



The Gamification of Digital Journalism: Innovation in Journalistic Storytelling

By David O. Dowling, New York & London: Routledge, 2021, 193 pp., \$44.95/£34.99 (Pbk), ISBN: 9780367076252

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BOOK REVIEW

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Even for those of us who have studied interactive digital journalism, we are a bit weary of thinking more about the 2012 longform multimedia piece *Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek*, published by *The New York Times*. That piece, indeed, is where today's longform digital journalism made its starting marks. Yet, the world of interactivity and digital storytelling has gone above and beyond, as David Dowling tells us throughout *The Gamification of Digital Journalism: Innovation in Journalistic Storytelling*. His piece captures this transition to serious gaming in the field of journalism that immerses users not only in sophisticated virtual and augmented realities but in stories of social and cultural meaning that engage users across generations through contestations via emotion, "facts," and independent exploration of stories.

But things do go back to the initial aww and the interactivity of *Snow Fall* that set us about a trajectory that has taken (and has merged) the roles of technologists, journalists, designers, distributors, and advertisers to new heights. That piece, with its responsiveness and its narrative and immersive scenery and sound, also created a craze among convergent newsrooms, sparking creativity and agency in journalists to try new things, and giving themselves something to sell to audiences. And audiences responded not just interacting with new (or some might say reproduced) forms of news genres, but, we hope, by seeing journalism as an industry that isn't just about information but information-by-innovation. That would be a welcome development.

What we get from Dowling contends that the gamification of journalism—using games to entice and educate news users—is an established genre. Throughout the book, the examples of games he culls from societies—VR experiences of police brutality and of food emergencies at a food bank in Los Angeles, for instance—provide readers with an excuse to play online, even if about serious subjects. Dowling writes that even local news is participating in news gaming, such as with the joint effort between *The Miami Herald* and local public radio WLRN's *Tallanasty Ethics Game* in the U.S. state of Florida. This game provides people an opportunity to become an elected official of the Town Council, and one must operate as such either for their own benefit or for the public good. The game is connected to news coverage about how and why Florida had once earned a C- for public corruption by a state investigating agency.

In this way, Dowling's book is first a wealthy resource of exemplars that can excite journalists, students, and citizens to think beyond the written word and sound, television and the internet, and to see journalism as it truly exists—as something that envelops us. But just as 360-degree video and virtual reality in ways used in news are not seen as having an intended use for pleasure (depending on the producer, of course) the games Dowling writes about are intersections of gender and technoscience, capitalism and social justice, conventional documentary and increased physical mobilities. These are political items and artefacts that may advocate for a particular person's experience and perspective, the user's emotional connection to the character or to their own travelling through virtual space driving the interpretation of the information presented. There is, then, a tension between these games and journalism that, while not objective, attempts to meet such an aim.

Early on in the book, Dowling rightfully acknowledges the application of conventional spheres of journalism amid this genre—possibly already challenged by the mediums' elevation of vantage points and emotional energy—is often plagued by gaming cultures, namely the hegemonic masculinity of game design, distribution, and discourse. (Anyone who spent time in a GameStop [before COVID-19, anyway] could likely attest to what is a commonality there—hyper-masculine and sometimes racist rhetoric surrounding the content of the games and the positionality of members of those communities.) Dowling, through this discussion, comes at his overview and deep analyses of gaming culture(s) and the adoption of gaming by journalism through a critical and a Cultural Studies lens that bleeds into the normative practices of how and what these games are, how and why they matter, and what they could mean for the future of journalism.

The blending of critical and cultural theories with sociological ones, with each chapter focussing on various aspects of gaming culture and its influence on the marketplace of journalism, makes *The Gamification of Digital Journalism* key for journalism innovators to understand the ethical, philosophical, beneficial, and dangerous aspects of their interest in journalistic gaming. In that vein, then, this book provides another opportunity to critique journalism itself in its balance between education and indoctrination through emotion and empathy that is at the core of immersive environments, including video, photography, and literary journalism.

Dowling moves beyond discussions of a broken or weakened economic model for journalism in most Western societies, looking to where audiences are—the billion-dollar gaming world—for its potential in understanding the human condition through a lens of Science and Technology Studies that never forgets the human element of social strife. Such is the case in his discussions on gaming as a mode for experiencing migration and the life of refugees, such as the BBC's *Syrian Journey: Choose Your Own Escape Route* and the *Guardian's The Refugee Challenge*. Other games look at decision-making, such as Rue89's *Rebuilding Haiti* following a destructive hurricane and an interactive investigation and *Pirate Fishing* by Al Jazeera, about pirating in Sierra Leone. Dowling's book is necessary for conversations of digital journalism today to curb any continued blind attraction of journalists and scholars to technology, to complicate journalism's social and cultural functions in a digital (and digitized) world, and to problematize the types and desire of those who participate.

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