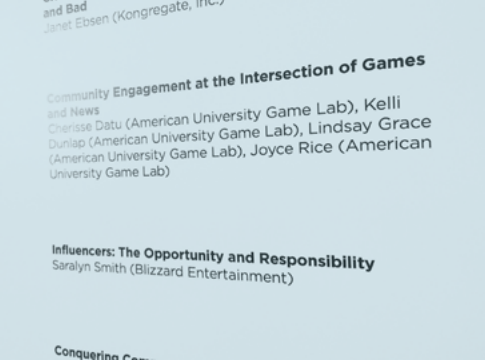
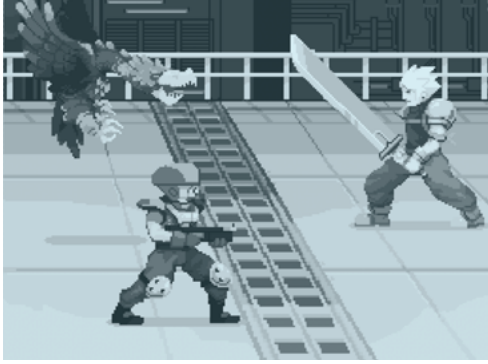


A TOOLKIT

# *Innovation in Journalism Through Engagement Design*

In our quest to find ways to make journalism more interactive and engaging, the JoLT team at American University concluded that the design principles that make gaming so captivating and lucrative can be applied to the challenges facing the news industry.

DECEMBER 2017

JOLT

GAME LAB

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC


# I. The engagement challenge for news

A unique group of professionals, students, academics and experts at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., asked this question: Can game-design techniques deepen reader engagement in news?

We say yes.

But arriving at that answer wasn't easy.

For some participants, the exploration meant letting go of the limitations of various professional cultures -- let's just say game designers and journalists don't think the same way. For others, it meant learning new ways of viewing, talking about and measuring success. For all, it meant embracing the ways game design techniques could build interaction, verification, feedback and trust into journalism.

We followed several paths over the three years it took to reach our conclusions. Through a generous grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, we pulled together a team that included three student Fellows earning a Master's in Game Design and six Professional Fellows, some from major media companies.

We embedded team members in several Washington-area newsrooms; we staged conferences and workshops; we developed digital and live games; and we held a NewsJam in Florida with the University of Miami, challenging teams to produce a handful of news-related games during the three-day event.

## Enter Engagement Design

We call the result of our efforts "engagement design." Engagement design goes beyond newsgames. While the term "games" tends to elicit a dismissive response in the news industry, the concepts behind games are not only serious, but share many intentions with journalism.

Games are not just about fun. Games can serve certain kinds of storytelling better than traditional journalistic forms. Games give us the opportunity to play with systems. They give us a safe space to embrace ambiguity and to take risks. They offer a playful way to experience an event, discover solutions, create empathy or learn skills.

But most important, games put the user in the center of the story, reward learning, and are inherently engaging.

Engagement design is something that newsrooms need to take more seriously, especially as a way to attract and retain younger audiences, says Anika Gupta, a product manager who has worked on community-focused products. "Being able to participate in news is a huge loyalty driver," she says. "You are dealing with a niche audience that wants to interact."

## How Engagement Design Helps News

Anyone in the news business already knows the challenges. At the Oct. 20-22, 2017, NewsJam at the University of Miami, Gupta asked the young participants to name the positive attributes of


*NewsPark, 2015*

games. The answers flew. Games build engagement! Foster community! Invite participation! She asked the same question about journalism. She was met with silence.

Journalists should know they have work to do.

Although experiments are ongoing, we have identified several areas where engagement design thinking already has been effective. This report outlines those ideas and best practices for the newsroom.

***"Game designers are experience designers. While readers read, and viewers watch, game players engage. Sometimes, experiencing the story is more persuasive and impactful."***

LINDSAY GRACE, DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY GAME LAB

## Engagement design:

- ***Builds trust by sharing your sources and data, and letting users interact with them.***

News organizations are facing growing issues of trust and transparency, as traditional audiences turn to niche sources that tend to reaffirm their beliefs. A recent study by the Media Insight Project shows that readers' trust in content is determined more by who shares a story than by who creates it. That means that a story passed on by a Facebook friend can trump CNN. This phenomenon is further complicated because more and more people are encountering news in their social media feeds, where there is less context to help determine credibility.

Our experiments with game-inspired engagement design suggest that individuals who see how a story is made, analyze it -- even contribute to it -- are more likely to trust it and engage. When users can see data, explore, manipulate and play with the elements, they can draw their own conclusions.

"Anything that's really interactive really heightens the users' level of trust. It becomes a two-way conversation," says Joey Marburger, the head of product for The Washington Post.

