

Video Games: a New Medium for Journalism

Video games are the youngest medium in our civilization. But in the few decades of their existence, they've come further faster than any other medium in history. Video games have become a mainstream medium – in fact, they are poised to become (and may already be) the dominant medium of our society. There are more gamers than football fans in the UK.¹ Video games outsell both movies and music.² And despite the current recession, their sales are growing at double-digit rates,³ while other media sales figures are steady, or declining.⁴

It takes time for the full potential of new technologies to be realized. When they were introduced in the early 20th century, both radio and television were dismissed as frivolous entertainments, unsuited to the serious business of journalism. Though some people still perceive video games as little more than gung-ho escapism, like any medium they are capable of great sophistication and intelligence.

The gaming audience is large and diverse. They are ready for factual games that help them understand the world around them. And the interactive nature of video games gives journalists an opportunity to reach audiences in powerful new ways. It is an opportunity not to be missed.

The Audience is Ready

In the last years of this decade, video gaming has become fully mainstream. Video games have climbed out of their early 'geek' niche to become a true mass medium. In the UK, one of the world's most mature gaming markets, the average age of a video gamer in 2008 was 33.⁵ Over a third (37%) of the UK's population describe themselves as "active gamers"⁶ – and that's across all age categories, including over 60's. In the 16-29 age bracket, the proportion of 'active gamers' rises to 48%.⁷ Essentially everyone in the under-16 bracket is an active gamer.⁸

What's more, the proportion of gamers in every age bracket is rising with every passing year. Video gaming is not a youth pastime that people abandon as they grow older.

Rather, gaming is something that people are picking up as kids, and then sticking to – just like television and reading.

Indications are that the gaming audience will be receptive to factual and journalistic content. There evidence that gamers as a group are more interested in politics – and more politically active – than non-gamers.⁹ Nor are they an isolated sub-population: several studies have shown that gamers tend to be at least as social and outgoing as non-gamers, if not more so.¹⁰ What's more, the gender balance of gamers is close, though men and women do tend to play different games.¹¹

Of course the primary reason most people play video games is because they're fun. But many players report that they also find games more stimulating and more thought provoking than TV or the cinema.¹² BBC audience research indicates that an overwhelming majority of gamers of all ages feel that games can be used for education as well as entertainment.¹³

The Medium is Ready

But can games really convey journalism? The answer is yes. There's nothing like being immersed in a situation to find out what it's all about and gain an intuitive understanding of it. Games have been used for learning for centuries – modern flight simulators and war games are just the latest examples. Though games as journalism are in their infancy, there are already several good examples of video games with a journalistic bent.

*Insurgency*¹⁴ is a simulation of street combat in Baghdad and Basra. The game is a modification of *Half-Life 2*, a commercially successful first-person shooter game. It was originally created as a volunteer project by veterans of the US armed forces upon their return from combat duty in Iraq. Authenticity and realism were paramount, according to Pablo Dopico, one of the game's makers:

“This is an adult game – it requires a lot of skill, and knowledge of military tactics. It attempts to depict modern military combat accurately. We have many players from the military. They contribute from their experiences, and they consult with us

informally on accuracy. People come straight back from Iraq, play the game, and they like the feeling of realism they get. Some of the team members are actually doing military training at the moment. [...] *America's Army* is the game most played by military people, and we are the second most played – the military users provide an invaluable feedback, like mailing us and saying 'the AK47 sounds good, but it should actually reload like this . . . '”¹⁵

*America's Army*¹⁶ itself is a free game used as recruiting tool for the US armed forces. Arguably it is advertising or propaganda rather than journalism, but it shares *Insurgency*'s commitment to accuracy and realism. Both of these games are, in a very real sense, interactive records of what it's like to be a soldier on the streets of Baghdad.

Where games really come into their own is as a medium for deep explanatory journalism – especially journalism about complicated systems with many interrelationships, interacting forces and factions. These can be important situations to understand, such as factional politics on the streets of Baghdad in 2005-06, or the complicated realities of the global fight against malaria. This sort of story is very difficult to tell in text, and doubly so in video, as these media require journalists to arrange dynamic relationships and issues into some sort of fixed linear narrative.

