

Newsgames

Journalism at Play

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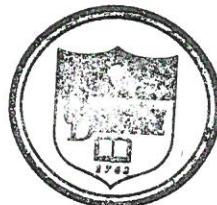
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1 Newsgames

Piracy off the coast of the east African nation of Somalia has run rampant since the start of a civil war in the early 1990s, but attacks have become more frequent and more daring in recent years. By the spring of 2008, pirates were venturing well away from the Somali coast in order to reach the higher-value vessels that enter and exit the Gulf of Aden, gateway to the Red Sea and eventually the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.

With numerous international governments concerned about the safety and viability of their shipping routes, the United Nations Security Council established Resolution 1838 in October 2008, calling on member nations to “deploy naval vessels and military aircraft” in support of maritime security in the region.¹ Regular conflict spurred an increase in worldwide coverage of Somali pirating. Most news outlets filed stories under international politics, as reporters cut the hull of a nation in anarchy through the waves of global commerce, defense, and other bastions of centralized authority.² Others offered human interest stories about the “fear and terror” that accompanied lengthy hostage situations on overtaken vessels.³

But *Wired* magazine’s writers sailed a different tack in their July 2009 feature on Somali pirates, choosing to focus on economics over politics or personality.⁴ In “Cutthroat Capitalism: An Economic Analysis of the Somali Pirate Business Model,” Scott Carney observes that Somali pirating expeditions had become not only more frequent, but also more profitable. Payouts from ransom and plunder surged to levels one hundred times greater in 2009 than they were just four years earlier.⁵ It stands to reason, argues Carney, that this escalation had arisen not from the depths of new wickedness and anarchy, but from the changing economic dynamics of piracy itself.

Unlike its more mainstream counterparts in the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*, *Wired*’s coverage looks more like a spreadsheet than an investigative report. It features eight full-color pages of text, infographics, and

diagrams, all meticulously illustrated and annotated by Siggi Eggertsson and Michael Doret. The graphics are playful, their rounded-edged pixel art abstracting boats, people, and maps into actors in an economic system (figure 1.1). The coverage itself takes a procedural rather than a narrative approach: it is divided into sections that describe the different steps of an attack, each section offering a textual description, an infographic, and a ledger or algorithm describing the economic dynamics of the topic.

The article's infographics run the gamut from mundane to remarkable, from bar graphs and pie charts to fever charts and a full-page map. The piece also deploys unusually complex typography to highlight different economic forces. Taken together, the spreads illustrate how a piratical Chief Financial Officer might witness a highjack-and-ransom attack from the vantage point of a ledger rather than a skiff. Each step calculates and summarizes its value proposition, and in so doing the feature explains the risk-reward system of ransom piracy by showing how the Somali pirates act according to a highly logical, if disruptive, self-interest.

Much about "Cutthroat Capitalism" reminds the reader of a videogame. Its visual design riffs off the blocky art of early coin-op and home console games, a method commonly used on screen and in print to apply video-game aesthetics to serious topics. But something else makes this decidedly static print feature resemble a game more than a column. Good games depict system dynamics rather than narrating specific accounts. Instead of telling a *story* about a particular pirate crew or hijacked freighter, the article characterizes the economic *system* of Somali piracy in general.

Of course, "Cutthroat Capitalism" isn't a game. It's a set of descriptions, formulas, and tabular data that *describes* the behavior of a system rather than *simulating* the system directly. A reader of *Wired* could get out a pencil and paper to determine a strategy for a hypothetical pirate raid, but it would be much easier to let a computer do the work.

Wired realized as much, so they paired "Cutthroat Capitalism," the article, with a Web-based game of the same name, one that operates under the same mathematical logic the article describes. The game puts the reader at the helm: "You are a pirate commander staked with \$50,000 from local tribal leaders and other investors. Your job is to guide your pirate crew through raids in and around the Gulf of Aden, attack and capture a ship, and successfully negotiate a ransom."⁶ The result effectively simulates capture and negotiation, synthesizing the principles of the print spread into an experience rather than a description.

The player begins on a map of coastal Somalia. The ship—represented by a skull token—starts in the city of Eyl, a pirate haven north of the capital



Figure 1.1

The similarities between "Cutthroat Capitalism" the magazine spread and *Cutthroat Capitalism* the game go beyond their visual design. Each describes the economic system of piracy off the coast of Somalia: one with words, the other through play.

of Mogadishu. When the player clicks on a part of the map, the pirate ship moves. Once in the Gulf of Aden, players click on passing ships—depicted as colored dots representing different classes—moving the pirate vessel toward a target. If the player's skull token intersects with one of these dots—be it container ship, cargo ship, cruise ship, tugboat, or one of five other classes—the game presents a chance to capture the ship and proceed with ransom negotiations. If the player fails to intercept, the crew is forced to sail back up the coast to try again.

The negotiation process consists of turns in which the player can choose a behavior to exhibit toward the hostages aboard the ship (feed, threaten, beat, or kill), a stance to take with the negotiating party (be cordial, erratic, aggressive, or walk out), and a ransom demand of up to \$30 million. The game rules remind the player that the highest ransom ever paid was only \$3 million.⁷ A complex calculus of these choices determines the health of the hostages, the mood of the negotiators, and the likelihood of a counteroffer.

Hijacking a ship turns out to be a process just as methodical as buying a car. Negotiation proves effective only when the player quickly divines the value of the ship and its hostages, and then works carefully and methodically toward that monetary goal. If the player successfully negotiates a ransom, the reward (covered by the vessel's insurer) is split between the local government, the tribal leaders and investors who staked the journey, and the crew. But if the pirate crew abandons ship or the player's forces are overrun, the negotiation ends in failure.

A smart player will rarely fail—and that is the strongest rhetorical point presented in the negotiation process. If a ship can be captured, its hostages and cargo are always worth *something*. Failure arises mostly from poor planning or greed. The game helps players recognize this fact, encouraging them to optimize for many small bounties of one or two million dollars instead of fewer, larger ones—a realization that also frames the increasing number of attacks as matters of economics rather than wickedness. A \$5 million settlement from a particularly lucky negotiation provides a smug sense of satisfaction, but it's rarely worth the risk of getting caught or losing bounties in order to spend the time needed to negotiate a ransom of that size.

Admittedly, the game does not simulate all of the elements of Somali pirating discussed in the article. The risk of capture after a ransom has been paid doesn't make it into the game, nor do the costs of maintaining a crew or mounting an unsuccessful attack (a real mission costs \$30,000 per crew member, but normally only a quarter of missions are successful).⁸ Some of

the subtleties that make the system rich (and make the article fascinating) are lost in the game—a situation probably attributable to the designers' desire to make the game manageable, learnable, and playable in short sessions. Nevertheless, the article provides only a disconnected, mathematical account of piracy, while the game offers a synthetic experience of the practice, one that unifies the disconnected algorithms of the print piece into a holistic account.

Cutthroat Capitalism (the game) explains how a pirate crew's modest, persistent efforts will produce significant results within the economic and social system of sea commerce that it disrupts. The print article addresses the issue from the perspective of the shipping industry. Somali piracy is just a modest cost of doing business for global freight. The time and money saved by going through the Suez Canal rather than around the Cape of Good Hope, combined with the relatively low cost of insurance compared to that of private security, makes good business sense for shippers. The game makes the case from the other side—that of the pirates. But it does something more, too: the game forces players to understand piracy by *experiencing* it in abstraction. The player quickly learns that the pirate's best strategy is to attempt a series of small ransoms, making the total cost to each ship low. Only 0.2 percent of vessels passing through the Gulf of Aden are successfully boarded by pirates, a fact that feels much more startling for the player of *Cutthroat Capitalism* than it does for the reader of its companion article.⁹

Cutthroat Capitalism shows that videogames can do good journalism, both as an independent medium for news and as a supplement to traditional forms of coverage. But what methods exist for creating and using such game in journalism? Are there different genres, forms, or styles? What are the editorial and publishing considerations for a news organization interested in pursuing such games? And why would such organizations want to take up such a practice in the first place?

Given the financial state of journalism today, everyone knows that a change is coming. Newspaper advertising revenue was down nearly 30 percent in 2009.¹⁰ Some papers, especially smaller ones, have had to cut staff or shut down completely. Community bloggers and big city newspaper publishers may not agree on the best format for news, but they do agree that digital media will play an important role in its future. Yet, most of the discourse about the way news and computers go together has focused on translations of existing approaches to journalism for the Web.

For that matter, despite the differences in popularity and accessibility afforded by Web publication, much journalism practice remains the same online. Online news sites large and small still publish written stories similar to those inked onto newsprint. They upload video segments like those broadcast for television. They stream monologues and interviews like those sent over the radio airwaves. The tools that make the creation and dissemination of news possible have become more simple and widespread, but the process remains almost identical: stories still have to be written and edited, films shot and cut, audio recorded and uplinked.