All these factors help build trust and create engagement. As Washington Post reporter David Farenthold investigated Donald Trump's philanthropic history, he posted images of his handwritten lists of charities, shared his progress on stories, and asked readers for tips that guided his work. That investigation, in part, garnered him the Pulitzer Prize.

- ***Shares information about your readers — and your content.***

Newsrooms also can gain insight about their constituents by understanding how those users interact with the content.

"We can tell editors, 'this is how people are perceiving your stories, and this is how you can adjust them to better meet their needs,'" says Lindsay Grace, the founding director of the American University Game Lab and Studio. Newsrooms can post a problem within a game, and readers' game play can help build a database, parse a document dump, identify a place or person or detect fake news.

In playing our game Factitious, for example, users learn to identify red flags about fake news. The way users play the game reveals how the source, headlines and article format signal veracity. For each article, we can see how many people understood or misunderstood the article as real or fake, how long they took to make the decision, and at what point they were convinced either way.

- ***Provides a better way to tell some kinds of stories.***

Games and interactives can be better than traditional linear narratives for some kinds of stories. Games and interactive visualizations can more concretely explain complex systems such as the health care system, global warming and conflict negotiation by allowing users to make choices, tweak inputs and see the outcomes. Allowing the user to simulate an experience or view an issue from an unfamiliar perspective can create empathy and understanding.

"Games allow the audience to participate in the news," says Melissa Bell, the publisher at Vox Media. "That old saying: 'Walk around in someone else's shoes?' Games let you do that – and how much better is your understanding when you do?"

Games can engagingly convey new information or teach skills, such as how to distinguish fake news from real news, or what to do if you are detained at immigration. Our Commuter Challenge game produced in collaboration with

NPR-member station WAMU allowed players to learn about the challenges faced by different communities when the Washington, D.C., Metro is closed for repairs.

- ***Transforms your audience into participants and contributors.***

Games can be used to crowdsource information, involve readers, and organize their feedback, which can be helpful in analyzing huge amounts of information such as a WikiLeaks upload. The British news site The Guardian involved about 20,000 readers in just three days to help analyze 170,000 documents about politicians' expenses. The key, developer Simon Willison told Nieman Lab, was not only to make it feel like a narrative with characters' mugshots, but also like a competitive game.

Other examples of the successful use of gaming techniques include the way Pandora's "name-that-tune" game adds to a database of music or how Ingress and Pokemon Go players on a digital scavenger hunt submit photos and GPS data that can help map an under-articulated area – and build another game.

"Games are good at creating loyalty," Gupta says. "If you show people the news, they trust it more. If they can participate, they are more likely to stay involved."

- ***Provides evidence that this type of format works.***

Stories that originate through audience engagement are top performers, trust-builders and subscription generators. Involving the user drives engagement.

Hearken, a platform that helps news organizations collect questions their audience would like to see a reporter answer, boasts that the resulting stories tend to be more relevant, shareable and lasting. Readers and listeners who vote on the best questions to be asked become more invested.

Kate Lesniak, the publisher of Bitch Media, writes: "Hearken-engaged readers are between two and five times more likely to convert to sustaining membership than ordinary readers."

WAMU 88.5, the American University-owned NPR affiliate, won a 2017 Edward R. Murrow Award with a question submitted by a listener through Hearken: "Why Can't Washingtonians Resist Asking Each Other What They Do For a Living?"

Chris Chester, WAMU's audience editor, said that in 2016, Hearken stories accounted for the No. 2, 3, 4, and 10 top-viewed stories by unique page views. By August, Hearken-sourced stories were No. 5, 6, and 10.

***"Anything that's really interactive really heightens the users' level of trust. It becomes a two-way conversation,"***

JOEY MARBURGER, HEAD OF PRODUCT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST.

On WAMU's What's With Washington, "even the worst-performing of those Hearken-sourced stories registered about 10 times the unique page views of a typical story," Chester says. "It's a force-multiplier for sure."

# II. Why game-design thinking works

Engagement design applies game-design techniques to keeping people interested in content, putting users at the center of the design process, leading them through difficult information to create an experience that makes them want to explore, respond and share.

"Game designers are experience designers," says Grace of AU's Game Lab. "While readers read, and viewers watch, game players engage. Sometimes, experiencing the story is more persuasive and impactful."

News organizations can certainly admire the statistics cited by the game industry: U.S. consumers in 2015 spent $16.5 billion on game content, spending more than 3 billion hours every week playing digital games. News groups can learn from the mechanics and principles that make games so compelling to find unique ways to tell stories, be more responsive and better serve news consumers.

## Engagement from experience, agency, play

We identified three key elements of game design that may prove useful for improving audience engagement: experience, agency and play.

