says.

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
Crux: The Knowledge Tracker

The startup Crux, based in London and Tel Aviv, was launched in 2018 by co-founders Barak Ronen and Roie Amir. The company has developed a widget, the Knowledge Tracker, that uses an algorithm to calculate a user’s knowledge score on a particular news topic and nudges them into improving that score by reading more articles. The idea behind the Knowledge Tracker is easy, based on gamification and recommendation, even though the underlying technology is very complex, says Christoph Pleitgen, chief revenue officer at Crux.33

"The Knowledge Tracker gives a sense of accomplishment and feeling knowledgeable," he says. “Some call it ‘a Fitbit to the brain’; instead of counting calories, you can check that you improved your score."34

Sifted, a Financial Times-backed online newsletter that reports on European startups, is the only publication that is fully using the Knowledge Tracker widget on its articles so far. Engagement from users who saw the widget increased by 55 percent, based on how many articles they read.34

Pleitgen typically speaks to the tech or product organisation, but there is interest from editorial as well. Journalists often become strong supporters, even if they may initially be skeptical, he says. Many journalists get the idea intuitively and appreciate that Crux provides a way of resurfacing so-called evergreen content at the right time and in the right context.

“The industry doesn’t have a content problem – most people don’t go to bed and feel they couldn’t find enough stories to read”, says Christoph Pleitgen. The big question and challenge is to help connect readers with the right content, and at the right time, to create experiences around news:

“Gamification could help create that better and more fun experience, and one that will hopefully help to create long-term loyalty and commitment towards a news brand.”

In the future, he says it would be interesting to put together “a knowledge score” from multiple touchpoints and websites. Gamification could also be used to help manage communities:

“Our invention is the quantification of knowledge and we’re starting with news publishers, but we’ll see where we move on from here.”

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33 Interview with Christoph Pleitgen, Chief Revenue Officer at Crux, September 2021.
34 Scire, Sarah. “Should you turn your “read next” links into a game? There’s a widget for that”. NiemanLab. 25 August 2021, niemanlab.org/2021/08/should-you-turn-your-read-next-links-into-a-game-theres-a-widget-for-that/
Motives for Using Gamification in Other Industries

Game-inspired techniques have long been used to build brand loyalty, boost sales and increase profit. But gamification is not trivial to implement, says Harry Lee, CEO of app development agency CitrusBits. It requires a careful combination of multiple game-like mechanics, synergizing to provide a “sticky” game-like experience.

“The ultimate payoff for implementing gamification is user engagement that is an order of magnitude higher than baseline — and everything that follows when it comes to revenues and reduced churn,” he says.35

Here we will look at some cases that demonstrate different rationales for gamification, in businesses outside journalism.

To increase loyalty

*My Starbucks Rewards* is a classic loyalty program to increase customer engagement, where members receive incentives such as free food and drinks. Customers also receive points or “stars” when they buy at Starbucks cafés, which they then can use for specific items or prizes. For example, at 450 stars, you’ve reached gold level and get extra shots of espresso, dairy alternatives, selected syrups and whipped cream.36 The purpose is to give consumers a sense of achievement and strengthen the idea that if they are loyal to the company, they will be rewarded.

To create a habit

The incentive need not be as material as getting a free drink. Many health apps, like Strava, will instead offer you challenges, badges, milestones and show how long you kept a good action going.

The language app Duolingo functions in a similar way. The game lets you earn XP (experience points) and Lingots (in-game currency that can buy you new lessons or virtual outfits for Duo, the brand’s owl mascot).

“Motivating yourself to learn is very hard (...) so we realized early on that we needed to try to encourage people to form a daily learning habit. We found that the most effective techniques for this come from the gaming world,” says Duolingo’s associate product manager Zan Gilani.37

The key to forming a habit is motivation. Those who are attracted to maintaining a daily strike may be driven by an internal motivation, while those who share their results are driven by a more performance-oriented or social motivation.38

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36 “Starbucks Rewards – make every sip more rewarding”. starbucks.co.uk/rewards


38 Interview with Mikael Jensen, senior lecturer at University of Borås, September 2021.
To build social capital and cultural identity

Gamification and online media is part of a social and cultural space, where we form our identity. When sharing your Runkeeper result on social media, you also tell the world you’re a runner. A social game can interface with the real world, like Pokémon Go, which speaks to our desire for discovery, meeting other players, along with the fear of missing out on rare Pokémon.