But as *Cutthroat Capitalism* suggests, there is something different about videogames. Unlike stories written for newsprint or programs edited for television, videogames are computer software rather than a digitized form of earlier media. Games display text, images, sounds, and video, but they also do much more: games simulate how things work by constructing models that people can interact with, a capacity Bogost has given the name *procedural rhetoric*.¹¹ This is a type of experience irreducible to any other, earlier medium.

For this reason it is necessary to understand the uses of games in the news, both new and old, on different terms. This book offers an introduction to *newsgames*, a term that names a broad body of work produced at the intersection of videogames and journalism. In the chapters that follow, we explore the ways games have been used in the news from past to present, covering the different applications, methods, and styles of newsgames. We also make projections and suggestions for how newsgames might be applied to journalistic practice now and in the future. Each chapter takes up one key genre of newsgames. Some will feel like adaptations of traditional news content, while others take the first steps into unfamiliar terrain.

In 2003, Uruguayan game studio Powerful Robot released a game called *September 12th*, about the war on terror.¹² Its lead designer Gonzalo Frasca envisioned short, quickly produced, and widely distributed newsgames about *current events*, the subject of chapter 2. *Editorial* games like *September 12th* offer the videogame equivalent of columns and editorial cartoons, conveying an opinion with the goal of persuading players to agree with embedded bias—or at least to consider an issue in a different light. Other forms have emerged as well, from *tabloid games* that offer a cruder form of opinion to *reportage* games that strive to reproduce the unvarnished goals and style of daily news coverage. This chapter also covers the many issues that arise when creating current event games, including timeliness, accessibility, and editorial line. Creators of these games typically strive to release

such a game while the story it covers is still relevant, a challenge that increases with the depth of the simulation and the complexity of the event.

Chapter 3 explores *infographic newsgames*. Visual matter has long done journalistic work by visually representing data and thus synthesizing information. At the start of the twentieth century, larger newspapers began integrating visual representations of data into papers to help the reader draw connections between complex networks of information and events. The resulting “information graphics” come in many formats, from the traditional forms of pie chart, line graph, data map, and diagram to more experimental forms produced for digital consumption. The adaptation of infographics into computational forms has broadened their scope in addition to changing their methods of authorship. As digital infographics mature and become more interactive, they are becoming more like games. Players can explore information to find surprising new revelations, engage with processes that depict how information arises or interacts, reconfigure information to replay possible scenarios, or experiment with information for the simple enjoyment of play itself. Some infographics might take the form of proper games, while others are merely gamelike, adopting some of the conventions and sensations of games.

Current event games cover isolated stories in a short and accessible way, but longer, more detailed treatments of the news are also possible. In chapter 4 we present *documentary newsgames*, titles that engage broader historical and current events in a manner similar to documentary photography, cinema, and investigative reporting. Usually larger in scale and scope, these games offer experiences of newsworthy events, something impossible to capture in print or broadcast news. In the case of past events, they recreate times, spaces, and systems that one can otherwise only understand from archival film footage or imagination. We discuss different types of documentary games, including those that recreate the setting and progression of particular events and those that attempt to create procedural (rule-based) accounts of the logics of social and political situations.

Serious news coverage notwithstanding, it’s worth remembering that games have been a part of the news for almost a century, since the first “word-cross” puzzles appeared in the *New York Sunday World* in 1913.¹³ By the 1920s, the crossword was a sensation, becoming so popular that it even incited a moral panic. When the *New York Times* finally revised the form and made it more “literate” at the end of World War II, the public was sold. Since then, many newspaper readers look forward to the puzzles as a joyous and intellectually engaging part of the day. Puzzles have not always carried news content, but experiments such as editorial crosswords

and news quizzes have tried to do so. The past, present, and future uses of such *puzzle newsgames* are covered in chapter 5, from digital adaptations of traditional news puzzles and quizzes to the popular online casual games that represent both a threat to and an opportunity for news publishers.

Journalism comprises a set of values and skills that must be learned somehow—it is a literacy, a set of rules for reading, writing, and critiquing a particular domain of knowledge.¹⁴ The first steps of journalism practice are traditionally taken in classrooms or at school newspapers, but certain qualities of videogames make them ideal supplementary media for a journalistic education. In chapter 6, we discuss *literacy newsgames*, those that offer direct or indirect education in how to become a good journalist, or for understanding why journalism is important to citizens and their communities.

Speaking of communities, at first blush videogames might seem to oppose cooperative action. When we think of games, from tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons* to board games like chess and *Risk* to videogames like *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Sims*, we normally think of them as private affairs. We play games indoors, at tables or televisions or computers. Even if we play with others, it is only in small groups. And while recent innovations in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) can support many hundreds or thousands of simultaneous players at a time, those players are usually widely distributed geographically. In chapter 7, we explore new genres of *community newsgames* that create and nurture local populations—often by situating games wholly or partly in the real world rather than in front of the screen.

As the technology with which news is created and disseminated changes, the very form of journalism alters itself. While the genres of newsgame just mentioned represent immediate opportunities for news organizations, many more might be developed in the future, either in response to technological shifts or as entirely new inventions. In chapter 8, we explore *newsgame platforms*, systems for the creation of new forms of game-based journalism that might supplement or replace current coverage in the future. In its most basic form, a platform is something that makes it easier to build other things.¹⁵ The newspaper itself is a platform that supports research, writing, printing, distribution, and feedback from the public. The format of the evening news is a platform that describes how to order stories in a useful or compelling way, how to integrate advertising, and how to consistently produce a televised show. Starting from familiar yet alternative platforms for news like fantasy sports, we speculate on the novel newsgaming platforms (and new applications of existing computational

platforms) that might support journalism in the future. They range from the familiar to the bizarre—what if a news organization released a documentary game “yearbook” about the changes in a local community? What if Yoshi the dinosaur from *Super Mario World* needed health care, and he had to buy insurance at the going rates? What if the dynamics of New York City racketeering laws could be operationalized in *Grand Theft Auto*? These possibilities suggest how journalists might think about what they do in new ways, instead of simply translating old media for digital distribution. It is on this note that we conclude the book, with a call to action for journalists and news organizations in chapter 9.

Many of the types of newsgames this book covers are already established forms. *Cutthroat Capitalism* matches five of the seven genres of promising newsgames just mentioned: infographics, editorial, documentary, puzzles, and platforms. Though it might not be the best possible example of any of these individually, the amalgam shows how *Wired* attempted to integrate a game into actual journalistic coverage of a topic, not just to supplement a print edition with an online throwaway.¹⁶

The game’s connection to infographics is obvious. The article makes extensive use of information displays, and the game’s map draws on the tradition of abstracted information set geographically. While the link to infographics is primarily aesthetic, the fundamental purpose of both article and game satisfies noted information designer Edward Tufte’s goals for information visualization: inform the reader, reveal insights into information that would otherwise be obscured, and synthesize complicated information into a legible format.¹⁷ The infographic transforms raw data into visuals, while the game transforms that data into mechanics.

Wired’s approach takes up documentarian goals as well. Stories about piracy off the coast of Somalia mostly enjoy coverage in the United States when events directly affect its citizenry and commerce. The seizure and subsequent standoff on the *Maersk Alabama* in April 2009 was notable for its violent resolution—Navy SEAL snipers shot and killed three pirates. Coverage of this incident certainly brought the issue of piracy directly to the American public’s attention. But rather than pursue the issue further, the three pirate deaths and one capture provided journalistic closure: the evildoers “got what was coming to them.” *Cutthroat Capitalism* directly challenges this tale, examining the structures of global trade that embed pirate attacks as a part of doing business.

The piracy game serves as both investigation and exposé. Its documentarian stance may not appear to take on the traditional firsthand infiltration of a global situation in progress, but it very much does: by uncovering

the dynamics and injustices of an economic system. At a rudimentary level, it even provides a “day in the life” account by putting the player in the shoes of one of its actors. By taking the role of a single pirate embedded in a complex network, the player comes to understand the logic by which all other pirates in that same system operate.

Cutthroat Capitalism might not seem much like a puzzle, because newspaper puzzles take very specific forms. But if puzzles refer to simple, abstract logic games pursued for mental pleasure, then aspects of the game start to fit the bill. The negotiation phase is reminiscent of a game of probabilities like rock-paper-scissors. The player plays three cards, the computer plays three, and the outcome alters the dynamics of the negotiation. Something more complex is at work here, too: the system boasts a preexisting state, as if the player is playing his or her cards against a given (but hidden) hand. The player must then reason about the state of the freight owners, and how they might respond. This casual noodling bears a resemblance to the chess or bridge problems that often appear alongside the crossword or cryptquip. Negotiation in *Cutthroat Capitalism* satisfies our desires to outwit a system by finding the optimal moves.

