Chapter 36
Games and Quizzes in Online Journalism:
Reaching Users via Interactivity and Customization

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ABSTRACT

The competition for online news page views increasingly involves strategies designed to promote the "viral" nature of content, and to capitalize on the content's spread by ensuring that the content does not quickly lose timeliness or relevance. As a result of the pressure for these stories, news experiences which can be revisited by consumers are at a premium. In this ecosystem, interactive games and quizzes which can be played to receive different feedback or reach a different ending offer promise for news organizations to receive ongoing and widespread reward for their efforts. This chapter provides an overview of the state of gamification in journalism, challenges and opportunities for the growth of games in online news, and discusses evidence for the impact of increasingly gamified news content on how users process and perceive news information.

INTRODUCTION

The most-viewed news story in 2013 was not really a news story at all.

Published on December 21st, "How Y'All, Youse, and You Guys Talk," the most-viewed story on the *New York Times'* site was an online quiz based on linguistic research from a Harvard student, as seen from the point of view of a former North Carolina State statistics student who was working at the *Times* as an intern. In the last 11 days of the year, the story managed to receive the most traffic of any *Times* story all year (New York Times Co., 2014).

The premise for the quiz was simple: users were served 25 multiple-choice questions, each of which asked about a specific example of word choice or pronunciation (for example, "What do you call the long sandwich that contains cold cuts, lettuce, and so on?"). Once users answered all 25 questions,

they received a result that matched their answers to the part of the country – often a small region – that matched their specific diction and pronunciation the best.

How did this story top coverage of news in a year filled with the Boston Marathon bombing and the rollout of new federal healthcare legislation? The answer lies in the increasingly socially mediated landscape of online news, in which content that offers users an emotional payoff, a novelty, and a chance to discover and share something about themselves is at a premium. The increased incentivization of these content aspects provides opportunities for news organizations to use news games and quizzes to not only deliver news value to audiences, but to drive traffic to their Websites. Increasingly, news organizations are providing audiences with interactive games and quizzes that provide users with an interactive experience that maybe highly related to a current news topic, or may just provide a diversion to users and traffic to the news organizations' Web servers. The integration of online news and online games has received attention as part of a broader rise of "gamification" across a variety of industries (see [*introductory chapter, this volume*]; Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011). Although motivating individuals to learn or act by using game-like elements has been hailed for its potential when done well (e.g., Kapp, 2012; Deterding, Björk, Nacke, Dixon, & Lawley, 2013), the adoption of news games by news organization has, to date, focused on creating discrete news consumption experiences, only some of which seem to incentivize learning or news consumption.

This chapter provides an overview of the role of games and quizzes in the journalism industry. It begins by discussing the state of the online journalism industry today, including changes in how audiences reach news content, how such content is consumed, and how news organizations seek to monetize content. The following section discusses the role of games and quizzes within this landscape, and discusses their contribution to news organizations and audiences from a functional perspective. This is followed by a section on best practices in the design of online news games and quizzes. This section is followed by descriptions of four types of news games and quizzes: identity quizzes, knowledge quizzes, simulations, and topical play. The final section of the chapter outlines challenges to and opportunities for the growth of news games and quizzes, and suggests necessary research for understanding how these formats change the relationships between audiences and the news.

THE ONLINE NEWS LANDSCAPE

Although Internet adoption in the United States has leveled off in recent years, consumption of news via the Web continues to grow by all metrics. Digital advertising revenue continues to grow (Holcomb & Mitchell, 2014), and new digital-first news organizations have emerged on to the scene, fueled by venture capital (Pew, 2014). Online news video consumption continues to slowly increase (Pew, 2014). As news consumers receive a growing portion of their news online, the market for news content grows less localized; news producers have found themselves in competition with national and global outlets. The competition for news consumers – whether measured in digital subscriptions, unique page views, minutes spent on the site, Facebook "Likes" – has never been more fierce. As famed journalist Glen Greenwald told the *New York Times* in 2014:

No one, not The New York Times, no one, is entitled to an audience. The ability to thrive is directly dependent upon your ability to convince people that you're providing something valuable and unique (Carr, 2014)."

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