Another example of social motivation is to involve customers in product development through gamification. Domino’s developed the game Pizza Hero that let users create their own pizza. Users could compete against each other and order pizzas that they have created on the app. The German chocolate brand Ritter Sport similarly let customers create their own chocolate bars online. The idea for the Unicorn Chocolate bar originated this way. It created a marketing sensation in Germany and was sold on Ebay for hundreds of euros.

To improve learning and productivity

“Forest” is a popular productivity app with over 40 million users. When you need to focus, you start a timer and plant a virtual tree on your phone. However, if you leave Forest prematurely to use a “blacklisted” social media, the tree will die. Each tree you build adds to a forest (to keep the user on a daily strike) and makes you earn in-game “coins” (that can actually be used to buy real world trees, to be planted by Trees for the Future).

Many companies use e-learning to educate new employees. Walmart’s Spark City is one example, a mobile management game that’s been downloaded half a million times. It’s complete with confetti rain and Fortnite-style happy dance moves every time the player avatar completes a task successfully.

Anders Gronstedt, president of the digital training company Gronstedt Group that developed Spark City, says that it works:

“In a world of short attention spans, game developers hold their audience captive for hours and hours.”

But he also believes that gamification such as quizzes, leaderboard and scorecards are relatively superficial ideas. He is betting on virtual reality and augmented reality tools as a way of deepening engagement in the future.

39 Domino’s: Pizza Hero, unit9.com/project/dominos-pizza-hero/
42 Walmart: Spark City mobile management game. Gronstedt Group, gronstedtgroup.com/walmart
43 Email interview with Anders Gronstedt, president of the Gronstedt Group, October 2021.
News games are a broad and varied genre, and although we’ve only looked at a few examples, I see significant possibilities for this type of storytelling. News games can present stories in a complex way that can raise questions or ideas as well as answering them. It provides an opportunity to depict multifaceted societal phenomena, such as work environments or dangers in wartime. When the user is active and has to make choices, their empathy and engagement is strengthened. This is also noticeable in smaller interactives, such as Steer through the Suez Canal, where many users stated that they suddenly understood how difficult it was to steer a container ship like Ever Given. The downside is the development cost, but it’s becoming cheaper and more open-source tools are available online. The Suez Canal project shows that interactives don’t always have to be expensive in time and money. For those who want to invest in a larger news game, the risks are bigger, but the possible rewards are also greater. We’re still talking about Snow Fall almost a decade later, thanks to its unique idea, and The Uber Game and Hacked have similarly shown a long-term impact. The profit may be difficult to measure in numbers and revenue, but as reinforcement of news brands they have worked well.

When it comes to gamified techniques, the benefits of loyalty and engagement seem clearer. Readers stay longer on the page and read more thanks to gamification, as we see with the journalistic examples of Opinary and Crux, but also with cases in other industries. The purpose is to give a better user experience, by engaging in a dialogue or giving better recommendations, while also serving a financial cause. On a final note, before we move on to ethical and practical considerations of gamification, the following story from Dmitry Shishkin might give some inspiration, and remind us about the importance of looking at user needs.
Shishkin is an independent digital publishing consultant, and former digital development editor for BBC World Service and chief content officer at Culture Trip. While working at BBC, he and his colleagues noticed that the traffic was plateauing after many years of growth. Maybe local news providers had caught up and offered more competition, but that couldn’t explain all of it. After some insightful field work, the penny dropped. They realized that users are using news in other ways than newsrooms think. They asked audiences why they consumed the news and from that survey made a now-famous list of six major “user needs”: update me; keep me on trend; inspire me; educate me; divert me; give me perspective. Shishkin’s job was to explain and enforce them around 41 different editorial teams.

“As you start adapting your model according to a user needs model, you will better understand your niche,” he says.

This may sound simple, but is often forgotten in the fast day-to-day reporting. Newsrooms often think that the user’s main need is “update me”. But if you are second and third to reach the audience, then try to find a different angle. Maybe “educate me”, “inspire me” or “amuse me” is the need they are looking for?

“Gamification should not be treated on its own, but as a wider audience content strategy,” Shishkin says. “The bigger purpose is to bring value and solve peoples’ problems.”