Video games allow a different approach. A video game journalist can construct a model of the way things work and interact in the situation being described, and allow the audience to explore the model at their leisure.¹⁷ The factual accuracy of this mode of journalism consists in making sure that the model reacts to a user's actions in the same way that reality would, thus generating an authentic experience and applicable understanding.

The successful *Sim City* series of games is a perfect example of this sort of interactive communication. Though not intended as journalism, these games do have a factual theme. *Sim City* puts players in charge of planning, growing and running a city. Starting from an empty patch of land, players must build the energy grid, plan the transport network, set taxes and provide services. Though the cities players design are fictional, success in this game requires an internalized understanding of very real concepts such as

infrastructure, tax policy, budgeting and zoning practice. This is dry stuff by any account, but the games in this series have sold over 18 million copies, and *Sim City* players can spend dozens or hundreds of hours on the game.

Not every topic will be appropriate for treatment in a journalistic video game. Games as journalism are less useful for telling the facts of *what happened* in a given past event – video, audio and text maintain their respective advantages here, not least because they can be produced very quickly. However, none of these media can match the power of video games to explain the *way things work* in an ongoing situation or issue. This fact, coupled with the relatively long production time most games require, makes video games eminently suited to long-form (i.e. current affairs or documentary) journalism instead of reactive news journalism.¹⁸

Games can also transmit a particular political or editorial point. A simplified version of the *Sim City* concept has been published by *The Economist* in association with the petroleum company Chevron. *Energyville*¹⁹ gives the player control of a growing city and the task of ensuring its energy supply in the face of shocks, changing technology and environmental pressures. The game's mechanics make this very difficult to achieve without resorting to petroleum – hardly surprising, given the game's principal sponsor. But this game does illustrate the power video games can have to make a rhetorical argument. Other games such as *September 12th*,²⁰ *Oiligarchy*²¹ and *The McDonalds Game*²² also make arguments about current events and are well worth a play.

The Critical Nature of Fun

Video games are a very powerful medium that can achieve an unparalleled level of engagement with the audience. The *Sim City* example is telling: it is hard to imagine many people spending many hours considering knotty problems of tax policy or residential zoning law (in their leisure time!) in any other medium. Games can achieve this level of engagement because they are fun. This may seem self-evident, but the concept of fun is a critical one for video game journalism, because fun in video games is a very specific kind of enjoyment.

Fun in video games consists of problem solving. This is the essence of the video game as a medium. Graphics, story, and so on are secondary features also found in most other media. But video games are unique because they confront the user with a series of challenges set by the game designers. At first the user is a novice, with no idea how to solve the problems being presented. Progress is patchy and random. With repeated attempts, however, the player gains expertise and confidence and is eventually rewarded with the thrill of success. Fun in video games is thus the process of engagement with a problem in the search for a solution. In other words, fun in video games is engagement in an iterative process of skill acquisition through repeated trial and error.²³

The skills acquired vary from game to game: *Insurgency* trains accurate aim and applied combat tactics. *Sim City* requires urban planning skills. Other popular games are challenges in geometry (*Tetris*), hand-eye coordination (*Wii Sports*), rhythm (*Guitar Hero*) and football tactics (*FIFA Soccer*).²⁴ In all these cases players experience are fictional (though more or less realistic) scenarios. But the skills and situational understanding players gain from facing these game challenges are very real.²⁵

This challenge structure is at the heart of games' value to journalism. By setting challenges relevant to the subject matter, a journalist can communicate understanding of almost any complex topic. Imagine, for instance, a current affairs project on the global fight against AIDS. Documentary series, magazine articles, and books have all been written about this. But a game on the same topic could cast the player in the role of a World Health Organization official tasked with eliminating the disease in a particular country. The player would have to deal with all aspects of the campaign – obtaining funding, training health workers, negotiating with local communities, sourcing and distributing drugs and other medical care. This sort of engagement, if properly designed, would be intensely fun and convey a rich understanding of the complex realities of global public health.

Are Journalists Ready?

