

Untitled Journalist Game (working title)

WP 2 (Scientific)

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Control an investigative journalist to publish stories on a weekly magazine. Gather and evaluate information through emails, archives, interviews, and phone calls that will be provided to you. Get tips on stories and decide whether the information you get is true or false. You will compose articles based on the information you find and decide to use. The value of your articles will be determined by the truthfulness and the factuality of the information you choose.

Genre: Puzzle, simulation, role-playing

Developed as part of the EduGames project

See <https://edugames.andreafranceschini.org> for more information.

1 High level concept

1.1 Background and game experience

This game is about the **construction of truth through document analysis and information processing**. It is difficult nowadays to find reliable news sources, and easy to fall into conspiratorial thinking based on inaccurate or purposely misleading information. This game helps players to learn how to cross-check information sources, to learn about the reliability of sources, and to recognize when individuals and organizations spread disinformation with intent.

Being developed within the EduGames project, “Untitled Journalist Game” is an educational game with entertainment ambitions. The EduGames project aims to collect design, development, and research guidelines for the creation and evaluation of video games that

intend to educate through entertainment. Too often, educational video games have the reputation of being *boring* and *badly designed*. This is in contrast to most entertainment video games which captivate players for many hours and multiple play sessions. Continual and repeated engagement is desirable in education as it promotes deeper and repeated exploration of, and exposure to, the educational content. More information is provided in the project's website.

1.2 Target audience

Everyone is prone to falling victim of disinformation, so our target audience is the **general population**. As we rely more and more on online news sources,¹ and non-mainstream sources in particular, it is important that we learn to detect reliable and unreliable information, and this is true across demographics to guarantee a fair democratic process.

“Untitled Journalist Game” does not aim for specific demographics, therefore the game should be playable and enjoyable without requiring specific progress knowledge or skills other than basic literacy. The content and tone of the game is designed to appeal to a wide cross-section of the general population to maximize exposure to the educational content.

1.3 Unique selling points

“Untitled Journalist Game” is developed by a multidisciplinary team composed of educators working on disinformation, professional game designers and developers, and researchers in Human-Computer Interaction. We gathered the best pedagogical practices to enable learners to acquire and practice the skills required in evaluating the reliability of source, and we map these skills and practices to video game ideas, identifying applicable game mechanics, and developing our video game ideas in terms of narrative, setting, style, genre and so on.

2 Product design

2.1 Player experience and game POV

The player is a journalist who must compose 3 articles in a week, for 10 weeks, by gathering information from a number of different sources.

2.2 Visual and Audio style

Visuals: style in development. The main gameplay is set on a desk. On the desk, we'll see scattered folders, a laptop and a phone. We'll be able to use these items and search for information. The laptop will contain email and internet access.

Audio: style to be decided. Background music plays while composing articles. Sound effects are used when extraordinary events occur – e.g., anonymous tips, game-world events, and so on.

¹<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>

2.3 Game World

The game is played entirely inside the journalist's writing room, with narrative implying events happening outside, i.e., major events related to our articles, and effects of our articles on the game world. The game opens with a phone call from our boss, saying that we have a week to write 3 news stories. We're an ambitious but also struggling journalist, so we will have to balance income and moral integrity. The game loop starts from there until the end of the game.

2.4 Technology

2.4.1 Requirements

The EduGames project requires that the games developed are open source, easy to maintain, and easy to access for players. This ensures that they remain playable and maintainable for as long as possible after the end of the project.

2.4.2 Platforms

The game will be playable on desktop computers. For maximum initial ease of deployment, the game will be published online as a Wasm² executable and accessible through browsers.

2.4.3 Engine

Godot 4 is the engine chosen because it satisfies the requirements gathered above. Godot 4 is open source, well documented, easy for beginners to learn and use, it is quickly becoming a favourite in the indie game development community, and it is making its way into the mainstream of commercial video games.³ These characteristics guarantee maintainability for the foreseeable future.

3 Detailed and Game Systems Design

3.1 Mechanics

3.1.1 Core loop

The game loop runs 3 times (days) a week as follows.

- 1 The player starts to discover sources of information. There are 4 main sources. Folders, computer, phone, and a notebook to take notes from these sources.

Folders: contain profiles and descriptions of the characters from the stories. The player can get information about these people for their article.

²WebAssembly is a technology to deploy executables on the web and run them in the browser.

³<https://godotengine.org/showcase/>

Computer: contains web pages and email. The player is able to surf the in-game web and check articles. They can get emails from insiders and anonymous informants.

