

Games are serious business at news organizations



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Later this month, Gannett plans to debut a page on USA Today's website with 70 free-to-play games.

The page will include brain training and arcade-style games, said John Geddes, the company's first director of gaming, entertainment, and events.

"We feel that expanding our portfolio to include additional popular games such as solitaire, mahjong, and brain teasers is a huge opportunity to not only provide something new for that existing audience but for us to also attract waves of new users," Geddes said.

Gannett is merely the latest media company to expand its games offerings. Several news organizations have acknowledged the increasing importance of games, whether for storytelling or diversion:

- The Washington Post has pulled together an in-house team to develop a platform that will allow the newsroom to easily create quizzes, leaderboards and surveys, said Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, the paper's managing editor for digital.
- BuzzFeed — fresh from a \$50 million infusion of capital from investment firm Andreessen Horowitz — has [has created a small team of developers](#) that will build games to be paired alongside editorial content.
- The New York Times [recently launched](#) a new mini-crossword puzzle available to non-subscribers and [posted a job listing](#) for a software engineer for games.
- The Associated Press announced in May AP Video Puzzles, which allows users to solve puzzles built from historic videos.

Why all the playing around? Games, with their Facebook and Twitter-ready results, have caught on with users. The New York Times' most popular piece of content in 2013 was [this dialect quiz](#), which [garnered more traffic](#) than breaking coverage of [the Boston Marathon bombings](#), news of [Pope Francis' election](#)

and [a personal column](#) from Angelina Jolie explaining why she decided to undergo mastectomy surgery.

Similarly, Slate's most [popular piece of content](#) to date was [The Adele Dazeem Name Generator](#), which mangled users' names in the aftermath of [John Travolta's faux pas](#) at the 2014 The Academy Awards.

The market for games in news organizations is getting bigger because of the traffic the games generate, said Jessica Rovello, who cofounded the games company Arkadium in 2001. Arkadium will provide games to Gannett and, Rovello said, works with more than 30 publishers including the Los Angeles Times, CNN and The Washington Post.

"I think it's expanding for one reason and one reason only: everyone is in an epic battle to acquire and retain users, and these quizzes have proved to be one of the best ways to get these users because they are so shared and so popular on social media," Rovello said.

Gannett's expansion into games began after June 2013, when the company created a task force that identified games as an area of growth for the company, Geddes said. He was named director of games strategy later that year. And after the company releases the games on USA Today's website this month, it will focus on bringing them to other Gannett sites.

The audience for casual games is attractive for a couple reasons, Geddes said. Casual gamers are more likely to spend more time on a website per visit, and they're more likely to visit the site again in the future. Games with social aspects, such as shareable leaderboards, also have the potential to bring new users into the site.

Further evidence of the rising popularity of games in news can be found at American University, which this year opened a lab devoted to creating games and [debuted a master's degree of game design in persuasive play](#).

The program's director, Lindsay Grace, says he's been approached by roughly one news organization per month seeking to combine games with editorial content since the program began. Non-disclosure agreements prevent him from being specific about the clients he's working with, but he says the lab has partnerships with news organizations in the works. (Later this month AU is a cosponsor of a ["NewsJam" at the Newseum](#), which aims to "inspire the spirit of political activism and news reporting into games.")

Grace attributes the recent upswing in the popularity of games and quizzes to a few factors, including the ubiquity of mobile devices and a gradual shift to a culture that views play as productive. Done right, he says, games can also be useful storytelling tools, because they allow audiences to experience information in a new way.

“We process, retain and share experiences differently than reports,” Grace said.

“Reports can be very efficient, but they may not have lasting impact. You can receive a report and forget the facts and figures, but an experience lasts in a different way.”

Grace cited two games that are particularly good at driving lessons home: Wired’s “[Cutthroat Capitalism](#)” — which explains the bloody economics of Somali piracy by making the user a pirate commander — and The New York Times’ “[Gauging your Distraction](#),” which illustrates the dangers of texting and driving by forcing users to navigate a series of tollbooths while sending text messages.

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