

Newsjam: Making Games at the Pace of News

Lindsay D. Grace
American University Game Lab

Washington, DC, USA
Grace@american.edu

ABSTRACT

Can games be made at the pace of news? The Newsjam, an event held in Miami, Florida in November of 2017, aimed to investigate whether short, simple games about current topics could be made in less than two days. While the plethora of game jam events does demonstrate that such games can be made, the larger questions was by whom and how? The Newsjam event convened a mixture of media professionals and non-gamers to test the hypothesis that game-making tools have become so simple those who have never made a game previously could make a game in a single weekend. The results indicate that while it possible to make simple digital toys, the highest quality contemporary newsgames were made by teams that had previously existing experience in game making. 19 participants, produced 5 games in just over 36 hours. Their expertise ranged from first time game maker to seasoned independent developers.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Computer systems organization** → **Embedded systems**;

KEYWORDS

Game Jams, Hackathons, Newsgames, Game Design, Social Impact Games

1 INTRODUCTION

The motivation for the Newsjam came from a contemporary dilemma of engagement facing news organizations. There is a renewed pressure on news journalism to deliver high quality, timely reporting under shrinking budgets and in an increasingly media rich environment. As the preponderance of fake news across the world increases, news organizations are struggling to compete. Particularly, editorial commentary from entertainment series like the Daily Show [1] are drawing away from the time

people engage with the news. At the same time, according to a study published in Wired magazine [2] based on research from Kabaam and Flurry Analytics in 2013, people spend a significantly more time playing games on their mobile devices than they do with news. Given that in well-resourced countries like the US, people use their phone an average of 5 hours a day [3], there is clear potential to engaging audiences through play and news.

The notion of using games to fill this gap between entertainment and an informed and engaged populous is not new. The seminal work on the topic [4] is now more than a decade old, while others have demonstrated use by organizations [5] but not necessarily how such work can be done on limited budgets and in the challenging news environments of contemporary journalism. This is particularly important as regional and local news organization experience declining financial support.

Likewise, seminal newsgames, such as September 12th, are now more than 8 years old [6]. The benefits of such games, including their ability to explain complex concepts experientially and their ability to convey concepts without the use of language (i.e. substituting mechanics for prose) are as important if not more important than they were when newsgames were first championed. Why then, have newsgames not taken hold in the same way that satirical websites and comedic television have? One speculation is that the skills to make games have often been highly specialized. Another is that the cost of producing newsgames is high. Yet another explanation is that games themselves are complex and difficult to design in comparison to other media solutions.

Drawing from a 3-year research project examining the challenges facing news and the opportunities presented through game design [7], it is speculated that it has become easier to make digital games than ever before. If so, it should be possible to produce games within the constraints of a news cycle. It should also be possible to do so with little budget and with limited game specific skills. This research, in the form of executing and evaluating a 36-hour Newsjam, set out to test the hypothesis that games can be made at the pace of news. It aimed to determine if games on

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current topics can be made quickly, with no additional financial outlay and by designers and developers who were not specifically trained in game design. It is design research as game jam [8]

The benefit of such research is evidence that creating games as editorial content or as ways to explain specific news events is possible. As provided in other research [9], the challenges for the future of news and games are evident, but so too are the opportunities, if games can be produced quickly and at little financial cost.

2 THE NEWSJAM

2.1 The Event

The Newsjam was offered to the general community of game makers in two very different urban areas, Miami, Florida and Washington, DC. The Miami area is home to fewer than 10 small game companies of 30 or less employees. However, the area is home to the Knight Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to fostering informed and engaged communities, who's funding supports community events and research in journalism throughout the United States.

In contrast, The Washington, DC – Baltimore corridor is home to more than 10 game companies, 5 of which exceed 85 employees (e.g. Zenimax, Bethesda, Firaxis). Washington, DC also serves as a hub for national newswires across print, broadcast and internet news [10]. The event convened community members from the news-focused DC metro area and Miami's urban center.

Three, 2-hour preparatory workshops had been offered through the University of Miami's Center for Communication Culture and Change. The workshops covered game and engagement design, current tools for rapid game making, publishing and promotion of games. Participants were recruited through Meetup.com, Eventbrite.com and the Newsjam's website located at NewsJam.PersuasivePlay.org.

24 people participated in the Newsjam. The participants held 1 or more of the three primary roles as host, general participant or advising consultant. A fourth group of support staff did not engage in game making, but facilitated support services including playtesting, food delivery, cleanup and other functional needs. Six participants were financially supported to travel from Washington DC, to Miami where the jam convened.