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47 Interview with Dmitry Shishkin, independent digital publishing consultant, October 2021.
While gamification opens journalism to a wide range of possibilities, there are many challenges of both an ethical and practical nature. Gamification should fall within the editorial codes or strategy of any news organisation. But it can involve new formats and new tools or technologies, so it is important for the news organisation to think collectively, across departments, about the possible conflicts with best practice and policy. One example of a code created to deal with new technologies is the AI Ethics Guidelines created by German regional public service broadcaster, Bavarian Radio.48

Gathering and Use of Data

If you are collaborating with partners or other companies, it’s important for the media outlet to keep the data. Data is needed for everything, for example, on-boarding or targeting and segmentation to sell different ads to different people.

"There are the ethical risks of gamification, when you’re asking people for data,” says Alison Gow, audience and content director at Reach Plc.49

There is usually a transaction between what the user gets in the data exchange. But are they being compliant and getting a fair value for it? She believes that so long as you have clear, intelligible disclaimers, it’s broadly okay.

"Most people realize that they’re giving away data,” she adds, “but maybe not how much data or how it’s used.”

Accessibility

When there was a public test for Hacked, many people over 30 years didn’t dare to touch the screen, recalls investigative reporter Juliana Ruhfus. When Pirate Fishing was user-tested, at least one person had no sense of scrolling, in which case they added a bar that says “scroll down”.

48 BR AI Ethical Guidelines accessible here: [br.de/extra/ai-automation-lab-english/ai-ethics100.html](br.de/extra/ai-automation-lab-english/ai-ethics100.html)
49 Interview with Alison Gow, Audience and Content Director, North West, Reach Plc (UK), October 2021.
“We can smile about it, but we can’t assume that everyone understands how new games or technology work,” she says. “That’s an important barrier to lower.”

Agnes Stenbom, Responsible Data & AI specialist at Schibsted, has a similar view. It may be attractive to play games for some, but for many it’s more important with a service that is easy to consume. She thinks that some have got it backwards in thinking that gamification means to lower the thresholds. It does require a certain commitment and if you’re not an experienced consumer, it might actually raise the threshold for the editorial duty of care.

“For me, personalization is broader than recommending articles and content. It can be how the news is presented for you, for example in bullet points, read aloud, or written in a more straightforward language. Artificial intelligence can be useful in doing all of those things,” she says.

Transparency

The most important feedback about The Uber Game came from a Reddit post, says Robin Kwong, who scripted the game for Financial Times. The post said: “This is crap, this is terrible. This game is anti-tech and anti-Uber propaganda, because you can’t win.” While someone else wrote: “This is Uber propaganda, it’s so easy to win.”

“The point is that different people will perceive the game differently. When people get to choose, they also become co-authors of the experience. To what extent is the game still journalistic? Is it still based on fact?”

The story is not of a single real life driver, but an aggregation of what challenges you could meet in a typical week, based on research by FT journalists. One third of all players won on the easy level, while 15 percent won on the hard level. One self-reflection Kwong made was that maybe it would have been better to be more transparent about each step of the game, even if it would slow down the experience.

Credibility

An entertaining format doesn’t have to equate to “fun” content. But there is a risk, for example, on the subject of immigration, that news games could be overly sentimentalizing or caricaturing a serious issue or experience, says media professor and author David O Dowling.

50 Interview with Juliana Ruhfus, investigative reporter, October 2021.
51 Interview with Agnes Stenbom, Responsible Data & AI specialist at Schibsted, September 2021.
52 Interview with Robin Kwong, New Formats Editor at The Wall Street Journal and former Head of Digital Delivery at Financial Times, October 2021.
"However, in the right hands, game-inspired aesthetics can open up the genre entirely and give us a new understanding of a journalistic event." 53

It’s of highest importance not to diminish the experience of interviewees and to keep journalistic integrity. What The Uber Game, Hacked and Steer through the Suez Canal have in common, is that their creators worked closely with experts on the issue. Not only to get the facts correct, but to find a tone and atmosphere for the game that would be coherent with the news story. Another credibility risk is if gamification takes you down “the clickbait road,” warns digital publishing consultant Dmitry Shishki. “To avoid this, editorial policy must be in right, left, and center,” he says. 54

**Mental Health**

A risk of gamification could be mental health and well-being. Putting people under pressure could have a negative impact on certain personalities, suggests Alison Gow at Reach Plc.