"The difference between other types of storytelling and games is that players act," Grace says. "It posits you as responsible for what happens. It creates a more engaged relationship to the story. It doesn't move without you. Nothing happens if you stop doing.

While some newsrooms became interested in the potential of newsgames in the mid-2000s, enthusiasm waned because of internal politics, the paucity of embedded developers in the newsroom and lack of ownership of the games' development. While some of the obstacles chronicled by game designer and professor Ian Bogost in his 2010 book, Newsgames: Journalism at Play, still exist, many have fallen away.

***While it used to take weeks or months to develop a game, production time for a streamlined team can almost keep up with a news cycle.***

Many newsrooms still face obstacles to change – tight budgets, lack of staff with digital skills and difficulty in figuring out how a traditional newsroom can incorporate experimental forms.

New technology in the last decade has greatly simplified the game-making process and game-making tools are more accessible. The independent game community is more developed and the coders more populous and prolific.

## Tools, templates are improving

Many templates and platforms don't require knowledge of code, including GameSalad, Game Maker, Construct2, and Twine. Sites such as Kenney provide free game assets.

While it used to take weeks or months to develop a game, production time for a streamlined team can almost keep up with a news cycle. Groups of developers get together for hack-a-thons and game jams, to bash out usable games and solutions (just for fun!) over a weekend. This year's Global Game Jam, a 48-hour hackathon in 95 countries, resulted in 7,000 rapid-production games.

"As game jams demonstrate, it is completely reasonable to make quick games at the pace of news now," Grace says.

Newsrooms, too, are rapidly evolving. They are learning to listen to their audiences more actively to identify and respond to their needs. Sites such as Vox, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Buzzfeed, NPR, ProPublica, Mother Jones and AL.com are taking the lead in creating interactive tools to help readers engage more deeply with stories.

## Building on previous work

Academics are examining this transformative area, and the AU JoLT program boasts one of the leaders in persuasive games, Grace, as well as Professor Mike Treanor, a pioneer in newsgames.

Our real-life collaborations with newsrooms benefit from and are building on overlapping research.

A 2015 paper by Maxwell Foxman of Columbia's Tow Center, takes a thorough look at the role of games and play in news and the implications for digital journalism. *The Guide to Journalism and Design* by NYU guru Heather Chaplin offers concrete ways to use design processes as a foundation for news innovation. Retha Hill, a professor at Arizona State University, created templates for newsrooms to use to make quick games. Gonzalo Frasca created the first newsgames site. In his overview of games in 2010, Ian Bogost wrote that using games as a form of journalism was not a question of tech-nology, but rather a question of will.

The technology has evolved. Now we are addressing the will.

# III. Case Studies

Engagement design is not a recipe; it is a process. We are able to highlight concrete ways others may take inspiration for news innovation through case studies -- projects the JoLT team produced with WAMU, Vox, The Undefeated, and at our own News Summit and program.

It's not enough these days simply to broadcast news to a general audience. We looked at how to create an experience that encouraged the participants to opt in to a system to understand information in a playful, yet meaningful way.

The JoLT fellows designed an information experience aimed at establishing formal news dialogues in today's new commons — malls, libraries, museums, train stations, terminals, and even at food trucks. The game-like


*NewsPark, 2015*

environment aimed to help attract participants and further their retention and interest in news and information that affects their daily lives.

## NewsPark

The JoLT team's first foray, NewsPark, allowed people literally to consume news. Passersby stopped by its pop-up location at the Newseum in D.C. to play a card game designed to enlighten them about the amount of water required to make their favorite foods. Each card described the number of gallons it took to produce a specific dish. One card noted that it took 850 gallons of water to produce 8 ounces of beef and 16 gallons for 8 ounces of soybeans. Players had to create a meal using the cards in their hand, trading with other players to achieve the lowest possible water consumption.