The relevance and interest of piracy notwithstanding, the game’s journalistic significance comes from more than its content. By publishing a print story tied directly to a game, in which each is based on the same factors, *Wired* has shown how a periodical can integrate games into its workflow. This workflow can become a model that might enable the regular production of these kinds of artifacts through organizational, rather than technical advances. The print and digital versions tell the story in two different but complimentary ways, allowing the writers, artists, and designers to share more than just a topic. Given journalism’s troubled present and uncertain future, proving the feasibility of producing new and different media artifacts is perhaps even more important a task than creating new media artifacts themselves.

All of the topics discussed in this book make a common assumption: that journalism can and will embrace new modes of *thinking* about news in addition to new modes of production. Rather than just tack-on a games-desk or hire an occasional developer on contract, we contend that news-games will offer valuable contributions only when they are embraced as a viable method of practicing journalism—albeit a different kind of journalism than newspapers, television, and Web pages offer. Newsgames are not a charmed salve that will cure the ills of news organizations overnight. But they do represent a real and viable opportunity to help citizens form beliefs and make decisions.

2 Current Events

From somewhere in the sky, you peer down onto a bustling town in the Middle East. Among the women and children going about their daily routine in the marketplace, you spot the caricature of a familiar figure: white keffiyeh bound tightly to his forehead, shrouded in a black robe, AK-47 in hand. You control a reticle with your mouse, the kind of crosshair seen when playing a first-person shooter. Your targeting circle is relatively large, much bigger than the buildings and people below, who move rapidly as they go about their business. Carefully isolating your target, you wait for the terrorist to walk into an uninhabited sector of the city and you click, expecting instant gratification and success. Instead, there is a delay. The terrorist begins moving away. A woman, two children, and a dog walk into the targeted area.

Finally, a missile strikes the marketplace. It does not discriminate, shattering bodies and buildings alike. Bloodied human limbs litter the streets. Smoke settles from the rubble. When civilians pass by the dead, they drop to their knees, crying. Eventually, mourning turns to anger, and a citizen morphs into a figure with black robe, keffiyeh, and automatic rifle—a new terrorist is born (figure 2.1).

The game is called *September 12th*, and the only way to win it is not to play in the first place. For every terrorist the player kills, many more rise to fill his place, indignant at the thoughtless slaughter of innocent passersby. It’s an argument against “tactical” missile strikes, conveyed in game form. And its opinion is clear: terrorism cannot be attacked surgically, and violence begets more violence. The elegance, directness, and novelty of *September 12th* were exceeded only by its timeliness. Released in the autumn of 2003, six months after the start of the Iraq War, the game enjoyed considerable coverage in the mainstream news.¹ *September 12th* also enjoyed considerable attention in scholarly and exhibition contexts. Bogost offers it as an example of a procedural *rhetoric of failure*, a design that comments



Figure 2.1

Every missile strike in *September 12th* triggers the conversion of new terrorists, illustrating the cycle of retribution as innocent civilians are killed in “surgical” attacks.

upon a political situation by denying players a victory condition.² Miguel Sicart argues that the game has the ability to turn its player into a moral being, by stimulating ethical reasoning rather than telling the players its message outright.³ Six years after its creation, lead designer Gonzalo Frasca received a lifetime achievement award at the Games for Change festival’s Knight News Game Awards.⁴

Political games have been around since the early days of computer gaming. Titles like *Balance of Power*, a cold war diplomacy game, and *Hidden Agenda*, a postrevolutionary simulation set in Central America, enjoyed commercial success in the 1980s. Indeed, politically themed board games have been common for decades, among them 1959’s *Diplomacy*, a pre-World War I strategy board game that John F. Kennedy and Henry Kissinger both called their favorite.⁵

But such games had disappeared from the public imagination by the early 1990s. *Balance of Power* and *Diplomacy* are games for adults, about adult topics, an audience the commercial videogame industry had

abandoned in favor of titles for children and adolescents. Tepid, forgettable “edutainment” titles had further marred the public perception of games beyond entertainment.

It took the open publishing environment of the World Wide Web and the turbulent politics of the post-September 11 world to make such games viable again. Al Qaeda’s attack on American soil and the preemptive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed became the most visible public policy issue in the United States and abroad, leading to an explosion of opinions online. This was the fertile soil into which Gonzalo Frasca planted *September 12th*, and the genre he named to house it.

Frasca called them *newsgames*, a genre he described as “simulation meets political cartoons.”⁶ We have adopted Frasca’s term, but we also expand its scope: for us, “newsgame” suggests *any* intersection of journalism and gaming. Frasca’s games do engage with the news, of course, in the same way as do reporting, editorial, and cartooning. This specialization in mind, we suggest the name *current event games* to describe titles like *September 12th*. Current event games are short, bite-sized works, usually embedded in Web sites, used to convey small bits of news information or opinion. They are the newsgame equivalent of an article or column.

Types of Current Event Games

Frasca’s first experiment with this challenge came before *September 12th*, although it was inspired by the same events. Frasca had been on a plane during the attacks. Just before boarding again to return home, he had heard a news report about the war in Afghanistan, in which American supply drops had crushed people and structures as they fell from the sky.⁷ Outraged at this mix of violence and humanitarianism, but charmed by the black comedy of the situation, Frasca created *Kabul Kaboom*. It is a simple game that asks the player to catch falling hamburgers while avoiding bombs. The name *Kaboom* comes from the game’s inspiration, an Atari 2600 title from 1982 called *Kaboom!*, in which the player moves water buckets across the bottom of the screen to catch bombs thrown by a prisoner at the top. *Kabul Kaboom* changes the water buckets to an iconic figure from Picasso’s *Guernica* and adds hamburgers in addition to bombs. Picasso painted his masterwork in response to the bombing of the city of Guernica by German and Italian warplanes during the Spanish Civil War. Frasca’s piece thus makes explicit historical connections—U.S. airstrikes and funding of the Northern Alliance in order to topple the Taliban are analogous to the involvement of foreign air forces in the Spanish Civil War.

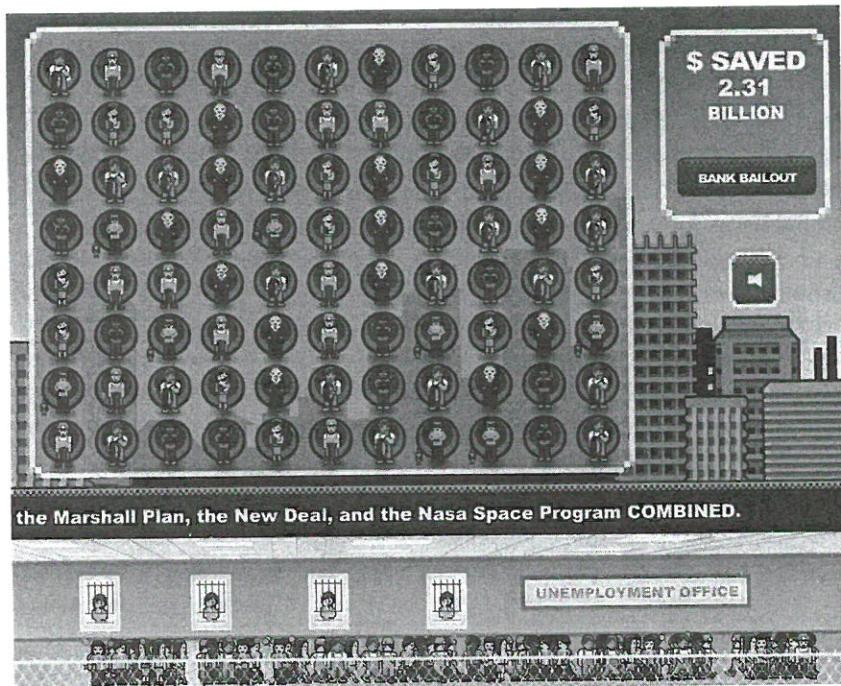


Figure 2.2

Tiltfactor's *Layoff!* illustrates how hundreds of workers with individualized stories have been reduced to simple color-coded types for easy elimination through redundancy. Note the number of "banker" tiles that have begun to dominate the grid.

Like *Kabul Kaboom*, many current event games borrow from simple arcade, home console, and casual games. *Layoff!*, created by Mary Flanagan's Tiltfactor Lab at Dartmouth College, offers another example. It comments upon the economic effects of the 2008–2009 recession on the workforce. Borrowing the mechanics of the popular match-three game *Bejeweled*, *Layoff!* editorializes about the mindset of the corporate downsizing specialist (figure 2.2). Players match "redundant" worker units (those with similar job descriptions) to clear them from the board into the unemployment line. The game generates a name and a backstory for each worker matched and fired, personalizing the experience. *Layoff!* adds another constraint atop the *Bejeweled* ruleset: the banker, who cannot be moved or matched. The combination of personalized workers and impersonal, immovable bankers forms the game's commentary: honest workers lose their jobs in order to preserve the livelihood of the same fraudulent economists who caused the downturn in the first place.

