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OTHERS

Playing with news



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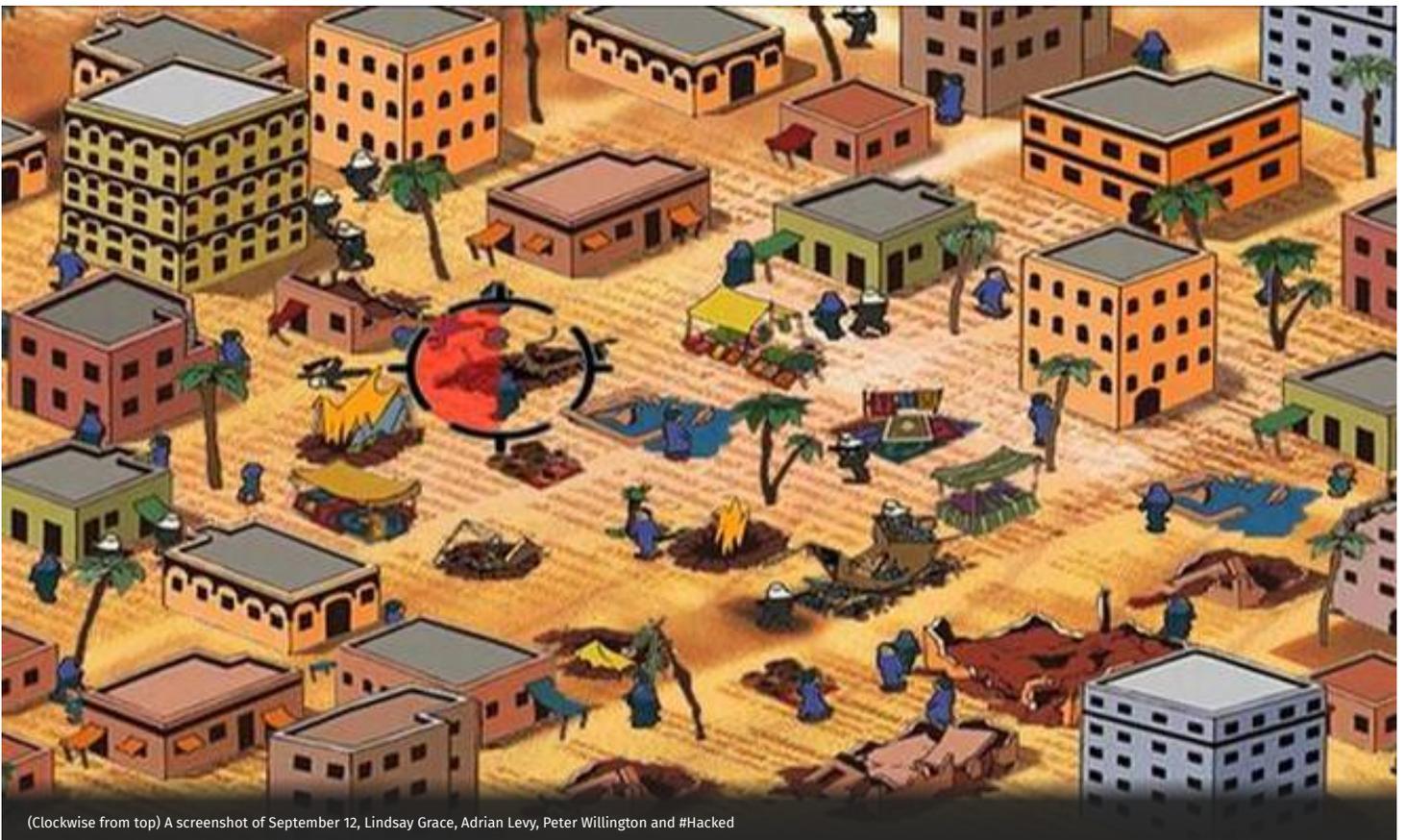


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Ten years ago, the newsgame was considered a journalistic breakthrough. Today, the hype has waned, even though advocates argue that it is here to stay

The Mumbai attacks of 2008 – remembered as 26/11 – are branded in public memory thanks to the embarrassingly gratuitous TV news coverage. For years, the smoking tower of the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, audio clips of gunshots, and, of course, Ajmal Kasab, remained the definitive images of those nightmarish days. What really happened remained nebulous, and was mostly pieced together through hearsay. Then, in 2013, investigative journalists Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark published the most authoritative account of the attacks in their well-received book, *The Siege*.