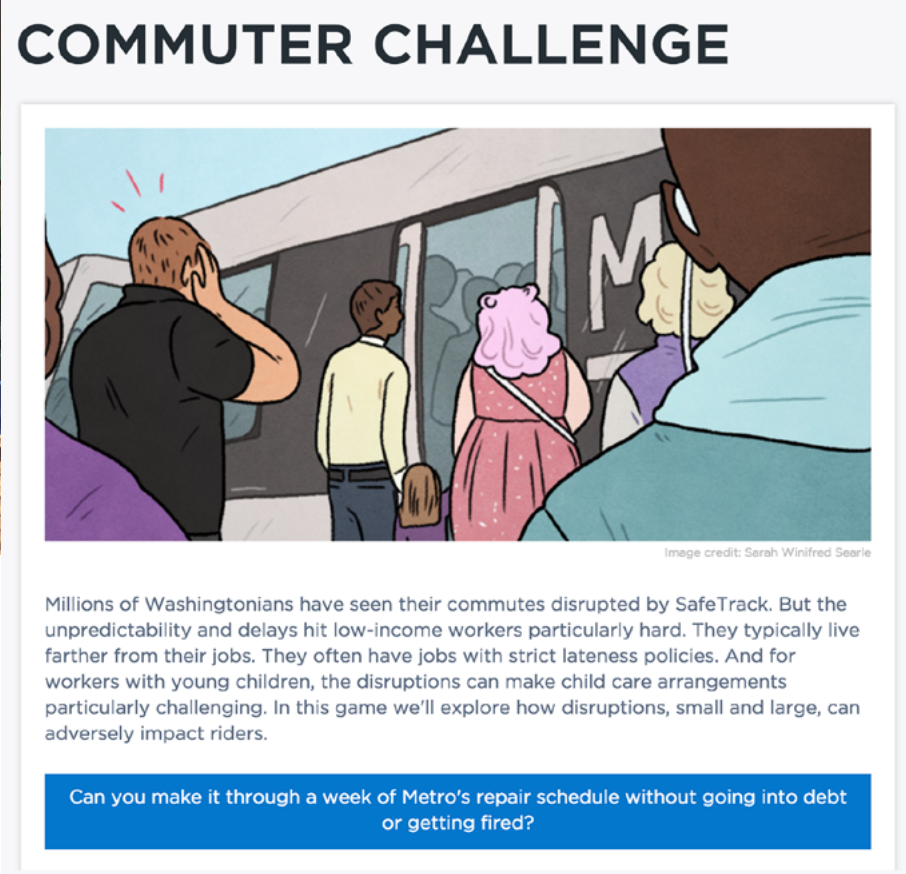
The design calls for the game to be played at a food truck, with the winning meal served as a prize, becoming consumable news that creates a direct, relevant connection to information about water consumption. The magnetic side of the truck can be used to post further information, actionable ideas and player commentary to further the dialogue and interaction sparked by the game. Using gaming techniques such as those in NewsPark could persuade news consumers to take part in "actionable journalism," which offers participants ways to act on information.

### NewsPark stats and feedback

Responses to a survey distributed at NewsPark showed that people stopped to play because of the colorful pop-up display, free food and the sense that people were having fun. After playing, 96 percent of participants said they liked the format and would like to participate in a pop-up news experience again. When asked to rate on a 1-10 scale whether NewsPark increased their interest or curiosity about water scarcity issues, the average response was 7.9.

### Takeaways

- Bring the news to your audience. NewsPark was set up in front of the Newseum in Washington, D.C., where there was a greater likelihood of appealing to self-selected groups interested in news. However, many participants were not visiting the museum.
- Make the experience attractive and rewarding. Free food may have lured players in, but the experience kept them there.
- People like to play. Participants spent about five minutes playing, whether they were interested in water consumption issues or not. That compares favorably to the amount of time the average reader spends on an online article (under a minute).
- The pop-up news experience lends itself to community engagement as well as solution and advocacy journalism. The more time people spend on the experience, the more interested they are in learning more and, perhaps, doing something about it. News groups could use pop-ups to engage communities and find out more about issues consumer care about. It is service journalism in action.
- The game is available to print and play here (http://bit.ly/2BhK9E8).




*Commuter Challenge, 2016*

## WAMU's Commuter Challenge

Residents and visitors regularly complain about the Washington, D.C., Metro, but recent shutdowns of major portions of the grid to make repairs provided new headaches for users. NPR affiliate WAMU wanted to deepen reader involvement in ongoing coverage about the how the service cuts affected some communities more than others. The result was Commuter Challenge, a simulation or empathy game that allowed players to experience the daily choices a minimum-wage worker faced when their public transit was interrupted.

A reporter rode the trains, interviewing about three dozen commuters in several locations to get a sense of the real consequences for those who depend on the Metro to get to work, school or other appointments, such as dropping off or picking up a child on time. One man, who lost his restaurant job because service disruptions made him late three times in two weeks, was the inspiration for the game's main character. The interviews helped determine that the key tension factors in the game – as in real life -- would be time and budget. In the game, all of the costs, penalties and obstacles were real, drawn from the reporting. Player Tracy Loh noted how much the game resonated with her:

> *"I commute from PG [Prince George's County] to downtown with a daycare drop-off every day. This game was so similar to my real life in terms of problems with the bus and being on time that it actually stressed me out to click through. ... I appreciate this game bringing to life what my experience as an east-to-west trip-chaining transit commuter is like."*

WAMU's Managing Editor of Broadcast Kathy Goldgeier says the game was "an enhancement for our digital brand and a big traffic driver." Commuter Challenge attracted coverage in local blogs for its novel approach, which in turn brought first-time visitors to WAMU's website. Atlantic Media's CityLab called it "a lavishly illustrated choose-your-own-adventure" and said that the game helped "close the perception gap."

