

Newsgames as a Case Study for The Value and Challenges of Archiving Digital Games

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INTRODUCTION

The recent history of digital newsgames has been relatively well-documented through academic literature (Bogost, 2020) across a variety of lenses (Gómez-García and de la Hera Conde-Pumpido, 2023). From this and earlier literature newsgames are unique not only for their focus on the contemporary, but also for their ephemeral nature (Sicart, 2009). Much of this is a product not only of relatively small budgets, but also of the perceived disposability of such games. Newsgames, it seems, are produced in much the way that older print news was - with an eye on low-cost production and assumed expiration over propensity for archiving and longevity. Digital newsgame materiality, if it can be called such, is much like newsprint, designed for scale and quick dissemination over archival qualities. This of course complicates game studies in the domain.

Using a data set of 101 newsgames maintained by the research team as an archive of such designs, this work reflects on the generalizable observations from maintaining the collection. The collection offers a unique snapshot of newsgames, across categories as diverse as politics (27%), business (13%), war (9%), science (8%), sports (5%) and others. Notably for archiving, only 27% have been identified as allowing contemporary, public play as of 2023. With a mean age of only 7 years old, or an average release year of 2016, the evident rate of lost access to these games is suboptimal.

While perhaps not surprising for all digital games, the relationship of this group to both the longstanding news industries and academic institutions one might expect better archiving rates. In some cases, such games are no longer available to play within a year of their release (Junior and Brooks, 2020) . Drawing from a three-year

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project to archive newsgames to support future designers, developers and game researchers, this work aims to help provide context and analysis on the lesson learned in such work. It iterates on prior work aiming to archive newsgames (James, 2017) and document their evolution (Grace and Huang, 2020).

While archiving remains a challenge across all digital media, and particularly in digital games, this research highlights observations and opportunities related to archiving newsgames. Newsgames offer a unique case study in their presumed ephemeral value, their often-wide dissemination, typically short play experiences and retrospective value. This research examines each of these characteristics to offer insight into a plausible future for archiving games.

To further understand the nature of archiving newsgames, the work provides several case studies in outliers that are rarely or never discussed in the academic literature on the topic. This includes games like *Socks the Cat Rocks the Hill* (Realtime Associates, 2018) and the New York Times *Think Military Strike Could Stop North Korea? Try It and See* (2018). Both experiences lack a single reference in the academic literature despite being early ventures into newsgames. However, *Socks the Cat Rocks the Hill* is well documented in fan spaces and crowdsource spaces, while lacking academic acknowledgement. The New York Times playful interactive was covered by news sources, but not in peer-reviewed publications which aim to list influential newsgames. Such omissions in the academic record demonstrate a gap between what game studies researchers are examining and what is commonly available.

By examining such games and adopting some new research approaches, this work aims to highlight the selection biases relevant in newsgames research that might also help reveal such bias in other domains. We found that such biases roughly orbit common demographic and technographic groups. It is more common, for example, for English language and Spanish language newsgames to appear in academic literature than other languages. This language bias could be the result of English Language focused academic publications, the languages of the people earliest to identify, teach and implement newsgames, the product of algorithmic preferences for content, the researchers own limited perspective or other issues.

Similarly, we noted affordability, availability and distribution scale as likely blind spots in the news games literature and potential other games analysis. In short, if a game is free to play, available through a common technology (e.g., playable on the web) and widely disseminated (e.g., not the product of a small game jam) it was far more likely to be documented and documented frequently. Simply put games that were not free or low cost, games that were not widely available on contemporary platforms when the research was conducted, or that were distributed in limited geographic and technographics communities (e.g., widely to their local community, but not widely to a global community) were more likely missing from the record of news games history. As a Nintendo Entertainment System ROM, *Socks the Cat*, for example does not have many of these traits. *Arizona Justice*, a game focused on the regional politics of the United States' 14th most populous state, may have suffered from similar reasons of omission as it was initially released as Windows executable and later as a HTML 5 web game. Identifying these attributes is particularly important as researchers undertake socio-political analysis on newsgames in domains on regional politics.

This work is not meant as a critique of prior research, but instead offers an opportunity to interpret historical understanding of games from these considerations and reflecting on the second such archive maintained by this research team. The work argues for the value of archiving such work to prevent loss of history, design precedents and lessons learned. In its simplest, the researchers observe that any archive, included community reporting (e.g., wiki documents) , automated archiving (e.g., archive.org), clearinghouses (e.g., play.google.com, newgorunds.com), well-played documentation, playthroughs, and development diaries help provide a wider perspective on this game type. It also highlights the need for retro-adaptive software tools, like Ruffle which makes Flash games playable over the web. Such solutions make legacy software experiences available to future players and ease the experience of primary source archiving and research possible without maintaining legacy hardware and software. In archiving communities this is of course ripe for debate, as emulation is not always as accurate as original content.

It is assumed that researchers and practitioners in domains like newsgames, social impact games, and art games, will benefit from these observations and reflections particularly given that much of the work responds to specific moments in history and is often similarly ephemeral.

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