September 12th, *Kabul Kaboom*, and *Layoff!* are modest games. It takes no longer to play them than it does to read a news article or to peruse a comic. But current event games can also take more complex forms, the equivalent of features instead of columns.

Killer Flu offers such an example. The game was commissioned by the UK Clinical Virology Network (the British equivalent of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) to educate the public about pandemic influenza. Originally conceived to explore both seasonal and avian flu, the game was released in time for the H1N1 "swine flu" panic of 2009. *Killer Flu* offers a serious, factual treatment of flu in a surprising way: rather than managing the response of health professionals or government officials, the player controls the spread of the virus itself, by enhancing its capabilities and guiding it between populations. Critiquing the manufactured pandemic flu panic that swept the world, *Killer Flu* shows players just how difficult it is for pandemic flu to mutate and propagate. The game also explains how seasonal flu spreads, and why it affects so many more people than animal flus. With generated geography and hundreds of simulated characters, *Killer Flu* is more technically complex than *Layoff!* and *September 12th*. Yet, it can still be played in a Web browser, just like the latter two games.

Current event games have low system requirements and wide distribution at online game portals in addition to the Web sites of their sponsoring organizations. They are often created in Adobe Flash, a multimedia technology with nearly universal access that can be embedded directly in Web pages.⁸ Producing a current event game does not pose technical challenges, but logistical ones. Their creators must balance timeliness with quality, deciding whether games should cover an isolated political issue or an ongoing social issue. Because they are short and compact, current event games have to work hard to ensure their players immediately understand the context and constraints of the topic and the game's approach to it. Some current event games explicitly state the facts via text or video, whereas others follow Frasca's lead and attempt to sway opinion through play alone.

We distinguish between three subtypes of current event games: *editorial games*, *tabloid games*, and *reportage games*.

Editorial games are current event games with an argument, or those that attempt to persuade their players in some way. *September 12th* and *Layoff!* offer examples, as do titles from independent developers Persuasive Games and La Molleindustria. Editorial game makers feel strongly about the issues they cover and use their games to express opinions. Some editorial games

offer simple, one-note commentary (*Kabul Kaboom*) akin to an editorial cartoon, whereas others make a more complex statement, like an op-ed column (*McDonald's Videogame*, discussed below). These games can take anywhere from one day to a few months to create.

Tabloid games are playable versions of soft news—particularly celebrity, sports, or political gossip. Within hours of Zinedine Zidane's disgraceful head butt at the end of the 2006 World Cup final, an anonymous Italian football fan created *Hothead Zidane*. Players control the titular antihero, who can be moved around a part of the pitch as clones of his Italian adversary Marco Materazzi come at him waves. After a few successful head butts, a red card is thrown and the game is over. The result offers neither entertainment nor commentary (the game lacks even a score), but it does capitalize on public interest, earning traffic as a result. Within a week of its creation, online game portal AddictingGames.com revamped the game with a score system and multiple levels of hit detection, better graphical fidelity, and enhanced sound effects. They also released the source code so other designers could make their own versions.⁹ Tabloid games, because they are so easy to make, are often improved and reinterpreted by other amateur game designers.¹⁰

Reportage games fall somewhere between editorial and tabloid games. They strive to emulate factual reporting, producing the videogame version of a written article or televised segment. Reportage games are carefully researched, with an eye toward factual description. For this reason, they are far less common than editorial and tabloid games. Unlike editorial games, they seek not to persuade players, but to educate them. And unlike documentary games (discussed in chapter 4), they are of smaller scale, and released while an issue is still current.

Although they were published in the paper's op-ed section, two games created by Persuasive Games for the *New York Times* offer good examples of reportage. The first, *Food Import Folly*, deals with insufficient numbers of FDA inspection personnel and their inadvertent role in food contamination outbreaks. The game challenges players to inspect agricultural imports at ports nationwide. Each level corresponds with a year in the decade 1997–2007, during which food imports increased from two million to nine million shipments, while FDA personnel and resources remained roughly constant.¹¹ By experiencing the increasing mismatch between imported goods and inspection resources, the player develops an abstract sense of the problem, independent of any opinion about its cause or solution.

Another game, *Points of Entry*, clarifies the behavior of the merit-based green card award system proposed in the 2007 McCain–Kennedy immigration bill. The bill proposed a federal standard for worker visa awards, based not on individual achievement, but on a single, standardized system for all immigrants. Some criticized the bill for rejecting family ties, others for putting business interests in the hands of the government. The bill never passed, but during debate about it, details were infrequently covered in the press beyond isolated examples.¹² The game goes further, asking players to configure hypothetical immigrants within a time limit such that they just outqualify a competing candidate (figure 2.3). By playing through many scenarios, citizens develop a more sophisticated understanding of the legislation the bill proposes, without the baggage of a particular opinion on the matter.

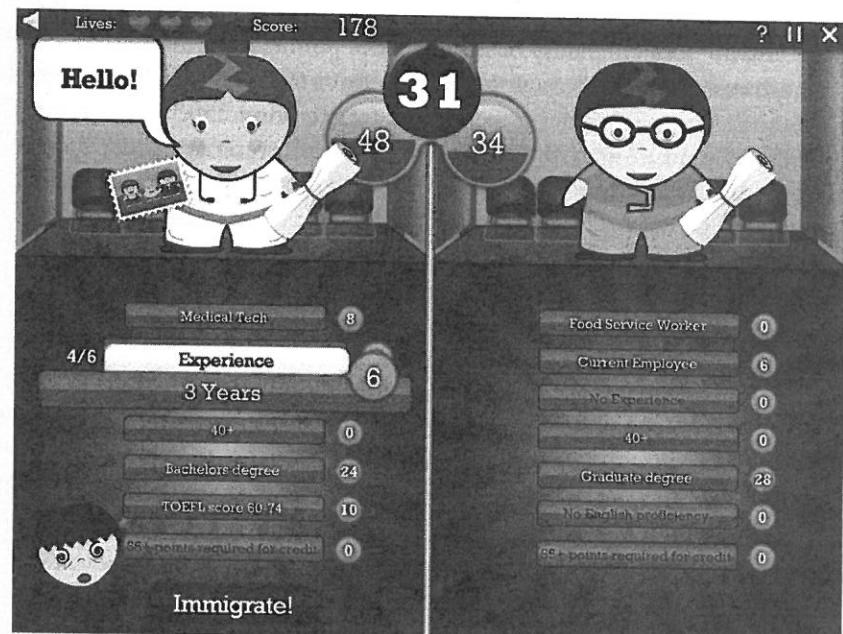


Figure 2.3

This match-up from *Points of Entry* visualizes the reductive force of the proposed immigration scoring system. Clothing and accessories change as the player alters values in order to attain a desired score, here matching a food service worker with a graduate degree against the “more desirable” medical technician with a bachelor’s degree.

Easy to Pick Up and Easy to Put Down

Before citizens tuned in or logged on for the news, they picked up a paper, reading it at the breakfast table, in the recliner, or on the commuter rail. Newsstands sprung up on street corners throughout the cities of the world for a reason: news must be widely available and highly visible in order to draw the attention of busy pedestrians. All newsgames face the challenge of distribution in a noisy market, but only current event games demand *timely* distribution to ensure their relevance.

Although Frasca created his own Web site to host *September 12th*, he relied on links from news Web sites and blogs to generate traffic. Still, the game's primary purpose was to editorialize, not to generate revenue. By contrast, tabloid games often take advantage of a popular controversy to turn traffic into ad impressions. During the 2004 U.S. elections, innumerable political "whack-a-mole" clones appeared, allowing players to bonk their favorite foreign enemy or least favorite politician.¹³ AddictingGames.com—owned by media conglomerate Viacom—often seeks out games like *Hothead Zidane*, paying developers small fees (around \$500) for rights to publish the games with pre-roll video ads. More recently, independent creators of current event games have been able to take advantage of user-contributed game portals like Kongregate.com, where they can earn a share of revenue from advertising.

Not only are current event games easy to create and distribute, they are also easy to play. And for good reason: they need to appeal both to people who regularly play games for entertainment and to people who don't. One strategy for drawing in potential players is to borrow tried-and-true game mechanics: match puzzle pieces, avoid falling objects, run and jump, point, shoot, and click. If players already know how to play a game, they might better absorb the news it contains.

