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# User and Player Engagement in Local News and/as Interactive Narratives

Torbjörn Svensson

University of Skövde,  
Box 408, 541 28 SKÖVDE, Sweden

**Abstract.** This paper presents a new approach to the understanding of gamification within the context of local news, foregrounding the varied ways that games and interactable narratives engage player/readers through increased interactability, relationship-building and dynamic storytelling. The research extends a model of Self Determination Theory and applies it to game play as a way to develop news content and build relationships among readers/players. This approach provides a foundation for the development of a new kind of local digital news-service where readers are given more possibilities to interact with the non-fiction narratives of news stories, allowing them to transform and grow over time and to build more personalized connections to news content.

## 1 Introduction

The PhD research described in this paper is conducted within the Level Up project, a project funded by the Ann-Marie and Gustaf Anders foundation for media research, based in Karlstad, Sweden. The project has two main parts: one focused on business development and led by Per Holmén Dahlin at Gothia Innovation, an innovation center connected to the University of Skövde; and the second, more research-based and focused on how games and games-technology can be used to increase youth engagement in news. The main goal of the whole Level Up project is to increase the reading and sharing of local news presented via a digital platform and targeted towards youth. In this case, youth is being defined as between the ages of 16-39.

The field of Newsgames is fully outlined in the *Newsgames* book [1] and Foxmans TowCenter report Play the News [2]. However, my project is not about making proper games for local news, neither is it focusing “classic” gamification where for example, players gain points for reading news. I am trying to deepen an understanding of gamification, illustrating how it goes beyond badges, points and achievements. Instead my research focuses on how games and interactive narratives engage players and if this interaction can be transferred to non-fiction interactive media.

Games and play have transitioned quite easily to digital formats. In fact, currently games have, more or less, become synonymous with computer games. However analog games, like board games, Chess, Go or card games have been around for thousands of years. Role-playing games stem back at least to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century era of “kriegsspiel” or war-game. Other games have evolved from narrative structures in literature, theatre and film to become interactable narratives, where the player experiences foreign worlds, solves puzzles, leading the main character forward in the adventure.

Games have had a smooth transition into the digital sphere, and the general audience for them seems also to have easily adapted to the new formats. Players are engaged by games, not the least by on-line games where human interactions are facilitated by computer systems. In on-line multiplayer games, engagement mediates intra-human

engagement, where the game is the primary medium for communication. In my research I will review the digitalization of the local news media in light of this transition of games and narratives to the digital realm. I focus on how digital (on-line, multiplayer) games engage users by facilitating autonomy, challenging competence and offering relatedness to other players. Could these mechanisms be transferred from on-line games to on-line news services and also there engage readers?

## 2 Current Research

### 2.1 Gamification: a Problematic Term

The “gamification” of local news to many may seem a straightforward task to add traditional game functions (creating point systems, leaderboards and using player achievements) for readers of local news to engage them in the content. But if one avoids an overt and overly simplistic definition of the term (“the use of game elements in a non-game context”) as many claim (Deterding, et al. 2011) one can deepen an understanding of how gamification is viewed traditionally and provide a critique of the term that deepens an understanding of player engagement through increased interactability of the news medium

Ian Bogost’s influential positional piece Gamification is Bullshit [4] followed up with an extended analysis in Why gamification is Bullshit [5] in the anthology *The Gameful World* has strongly influenced many game-scholars definitions and understanding of the word gamification. Bogost’s texts also point towards the diverging views between designers, game scholars and business consultants about what gamification could or should be. Deterding, for example, takes another approach than Bogost and offers a strongly sociologically influenced reflection on gamification in his article The Ambiguity of Games: Histories and Discourses of a Gameful World [6]. Here Deterding refers to the ludification of culture and cultivation of ludus and how that leads him to sketch out different rhetorics of the gameful world. This work provides a more complex basis from which to expose the different faces of gamification, to identify what it is and could be for different stakeholders. Deterding opens up the term, offering the possibility to widen the term and deepen the discussion around the engaging mechanisms of games, without totally dismissing the impact that rewards for players can generate. I find this a fruitful foundation for further exploration.

### 2.2 Self Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan have since their seminal book on the subject in 1985 [7] together, individually, and with other scholars published several papers and books [8] [9] [10] presenting and showing examples of the use of Self Determination Theory. Self Determination Theory (SDT) is a psychological needs fulfillment and motivation theory that is based around the three concepts Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness. “*Competence or mastery* is our fundamental need to feel effective and successful in the moment-to-moment activities of life... ..*Autonomy* is our fundamental need to feel volitional in what we do. We want to determine the path we are on and whenever possible have meaningful opportunities from which we can chose freely... ..*Relatedness* is our fundamental need to feel supported by others; to feel that “I matter” to others and they matter to me.” [11 p 120-121]

SDT was initially primarily applied to physical exercise, learning and workplace development, but has lately been applied also to computer-games by Deci and Rigby in both a journal article [12] and later the book *Glued to games* [13]. Scott Rigby has also deepened the description of motivation and SDT applied to gamification in the article Gamification and motivation in the anthology *The Gameful World* [11].

This application of SDT to gaming and gamification makes it a good candidate for studying engagement and motivation concerning the use of digital on-line news sources.