The game received more than 15,000 unique page views, and has an impressively long tail: nine months after the launch the game is still getting between two and four dozen unique visits per day. Most important for WAMU, it brought 6,225 new users to the website.

One thing both the JoLT and WAMU teams learned was that the story and the interactive piece should be developed simultaneously. After the game was developed, the WAMU team leaders decided they would like a companion piece story to highlight how commuters with the least income and job flexibility were much more affected by public transit disruptions. Integrating the story development with the game development would have resulted in a stronger outcome. Adding a link to the story from the game would also have elevated reader and listener numbers.

"Could we improve on the formula?" Goldgeier asks. "Sure. I think our story was a little bit of an afterthought to the game. If it had been a bit more integrated, I think the boost to the journalism would have been that much more, but that's how we learn."

Commuter Challenge is a good example of how making a story interactive does not have to be difficult. We used a simple, open-source tool for telling stories called Twine, in a choose-your-own-adventure type format. A reporter or multimedia person without programming experience can quickly figure it out, and a skilled programmer can make the experience

much richer by using variables, conditional logic, images, CSS, and JavaScript. We used an illustrator to create art for the game, but a news group could use its own photos or art.

### *Takeaways*

- News groups can make an effective interactive narrative or game with open-source tools, such as Twine.
- The format can be as simple as a text-based game, or enriched with art and branching narratives.
- Interactive narratives work well to enhance engagement with long-term or ongoing stories.
- Interactive narratives and games offer a way to explore a system, simulate a story and its dilemmas or explore choices.
- In the design and production process, have clear editorial goals, include both designers and reporters and keep iterating with feedback.

## Factitious

Real or fake? Today's tsunami of information can confuse readers by the blurring of boundaries between what is verified news and what is not. To increase news consumers' sense of agency in detecting fake news, we designed Factitious.

Designed first as a paper prototype and then developed as an online and mobile game, Factitious presents players with stories culled from internet sites. The player decides whether it's an actual news story. The mobile interface, inspired by the Tinder dating app, asks users to swipe right for a real story and left for fake. One news report dubbed it, "Tinder Meets Fake News."

The mobile version has so far attracted 541,000 users who played 1.1 million rounds. The game was reported on by NPR, Newsweek, Nieman Lab and about a dozen other outlets. University researchers have asked to work with our data sets, and the game will be offered to the News Literacy Project for high schools to use along with its checkology® digital curriculum.

In Factitious, players receive immediate feedback, and see which elements of the story should have tipped them off to its veracity or


*Factitious, 2017*

category. The more they play, the more familiar they become with common news conventions versus the signifiers of stories posing as news. Future levels may have players judge further whether the "fake news" is satire, spin, an advertisement or commentary.

The experience of making Factitious led us to a key conclusion: Games are a novel way to crowdsource feedback on your content. The game engine can be adapted for other uses, such as polling or A/B testing.

The design process started with putting the user in the center of the game and asking what we wanted them to do. Unlike traditional journalism, which is designed to transmit information, game design is centered around active verbs: to play, to learn, to detect, to share. Good games empower the player to act, and action -- in games and news -- is engagement.

In Factitious, the players must judge. After they swipe right for real news or left for fake, they get immediate feedback. As the players level up, the categories get more specific and challenging.

To afford agency, Factitious equips players with a set of criteria to measure quickly whether a story is believable, sensationalized or made up: what is the source, who is quoted, what is the story's intention, is it verifiable? Players interested in learning more can ultimately find quick tutorials on how to check out a story, or to understand as a news creator what the hallmarks of veracity are. By analyzing their

reactions, we can also understand which elements of a story might cause distrust or skepticism, and how to better signal veracity.

The hidden beauty of Factitious is its open and adaptable database engine. The game, on the surface, is an enhanced quiz. But players' responses can be analyzed to understand how they perceive stories, and what signals credibility to them. Another important benefit allows the database template to be simply adapted for other uses: for simple A/B testing, to garner feedback on stories, and to crowdsource information.

We learned a few things: Games are a novel way to crowdsource feedback on your content; players were intimidated by large blocks of text; game players hate asking for hints so we changed "hint" to "source."

We also learned we needed a mobile version because most people get their news on their phones and younger audiences expect interactivity.

The most satisfying learning? Players got better at detecting fake news. As in any game, it takes a bit of play to figure out the rules and what to look for, but pre- and post-play surveys showed that players felt they had acquired detection skills.

### *Takeaways*

- Decide what you want the participant to DO.
- Design in feedback for guidance or positive reinforcement.
- Make it playful and interactive.
- Test it out, welcome feedback, and iterate.

