CONVERGENCE

Endless mode: Exploring the procedural rhetoric of a Black Lives Matter-themed newsgame

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Abstract
A week after the back-to-back police shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling in early July 2016, a game developer, who goes by the screen name Yvvy, sat in front of her console mulling over the headlines. She designed a newsgame that featured civilian–police interactions that were plucked from that reportage. She entitled it Easy Level Life. The newsgame is fashioned in what developers call 'endless mode', where players are challenged to last as long as possible against a continuing threat, with limited resources or player-character lives. This case study explores the procedural rhetoric of Easy Level Life to investigate how it condemns police brutality through play. Using Teun van Dijk's concept of 'news as discourse' as the framework, I found that this newsgame followed the narrative structure of a traditional newspaper editorial very closely. I explain how the situation–evaluation–conclusion discursive model best describes how Easy Level Life conveys its political ideologies. I conclude by suggesting that this discursive model should perhaps become a benchmarking tool for future newsgame developers who aim to strengthen their arguments for social justice.

Keywords
Black Lives Matter, discourse analysis, journalism, newsgames, procedural rhetoric, race, social justice

Introduction

It was a simple request.

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'Stay with me', Diamond Reynolds said to Philando Castile on July 6, 2016, as he rasped beside her in their car. As the deep maroon bloodstain on his T-shirt grew larger, his moans of agony became fainter. In the end, Castile did not stay. He died next to Reynolds in that vehicle, after a routine traffic stop in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, as his 4-year-old stepdaughter watched from the backseat.

The world came to know about this tragic event through Reynolds' brave filming of it. Her recording marked the first time that anyone had used Facebook Live to document a case of fatal police brutality. The video hit Black America to its core, since police shot and killed another African American man, Alton Sterling, just one day before Castile, in Baton Rouge Louisiana. The Pew Research Center reported later, in July 2018, that the back-to-back shootings inspired peak circulation of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. In the 10 days that followed, users tweeted it nearly 500,000 times daily – more than any other documented timeframe on the platform (Anderson et al., 2018: 3).

As the #BlackLivesMatter hashtags gave way to vociferous blogger think pieces and academic studies alike, an unusual discursive response to the killings emerged: a Black Lives Matter-themed video game. On July 11, 2016 – one week after the shootings – a developer named Yvvy, who identified as a 'Black, femme gamer' in a *Fresh Out of Tokens* (2016) podcast, debuted *Easy Level Life*. The premise of the game was deceptively simple. Choose one of five possible fates to survive an encounter with the police. The game was fashioned in what developers call 'endless mode', which challenges users to last as long as possible against a continuing threat, with limited resources or player-character lives (Polson and Shah, 2015). It is a mode in which many African Americans find themselves operating in real life, Yvvy told *Kill Screen*, a video game blog (Budgor, 2016). Yvvy said: 'The closest thing to a win condition where police brutality is concerned, is simply not being the wrong skin color. The game is the same way'. Yvvy explained further that her frustration with both the media coverage of the fatal police shootings and certain groups' online discussions about the killings inspired her to design *Easy Level Life*. With every fresh case, she said: 'I see the same questions: Were they listening to the cop? Why were they afraid if they didn't do anything wrong? If the cop was afraid, didn't they do something wrong?'

As I read other game reviews and Yvvy interviews (Lachenal, 2016; McKenney, 2016), it was clear that the developer was making a discrete social justice claim with *Easy Level Life*. That point, on its surface, seemed to be that the 'game' itself was rigged: that African Americans were disproportionately more likely to die during routine encounters with the police. Yvvy's game, in this vein, was like a Coates' (2016, para. 5) editorial come to life. He wrote in *The Atlantic*:

> When the law shoots down 12-year-old children, or beats down old women on traffic islands, or chokes people to death over cigarettes; when the law shoots people over compact discs, traffic stops, drivers' licenses, loud conversation, or car trouble . . . when much of this is recorded, uploaded, live-streamed, tweeted, and broadcast; and when government seems powerless, or unwilling, to stop any of it, then it ceases, in the eyes of citizens, to be any sort of respectable law at all.