### 2.3 Using SDT to Break Out of the Black Box of Reward-Driven Gamification

The idea to gamify actions and objects, from saving energy in a home setting [14], to social networking sites for employees [15], to computer assisted learning [16] has often involved points, badges, achievements or other kind of reward systems. The main problem of these kind of gamifications, besides the fact that the positive effects seem to be very dependent on situation and users [17], is that gamelike reward systems may be added to non-games or other gaming situations not easily identified as traditional games. Games are, of course, comprised of many elements, but at its base, a game may be defined as an activity in itself, a set of actions taken by a player to fulfill a task in a game world. The playing of the game by the rules is a means to the games end. This also holds for analog games. To gamify something that is not a game is splitting this relationship and the “gaming” then becomes the means to reach another end, outside of the game’s end. In essence players get rewarded for striving towards a goal that lies outside of the game. In this case players are actually rewarded for an activity that they would hopefully have engaged in for other reasons than rewards. The rewards works to “sweeten the deal”, enticing them to put time and effort into something.

According to SDT the above-mentioned forms of gamification is clearly identified as extrinsic rewards/extrinsic motivation, to motivate by giving the user/player a reward that is not well connected to the activity. If we are to use any kind of reward systems or progression enticer for on-line news they should be well connected to the activity of engaging in local news.

**Using SDT to Analyze and Change On-Line News?** As research has shown, millennials are engaged by news but not from the same news sources as earlier generations [18]. Additionally they do not read the printed newspapers or newspaper web sites, as did earlier generations of newsreaders. If we study the newspaper or digital versions of today’s newspapers compared to digital games from a SDT perspective, we find that there are some interesting differences. When it comes to *autonomy*, games give players real or illusory freedom to interact with the game world. The highest sense of autonomy is given in “sandbox” type games, like Minecraft [19], or the upcoming Dark & Light [20]. Games like this might fall outside a strict definition of what a game is, but they are still played (with) by millions of players around the world. Even games where the interactions are more restricted, sometimes referred to by game-designers as corridor games, where the player is funneled through a story, there is a distinct sense that the player can change things by interacting with them. This may be in fact because everything that *happens* is still driven by the player’s interactions within the game. That drive from the player might be the least common denominator between games and on-line news,

The reading of news is also driven forward by the player/reader and is format dependent. There are differing degrees of interactability between print and digital news formats, but the outcomes may be surprising. For example, in the printed-paper there exists a great possibility to choose one’s path through the paper, skipping pages, glancing at headlines and deciding where to spend time. In the digital format, (where, ironically, one might expect more interaction and engagement from the medium), readers are often confronted with a high number of equally sized linked headlines with

small images on 4-5 screens worth of scrolling. Such a format promotes quite a low level of engagement and participation for news readers. Without a clear overview and higher degree of interactedness the possibilities for the reader to feel autonomy is limited. This provides a basis then for more development.

Well-designed games are excellent at letting the player feel competent by introducing new mechanics, abilities or enemies in pedagogical ways, thereby increasing the challenges as players increase their skills. On-line news does not generally adapt to the readers' level of competence or take into account that the readers may become more competent and increase in knowledge with every article they read within a specific subject area that they may find interesting.

It is a generally accepted fact that on-line games are effective at allowing players to *relate* to each other and thereby help to forge relationships among players. This aspect of relatedness is, however, poorly developed in current online-news format, where often readers have no sense of whether or not other readers are reading the same article, and where they may, therefore, be considered co-participants in the news content. One might be able to read comments about the article from other readers, but that activity is limited in terms of its capacity for relationship building. In fact, such occurrences are generally not even on-going at the newspaper site, but instead this kind of relationship building, sharing, and co-participation takes place on Facebook or in other social media contexts. So opportunities exist to develop these aspects at the primary news site.

In all three primary areas of SDT (*autonomy, competence and relatedness*), games provide a means for fulfilling the needs of its users. The digitalization of news media has not, however, provided the users with the same possibilities. And it is here where gamification models could be focused and extended in terms of development in local news contexts. This change could provide a basis to acknowledge the differences and similarities between individual users, and it could provide game-like possibilities regarding choices and paths, tracking, challenging the readers competence for news subjects. Significantly, it could also provide a method through dynamic user content creation to support relationships among other readers.

This view of gamification opens up for increased interactions where news readers can comment and draw deeper relationships to news-stories with the possibility to offer their personal insights and to create additional content.

### **3. Status and Next Steps: Case Studies and Halfway Seminar**

The theoretical framework laid out in this paper will be used in two case studies to empirically study interaction and engagement with news.

The first case to be studied is the ongoing work with the Level Up projects internal prototype for a local news social media platform with the working title nUs. Right now the core of nUs is a news-aggregating mechanic where the user/player acts as editor and promotes stories from regular news sites, but with added comments. The mobile phone app is iteratively designed in regular workshops and will focus on satisfying the users needs as presented in SDT.

The second case to be studied is a project called Mobile Stories, which is driven by two journalists and the basic idea is to teach schoolchildren (ages 13 and up) about what journalism is and how to make news. The core of Mobile Stories is a mobile phone/iPad app that is both a learning tool and an editor for news content. The main question for the Mobile Stories case is whether this interactive way of making news will change the users engagement in news overall.

The Level Up project is coming up to its halfway point during the autumn 2017 and documentation of the research will be presented late this year taking into account the research I propose for the Doctoral Consortium at ICIDS.

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