## Spark

Play allows people to experiment safely in a contained environment. The news production process, delivery and consumption can all benefit from a playful approach. This might work at a staff retreat.

The JoLT fellows created Spark to introduce quick-thinking, out-of-the-box adaptation to ever-changing constraints. The aim is to help create an environment in the newsroom that encourages risk-taking and collaboration. It's played live, in a workshop type setting.

Groups are asked to write headlines or stories on a given theme – but with constraints. The first round asked players to present a story in only 140 characters, like a post on Twitter. In each round, the game director introduces a new constraint, such as "You can't use the letter 'e,'" or "Your story must relate to outer space and use a GIF." The game's underlying goal is to recharge players' ability to identify and react to a rapidly changing environment and help them embrace opportunities. In a work environment, it can reveal the creativity of younger staff and their command of novel tools, giving them a chance to flatten the traditional newsroom hierarchy and to work across typical divisions of reporters vs. designers vs. programmers.

### *Takeaways*

- Constraints can spark creativity.
- A playful warm-up can give permission to break the rules, and highlight staff's hidden skills or ideas.
- Combining reporters, designers and programmers invites collaboration across hierarchies and traditional divisions.

## Final Fantasy 7 Square Off

The JoLT team partnered with Vox Media's Storytelling Studio to create a game to engage the audience with a major story by Vox Media's gaming brand, Polygon.

Final Fantasy 7: An Oral History, about the making of blockbuster video game, was a

*Spark, 2015*

massive journalistic undertaking. Matt Leone, Polygon's features editor, had been reporting on the story for more than two years. JoLT fellows Cherisse Datu, Kelli Dunlap and Joyce Rice describe the process behind the project:

"Final Fantasy 7 is a name that holds a lot of nostalgia for RPG [role-playing game] players. Therefore, the first game verb that we thought about was 'share.' In addition, we wanted players to use Matt's oral history to win the game, so 'learn' also became a key verb. We played a word association game with the storytelling team. We asked what they'd like players to do. After that, we went to work.

"A lot of our initial concepts echoed mechanics from the original game. We played with the idea of mixing up materia to summon development team members. Another idea was based on finding characters on a map resembling Final Fantasy 7's Gaia. We also thought about having players share how old they were and where they were when they first played Final Fantasy 7. After a round of brainstorming, we came up with a turn-based battle trivia game.

"Square Off was a happy marriage of Matt's two-year investigation and a playful tribute to Final Fantasy 7. Our verb was 'attack,' but also 'attack correctly.' Coupled with the feature to share answers on social media, our main verbs of 'share' and 'learn' were achieved."

## *Collaborating with a creative newsroom*

Vox Media was a good partner for this experiment because the group already pushes boundaries with its design and user interface. Vox Media has eight brands covering news, food, sports, video games and other niches, and designs across several platforms, including Facebook, Apple News, Google News and Snapchat.

Kainaz Amaria, executive design director of storytelling at Vox Media, says that "with new technology comes a whole host of problems that you have to solve. Our motto is 'Thrive on change.' It's sort of baked in here."

Even so, both teams learned from each other. Amaria says the JoLT team "brought a different way of thinking to us. When we went into the brainstorm and you explained your process, 'What do we want our audiences to DO?' That sort of broke open a new process for us as a way to tell our story. What action do you want your audience to take? When we do think of that, we usually think about navigation, not storytelling. I don't think journalism explores that enough."

Katie O'Dowd, the senior project manager of Storytelling Studio, says that its Storytelling team has added that element to its design process. "We have added a question to our kickoff – what do we want the reader to do?" she says.

Square Off was an opportunity to collect more data about how reader-players interact with this kind of content. About 44 percent of readers clicked through from the story about Final Fantasy 7 to play the related game. "That's a pretty good conversion rate," says JoLT fellow Kelli Dunlap. "It's also cool to note that Square Off was the top next page view after the Polygon homepage."

Next time, team members say, they would put the link to the game higher in the story or link to it on the home page. They would also measure how long players spent playing the game and at which points they left it.

Every experience is feedback for the next iteration.


*Square Off, 2016*

*Square Off, 2016*

### *Takeaways*

- Collaboration works best if it is regularly scheduled and in-person, at least at first.
- "Hiring someone to be in the actual building and collaborate with your desk is really important," Amaria says.

***"You brought a different way of thinking to us . . . 'What do we want our audiences to DO?' That sort of broke open a new process for us as a way to tell our story."***

KAINAZ AMARIA, EXECUTIVE DESIGN DIRECTOR OF STORYTELLING AT VOX MEDIA

- If the collaborator is a contractor, nail down the contracts and fine print. This project was delayed while Vox Media, American University and the Knight Foundation created a pioneering contract agreement for this new kind of work.
- Define clear parameters and end goals, especially if you are working on two related but different products, like the game and the oral history.
- Dare to take risks. Both sides said they would like to work together again to try to create something that pushes boundaries a little more.
- Know how you'll incorporate the game or tool into the story. Place it at the top or on the landing page for best engagement. Don't make people stumble upon it.