3 participants served as hosts. Hosts each delivered 1 of 3 orientation workshops during the 36 hours to provide all participants with an overview of game design, game art and journalism respectively. Hosts also contributed to their own and other team games made during the weekend, by providing advice informed by experience in newsrooms or small game studios. There were 2 consultants, who did not serve on teams but offered feedback on design and efforts from a news professional's

perspective. These consultants each had more than 10-years' experience in newsrooms each. Consultants were not paid.

General participants were also not paid, but they were provided all meals and thank you gifts for their work (i.e. a mug with the event's logo). All participants were told that one winning team would be paid to travel to Washington, DC to demonstrate their game to the news community.

The event started at 6:00 PM On Friday, October 20th and concluded Sunday at noon, on October 22nd. It took place in the Orange Umbrella design studio at the University of Miami, and included all meals and snacks. The event had two open sessions for non-participants to watch and critique, which were advertised through the same outlets as the event.

2.2 Participants

Demographic and technographic data on general participants was collected. Most participants, 11 of them, were between the age of 22-30, with other age ranges outlined in table 1. Eight participants and 2 hosts identified as female, with the remaining identifying as male.

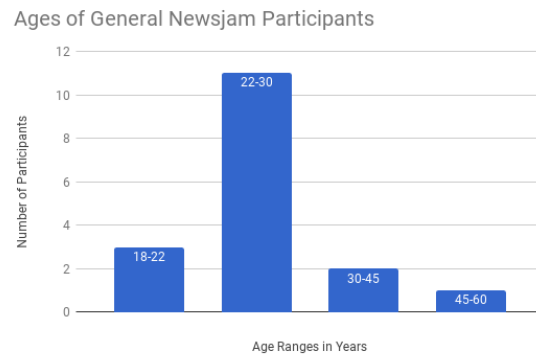


Figure 1: Age ranges of Newsjam participants.

Given the opportunity to self-identify as a designer, developer, journalist, or other, there were 6 designers, 5 designer-developers, 1 student, 1 journalist and the remaining did not identify or identified as other. 6 had participated in any kind of game jam or hackathon previously, 10 had made a game of some sort previously, and 3 had experience working at a news organization. It's important to note that 2 participants quit the Newsjam on the second day, reporting illness and disinterest respectively.

Unlike other such events, all participants slept through the night, as the jam was closed at 10:00pm on Friday and Saturday, and reopened Saturday and Sunday morning at 9:00 AM. The goal in encouraging participants to sleep, was to mimic a more practical work environment similar to a work day than the rigor and sleep deprivation of a hackathon. This constraint was designed to counter the claim that jamming to keep up with the pace of news is not sustainable.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The Games

The participants were given four prompts related to current news. These were fake news, current topics, citizen journalism and technology and news. For fake news, the foci for design were telling fake news from real, misinformation, disinformation and news literacy. For current topics, they were encouraged to cover the recent hurricane in Puerto Rico, the wildfires in California, sexual harassment and climate change. Citizen journalism focused their concepts around, inspiring people to report the news, enabling people to capture and share the news and community information verification. Technology and news focused on identifying bots, news dissemination via social media and combatting or supporting viral news spread. The prompts were delivered as part of a 25-minute keynote speech.

Using these prompts, the participants formed teams based on their affinities toward one of the 5 prompts. The jammers created 5 games during the event. Although some games were revised after the jam was completed, the screenshots and descriptions provided in this document represent the games as they were completed by the conclusion of the jam.

Rising Tide, set players up with the experience of a player versus player fighter. However, as play proceeds, sea level rises around both player characters. Players soon realize that they need not combat each other, but instead combat climate change to stay alive. Players do so by planting trees, putting recycling and trash in the appropriate bins, and capping waste water drains. Rising Tide is shown in Figure 2.

Rising Tide was made using Construct 2 [11] for development and Photoshop for image creation, by a team of 1 developer, 1 designer and 2 artists. All but one of its members had experience making games in the past. The game's developer had participated in 3 prior game jams.



Figure 2: The main gameplay of Rising Tide.

I am a bot, shown in Figure 3, required players to learn about news bots by requiring them to perform like one. Bots is the casual terminology for automated software systems that employ light artificial intelligence designed to mimic human behavior,

such as commenting on articles and sharing content. In each round of play the player decided which attributes of their bot they wanted to adjust to emulate the behavior of news bots. If the player made their bot too mechanical (e.g. did not allow spelling errors or inaccuracies) they would be detected and fail. Likewise, if they were too human, they would also be detected. The designers worked to create a learning game that helped the average person understand how bots work.