Easy Level Life appeared to make identical connections – that these state-sanctioned killings were thematic, rather than one-off, episodic events (Aarøe, 2011; Gross, 2008). I became interested in how Yvvy used gaming to protest police brutality. I wanted to know whether the structure of her core arguments resembled any of the Black Lives Matter-themed newspaper, magazine, or Web-based articles I read at the time of the Sterling–Castile killings.

In what follows, I discuss what a multimodal discourse analysis of *Easy Level Life* revealed the structure of its core political arguments. First, I offer a working definition of newsgames. Then, I

explain how scholars believe newsgames persuade audiences, through a collection of sophisticated rules and processes called 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost, 2007). Lastly, I explain how well the situation–evaluation–conclusion discursive model describes *Easy Level Life*'s gameplay. Taken together, this case study suggests that this discursive model perhaps could become a benchmarking tool for future newsgame developers who aim to strengthen their arguments for social justice.

Newsgames, a primer

Videogames, at its core, are about much more than play. Bogost et al. have explained: 'Games display text, images, sounds, and video, but they also do much more: games simulate how things work by constructing models that people can interact with . . . [a] procedural rhetoric' (2012: 6). This procedural rhetoric creates the rules of the gaming environment into which the user is immersed. It also sets boundaries between the real world and the gaming world, to allow the user to imagine alternate universes, such as one inhabited by superheroes or zombies.

Newsgames set boundaries too, albeit in different ways. Meier (2018) has written that other digital journalism genres, such as multimedia reports or web documentaries, benefit from a level of narrative gravitas that newsgames do not. In other words, serious topics are communicated effectively in these conventional formats. As for newsgames, however, Meier has argued: 'Ethical doubts as to whether serious topics should be played in games are offset against the benefit of creating interest and empathy' (p. 429). Said differently, newsgames perform important 'boundary work', in that the genre sets itself apart from established videogames and digital journalism formats, yet it garners debatable effects on news audiences (Brennen and Cerna, 2010).

While García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2018) consider newsgames as a form of gamification of journalism, Ferrer-Conill (2018) posits, 'newsgames signify a distinct journalistic genre as they transcend the digitization of print news into a software-based artifact that combines features of both journalism and digital games' (p. 26). In other words, the uniqueness of newsgames lies in that they are stand-alone playable digital game parsing news or current affairs content that, when leveraged well, have the potential to affect the way journalists produce news, shifting the topics that are introduced in the production pipeline, as well as how news users consume journalism (Ferrer-Conill, 2016).

Newsgames as editorials

Sicart (2008) has suggested that newsgames convey an 'editorial line' (p. 32). Unlike computer games that leverage a 'black box technique [that] blinds players from the algorithmic relations between input and output', newsgames instead are 'more keen on showing their inner system' (2008: 32). Stated differently, newsgames are more likely to be more expository in nature. Sicart has explained that this is because a 'key element in newsgame design is not only to translate the news into a game, but also to make players realize the editorial line of the game' (2008: 32).

To explore how Yvvy structured her editorial line in *Easy Level Life*, I blended two of van Dijk's theoretical frameworks: (1) his approach to news as discourse (2013) and (2) his ideas on the function of newspaper editorials as agents of perpetuating racist ideologies of the elite (1992). In *News as Discourse*, van Dijk has explained that the schemata of news rely heavily upon 'macro-propositions', which provide the gist of the story as headlines, and 'macrorules', or story components, which reduce or omit information in three key ways (2013: 32). First, news media often delete information that is no longer relevant. Second, reporters commonly use generalizations or formulaic

frames to make stories familiar to their audiences. Third, journalists often reduce the explication of a sequence of events to report merely its outcome, which describes the whole process more succinctly.

To the first point, in the case of Philando Castile, for example, the salient fact is that Officer Jeronimo Yanez killed him during a routine traffic stop. Of lesser importance, perhaps, is the make and model of Castile's car or the exact street where the killing occurred. National news media commonly omitted these local details in its reportage. To the second point, regarding generalizations as narrative shortcuts, the Castile story was regarded widely as a watershed moment for Facebook Live, while few news reports explored the political economy of relying upon an elite technology company to elevate marginalized voices. To the third point, journalists commonly explained that Castile's family received a US$3 million settlement eventually, yet did not discuss all of the steps involved with seeking and winning such a civil suit.

