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Bogost, Ferrari and Schweizer (p. 6) maintain the journalistic practices that characterised print media were transported to broadcast and online platforms. Newsgames, they argue, are different, based on computer software and combining features of both video games and journalism rather than presenting a digitised version of print news.

Definitions here are important. Bogost et al. (p. 180) define journalism as a practice in which “research combines with a devotion to the public interest, producing materials that help citizens make choices about their private lives and their communities”. The term ‘newsgames’ is not to be confused with ‘gamification’, which ProPublica news application developer Sisi Wei (2013) explains refers to the inclusion of gameplay elements in something that is not a game.

The strengths of Newsgames are its explanation of game design and the overview of the broad range of applications considered “newsgames”, from web-based simulations such as Cutthroat Capitalism to playable infographic Budget Hero and current events game Super Obama World, based on old favourite Super Mario Bros.

Less convincing is the inclusion of ‘puzzle newsgames’, and the argument that games with in-game news sources, such as the radio in Grand Theft Auto, educate players about how to become a good journalist or the importance of journalism to a community.

Bogost et al. point out that print news has a tradition of including crosswords and puzzles for reader entertainment. But to imply puzzles are ‘news’ by including them at the intersection of journalism and video games, even with their broad definition of journalism, is questionable. The authors acknowledge that a web-based game offers a limited version of a situation that can be explored more fully in an article, describing pirate simulation Cutthroat Capitalism, for example, as lacking the subtleties of Wired’s associated print article (p. 5). They offer the game as proof that “videogames can do good journalism” (p. 5), as a news medium and supplement to traditional formats. ‘Can’ is important in this context. Modal verbs such as ‘can’ and ‘might’ are frequent in Newsgames, and that is an issue.

Newsgames’ speculation is interesting, but I expected empirical evidence — for example, on the effectiveness of newsgames in simulating news production for journalism students. In
this I was disappointed. However, the authors’ appraisal of the field is grounded in reality, pointing out that many early attempts to include editorial games on news platforms, such as the New York Times’ trial run with games such as Food Import Folly, were not sustained (p. 176).

Bogost was keynote speaker at the 10th ‘Games for Change’ conference in New York in June, an event that revealed how fast the field is evolving. Despite the rapid expansion of games since Newsgames was first published, its exploration of basic game design remains a valuable addition to the field, useful for anyone interested in exploring newsgames’ potential for journalism.

— Janet M. Harkin, Film, Media and Communications, Monash University