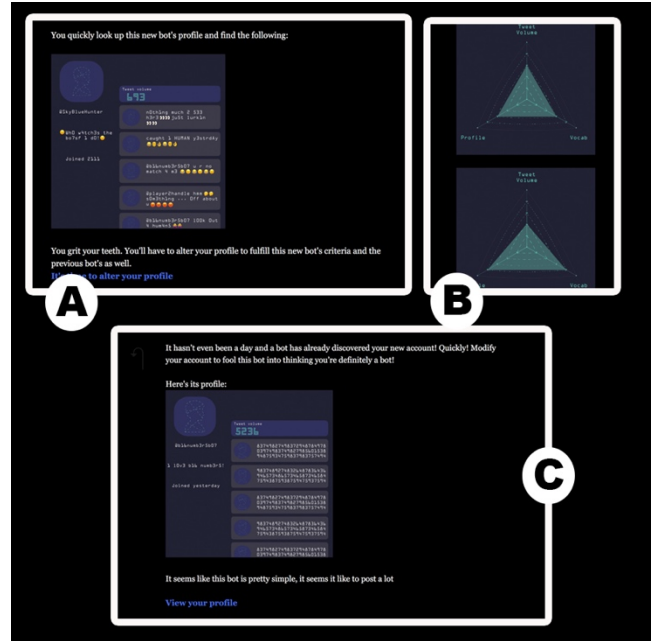


Figure 3: I Am a Bot, various play screens. In (A) the players must evaluate a bot. In B, the player selects the bot attributes and characteristics from graphs. In C, the results of their selections are presented.

I Am A Bot was created by two people using Twine [12]. Neither of the two people had ever used Twine previously. They both had limited experience with Photoshop. In Newscheck, shown in Figure 4, players navigate a platformer, avoiding fake news and collecting real news. Newscheck was made by a team of 4 who had limited Photoshop experience and no experience making games previously. In LA Firefighting, also shown in figure 4, players must extinguish fires while saving citizens and animals. LA Firefighting was made by using GameSalad [13] by a team of three participants that had no prior game-making experience. Images were made using Photoshop.



Figure 4: LA Firefighting game in (A) and Newscheck in (B)

The hosts also developed a game based on the increasing number of sexual harassment allegations being made about celebrities. In the game, players had to help non-player characters speak by tapping them. Enough taps released the character from a bubble and allowed them to fall on a scale counter-balanced by the harasser. If the player popped enough bubbles then the harasser would be hurled from the scene and a new level would load. It was based on the metaphor that if enough sexually harassed people speak they can tip the balance of justice. The game, called Hurl the Harasser, is shown in figure 5. The game was created using GameSalad for game development and Adobe Illustrator for images. Three people contributed to the creation of the game.



Figure 5: The Hurl the Harasser Game

3.2 Observations

While not all of the games produced were ready for release, two of the games were particularly well-received. The judge favorite for the event was *Rising Tide*, which was later developed into three levels. The new levels focused on smog emissions (players replace coal-sourced energy with solar, and replace inefficient appliances with efficient ones) and trash (players again recycle, but also limit consumption of disposables and cap waste outlets). The revised version of the game was shown at a 50-person convening of employees and researchers from the Smithsonian Institutes, the Wilson Center, regional public radio and news at the American University Game Lab. Although no further plans were made to develop this game, the team that created *Riding Tide* have committed to developing more games together.

The *Hurl the Harasser* game later received news coverage from the *Jakarta Post* and *Philippine Inquirer* [14] in Asia and two local newspapers serving Raleigh, North Carolina and Asheboro, North Carolina in the United States [15]. Although pure serendipity, it is worth noting that the reporters who elected to write about the *Hurl the Harasser* games did so for regional newspapers and larger national organizations abroad. These represent two targets previously identified as appropriate benefactors of newsgames at the pace of news. First, that regional news sources could benefit from small scale newsgames like *Hurl the Harasser*. Secondly, that these games can help an increasingly global community by translating news content into language agnostic mechanics.

Lastly, given the relative scale of the game, only 5 minutes of play through 3 levels, it's noteworthy that newspapers found reason to write about it all.

The goal of the *Newsjam* was to demonstrate that such games can be produced at the pace of news cycles. It also aimed to demonstrate that specialized game specific coding skills were not required. While the most successful games had teams, who had practiced game design or development previously, and for whom the tools were familiar, all the teams were able to complete a basic game in the accelerated environment of a jam.

It was also evident that while the preparatory workshops helped frame the design process, all participants admitted that more time practicing the tools would have made their final results more effective. All games were made using a free game making tool.

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