This assemblage – of macropropositions and macrorules – is the overarching, organizing feature of everyday news as discourse, van Dijk wrote. Some forms of journalism, however, rely on a deeper set of organizing rules. In terms of the newspaper editorial, van Dijk has noted, the opinion pages of newspapers belong to the elite, which is often White and male. This means that the editorial is meant to prime 'influential news actors' to think in ways that maintain the balance of power (van Dijk, 1992: 245). Newspaper editorials achieve this through a three-pronged discursive structure, van Dijk explained. All newspaper editorials begin by explaining the problem or 'situation'. Then, the writer suggests a possible solution or 'evaluation'. Lastly, the writer ends the piece by offering a call-to-action or an agenda-setting 'conclusion'. This case study explored whether these three conventions were woven into *Easy Level Life*'s narrative structure. Additionally, the research team examined how the video game used discursive macropropositions to depict power relationships between civilians, the police, and the press. Lastly, the study aimed to identify any macrorules, such as racial stereotypes or videogame storylines that mirrored actual news events.

Method

My methodological choices draw from van Dijk's (1992, 2013) news as discourse framework. First, I downloaded *Easy Level Life* on my desktop computer, and I created a screen capture of myself playing the game on a desktop computer to facilitate replay for coding. Second, I created codes and subcodes that I assigned to lines of script that appeared onscreen as I played the game. The coding scheme included eight categories: (1) macropropositions re: civilians, (2) macropropositions re: police, (3) macropropositions re: the press, (4) macrorules re: news events, (5) macrorules re: racial tropes, (6) editorial-situation, (7) editorial-evaluation, and (8) editorial-conclusion. Finally, five additional 'player co-researchers' (Jørgensen, 2012) annotated the game. Each person played during a recorded screen capture, then used the eight categories to analyze its discursive elements. Three player coresearchers identify as African American, one as White, and another as Korean American. All of the coders are graduate students at a private university that is located in the Western region of the United States.

Results

Yvvy's *Easy Level Life* incorporates van Dijk's tripartite editorial structure through a blend of visual and textual appeals. The situation, the evaluation, and the conclusion of Yvvy's immersive editorial are built into the gameplay sequence. Additionally, the team found that the developer

relies on a series of explicit graphics alongside implicit macropropositions and macrorules to transition from each phase of the editorial. I summarize the findings here, in three parts, to mirror van Dijk's scheme.

Communicating the 'situation'

Yvvy opens the game with a subtle paradigm shift. A Black child avatar, rather than a White character, is the default selection (see Figure 1). The character's gender is ambiguous too. Herein lies the game's first macroproposition about civilians who become victims of fatal police encounters: the Black character's fate is not linked to its navigation of this virtual world as a girl or boy. This is a departure from iconic virtual worlds that have gendered roles entrenched in its architecture, such as 'save the princess' games. It is also the game's first subtle argument that both Black boys and girls are vulnerable to police brutality.

Once the player selects the Black child, the character begins to walk down the street of a fictional, two-dimensional neighborhood. The game's first few lines of script read: 'It's a nice, sunny school day. You're on your way to 7th grade'. This is the game's first macrorule, or implied shorthand reference, of a news event. A seventh-grader is a child of 12 most commonly. Tamir Rice, whom police shot fatally in an Ohio park for playing with a toy gun, was 12 years old when he died on November 22, 2014 (Stone and Socia, 2019). The game provides cultural homage, therefore, to one of the youngest victims of excessive force during the Black Lives Matter era.