> Maybe for someone with autism or a mental illness, where competitiveness could really stress them. We see it with some kids who play immersive games, like Fortnite, might need rationing. We have to be mindful about that. 55

However, as we’ve seen with some examples, like the Forest app, gamification could also reduce stress and create a more thoughtful user experience.

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53 Interview with David O Dowling, professor in the University of Iowa’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication, October 2021.
54 Interview with Dmitry Shishkin, independent digital publishing consultant, October 2021.
55 Interview with Alison Gow, Audience and Content Director, North West, Reach Plc (UK), October 2021.
The Big Tech giants are often seen as competitors to media companies, "stealing" users’ attention and advertising money. But they also pave the way for new digital innovation and give us a hint about the future. At the time of writing, Facebook has recently announced its name change to Meta, and indicated that augmented and virtual reality will be a key part of its strategy in the coming years.

"The metaverse is the next frontier just like social networking was when we got started," CEO Mark Zuckerberg says, and adds that the metaverse will be the successor to the mobile internet. It’s difficult to imagine how social media and networked journalism will change in the future. In the same way that it was hard to conceive, say twenty years ago, of what it would mean one day almost everyone would have a mobile internet in their pocket. If Meta’s vision is correct, soon we’ll likely meet in virtual worlds and have our own avatars.

Should journalism move with this trend? Some argue that the news media needs to understand how structures for finding information are changing:

"Journalistic thinking and schools are behind," says David Dowling, himself a professor at the University of Iowa’s School of Journalism. "We need to think about storytelling across all media, and realize that news isn’t only about information. It’s about culture, context and identity."

Together with gamification, there are several other trends to keep an eye on. Podcasts are growing fast, and audio is an increasingly important part of new media. Language technology, including natural language processing (NLP) and natural-language generation (NLG), will be major value creators for AI and journalism in the future.

Does it mean we should jump on all the trends and do everything at once? Maybe not. The following words about artificial intelligence, by Schibsted’s Agnes Stenbom, could just as easily apply to gamification and digital innovation in general:

"My lesson is that a ‘mature’ AI organization doesn’t always do a lot of AI," she says, "but they are skilled at evaluating when advanced technologies are needed and when simpler solutions do the trick."

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57 Interview with David O Dowling, professor in the University of Iowa’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication, October 2021.

58 Interview with Agnes Stenbom, Responsible Data & AI specialist at Schibsted, September 2021.

59 Interview with Agnes Stenbom, Responsible Data & AI specialist at Schibsted, September 2021.
Recommendations

For journalists and media companies who want to get started with gamification:

**Know the purpose**

What is the question that gamification is the answer for? What would gamification add that you don't offer in other ways?

**Explore users’ needs**

Gamification should be part of a bigger user-content strategy. One size doesn't fit all. For example, don't assume that all young people will love a news game, or that those you want to click on a poll are the ones who actually answer.

**Be transparent**

Clarify what elements are based on journalistic research and facts. If a news game has different endings, explain what the different difficulty levels are based on. If polls are sponsored it must be clear to the user (compare with native articles). Say how data is collected and what it will be used for.

**Fun format isn’t equal to fun content**

It's possible to make games about difficult subjects. But it takes sensitivity and consent from the people portrayed in the story.

**It’s still journalism**

Gamification in the media require journalists in the process, to ensure that editorial ethics are maintained.
Start simple

Be clear about "the one thing" you want users to take from the experience. That will anchor all the other choices you make in the process. There are many free tools to use, and smaller projects can be tried out on social media.

Collaboration is key

While gamification tools are getting more accessible and democratized, it still costs time and money to develop more serious projects. Cooperate between disciplines or departments, both internally and externally, to find the best ways to solve a problem or tell a story.

Gamification becomes part of the news brand

Whether it's a news game or gamified elements on your site, it will reflect on you as a company – from format and content, down to the colors you use and the shape of buttons.

Testing, testing, testing

User-testing will let you know if you reach the right target group, if the games are too difficult, questions are unclear, and so on. But also, be prepared to launch, evaluate, and develop the product further.

Have fun and experiment

Set aside people who can test new ideas and are allowed to fail. Gamification in online journalism has only been around for a decade and is developing at a fast pace. Artificial intelligence and virtual reality will radically change the game plan for the years to come.

Further reading:

How Can AI Build Audience Engagement and Loyalty? Report including section on gamification from the Polis LSE Journalism AI Collab 2020

lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/polis/JournalismAI/Collab-Team-5
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