This in mind, some current event games deliberately copy commercial games. Released just before Thanksgiving 2008, *Cooking Mama: Mama Kills Animals* is an "unauthorized PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] edition" of the popular Majesco cooking simulation series. The game urges Majesco to create a vegetarian version of *Cooking Mama*, while educating players about the consequences of their upcoming Thanksgiving feasts. Through a series of sequences that ape the Nintendo Wii platform's motion control system, players pluck and gorge a turkey while mixing spare parts into stuffing and gravy. The process is presented as disgustingly as possible: blood, feathers, and offal drip out of everything (even the chicken eggs). The game's cartoon gruesomeness is juxtaposed with real

footage of the American turkey industry, including depictions of animal drugging and live slaughter.

After preparing the bird, mixing the stuffing, and rendering spare parts into gravy, the player unlocks a "bonus round" wherein Mama decides to go vegetarian by preparing a meal of Tofurkey and steamed vegetables in one-third of the time it took to cook the traditional meal. It argues both for the humanity and the relative ease of the vegetarian lifestyle. Accompanying links distribute vegetarian recipes and a pledge to "go veg." PETA, never an organization to be upstaged in public relations, rewards players who complete the experience with wallpapers, banner ads, and the ability to download the game or host it on their own Web pages.

Mama Kills Animals is both editorial game and reportage game. On the one hand, it offers openly biased commentary against meat eating, simulating processes that don't usually concern the Thanksgiving chef, such as the plucking and beheading of the bird. On the other hand, the game uses the platform of commentary to showcase extensive research in an accessible manner. It also manages to be fun in a way that many games of this genre aren't, copying the mechanics of a popular children's game exactly while making the player conscious of and complicit in a grotesque act that we all take for granted.

PETA's game is timely because it takes advantage of a cyclical event, the Thanksgiving holiday. Following this lesson, current event game publishers can plan for the creation of games in the same way they might plan for traditional stories. New York City's *Gotham Gazette*, an online newspaper published by the Citizens Union Foundation, was one of the earliest news sources to start producing editorial games. In 2004, they created a suite of games on the theme of that year's upcoming election, called *Voting Arcade*. The hook: New York City's voting booths had been around since before Atari released *Pong* in 1972. As shown in figure 2.4, these games reskin arcade classics (*Pong*, *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, and *Dig Dug*), and they mix trivia content with procedural rhetoric to great effect.

Dig Dug Kellner is a stripped-down version of the classic coin-op, featuring the iconic mining protagonist and theme music but none of its other mechanics. The player moves around, running into rocks that represent the ridiculous aspects of the voting apparatus: language limitations, a mandatory twenty-five-day preregistration period, misplaced registration applications, and untrained poll workers. The lack of authentic *Dig Dug* mechanics breaks the game in a purposeful way. It argues by extension that the voting system itself is missing key functionalities required to make the process fair and democratic.

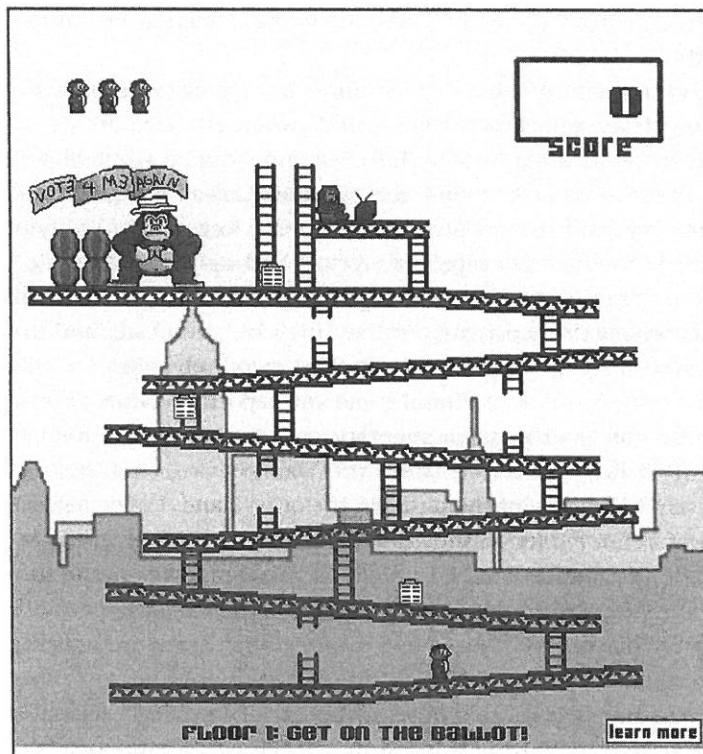


Figure 2.4

In Gotham Gazette's remake of *Donkey Kong*, a political incumbent becomes a buffoonish ape who throws paperwork and media influence down the rafters toward the ascending challenger. Nestled in a recliner atop the tower sleeps the undecided voter.

Donkey Con (Elephant Evasion) is a *Donkey Kong* clone about tackling incumbent officeholders for the hearts and minds of lazy constituents. Each tier of Kong's tower represents a different set of obstacles for the challenger: ballot access, party politics, name recognition, the incumbent powers of media relationships, and campaign cash. Unlike the original, the challenger can't get a hammer power-up to smash through the descending perils. There is a custom death message for each tier, contextualizing abstract obstacles through concrete examples. The game also features a curious exploit: an invisible ladder, which represents running as a Reform candidate, provides a protected route from the bottom level to the top. The game seems to suggest that most of the obstacles of incumbency are

surface effects of the two-party system. For somebody running on a Reform ticket, the *Gazette* argues, campaign cash is the only major concern.

These simple arcade games forsake complex narratives in favor of familiar and evocative experiences. In so doing, they encourage reflection rather than enjoyment. Following playwright Bertolt Brecht's practice of breaking down theater's fourth wall, Gonzalo Frasca argues that players must be able to maintain a critical distance from the subject matter of a political game.¹⁴ In commercial games, immersion threatens this distance, often through complex, carefully crafted narrative structures.¹⁵ One of the ways games can immerse players is through a well-crafted narrative structure; therefore, Frasca suggests focusing on simulation instead of storytelling. Simulation lends itself to multiple playthroughs, a wide variety of end states, and a flexibility of values. This is why Frasca made *September 12th* an abstract simulation of the origins of terrorism, not a narrative on the same subject. Avoiding narrative also contributes to the casual nature of current event games, making them "easy to pick up and easy to put down." Simulation often distinguishes editorial or reportage games from tabloid games; the former two tend to offer an experience of a model (the economics of Somali piracy), whereas the latter often recreate an event through a short narrative (a head butt at a World Cup match).

Timeliness

In the videogame industry, conversations about business ethics and quality of life are common.¹⁶ In particular, game studios often demand extremely long hours at the end of a videogame's development cycle to complete a title in time for a predetermined ship date. Industry insiders call it "crunch time." These standards seem especially cruel when compared to the labor conditions of other industrial arts, film and television, whose practitioners enjoy union protection and overtime pay. Yet long before game corporations concocted crunch time, reporters burned the midnight oil to bring breaking news to the public. In a way, this shared understanding of the lived condition of largely thankless over-work is a unique way in which journalists and game designers are linked.

The twenty-four-hour news cycle puts a strain on current event games. Although game designers are no strangers to toil, few current event games are actually released within a day or two of the event they cover—a key period, after which many stories reach saturation.¹⁷ Even veteran designers and programmers would be hard pressed to craft a game worth playing overnight. Gonzalo Frasca was able to create *Kabul Kaboom* in only a few

hours, not bad for a videogame cartoon. But more complex procedural arguments require more time. Even though it may seem fairly simple, *September 12th* took three months to perfect.¹⁸ Perhaps the most successful rapidly produced current event game is *Madrid*, which Frasca and his studio Powerful Robot Games created in the forty-eight hours following the terrorist bombing of a subway train in Spain's capital on March 11, 2004. Instead of depicting the event or mounting an argument, *Madrid* solemnly asks its player to remember the tragedy that transpired.

The game presents one screen to the player: a candlelight vigil. Its attendants wear T-shirts commemorating major cities that have suffered a prominent bombing: Madrid, Baghdad, Oklahoma City, and Buenos Aires, among others. A steady wind is *Madrid*'s only sound effect, cueing the player to the slowly dimming candlelight. The player must click the candles to keep them lit, and doing so methodically for an extended period results in "victory." It is actually quite difficult to keep the candles lit and reach the win state, and for many players the game offers a poignant lesson that remembrance requires non-trivial effort.

Madrid provides no information about the bombing itself; players have to come equipped from previous news coverage to comprehend it. The same could be said of *Hothead Zidane*, which also offers no context or explanation. Should a current event game be held to the same standards of timeliness as the news? Perhaps, although commentary takes time to develop. A current event game need not be timely in the way a breaking story is timely. Frasca envisioned current event games as adaptations of editorial cartoons rather than features, but other options suggest themselves.¹⁹ Mike Treanor and Michael Mateas have suggested that current event games need not release when a story breaks, but only while the issues they cover are still pertinent, a sentiment that dovetails with a journalist's duty to "make the significant interesting and relevant."²⁰ Treanor and Mateas expand on Frasca's proposal for playable editorial cartoons by differentiating between *social comment cartoons* and *political cartoons*.