As the *Easy Level Life* script progresses, it explains to the player: 'This is a new neighborhood for you. A nice one, your mom says. You'll be safe here'. These words are juxtaposed with the images of the Black child approaching a group of six White characters who are huddled together on the opposite side of the street. As the onscreen script relays that the Black character still has not made friends in school but will try again on this day, four more characters come into view as the screen scrolls left. Three White officers beat a Black man with red billy clubs. The man writhes on the ground. *Easy Level Life* relies again on several macropropositions about civilians and police and macrorules regarding news events in this setting of the editorial situation. First, with reference to civilians, the game's portrayal of White characters huddled on the opposite side of the street appears to make a macroproposition about White privilege writ large, which allows non-Black onlookers of police brutality to gaze upon it without being harmed. Second, with reference to police, the game visualizes another macroproposition: that brutality often occurs in broad daylight, for all to see. In many of the recent videos of fatal police encounters that feature Black victims, such as Philando Castile or Eric Garner, it was daytime when the tragic events transpired. The sunny setting of *Easy Level Life*, therefore, adds to the game's mounting affective qualities, which suggest that the character's fate could be meted out anywhere, to anyone who shares the same skin color.

Shorthand macrorules from actual news events round out *Easy Level Life's* setting of the situation. The game's depiction of police assaulting a Black character with billy clubs harkens back to the Rodney King tapes of 1991, which captured the Black motorist being beaten similarly alongside a California highway. Likewise, the game's riot gear-clad police conjure imagery from Ferguson in 2014, in the wake of the Michael Brown's killing, or Baltimore in 2015, in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death, where local law enforcement officers met peaceful demonstrators in both cities with tanks and teargas. This amalgam of news imagery – juxtaposed with a script that relays the childhood concerns of making friends and finding one's place in a new school – set up a compelling gameplay sequence. *Easy Level Life's* virtual world, as it is presented in

Figure 1. *Easy Level Life*'s default avatar.

endless mode, offers the player neither superpowers nor weapons as it approaches the scene of police brutality. Instead, one encounters a series of five choices to stay alive and in the game. These choices form Yvvy's transition to the 'evaluation' phase of her editorial.

Communicating the 'evaluation'

The evaluation portion of a traditional newspaper editorial, as van Dijk has described it, appraises a societal problem and primes the reader to evaluate the success of relevant political actors based on a series of prescribed solutions. These political actors are expected to follow the advice given in the editorial, lest they become subject to public admonishment in subsequent editorials. In the context of *Easy Level Life*, Yvvy offers the player five possible solutions for the Black character who happens upon police brutality on her (or his) way to school: (1) eat breakfast, (2) cross the street, (3) quickly go past; (4) stand there quietly, or (5) this is so scary! (see Figure 2). All of the proposed solutions, in the end, lead to the Black avatar's death. Players are alerted to this when they hear a lone gunshot each time, followed by the screen's splattering with bright red, digitized blood.

At the level of macroproposition, Yvvy is making a claim about the nature of American policing in this phase of the video game. The implicit meaning is that the game's main character cannot cheat death because she (or he) is Black. Although the main character is an unarmed child, the game's police regard the avatar as a threat and extinguish it quickly. The game draws much of its discursive power from eschewing time-honored gameplay objectives in this way. Typically, the main character in a video game is assigned the task of maintaining order by vanquishing the Other. The failure to annihilate or conquer the Other is the gaming equivalent of allowing evil to run amok; it signals the fall of a ruling faction and the dystopian rise of an unchecked, malignant enemy. In *Easy Level Life*, if one follows this typical gameplay ideology, the Black character's failure to destroy the Other, herein recognized as police, signals a collective societal failure to stop

Figure 2. *Easy Level Life*'s five gaming scenarios.

state-sponsored violence. This is a powerful affective device, as the player is left to contend with the feelings of helplessness that such an unwinnable game summons. It leaves the player, perhaps, with questions about why police encounters are like this for many African Americans.