At 2 p.m. on Sunday, 16 November 2008, a 15 year-old boy from Halland province, in Sweden, collapsed in an apparent epileptic fit. He was rushed to hospital, where doctors found him to be dehydrated and exhausted from a prolonged period of extreme

concentration. After a brief stay in hospital on an electrolyte drip, he was discharged. The cause of his collapse: *Wrath of the Lich King* an expansion of the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft*. The boy had gotten a copy of the game on midnight Saturday and gathered with his friends to play it. The experience engrossed them so intensely that they stayed up, not tiring, forgetting to eat or drink, for over 36 hours of continuous play.²⁶

This story was reported in several papers as a lamentable example of what video games can do to people. The boy undoubtedly made some poor choices. But his story illustrates a larger point.

In the video game, journalists have at their disposal a medium so powerful, so engrossing, that people can forget to eat or sleep while using it. Players of *World of Warcraft* memorize great tomes of arcane knowledge to gain an advantage in the game's invented world. Why should this kind of power be restricted to fiction and fantasy?

Video games are as powerful as television, radio, or even books. It is time we started using them for more than entertainment.

This article based on the author's posts at Just Another Meme Vector, <http://trippenbach.com>. Bibliography and additional reading available at <http://del.icio.us/trippenbach/FoI>

¹ David Hayward: *Under the Mask: Perspectives on the Gamer* (<http://pixel-lab.squarespace.com/talks/2008/6/11/under-the-mask-games-culture.html>)

² 'Games 'to outsell' music, video' *BBC News* (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7709298.stm>)

³ 'Games will 'eclipse' other media' *BBC News* (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7821612.stm>)

⁴ Julia Kollewe, 'Games buoy HMV while CD sales sink' *The Guardian* 2 July 2008 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/jul/02/hmvgroupbusiness.retail?gusrc=rss&feed=technology_full)

⁵ Interactive Software Federation of Europe: *Video Gamers in Europe 2008*. (http://www.isfe-eu.org/tzr/scripts/downloader2.php?filename=T003/F0013/8c/79/w7ol0v3qaghqd4ale6vlpnent&mime=application/pdf&originalname=ISFE_Consumer_Research_2008_Report_final.pdf)

⁶ Interactive Software Federation of Europe: *Video Gamers in Europe 2008*.

⁷ Interactive Software Federation of Europe: *Video Gamers in Europe 2008*.

⁸ BBC Audience Planning: *State of Play II* (Internal publication, 2005)

⁹ Amanda Lenhart et al.: *Teens, Video Games and Civics* (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008) (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Games_and_Civics_Report_FINAL.pdf)

¹⁰ Amanda Lenhart et al.: *Teens, Video Games and Civics*

¹¹ BBC Audience Planning: *State of Play II* report (2005)

¹² Interactive Software Federation of Europe: *Video Gamers in Europe 2008*.

¹³ BBC Audience Planning: *State of Play II* report (2005)

¹⁴ <http://www.insmod.net/>

¹⁵ Personal communication with the author.

¹⁶ <http://www.americasarmy.com/>

¹⁷ Ian Bogost, a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, calls this kind of communication 'Procedural Rhetoric' and discusses it further in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (MIT Press, 2007)

¹⁸ Future production tools and methods may shorten this, but at the moment even the simplest in-browser Flash game has a production time of a few days – too slow for the 24-hour news cycle, but entirely adequate for 'magazine' type journalism.

¹⁹ <http://willyoujoinus.com/energyville/>

²⁰ <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>

²¹ <http://www.molleindustria.org/en/oiligarchy>

²² <http://www.mcvideogame.com/>

²³ Raph Koster explores the nature of fun and fundamentals of video games in his book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. (Paraglyph Press, 2005)

²⁴ The Wii's hand-eye coordination training is good enough that some hospitals have started using it as a training tool for surgeons. One hospital in the US reports that surgeons who spend an hour a night on the Wii score 48% higher on tool control performance than those who don't. Paul McNamara, 'Why a Wii could be good for your health' *Guardian*, 7 August 2008

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/aug/07/research.games>)

²⁵ Imagine the following thought experiment: take 20 people who have never played football and divide them into two groups of 10. One group is assigned games consoles and plays 4 hours of *FIFA Soccer* a day for six months. The other group is a control and is exposed to no football at all, in any medium. Both groups then get one day of on-the-pitch soccer training before facing off in an exhibition match. Which group will prevail?

²⁶²⁶ David Brown: "Boy collapses after playing World of Warcraft for 24 hours straight." *The Times*, 17 November 2008. (http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article5173755.ece)