Social comment cartoons, they explain, focus on a broad and easily identifiable social issue, such as global warming, and encourage the viewer to acknowledge the issue with a smile.²¹ Political cartoons, by contrast, take a specific news event and use it to comment on a larger issue. A videogame analogue of the social comment cartoon would enjoy a much more leisurely production schedule than a political cartoon game, because it could tap into an ongoing issue able to maintain public interest over time.²²

The tabloid game *So You Think You Can Drive, Mel?* illustrates the difference clearly. Created by the Game Show Network in the aftermath of

Mel Gibson's widely publicized ethnic-slur-riddled DUI, it is perhaps the most well-designed celebrity sleaze tabloid game ever. A caricature of Mel's face hangs out of his car window as he speeds down the highway. The screen scrolls to the side, and the player can only control the car's vertical motion. The player's score rises slowly as the game wears on. Grabbing bottles of whiskey increases the score considerably, but it also raises Mel's blood alcohol level. In turn, it becomes more difficult to control player movement as the car lags behind, jumps forward, and bounces up and down.

There are two enemies in the game: Hasidic Jews and cops. The Hasidim throw Stars of David at Mel's car from the top of the screen, and if they score a hit the player loses twenty-five points. Running over a cop doesn't decrease the score, but once the player hits five of them the game is over. The rhetoric is clear: Mel has a single-minded obsession to drink, he despises "Hollywood Jews," and he sees the law as little more than an inconvenient obstacle.

It is ironic that a game about an isolated celebrity blunder might offer the best example of timeliness in political cartoon games. One can't imagine it helping players make decisions about their own lives, yet *So You Think You Can Drive, Mel?* is not only timely, but also a timeless documentation of an event now forgotten by most of the media and public. By contrast, a social comment rendition of this tabloid piece would require a broader perspective; the fallibility of celebrities could serve as a hook to draw attention to the fact that no one is immune to the dangers of drunk driving.

Timeliness in other current event games follows this model. *Madrid*'s poignant commemoration of tragedy is more likely to become unplayable due to changes in technology than it is to become irrelevant, while *Kabul Kaboom* is inscrutable absent supplementary information about air-drops during the Afghan war. Social comment games often cover highly visible, ongoing public policy issues; thus, they remain relevant as long as the situation covered persists. In the case of *September 12th*, the war on terror itself has remained a pressing issue long after September 11. The game can continue to be played as long as civilian deaths from missile strikes remain a part of the contemporary milieu. Additionally, daily newspapers serve an archival purpose. More so than even popular and academic history books, archived newspapers preserve a record of daily, lived experience. Any current event game created becomes a peculiar ludic commentary on the trials and tribulations of a specific moment in time.

Editorial Line

Whether editorial or reportage, cartoon or social comment, all current event games derive their content from actual events. Just as news stories don't reinvent common forms of composition like the inverted pyramid with every publication, so newsgames don't always reinvent forms of the videogame. Today's commercial videogames may sell millions of copies, but they still reach a far narrower population than a major news broadcast or Web site. As many of the games discussed above show, current event games can focus their players on journalistic messages by borrowing from classic videogames.

Consider a plaintive example. In his book on game design, Raph Koster imagines how the experience of playing *Tetris* might be different if its iconic tetrimino blocks were transformed into the bodies of genocide victims being packed into a mass grave.²³ Some years later, Brazilian artists realized a similar idea in a political game about execution, *Calabouço Tétrico* (*Dungeon Tetris*). The game can only be "won" by allowing the torture victims to climb out of their pit and assault the player's avatar, driving home a moral rhetoric: one can never undo the atrocities one commits. In game development, reskinning is generally denigrated as uncreative derivativism. But *Calabouço Tétrico* shows that serious commentary can arise from repurposing familiar games.

Less graphic examples exist, too. One widely circulated current event game of the 2008 U.S. presidential election was *Super Obama World*, a reimagining of Nintendo's *Super Mario World*. The game replaced Mario with Senator Obama, goombas with corporate crooks, and koopas with pork barrel politicking pigs. Each zone in the game covers a foible of the McCain campaign. In one, Obama trounces villains while leaping over a series of high-end clothing stores, commenting on Cindy McCain's wealth and Sarah Palin's then-scandalous use of campaign funds to buy clothes for public appearances. In another, the player runs for an annoying length of time on an empty bridge that abruptly dead-ends into a ravine, highlighting the absurdity of the "bridge to nowhere" Palin backed as Governor of Alaska.

Controlling an Obama avatar as he stomps on crooks offers a reasonably effective message, but adopting the form or mechanics of a familiar game hardly guarantees journalistic relevance. Years before creating his first current event games, Frasca remarked that "the design of consciousness-raising videogames is not as simple as replacing Nintendo's Mario and Luigi with Sacco and Vanzetti."²⁴ To trade gimmickry in favor of

commentary, a current event game must tightly couple its content to its mechanics. A current event game takes a mechanic that is primarily *expressive* (communicating a feeling from the game to the player) and makes it *persuasive* (communicating the operation of an idea), thus creating the videogame equivalent of an editorial line.

Simulations have varied complexities. Much of their meaning rests on which facts an author decides to include and exclude. Journalists embrace objectivity by including all the reliable facts, whereas editorialists pick and choose in order to persuade their readers.

When creating a simulation game, a designer accepts the need to omit some facts or possibilities from the model. Instead of hard-coding each important aspect, the programmer crafts algorithms that create an *impression* of the represented system, along with a gulf between it and its real referent. Bogost has called this gulf between the real system and the game's model of it the "simulation gap."²⁵ With this representational chasm in mind, Miguel Sicart argues that the "ideology of a newsgame ... can be found in the way the original topic of the news has been translated into the game system."²⁶ Creating an editorial line in a current event game involves a process of including or excluding specific information from the model, of creating a simulation gap. In the case of the pro-Palestinian editorial game *Raid Gaza!*, much relevant information is excluded to make a succinct political point. The game addresses neither Palestinian terrorists' reasons for shooting missiles at settlements nor the motivations of rogue Israeli settlers. Instead, *Raid Gaza!* focuses all its effort on claims that Israel uses undue force and that the United States will never cease military and fiscal support of the country. The game carefully picks its fight and then plumbs the depths of possible, relevant consequences.

There is much work left to be done to accomplish such tasks successfully. Failure is still common. Persuasive Games' Arcade Wire series, published on AddictingGames.com and Shockwave.com, attempts to contextualize its editorial heft by beginning games with the image of a newspaper's front page, the headline presenting a comedic one-liner on the subject matter at hand (figure 2.5). These games also feature extensive tutorials that ease players into the experience. Yet despite this effort, a short glance at the comments on the Web pages containing the games shows that a significant number of players expect vanilla leisure, not thoughtful commentary.

One of the greatest examples of cinema's failure to convey an idea to its audience was the "intellectual montage" Sergei Eisenstein employed in many of his films. Eisenstein contended that the essence of cinema could



Figure 2.5

The splash screen from *The Arcade Wire: Oil God* apes the front page of the Gray Lady while encapsulating the editorial thrust of the gameplay: by manipulating nature and humankind, the player attempts to drive up oil prices as quickly as possible.

be found in the juxtapositions made possible by linear editing. One of his first proofs-of-concept was a scene in *The Strike*: he intercut the Tsar's slaughter of revolutionary workers with images of the butchering of a steer. In Eisenstein's mind, this simple cross-editing would communicate directly to his viewers the idea that the revolters had been senselessly slaughtered without any means to defend themselves.²⁷ Upon viewing the film, audiences were confused or infuriated. Why? Eisenstein was an intellectual, his audience the Russian peasantry. In rural communities, the slaughtering of a steer was a happy occasion resulting in a rare dinner of meat instead of grain. It is a misunderstanding akin to that of the AddictingGames.com audience expecting a casual distraction and receiving an editorial exegesis. These games must be carefully framed to avoid confusion.