Phone: contains messages from characters of the story and/or voice mails. Transcribed phone conversations may also be available.

Notebook: a place to store and recall “highlights” from the investigations to be used to compose news stories.

- 2 In the sources, some words and sentences are highlighted. These are the parts that can be used to compose articles. The player should choose these highlighted information carefully, fact-check every single one, and compose their article using these notes.
- 3 The player should be careful while evaluating news sources. The story published should be true and accurately reported. If the article published turns out false or inaccurate, the magazine will sell less and suffer a reputation hit. The reward will be determined by their success on reliability and the relevance of the notes they chose for the story.
- 4 After the player publishes an article, some characters from the story will contact the player. They can tip the player for them to compose the article in a certain way, or not compose any article at all. Furthermore, story insiders be contacted through phone or email to gather further information.

3.1.2 End of game

Win condition: after 3 loops (days), a week would pass and an issue of the magazine is published. The player will see the result of their articles with a success percentage and other stats, including copies sold and reputation. If the player gets all the information and the relevancy correct, they will get a perfect score. The score decreases based on several considerations with respect to the reliability of the sources chosen and how the player chose to report certain facts. Also, the player will see their reputation change over time. If their score is above 50% their reputation increases accordingly.

3.2 Objectives and Progression

The player’s objective is to compose “good” articles in order to get money and increase their reputation, and that of the magazine. A player can get more money by composing articles that are offered by anonymous informants, but their reputation can decrease if the result is not “good enough.”

“Good” and “bad” in this context is defined according to a score associated with each piece of information and the way it is used. The score is pre-calculated at the time of writing and used to produce a combined judgement.

At the time of writing, the way this will be done is in development along with the writing process.

3.3 Game Systems

In the first instance, the basic game system is entirely described by the core loop. There is scope for power-ups and side-mechanics to make the game more flexible and increase the player's control, freedom, and immersion.

3.4 Wireframes and Interactivity

Figure 1 presents a selection of reference screens for the game. The computer screen is referenced from "Orwell: Keeping an Eye On You game" (a).

4 Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

The following analysis must be considered in the context of educational video games, as explained in §1.1.

4.1 Strengths

Player freedom: the game allows the player to choose their strategy, providing feedback in the form of clear metrics.

Player control: the game has presents a "most desirable outcome" at the beginning, as part of the narrative which constitutes the main game fiction (§2.3), but does not force the player to achieve it, allowing an element of role-play.

Neutrality: the game presents the issue of fact checking and document analysis in as neutral a way as possible so that the player can choose the best course of action based on their objectives.

Content presentation: the content is woven into the gameplay and is central to the main game fiction.

4.2 Weaknesses

Content presentation: the content may feel a bit literal, it may be overly clear that the game is of the educational type and that it is trying to teach something, which some players may find unattractive.

Replayability: the mechanics of the game are limited, the player will examine the same sources on every article. However, since the story will change and the articles they write affect the story, every choice would create a different way of navigating the game's narrative.

4.3 Opportunities

Expanded narrative: e.g., include new events that impact the world of the game and create new stories.

Side mechanics: e.g., buying new items that can be useful for the player with the money they earn.

Trolling: this can present an opportunity for increasing engagement in the game's theme and will be discussed among the threats in the next section.

4.4 Threats

Controversy: the stories in the game are written by us. Even though the player can compose different type of articles, the general story and the events would remain the same. We should state that every story in this game is a work of fiction and nothing to do with real people or events.

Trolling: online trolling activity can affect the perception of the game. If played well, this can be turned into an opportunity to impact the public discourse about news consumption and document analysis. There is a very small chance that online trolling and animosity could migrate offline and produce real-life consequences for the individuals involved in making this game. The chance of this happening is negligible but not null.

5 References

5.1 Gameplay

The main inspiration for this game is “The Westport Independent” by Double Zero One Zero, a censorship simulator game taking place in a post-war country. The player must remove and edit the content of the paper, affecting the people's opinion of both the rebels and the Loyalist government.

The main similarity between “Untitled Journalist Game” and “The Westport Independent” is that the player analyzes documents and information sources to advance in the game and get scores in terms of how well they do it.

5.2 Visuals

Style in development. The main stylistic inspiration is “Death and Taxes” by Placeholder Gameworks (figure 1b).

5.3 Music

Style to be decided. The background music during gameplay is generic yet arousing in order to keep the player active while limiting distractions. Sound effects should be plausibly realistic to match the game fiction.



(a) Computer screen (Orwell)



(b) Desk (Death and Taxes)



(c) Desk (The Westport Independent)

Figure 1: Reference material for game screens