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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School of Communication JoLT project: Innovation in Journalism through Engagement Design

American University, Washington, D.C.

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In a quest to find ways for journalism to be more interactive and engaging, the JoLT team at American University has been investigating how the design principles that make gaming so captivating and lucrative can enhance news engagement. We call it “engagement design.”

*Factitious
prototyping at
the 2015 JoLT
summit*

We followed several paths over two years to reach our conclusions. We sent game

designers, a psychologist, a graphic storyteller and a video journalist into Washington, D.C., area newsrooms for several months to see what they could create. We staged conferences and workshops. We developed digital and live games. And we held NewsJam, a three-day event at the University of Miami for teams to produce a handful of news-related games on the spot.

Factitious

1.1 million plays in four months

Commuter Challenge

Brought 6,000 new users to the WAMU website

Square Off

44% conversion rate from news story

NewsPark

96% would play again

NewsJam

5 newsgames in 36 hours

Summit

Convened digital newsmakers, game designers and scholars to discuss collision – and confluence of game design and news

This is what we found:

Engagement design, inspired by the principles that make games so compelling, can be an effective tool for newsrooms to address fundamental questions of engagement, transparency and trust. Playful interaction also can reveal how readers perceive content and provoke them to provide valuable feedback.

Engagement design is not a recipe; it is a process. But through case studies and reflections on projects the JoLT team undertook with radio station WAMU 88.5, Vox, The Undeclared, and at our own AU News & Games Summit, this report highlights concrete ways others may find inspiration for news innovation.

This report offers a few surprising findings as

well as suggestions for bringing playful interactive activity into innovative newsrooms.

Games can be used effectively on some kinds of stories:

- to explain complex systems such as global warming, immigration, elections
- to create empathy or understanding
- to teach skills or convey new information
- to create connection or interaction

“The difference between other types of storytelling and games is that players DO,” says Lindsay Grace, head of the AU Game Lab. “It posits you as responsible for what happens. It creates a more engaged relationship to the story. It doesn’t move without you.”

Games teach us that showing how a story is developed builds trust among consumers.

If people can see how a story is made, analyze it themselves — even contribute to it — they are more likely to trust and engage with it. When users can see data, explore, manipulate and play with the variables, they can draw their own conclusions. Their play becomes an act of verification.

Play can tell you a lot about your readers and your content.

Engagement design can create playful content with targeted feedback in mind -- as a poll, an A/B test, or a perception barometer. The way users interact reveals more than mere analytics.

“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,’” Grace says about JoLT’s Factitious game.

Interaction changes your audience into participants.

When a broadcast becomes a conversation, your users gain agency and you gain feedback. News groups also can crowdsource computation or verification through gameplay.

Engagement doesn’t have to be digital.

Meet your users where they are, and listen closely. A pop-up news experience lends itself to community engagement as well as solution and advocacy journalism. When we held a live game called NewsPark outside the Newseum in Washington, D.C., we facilitated conversation about water shortage among strangers for whom the issue seemed far away and irrelevant.

Engagement design doesn’t have to be expensive or require special skills.

Technical tools have become simpler and open-sourced. Our NewsJam with 21 people created five newsgames in 36 hours. Engagement design does require will, clarity, collaboration and iteration. Lots of it. Our projects worked best when the designers were part of the editorial team and in the same room from the beginning. The costs are up to you.

Read the full report *Innovation in Journalism through Engagement Design* [here \(http://www.american.edu/soc/news/upload/jolt-Toolkit.pdf\)](http://www.american.edu/soc/news/upload/jolt-Toolkit.pdf)

More about JoLT [here \(https://edspace.american.edu/jolt/\)](https://edspace.american.edu/jolt/).

Video overview of the project [here \(http://bit.ly/2ikaP3e\)](http://bit.ly/2ikaP3e).

Play Factitious, a game that tests your news sense, [here \(http://factitious.augamestudio.com/#/\)](http://factitious.augamestudio.com/#/).

Play Commuter Challenge, an interactive narrative, [here \(https://wamu.org/commuter-challenge/\)](https://wamu.org/commuter-challenge/). (WAMU)

Play Square Off, a Final Fantasy VII trivia battle [here \(https://www.polygon.com/a/final-fantasy-7/battle-trivia\)](https://www.polygon.com/a/final-fantasy-7/battle-trivia). (Vox)