The duo soon went on to turn the book's narrative into an interactive online experience — or newsgame — that puts the player at the centre of the events on that fateful night in November. Players navigated several potential routes to safety as the action unfolded around them. Hosted by websites such as *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times* and Rediff, Levy shares that it clocked over hundreds of thousands of players.

The game has since been taken down because of the large amount of server space required to host it. But 10 years later, Levy is back at it again, this time with an upcoming newsgame that recreates his latest book, *The Exile* (also co-authored by Scott-Clark) on Osama bin Laden's flight after 9/11. "There's an audience that the mainstream is clearly not reaching, and hence we have to be clever," says the journalist. Something dressed up as a game can also touch upon issues of justice and human rights. For instance, you can bury the issue of torture deep into a puzzle game.

Journo-play

If you are a video game junkie with a fondness for the adrenaline-boosting pace and multi-million-dollar graphics of *Grand Theft Auto*, you are likely to skip over the newsgame — broadly defined as any game that is based on the news, either with a journalistic purpose or an activist/editorial one. Uruguayan game developer Gonzalo Frasca, who created *September 12*, one of the pioneer games of the category, is widely credited with coining the term.

His game, which was played by more than a million users (and which Frasca continues to receive hate mail for) is set in a Middle Eastern village. The players are positioned in the sky. When they spot and shoot the terrorist, innocent civilians also die. There is no winning, which is the point the creators tried to make about the war on terror.

In the mid-2010s, mainstream media outlets such as *The Guardian* participated in and organised newsgame "jams" — providing designers and developers with a story and giving them 48 hours to develop a game. However, the cost of development, along with the rapid pace of news cycles has hindered its ability to become a more widely-used tool.

Many newsgames tend to be simplistic in their design and presentation. In late April this year, *ProPublica*, the American nonprofit newsroom specialising in investigative journalism, released *The Waiting Game*. It allows players to experience firsthand the arduous process of seeking asylum in the US. After choosing one of five possible characters (including a Bangladeshi man persecuted for marrying outside his religion and a student protestor from the Congo), the player merely has to keep clicking to read about the highlights of each day spent. If tired of the unending clicks (often over 600), they can give up and fast forward, but are reminded that this was never an option for these asylum seekers.

Lindsay Grace, Knight Chair at the University of Miami and a researcher in news and games, says, "I've argued for years that newsgames should be the modern version of the editorial comic or political cartoon. The medium is young, and it doesn't make sense to expect Disney quality animation."

What then does a newsgame do that editorial or journalistic prose cannot? "Experiential depth, making a point in a way that only play can," says Grace. Al Jazeera's 2016 web-based app, *#HACKED: Syria's Electronic Armies*, is an apt example. Players work as investigative journalists alongside Juliana Ruhfus — whose work helped form the basis of the game — taking them deep inside Syria's cyber war.

Key to narratives

Today, despite notable examples, public interest in newsgames has waned. Even though the cost of production is lower, Frasca, who himself has moved on to learning games, believes, "Nobody has found a good business model for them. Maybe there isn't one". Grace believes that factors such as the decline of regional journalism and rising economic pressures faced by traditional newspapers are to blame.

However, to fill that void, there is a growing number of people outside the journalistic world using "newsy" narratives to tell their stories and share opinions. For instance, game designers have worked on powerful stories about migration such as *Bury Me, My Love* (developed by Florent Maurin, a former journalist).

While examples of virtual reality being used in newsgames are few (often due to costs), Peter Willington of Auroch Digital, the UK-based *Game the News* initiative which has worked with the BBC and *WIRED*, believes that 3D reality will allow for more interactive and immersive experiences. “We have experimented with VR ourselves, and the work we created shows great promise in the field of interactive documentary,” he says. Grace concurs, citing projects such as *Ferguson Firsthand*, which allows users to experience eyewitness accounts of the shooting of Michael Brown in Missouri (an incident which sparked outrage about police brutality against African Americans). However, as Grace points out, “The problem is cost, and commitment by those who interact with them (putting on your headset, getting the app, etc).”

Challenges notwithstanding, this mixed-media approach is what excites Levy. With *The Exile*, he wants to get “a Netflix-like audience and create a narrative that’s more rigidly based on truth”. Not only will it be a game, but also a film narrative in a language that’s global. “We want to reach more people and immerse them in new experiences,” he concludes.

Newsgames should be the modern version of the editorial comic or political cartoon

Lindsay Grace