

Designing games that change perceptions, opinions and even players' real-life actions

May 26 2017, by Lindsay Grace



In 'Big Huggin,' players control the action by giving affection to a teddy bear controller. Game by Lindsay Grace. Credit: Stacey Stormes, Author provided

In 1904, [Lizzie Magie](#) patented "[The Landlord's Game](#)," a board game about property ownership, with the [specific goal of teaching players](#) about how a system of land grabbing impoverishes tenants and enriches property owners. [The game](#), which went on to become the mass-market classic "Monopoly," was the first widely recognized example of what is today called "persuasive play."

Games offer a unique opportunity to persuade their audiences, because players are not simply listening, reading or interpreting the [game's](#) message – they are subscribing to it. To play a game, players must accept its rules and then operate within the designed experience. As a result, games can change our perceptions, and ultimately our actions.

In [American University's Game Lab and Studio](#), which I direct, we're creating a wide range of persuasive games to test various strategies of persuasion and to gauge players' responses. We have developed games to highlight the problems with using [delivery drones](#), [encourage cultural understanding](#) and [assess understanding of mathematics](#).

And we're expanding the realm beyond education and health. With support from the Knight Foundation, we've been researching ways to connect games and journalism to engage people more deeply with issues in the [news](#). (The Knight Foundation has also funded The Conversation US.) Our newest game, helping people and [news organizations](#) distinguish between real news and fake reports, [is out now](#).

Game play involves action

When talking about games as a persuasive tool, I often repeat the notion that readers read, viewers watch and players do. It's not a coincidence that when sitting down to learn a new game, a prospective player most often asks, "What do you do?" Persuasive play offers people the opportunity to do [more than merely read or watch](#) – they can [engage](#)

[with the game's subject matter](#) in [fundamentally valuable ways](#).

In our work, we want to enhance people's understanding of complex topics, change their perspective and encourage them to think critically about the world around them.

For example, Game Lab faculty member Bob Hone worked with the National Institutes of Mental Health to create a game that is now in clinical trials as a treatment for anxiety without medication. The game, "[Seeing the Good Side](#)," asks players to find numbers hidden in detailed drawings of classroom scenes. In the process, players practice calming themselves by looking around an entire space rather than focusing on one person's anxiety-provoking angry face.

Games can relieve stress in other ways, too. A [recent study we conducted with Educational Testing Service](#) found that a game we created to replace multiple choice standardized tests offered a more positive test-taking experience for students. In addition, students were better able to demonstrate their abilities.

Turning to the news

Persuasive play is most common in education and health, but it's becoming more common in other fields too. We've been working on using game design [techniques to get people to engage with the news](#). We've also proposed [adapting lessons from gaming](#) to attract and retain audiences for news websites.

One project we did involved creating a game for WAMU, a National Public Radio affiliate in Washington, D.C. The station was covering public transportation failures in the city, specifically of the D.C. Metro subway and train service. We designed a game to increase audience engagement with the material.

TIME:
90 MIN


MONDAY

MONEY:
\$200



The alarm goes off, time to get up for work!

Your typical 65-minute commute goes like this:
it takes about 20 minutes to get your son out the door, 5 minutes to walk to the bus and a 10-minute ride. Then you have about 30 minutes to take the Metro to work. That's if everything goes right ...

Get Jimmy ready for day care and head for the bus stop.

Hit snooze, just 10 more minutes.

LATE: 0

RESTART

A game about reality: The beginning of a commuter's day starts with an alarm clock. Credit: American University Game Lab, CC BY-ND

WAMU sent an experienced reporter, Maggie Farley, into the field to interview a variety of Metro riders about their experience. We aggregated those stories into a single narrative and then made that story playable. In our "[Commuter Challenge](#)," players have to make it through a week on the Metro system as a low-wage employee in the D.C. Metro service area.

The problems facing players align with real-world trade-offs the reporter found people making: Should a worker choose a pricey ride-share service to get to the daycare in time for pickup or save money by taking the train but risk incurring fees for being late? Should a worker trust the announcement that the train will be only 15 minutes late or decline an extra shift because of rail service outages? Players have to balance their family, work and financial demands, in hopes of ending the week without running out of money or getting fired for being late to work.

Boosting connections

WAMU found that the game got four times more visits than other Metro-related articles on its site. And people spent four times longer playing the game than they did reading or listening to the standard news coverage. People, it seemed, were far more eager to play a game about the plight of Metro riders than they were to hear about it.

Most recently, we released a game called "[Factitious](#)." It works like a simple quiz, giving players a headline and an article, at the bottom of which is a link to reveal the article's source. Players must decide whether a particular article is real news or fake. The game tells the player the correct answer and offers hints for improvement. This helps players learn the importance of reading skeptically and checking sources before deciding what to believe.

In addition, for each article we can see how many people understood or

misunderstood it as real or fake news and how long they took to make the decision. When we change headlines, images or text, we can monitor how players' responses adjust, and report to news organizations on how those influence readers' understanding. We hope games like this one become a model for getting honest feedback from the general population.

While the original "Monopoly" aimed to explain the drawbacks of land grabbing, contemporary persuasive play has even grander hopes. This new generation of games aims to learn about its [players](#), change their perceptions and revise their behavior in less time than it takes to [build a hotel on Park Place](#).

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