I should note that one player coresearcher read this macroproposition about Othering in another way, to yield the same affective results still. The coder felt that the continual losses flipped the paradigm of the main character as the heroic member of the dominant culture. Instead, the main character represents the Other, thereby casting the riot-clad police as the antiheroes who maintain order. In this model, the coder asserted, the main character is not operating in endless mode, with limited weapons for her (or his) defense. As Other, the main character's differences equate to the fact of blackness (Fanon, 2000) in this virtual world – race *is* the weapon. The main character is not unarmed at all, in this model. This alternative reading of the game's editorial evaluation of police brutality was a fascinating point of debate for our team. If the main character was the enemy, then the game still functioned as a critique of police, in that all of the humanizing scripts that preceded the character's death made it more poignant. The mentions of the child's impending day at school, for example, made the fatal shooting hurt more the player coresearchers argued. Just in our small group of coders, the feeling of virtual defeat inspired difficult conversations about how Black Lives Matter activists face a formidable battle against real-life nihilism or mediated numbing to the issue of police brutality, as tragic video after video goes viral. Yvvy does not end the game here, though. She offers, instead, a sly conclusion, which reinvents the news editorial.

Communicating the 'conclusion'

When a player dies in the virtual world of *Easy Level Life*, the customary 'game over' message does not appear on screen. Instead, a floating box in the foreground offers the player two options: to 'try again' or to opt out by clicking 'I've had enough, thanks'. In the background, a newspaper page

Figure 3. *Easy Level Life*'s fictitious newspaper.

details the player's fatal choice (see Figure 3). This layered imagery implies two macropropositions about civilians. First, the box in the foreground breaks the newsgame experience by reminding the player that leaving this environment is a privilege. The box created, for the player coresearchers, the 'proper distance' (Nash, 2018) from the problem of police brutality. It jarred them out of the realm of play and into an exercise of real-world, solutions-based inquiry. In this manner, the game makes a macroproposition that the people who can leave the game in the real world must work with those who cannot affect real change. On another discursive level, however, the media make this difficult, Yvvy suggests. The newspaper imagery in the background is rife with macropropositions and macrorules about the press, our team found.

The fictional newspaper, called *The Old Post*, is dated July 10, 2016. This narrative decision, to have the game set on this day, reflects an imagined world in which both Alton Sterling and Philando Castile would have died already. The game's events would have also occurred after Micah Xavier Johnson's real-world ambush of police in Dallas, Texas, in which he shot and killed five officers and wounded nine more. The price of the newspaper reads accordingly: '#ablacklife'. Three of the five player coresearchers categorized this 'pricing' as an affirmation of the old press adage: 'If it bleeds, it leads'. In other words, news media profit from the spectacle of Black death. In this interpretation, the price functions as a macroproposition about the assumed capitalistic opportunism of the press during times of crisis in Black America. Two coders read this pricing differently, however, inferring instead that the price suggested that more Black deaths were imminent. Since more than one slain Black person's name became a hashtag during major Black Lives Matter campaigns online, the coders wrote that the newspaper's 'price' was an ellipsis of sorts; a biting, 'to-be-continued' discursive element.

As our team annotated the remainder of the fictional newspaper's front page, we found that *Easy Level Life* uses this design element to critique (1) legacy media's coverage of fatal police shootings of people of color and (2) racist reportage of victims of color. To the first point, Yvvy

makes macropropositions about the press in the newspaper's top headline. Then, to the second point, she uses the newspaper's three-column structure to lambast the press further in the first article, to challenge civilians in the second, and to castigate police in the third. For example, if a player picks the gaming option 'eat breakfast', the police shoot and kill the main character. On the next screen, the newspaper's main headline reads: 'Suspect dead over candy'. The first column headline reads: 'Massive hulking Black person dead after a very violent attempt to eat candy'. This reference to candy summons the 2012 case of Trayvon Martin, who was walking home from a convenience store in Sanford, Florida when a neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, approached him. Martin was unarmed, carrying only a bag of Skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea. Zimmerman shot Martin after a scuffle that he instigated, despite local police instructions to stand down in his pursuit of the teenager. On trial, Zimmerman later admitted that he thought Martin was much older than his 17 years. Similarly, in the Tamir Rice case, the man who dialed 911 on the child playing in the park described him as a 'guy' in the emergency call. These media reports likely inspired a string of related sociological studies during the Black Lives Matter era, such as the investigation that found Black children often are mistaken for older than they are and viewed as less innocent than their White peers (Goff et al., 2014). Yvvy's headlines function, therefore, as shorthand for the news media's racial stereotyping of Black children.