Perhaps the best example of the clash between a designer's ideology and player expectations can be found in La Molleindustria's *McDonald's*

Current Events

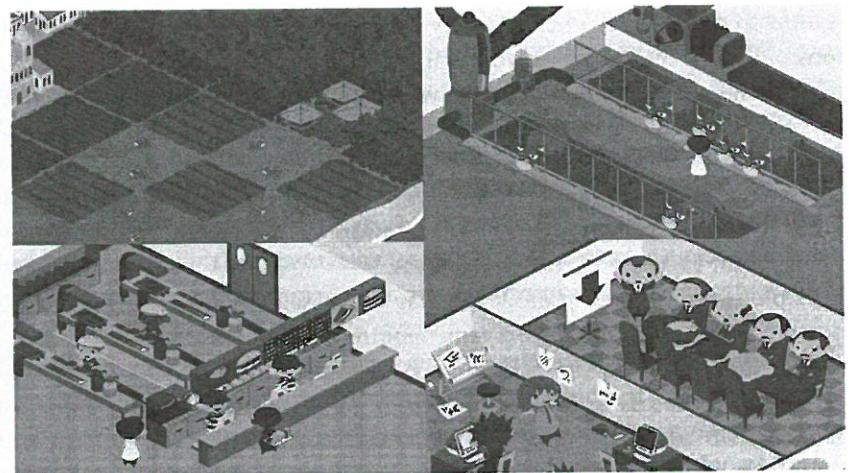


Figure 2.6

This four-panel view of La Molleindustria's *McDonald's Videogame* displays the different fast-food business domains players can manipulate. What to do first: corrupt children with advertising or destroy an Amazonian village with a tractor?

Videogame. Its designer, a young Italian subversive named Paolo Pedercini, harbors anticonglomerate and prolabor politics, advocating strikes and corporate sabotage in his life outside making games.²⁸ *McDonald's Videogame* hopes to demonstrate the abject corruption required to maintain the profitability of a multinational fast-food organization. In the game, players control fields in South America where cattle are raised and soy is grown, a factory farm where cows are fed and controlled for disease, a restaurant where workers have to be hired and managed, and a corporate office where advertising campaigns and board members set corporate policy (figure 2.6). The game starts out like most business simulations—set up a steady supply of meat and soy, build a workforce, run television advertising. Costs quickly outstrip revenue, and the player must take advantage of more seedy business practices. These include razing rainforests to expand crops, mixing waste as filler in the cow feed, censoring or firing unruly employees, and corrupting government officials to minimize public outcry against the above actions.

Interestingly, many players—especially those who are technically minded and enjoy mastering their videogames—find themselves lamenting the difficult job of McDonald's executives, rather than incensed by their corrupt corporate policies. Keep in mind that Molleindustria's games are well contextualized, both on their own Web site and on game portals,

thanks to sophisticated introductory statements about the political opinions of the game and its creator. Still, players manage to recast their contexts; well-crafted simulation gaps always admit unexpected reactions. The incredible difficulty of *Madrid* has lead players to conclude that it addresses the *futility* of remembrance rather than its necessity.²⁹ And *September 12th* could be read as a call for a full-scale military invasion—bombing creates more terrorists, and they’re not going away on their own, so a ground strike might be the only path to success.

Exploits—loopholes or modes of play unforeseen by the design team—pose additional trouble. Since a game requires player interaction, it is never possible to anticipate the myriad ways someone might “break” a game. Treanor and Mateas note such an exploit in Persuasive Games’s *Bacteria Salad*, which addresses issues of food safety in industrial farming.³⁰ In it, the player must maintain the crops of five contiguous farms, defending them from agro-terrorists and disease as they attempt to provide a steady stock of two types of vegetables to consumers. But the game is easily compromised and mined for points: players can just raze a farm and quickly replace it every time a contamination event occurs. A critical player may ask whether this behavior is part of the game’s commentary or an unintended effect of the system. The power of interpretation, present in the experience of all other media, is amplified by the participatory nature of computational media.

Public Debate

Here’s a question anyone using videogames for purposes outside entertainment will eventually hear: is a *game* really an appropriate way to address a serious issue? In the short history of current event games, the greatest fallout from such a query blighted *Faith Fighter*, a game about religious intolerance.³¹ La Molleindustria created the game in order to comment upon a string of anti-Islamic editorial cartoons in Danish newspapers.³² In the game, Molleindustria attempts to expand prejudicial claims about the Muslim penchant for violence to include every major creed, showing that those in positions of power use religion instrumentally, usually by inciting hatred among the faithful. The game even provides explicit instructions for how it should be used, as a cathartic way to exorcise religious hatred without actually doing real-life violence against others.

A number of concerned parties spoke out against the game, including mass media outlets and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). When negative attention for the game reached critical mass, designer Paolo

Pedercini removed the game from his Web site and replaced it with a letter to visitors. In addition to linking to some of the many versions of the game others had posted online, Pedercini also accused the OIC of not having played his game before denouncing it. He found it impossible that they had played it, based on the statements made by the organization that the game could *only* be seen as inciting hatred between Muslims and Christians: “This phenomenon is related to the still marginal role of the medium,” writes Pedercini. “Commentators feel authorized to judge a game without playing it and just conforming to the common narrative depicting video games as violence generators.”³³

It’s a common sentiment among the creators of current event games that the vanguard of privileged media uses its position of power to prevent the public acceptance of gaming as a form of sophisticated speech. But the *Faith Fighter* controversy also underscores a major problem for games as advocacy, because it shows that the parties a game addresses are the most likely to be offended. Pedercini understood the dilemma, and he created a sequel to share his insight. The result was *Faith Fighter 2*, a parodic appropriation of Frasca’s mechanic of commemoration in *Madrid*: click on numerous gods from the first game to feed them with love and prevent their memories from fading away (see figure 2.7 for a comparison of the two games). Upon inevitable failure, the player is treated to the claim that many made against Pedercini himself: “Game Over: You failed to respect a religion, and now the world is a total mess!” It may be possible to keep a game of *Faith Fighter 2* going indefinitely, as it doesn’t appear to arrive at a natural conclusion. At some point the player must slow down or give up, a meditation on the possible futility of the endeavor.

According to many editorial cartoonists, a publication that apologizes for a cartoon or removes it from their archives commits journalistic treachery.³⁴ The purpose of a cartoon is to inspire heated discussion, and suppression does just as much of a disservice to detractors as it does to the artist. Pedercini was heavily criticized by some of his fans for “caving” to the demands of what they saw as a bullying OIC; in reply, he insisted that the removal of the game didn’t constitute self-censorship, but recognition that the game had missed its mark completely. Prominent editorial cartoonists, deplored the current state of the art, admit that most of the cartoons that never make it off the drafting table probably deserve to remain there.³⁵ The greatest weakness of most rejected cartoons is their lack of clarity. In Pedercini’s case, he set out to critique the negative treatment of Muslims in Danish political cartoons and ended up upsetting the OIC instead. He apologized not for making the game, but for the

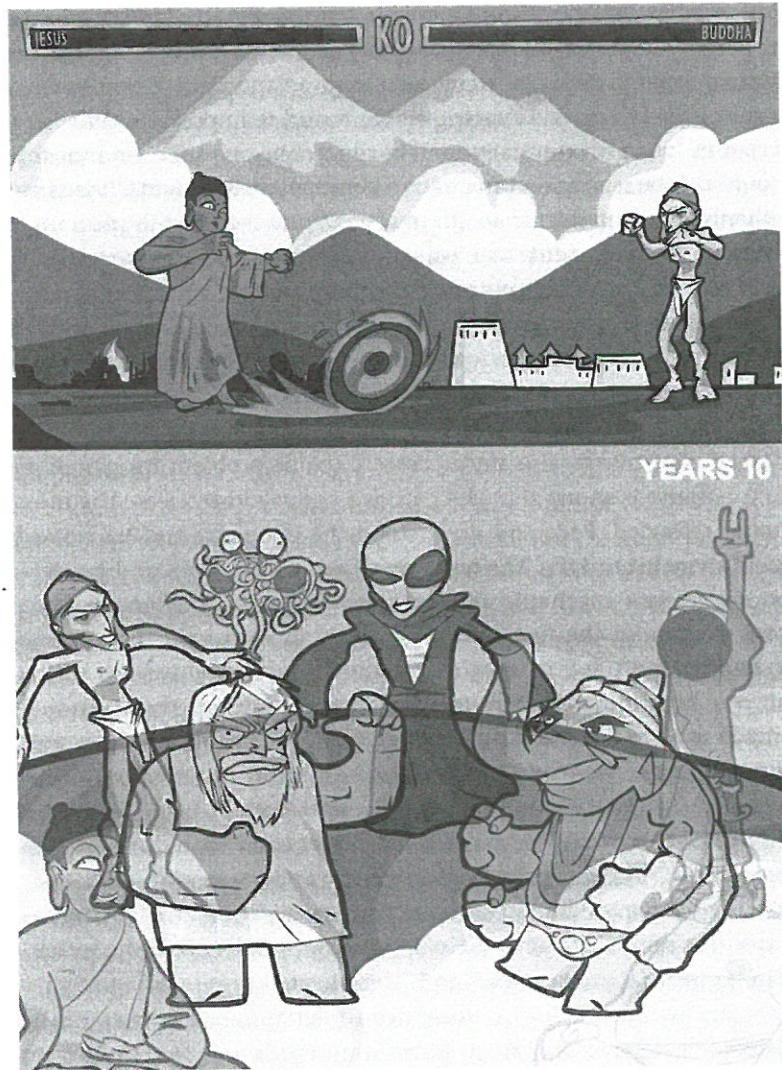


Figure 2.7

At the top, from *Faith Fighter*, Buddha uses his “dharma wheel” secret move to slam a cartoon Jesus into the city below. In the sequel, on the bottom, gods of the multireligious pantheon stand around giving thumbs-up and peace signs, vying for love in the form of clicks.

unfortunate circumstances leading up to its removal. Both his letter and the follow-up game further poke fun at the ridiculous mass media manufactured outrage, making the apology easier to stomach.

