

BOOK REVIEW: *NEWSGAMES: JOURNALISM AT PLAY* (IAN BOGOST, SIMON FERRARI AND BOBBY SCHWEIZER, 2010)

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REVIEW

As videogames continue to inexorably shed the popular cultural stereotype of the medium for spotty teenagers, several divisions have opened up in both the videogame academe and the creative industry. Most of all, these divisions are centred on the possibilities for the future of the medium as it expands: new social functions, new uses, and new audiences. While *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer, 2010) only operates on the periphery of these issues, it nevertheless arrives at an illustrative juncture. While drawing a rigid dichotomy would be simplistic at best, it is nonetheless reasonable to sketch out two related, contemporary threads of thought for the future of videogames. On one side of the coin we can see recent works (McGonigal, 2011; Ederly and Mollick, 2009) that advocate the adaptation of videogames to benefit reality – in other words, videogames for meaningful external change. On the other side of the coin sits *Newsgames*, which advocates videogames that reflect on and encapsulate reality – in other words, videogames with meaningful content and structures. Indeed, it is *Newsgames'* comparatively modest aims that make it one of the more satisfying videogame theory publications of recent times.

At its heart, *Newsgames* contains a simple problem: how might videogames be used for journalism? For most readers, even those already grounded in videogame studies, this is an unusual question. Though there have previously been some brief explorations of the newsgame format (Sicart, 2008; Treanor and Mateas, 2009), Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer are able to effectively leverage the unfamiliar territory to present a convincing and comprehensive overview. Despite its brevity (181 pages), *Newsgames* mounts a persuasive argument for the potential usefulness of the

videogame for journalistic applications. And, while not without its shortcomings, *Newsgames* also provides a satisfying survey of the academic and theoretical foundations in which the authors have couched their work.

Essentially, *Newsgames* argues that journalism is a practice tied to many platforms, each with strengths and disadvantages, and that as it evolves, journalism must “embrace new modes of thinking about news in addition to new modes of production” (2010, p. 10). Videogames, the authors suggest, contain unique qualities that make them ideal as a complementary platform for journalism. These qualities are largely understood in *Newsgames* via the videogame’s procedural and systemic strengths. Therefore, the procedural mode of videogame analysis serves as a foundation for much of *Newsgames*. Procedurality has often found its centre at Georgia Tech, where all three authors of *Newsgames* are based. Indeed, it has been at its most potent in the hands of Bogost, who popularised procedural rhetoric as a framework for videogame analysis in *Persuasive Games* (Bogost, 2007); and Ferrari, who further explored the concept in his Masters thesis (Ferrari, 2010). In *Newsgames*, procedural analysis finds its most useful application thus far. By focussing on the systemic expressiveness of newsgames, Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer convincingly illustrate that “games simulate how things work by constructing models that people can interact with” (2010, p. 6).

The multiple typologies of newsgames suggested by the authors shape the structure of *Newsgames*, with numerous fruitful digressions. This allows *Newsgames* to draw upon a wide variety of depth and quality when discussing the possibilities of newsgames: from the simple and occasionally trite “tabloid games” like *So You Think You Can Drive, Mel?* (Game Show Network, 2006); to more complex “infographic games” such as *Budget Hero* (American Public Media, 2008); to provocative “documentary games” like *JFK Reloaded* (Traffic Games, 2004). The strengths of such an approach are that it allows *Newsgames* ample room to discuss the merits and potential of each mode of newsgame, and ultimately sketches a multiplicity of potential implementations familiar to journalism: comment, editorial, humour, illustration, reportage, and insight. *Newsgames* also benefits from the inclusion of several interesting detours, and exhibits a good eye for the history of both journalism and videogames (a brief overview of the history of the crossword puzzle is particularly welcome).

However, *Newsgames*’ reliance on examples is also its most glaring weakness, especially when most newsgames so clearly indicate the infancy of the genre. Some newsgames featured in the book are simply too naïve to alone convey the authors’ understanding of the potentials of the genre, yet are sometimes offered without comment. And, though many of the major arguments in *Newsgames* are persuasively made by example, occasionally the example is allowed to overtake the larger point being made by the authors. The chapter on infographic games, for example, goes to great lengths in describing the workings of a number of infographic newsgames and infographics in general, yet offers only a few passing thoughts on what it may mean to engage with data in such a manner. *Newsgames* may have therefore benefited from a few more instances of deep theoretical discussion.

The practical possibilities of newsgames are taken very seriously by the authors, however, and it is likely that the newsgame practitioner (or potential practitioner) may gain more from the book than the academic reader. Bogost, via his Persuasive Games studio, has much first-hand experience in the creation of newsgames, and it is the account of his dealings with the *New York Times* that is simultaneously the most engaging and sobering component of the book. Though Persuasive Games was engaged by the *New York Times* for six monthly newsgames for its website, only two were ever published, with the *Times*' editorial desk eventually failing to communicate at all with Persuasive Games. While the authors view the incident forgivingly – “Rather than wickedness or deceit, organizational politics are likely to blame” (2010, p. 176) – it nonetheless illustrates the daunting practical problems facing the widespread adoption of newsgames.

Ultimately, however, it is scope that is almost certainly *Newsgames*' most commendable trait. Although it is broad in its examination of the topic at hand, *Newsgames* is willing to confine its sights to a narrowly defined topic. In the context of over a decade of works intended as “foundational” for videogame studies, *Newsgames* proves that there is room for good scholarly work in building and improving upon those foundations. As with Bogost's *Racing the Beam*, an exploration of the Atari VCS (Bogost and Montfort, 2009), *Newsgames* represents a genuine attempt to deepen – and not simply reshape – the body of knowledge of videogame studies. It is important work that videogame studies should be doing more of.

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