## NewsJam

In October 2017, American University and the University of Miami's Center for Communication, Culture and Change co-sponsored a NewsJam on the Miami campus. The challenge: Make a news-related game in 36 hours. Participants were UM Interactive Media grad students, members of a gamers' meetup, professors and folks who were simply curious. Only a few had game design or programming skills.

From Friday afternoon to noon Sunday, participants developed games based on trending news topics: battling blazing fires, slowing the pace of global warming, separating "bots" from humans, stopping sexual harassment, and fighting fake news.

"One of the most impressive things about this experiment is that many participants had never made a digital game before," Grace says. "Years ago these kinds of games would have taken five or 10 times longer to design and implement." Now, he says, "these types of games can easily fill the space of political cartoons or crosswords."

Several teams used game-making tools such as GameSalad or Construct 2, which have built-in blocks of code.

"Hurl the Harasser," addressed sexual harassment, trapping women who have been harassed in a bubble of isolation and shame that they can burst by speaking out. When enough women are freed to speak, their collective mass tips the balance of power and hurls the bathrobe-clad harasser off his teeter-totter perch. The game highlights how difficult it can be for women to speak out, while reflecting the power in numbers women hold when they do.

### *Takeaways*

- Newsgames can be made quickly with open-source tools that simplify programming and game creation.
- Newsgames can act as an interactive editorial cartoon or a puzzle that suggests real solutions to a topical problem.
- Newsgames can enliven and explain a trending topic and enhance readers' interest.

*Newsjam, 2017*

# IV. Toolkit for news games

## Design is a process, not a recipe. For newsrooms to start, consider these steps:

### 1. Identify your story goals

Why are you telling this story?
*To inspire empathy, convey information, spark action, persuade, experience a story, explore a system?*

What do you want the user to DO?
*Share, learn, explore, understand, commit, organize, connect, return?*

Which interactive form is best to tell it on each platform?
*What will best enhance the storytelling beyond prose or video? Interactive, toy, or game?*

### 2. Build your dream team

Whom do you need for the platforms? Integrate with the newsroom; don't be a separate pod of tech and design folks, or have people working in silos.

### 3. Workshop it to start speaking the same language

Agree on game verbs (what you want the user to do), how the team will collaborate and editorial goals. How will you make the design cohesive across platforms? Define the product's scope and its business role to know what resources it needs.

### 4. Project manage

Have one person direct traffic. Have clear goals, benchmarks and timelines.

### 5. Make a prototype

It's much easier to build a paper prototype, playtest it and adjust it before you sink investment into the real thing. "Make a quick model to demonstrate the idea, and iterate quickly," says AU Game Lab's Lindsay Grace. "People don't always understand abstractly, but they can understand and amend a model."

### 6. Trust your dream team

Collaborate on vision, but don't try to design by committee. "If you try to do a single panel cartoon and have a single artist creating it with the feedback of eight people, it won't work," Grace says. "Let designers do their thing and run with it." Then iterate with feedback.

### 7. Playtest it

Adjust. Test it again. Iterate.

### 8. Stay playful

The bottom line: Is it engaging?

### 9. Don't neglect the art

Visual design can make or break the appeal.

### 10. Think about scale

Can the template or platform be used for other stories? Do you need to contract talent? Have someone on staff?

### 11. Design in an owner

Who is responsible for follow through, maintenance, iteration?

### 12. Do a post-launch review

What worked? What unforeseen challenges cropped up? What would you do differently next time? Document and share your learnings.

*JoLT Workshop, 2015*

*JoLT Professional and Student Fellows, 2015*

*This report was prepared through the generous grant of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which supported the JoLT team effort at the School of Communication at American University as it explored the intersection of game design and journalism.*

*The effort was launched by SOC Dean Jeffrey Rutenbeck and run by SOC's Lindsay Grace of the Game Lab and Amy Eisman in Journalism. The effort included a team of professional fellows — including Matt Thompson, now at The Atlantic, Mitch Gelman, now at the Newseum, Tory Hargro, now at Facebook, and Bob Hone and Maggie Farley, both at American University —Hone in the Game Lab and Farley as an adjunct instructor.*

*The games have been built, designed and debated by the three JoLT fellows, who received Master of Arts degrees in Game Design —Cherisse Datu, Kelli Dunlap and Joyce Rice —and by Maggie Farley and Bob Hone. The final report was written by Maggie Farley and designed by Joyce Rice.*

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*Lindsay Grace* is an associate professor at American University and founding director of the American University Game Lab and Studio. He is the Fall 2017 Visiting Knight Chair at the University of Miami. His work has received awards and recognition from the Games for Change Festival, the Digital Diversity Network, the Association of Computing Machinery's digital arts community, Black Enterprise and others. He has published more than 50 papers, articles and book chapters on games since 2009. His creative work has been selected for showcase internationally including New York, Paris, Sao Paolo, Singapore, Chicago, Vancouver, Istanbul, and others. He has given talks at the Game Developers Conference, SXSW, Games for Change Festival, the Online News Association, the Society for News Design, and many other industry events.