Easy Level Life's fictional newspaper reports civilian reactions to the game's shooting in the second column and the cop's non-indictment in the third column. For example, if the player selects the 'stand there quietly' option, the second headline reads: 'Sneaking around? Not in Old'. Again, this conjures the imagery of Trayvon Martin 'sneaking around' in his affluent Sanford neighborhood. Zimmerman stated during his 2013 trial, after all, that he assumed Martin was a would-be burglar. Yvvy plays up these racial tropes by quoting civilians who claim: 'I'm not saying they was *(sic)* a criminal. But the chances are pretty high up there aren't they? For those little vagrant thugs?' Another bystander in the fictional story says: 'I just don't trust'em. I'm pretty sure they stole from me once'. In the third column, the headline reads: 'Officers at scene gave logical and ideal response, none will be indicted, says the DA'. Within the article, the district attorney is quoted as such: 'Our officers did what they could to a huge danger in our city. They should receive medals, not be punished'. The irony in this three-column editorial structure is that the second and third articles do not change throughout the various fatal choices that a player makes; only the main headline and first article are altered. In this manner, Yvvy suggests that the media have a boilerplate response to fatal shootings of Black people; the names, dates, and locations may change, but the public's response and the non-indictments remain the same, she claims.

For every option that a player selects, there is a different postmortem report that combines the same macrorules about news events or racialized tropes. If one selects the 'quickly go past' option, for example, the first headline reads: 'Massive, hulking Black person dead after very violent attempt to cross street'. The copy reads further: 'Evidence shows that the perpetrator, Amari Hines, was guilty of trying to rush past cops as they were beating a suspect in a grand cigarette hocking scheme'. These references include cultural nods to the 2014 Michael Brown killing, in which the officer, Darren Wilson, said he regarded the 18-year-old as a 'demon', as he walked down the street (Hawley and Flint, 2016) and to the 2014 Eric Garner fatal chokehold case, in which New York Police Department claimed that they approached the Staten Island native for selling loose cigarettes. Even the player option 'This is so scary!' yields no relief. In that scenario, the game's main character runs home, but police break in the door and shoot the child dead. The newspaper's headline reads: 'Large Black person dead after very violent attempt to return home'. The subhead continues: 'They were huge and just cowering there in the kitchen.' This scene seems to

foreshadow the August 2016 Korryn Gaines incident, which happened a month after the game's release. Baltimore County police fatally shot Gaines in her kitchen – in front of her 5-year-old son, Kodi – after she refused to come outside of her apartment to be served with a bench warrant for traffic violations. The illegal storming of Gaines' residence marked a violation of her civil rights, a Baltimore County jury decided in 2018, awarding an unprecedented US$38 million to the family. The County has since appealed the decision, and no monies had been awarded at the time of this article's publication in 2020.

In this manner, the newspaper, as a discursive device, offers the closing arguments for this gamified form of editorial. Taken together, Yvvy volleys from various cases of fatal police brutality with a deft deployment of macropropositions and macrorules that take turns critiquing the police, the press, and the public. She has reimagined, therefore, the conventional editorial in a newsgame. The result is an engaging work that rages against police brutality.

Discussion

Easy Level Life offers a first-person, opinion-piece production experience. The player feels like a partner in the construction of an argument as the game progresses through van Dijk's three discursive phases of news editorials: the situation, the evaluation, and the conclusion. The newsgame invites audiences to build-their-own outcomes, which culminate (in the case of this game) toward one central argument. This illusion of choice is alluring – until one realizes that the game is unwinnable. This stark realization then forces the player to address the crux of the game: that for some people living in the United States, encounters with police may be just as oppressive or fatal. The strength of *Easy Level Life*'s procedural rhetoric is that it transcends the classic video game by challenging the traditional faces of good and evil. Whereas criminalized Black main characters typically have allowed White gamers to engage in digital blackface (Matamoros-Fernández, 2020) for a bit – to experiment with a level of mediated violence that they may never exact in real life – putting oneself into the shoes of a victimized Black child in *Easy Level Life* is a different kind of cognitive experience. There is no presumed glorification of the violence here; no antihero drag racing through the streets, trying to evade police à la *Grand Theft Auto*. Instead, this gaming experience casts the main character, a 12-year-old Black child, as the Other who must be destroyed. The avatar becomes a symbolic dilemma in this game; a character who bears no weapon of self-defense, but whose very identity is the weapon.