In both tabloid games and tabloid journalism, a fine line separates earnestness from sensationalism. The “red tops” of the United Kingdom, papers that focus on celebrity, sports, and political gossip with transparent ideological bias, might exemplify the former. For the latter, one need go no further than the supermarket checkout, where gossip rags publish outright fiction, selling sensationalism by means of the nastiest rumor possible. *Hothead Zidane* offers an example of the former, but relatively few examples of the latter seem to exist.

Perhaps a close cousin to supermarket tabloid schlock in current event games is *Terri Irwin’s Revenge*, a game about “Crocodile Hunter” Steve Irwin’s death. The game, originally circulated by email, features Terri Irwin snorkeling through stingray-infested waters in a quest to slaughter the animals that killed her husband. Compared to *Hothead Zidane*, *Terri Irwin’s Revenge* is much more complex—featuring opening and closing titles, two types of enemies, a “Croc bomb” attack that summons a beloved crocodile ally to clear the screen of rays, a life and health pack system, and a steadily increasing difficulty. Despite its polish, the game was so tasteless to most players that a significant outcry resulted in its total removal from the Web. Yet, even *Terri Irwin’s Revenge* doesn’t hold a candle to the offense of celebrity rumor papers.

Tastefulness is a long-standing problem among even the best editorial cartoonists, so it’s no surprise that the challenges of refinement extend to current event games. Even bad taste is sometimes a good thing: in the case of editorial cartoons, crossing the line is often necessary in order to determine exactly where the line is.³⁶ Political correctness is helpful when it protects oppressed minorities from the often unconscious denigration of the privileged, but it also tends to limit the playful expression that can elucidate unseen facets of an issue. Sometimes, generating public debate about an underexplored issue is the whole point of the enterprise.

Turn to the Games Section

Bias is inherent to opinion journalism. When flipping to the editorial page of a newspaper, one knows that facts take a backseat to persuasion. One must muster the same attitude when playing editorial games. Therein lies the difference: the editorial page provides a recognized context for opinion, often by highlighting a spectrum of differing viewpoints on a single page.³⁷

Editorial cartoons are refined, clarified, and expanded by accompanying columns, and vice versa. But no such setting yet exists for the editorial videogame.

Editorial games have been denied much of this organic discourse and oversight because of their relative isolation from other news. Most current event games have been relegated to curious corners of the Web, primarily sites specializing in casual games. Few efforts have combined editorial games with traditional online reporting and editorial. Even if heavy-hitters like the *New York Times* and CNN have dabbled in the form, none has offered more support than parenthetical hyperlinks to related articles for accompaniment. The series of articles and infographics on Somali pirates that accompany *Cutthroat Capitalism* may be the best integration of games into wider reporting to date.

Perhaps innovation in current event games will not take place in the United States at all, but in scrappier news markets. In 2009, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published not a single game, but Brazilian newspaper *Estado* created two under the title *Jogos de Sustentabilidade* ("Sustainability Games"). These titles were produced for a series on recycling and conservation, and the editors embedded them in pages carrying informational articles, columns, and graphics on the same subject. One is a clone of the arcade game *Elevator Action*, the other a reskinning and revision of *Kaboom!*. The latter simply educates players about the types of materials that go into each color-coded recycle bin, but the former uses a quiz format to test the player's knowledge of energy conservation in an apartment building. Halfway around the world, *Madrid* was cloned into the Turkish current event game *Huys* ("Hope"), a game that invites players to remember the murder of an outspoken Turkish journalist and the importance of journalistic freedom and integrity.

Divorced from their natural habitat of the front page or the editorial page, current event games are used all too often as rudimentary Web site traffic-grabbers. Most current event games are loss leaders, a way to draw visitors to the "real news" and to generate revenue through advertising viewership. The relative novelty of current event games ensures that blogs, forums, and even mainstream news outlets will circulate information about these games, particularly if they are controversial. Current event games can thus be used instrumentally, as attention-grabbers rather than as earnest journalism.

Nadya Suleman, the single mother of octuplets who dominated human interest coverage in early 2009, suffered no dearth of editorial criticism.³⁸ Among the many editorial cartoons that critiqued her plight, one riffs

off the widely published photograph of Suleman's enormous pregnant stomach, slapping ads and emblems on it, including donation requests via PayPal and Visa.³⁹ Others connect her with a contemporary event, the Obama economic stimulus plan. One suggests that a large litter might help bear the burden of the stimulus plan's debt; the other compares the irresponsibility of Suleman with that of the Democrats by applying an over-stretched womb to a donkey.⁴⁰

All of these cartoons are biting in their own way, but not one of them addresses the fate of the mother or the children. Other forms of written and spoken editorial took on this topic more than any other, puzzling over how one could care for fourteen children and what ill effects eight babies might have in the hands of a human mother designed to care for two at most.

The Octuplet's Game picks up here. The game's subtitle declares, "now you can be a milk machine!" Gameplay mimics *Space Invaders*, the player controlling the two breasts of a lactation device rather than a defensive laser. Eight babies line the top of the screen, each nestled into a color-coded test-tube to match its gender. Occasionally the babies cry, inching their way down the screen. Pressing spacebar fires milk, which placates the crying babies above. If an unfed baby makes its way to the bottom of the screen, the game ends. There's one catch: the milk machine can't operate continuously. A pump at screen right shows the machine's current power. Once it's depleted, the player must press the B and G keys in alternation to refill it.

As coverage and commentary, the game effectively communicates a few points. It highlights the inhuman act of technological medicine, which transforms mother into machine. It questions whether such a machine can ably tend to so many children in the way a mother can, mirroring the concern expressed in other media about Suleman's ability to mother such a large brood. And it depersonalizes the children themselves, absurdly extending their test-tube conception to a cyborg-childhood. Indeed, it is hard not to see the babies just as fluid-sinks rather than human beings.

Even if it might not be the most sophisticated, scathing, or insightful example of public commentary, *The Octuplet's Game* functions effectively. Yet it wasn't created as news at all. The French interactive agency L'Agence Toriche whipped it up not on behalf of a journalism client but as a demonstration of their own services in e-marketing, realizing their prowess at "getting buzz" online by performing the act with their own product.

The Octuplet's Game isn't quite yellow journalism, but it's hardly Pulitzer Prize material either. A journalist might want to present a more

even-handed view of the Suleman situation. For example, tending to eight infants at once as a single mother is an idea worth experiencing rather than just pondering. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game has nothing to do with its journalistic quality, but with its context: a marketing agency rather than a news organization chose to produce and distribute it. The three types of current event games suggest a continuum, from tabloid sensationalism, through balanced reportage, to the biased conviction of editorial. Within this spectrum, newsmakers will have to make deliberate investments, lest the potential for earnest counsel in current event games become subsumed by crass marketing.

3 Infographics

"If you ever wanted to control where your tax dollars go, here's your chance to decide," proclaims *Budget Hero*, a game created by American Public Media. *Budget Hero* challenges players to plan for the nation's future by picking and choosing programs that reduce or raise government spending while avoiding excess debt and fulfilling player-chosen promises. Play involves reallocating funds from different budget categories, each allotment altering a twenty-year projection of the country's financial situation. Since budgets imply values, the player chooses goals in the form of "badges," among them health and wellness, national security, economic stimulus, and efficient government. The game judges the player's performance based on how well these chosen areas are developed over time.

Budget Hero's interface is a bar graph drawn to look like a cityscape (figure 3.1). It uses the skyline bar graph as a metaphor for the nation's health, stability, and size. By raising and lowering the constituent structures, the player helps to "define tomorrow's skyline." When the player clicks on a building, the game reveals a series of cards with budgetary subitems. One might choose to "Bring troops home soon" to save \$210 billion, fund "diplomacy and foreign aid" at the cost of \$390 billion, "increase mass transit funding" for \$33 billion, or give a "tax break for first time home buyers" at the expense of \$4 billion. There are 154 policy options in all.

The heights of the buildings change when the player selects a card or drags a marker across a timeline, displaying the projected budget over a twenty-year period. Players can see their progress on three meters measuring the deficit/surplus level, the relative size of the government, and the national debt. Another display shows the "Budget Bust," the year when the combined costs of health care, Social Security, and debt interest overtake revenue, breaking the bank. After selecting budget options, the player submits the budget to see what results it would produce. The game then