*Maggie Farley* was a professional fellow at American University's Journalism and Leadership Transformation program from 2015-2017, and is now an adjunct professor at AU in the School of Communication. She is a co-creator of Factitious, Hurl the Harasser and Commuter Challenge. Farley spent 14 years as an award-winning foreign correspondent for the Los Angeles Times. She was based in Hong Kong and Shanghai, covering Southeast Asia and then China before returning to New York to head the U.N. Bureau just in time to cover 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. Farley hopped to new media from old media in 2009, as a partner in Lucky G Media, creating digital educational content. Lucky Grasshopper, an animated app for learning Chinese characters, hit the App Store's top ten in educational apps in 2010. Farley has designed digital education projects for Pearson Foundation, bgC3, and the News Literacy Project.

*Bob Hone* is currently a Designer-In-Residence and Visiting Scholar in American University's School of Communication. He teaches "Designing Health Games" in the spring and the inaugural class resulted in four 'fundable' game concepts developed by AU Game Lab students. He is also the acting Game Studio Manager and has designed and managed two game projects in the past year. He recently presented his design of a "gaming therapy" for anxiety, "Seeing the Good Side," at the Games for Change conference in June. Prior to joining the Game Lab in 2015,

Hone was the Creative Director for a boutique interactive design company, Red Hill Studios, that received numerous grants from the NIH and the NSF to develop innovative software. Prior to that, he was an award-winning PBS Science Television Producer/Director/ Writer (Peabody/Emmy). Prior to that, he was an MIT-educated Chemical Engineer with stints at duPont, General Electric, and Exxon. He enjoys learning new skills and switching careers every so often :)

*Joyce Rice* is a cartoonist and game designer with a focus in journalism and education. She cofounded Symbolia, was a Fellow in American University's JoLT program, and teaches digital comics at the California College of the Arts. She's spoken about media innovation at SXSW, Game Developer's Conference, and on the Verge's Top Shelf, and she's worked with the fine folks at Vox Media, Showtime, and American Public Media to produce powerful stories.

*Cherisse Datu* is a video producer and game designer. She received her Masters in Game Design from American University, and was a JoLT (Journalism and Leadership Transformation) Fellow studying the the Intersection of Game Design and Journalism with a grant from the Knight Foundation. She's worked with ESPN's The Undefeated, Al Jazeera's The Stream, Extra Credits, and Fusion. She's a game designer for The Girl Who Sees, a Filipino fantasy-adventure game. She was chosen as Google Jump Ambassador, and is currently working on a VR project on Asian-American experiences and identity.

*Kelli Dunlap, PsyD* is a psychologist and game designer. She currently works as a freelance researcher at iThrive Games, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the mental well-being of teens through games. Dr. Dunlap presents regularly at psychological and games industry conferences on games and mental health, and her research has been published in scholarly journals including Games for Health and Carnegie Mellon ETC Press. Dr. Dunlap has collaborated with non-profit organizations including the National Institute of Mental Health and NOVA Labs to develop games that address mental health issues. She has also developed her own digital game about the therapeutic process which was recognized by Games for Change.

*Amy Eisman* is the incoming director of the Journalism Division at American University's School of Communication, where she teaches journalism, entrepreneurship and digital content. Eisman facilitated the JoLT project, which focused on the intersection of games and journalism. She is former director of the MA in Interactive Journalism, the MA in Media Entrepreneurship and the Writing for Communication classes in SOC. In 2015, she was named among the 100 Tech Titans in digital Washington by Washingtonian Magazine. Eisman was with Gannett for 17 years, first as a Cover Story editor at USA TODAY's launch and later as Executive Editor of USA WEEKEND. Eisman was also a managing editor at AOL, a Fulbright lecturer in Moscow and trained newsrooms worldwide on web content and writing after an earlier newspaper reporting and editing career. She co-authored online training modules for Gannett about breaking news online, interactivity and database journalism and co-wrote a module for Knight Citizen News Network about online journalism. Eisman co-chaired the 2010 Online News Association conference and in 2011 presented in Vladivostok about digital journalism. She chairs ONA's MJ Bear Fellowship committee, honoring rising digital journalists under 30, and judges the White House Correspondents' Association Awards.