“I’m so going to nuke Helsinki” - Newsgames in the Nordic media landscape

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ABSTRACT
This presentation looks at newsgames in the context of Nordic countries. By focusing on selected cases from the region, the presentation gives insight into the design choices behind newsgames, including their promises and pitfalls. With the transition to a digital age continuing to challenge news production and distribution, the interplay between games and journalism continues to offer interesting avenues of research.

Keywords
Gamification, journalism, newsgames, the Nordic countries

INTRODUCTION
The changes brought about by the transition to digital news production and distribution have given rise to a variety of multimedia formats becoming standard repertoire of news websites (Jacobson, 2012). Evolving in tandem with this broader trend is the rising popularity of newsgames, or instances where journalism meets games. This presentation looks into the connections, promises and pitfalls between journalism and games.

In recent years there have been several attempts at utilizing the principles of gamification or gameful design in connection with journalistic content. Many of these attempts aim at illustrating difficult-to-illustrate-data, or to motivate the reader to try out and compare different scenarios. For example, Helsingin Sanomat, the largest Finnish daily newspaper, made an online addition to a story about nuclear armaments where you can try out what kind of an effect a nuclear device have on your home town. Even simple cases like this bring out a host of questions related to the interplay between playfulness and seriousness, truthfulness and creative freedom, and others.

There have already been some openings into understanding gameful design within the realm of journalism. Perhaps the most notable of these is the seminal book Newsgames: Journalism at play by Bogost, Ferrari and Schweiz (2010). However, because the field is
evolving rapidly, and ever new players are entering the arena both from the side of journalists and their audiences, there is need to look into recent developments and offer contrastive views into the connections between gamification and journalism. For this purpose, this presentation focuses on the media landscape in the Nordic countries. With active media houses leaning towards digital distribution, and strong regional and language differences, this context has the promise to offer interesting views into the topic.

In this presentation, we do not follow the world-changing promises that some authors connect to gamification (McGonigal, 2011), nor do we see it as cynically as some who claim that the whole approach is about easy exploitation of the target audience (Bogost, 2011; Chorney, 2012). We look for alternative and broader definitions for the term gamification, such as Huotari’s and Hamari’s (2012) proposal where instead of systemic elements the focus is on the experiential level - that is, user experience. From this viewpoint, game design elements create affordances to the user/player, but by no means guarantee the existence of a game (Huotari & Hamari, 2012). Finally, we claim there is a deeper change taking place in how journalists and similar actors approach media in the digital age, where interactivity and engagement are not simply buzzwords but something that is included in the design from the get-go.

This presentation aims to answer the following broad research question: What kinds of “gameful” design choices have recently been utilized in the Nordic media landscape? The presentation focuses on some prominent cases and through “directed” qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) reflects them against existing models and theories such as Thomas Malone's theory of intrinsically motivating instruction and Mark Lepper's design principles for intrinsic motivation (see e.g. Kapp, 2012).

ENDNOTES
1 See e.g. http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/2011/12/16/ten-examples-of-games-used-to-tell-news-stories/

2 The game in question can be found at http://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/Ydinaseet+vertailussa+++HSn+tuhokone+n%C3%A4ytt%C3%A4%C3%A4+pommien+voiman+kartalla/a1305620620516

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