My only critique of *Easy Level Life* as a newsgame, ironically, falls along the lines of player involvement. Yvvy is making a fairly large assumption about the media literacy of the game's players. As a researcher who studies race and media, I acknowledge that I may be more attuned to some of *Easy Level Life*'s more nuanced macrorules. Two of the player coresearchers, for example, did not make the narrative link between Tamir Rice's age and that of the main character. Although they were moved that the main character died eventually, they were more likely to discuss the avatar's age in relation to the contradictory news headlines that appeared at the end of the game, which described the slain child as 'hulking'. When the coders were finished annotating, I mentioned Rice, yet only one of the three who recalled his killing could remember his exact age. This indicates a potential weakness in the situation–evaluation–conclusion discursive model of newsgame discourse. If a game designer leaves the player to fill in too many of the narrative news gaps, assuming that the player knows enough details for a macrorule to be used, then the game's core argument may lose some of its potency. In other words, without enough articulation of the 'situation', there cannot be a fully realized evaluation or conclusion phase of the newsgame.

In a traditional, web-based editorial, this problem is solved by adding hyperlinks to related news stories. It is not uncommon, for example, to observe opinion pieces that offer links to previously reported news pegs, so that the author might move more quickly to her core arguments. A hyperlink in this format would be distracting, however, in that it would disrupt *Easy Level Life*'s procedural rhetoric to take the participant out of a virtual world and back into the real world that journalists have constructed. Still, *Easy Level Life* is a fascinating kind of newsgame, which is designed to inspire empathy through vicariousness and participatory sensemaking. The unwinnable nature of the newsgame, in particular, seeks to engender support for the anti-police brutality movement in a way that transcends a traditional one-way appeal in a newspaper.

Conclusion

With its moralism and its infusion of Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), *Easy Level Life* belongs in the same rightful discursive sphere as other mediated discussions that surrounded the Sterling–Castile killings of July 2016. This innovative form of narrative suasion is intriguing when one considers that video games actually have reified rather than reduced racist stereotypes throughout their history (Dill et al., 2005; Leonard, 2004; Williams et al., 2009). In view of this, I was curious to see how a Black Lives Matter-themed newsgame crafted its core arguments. I sought a discursive model, therefore, that helped expose the pressure points of an editorial line. The situation–evaluation–conclusion discursive model achieved this, thus it could become an important benchmark in the iterative newsgame design process.

Many nascent studies suggest that newsgames affect audience empathy, after all. Alhabash and Wise (2015) found that just 20 min of gameplay helped change Israelis' and Palestinians' implicit and explicit biases against one another. Similarly, Plewe and Fürsich (2018) found that newsgames helped enhance players' understanding of the global refugee and migrant crises that many nations are facing today. The team discovered that *The Refugee Challenge, Against all Odds* and *The Migrant Trail* all depicted what it was like to face 'the existential crisis of involuntary dislocation' (p. 2470). Playing these games even helped to decrease the act of 'Othering' people who find themselves in these dire straits. The question remained, however, whether these kinds of 'persuasive games' (Wright and Bogost, 2007) created too much distance between those playing and those who are actually living the experience.

Those who seek to answer these kinds of questions – of newsgames' efficacy – might deploy the situation–evaluation–conclusion model to run better player focus groups, for example. The researcher could ask participants informed questions such as: *Did the player lack the media literacy or public affairs knowledge to grasp the situation? Was the evaluation or suggested solution absent, leaving the player with a sense of hopelessness or overwhelm? Or, was the conclusion poorly developed?* Scholars will find that this area is ripe for investigation. As social justice-themed newsgames continue only to proliferate the digital journalism landscape, we need more thorough ways of thinking about how these kinds of media tell difficult stories and make bold arguments.

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