Game-O-Matic (The Cartoonist)

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
Game-O-Matic	Georgia Tech Research Corp.	A free, easy-to-use tool that allows journalists to build cartoon arcade games based on their news content	**$378,000**

In partnership with the University of California Santa Cruz, the Georgia Institute of Technology received News Challenge funding to create a free tool that allows anyone to create cartoon-like current event games that can be easily integrated into the websites of local newspapers and media outlets. The aim of Game-O-Matic (formally called The Cartoonist) was to increase the use of news games to convey editorial opinion, helping journalists and editors draw communities to their local newspapers, and further inspire citizens to explore the news.

THE INNOVATION

The developers conceived Game-O-Matic as a free tool for those without a background in game development to use in generating simple, cartoon-like current event games that are the equivalent of editorial cartoons. Several other projects exist to develop digital games to build citizen engagement in important issues.[1] The expense, time, and expertise required to craft regular video-game content, however, has prevented the widespread adoption of news games by traditional media sources. Game-O-Matic was created to relieve the burden of programming and design while encouraging journalists to think of news events not just as stories, but as systems that can be modeled and explored. The tool serves as an intelligent operating system for creating arcade-style games through the process of concept mapping relevant actors and their relationships. By answering a series of questions about the major

actors in a news event and making value judgments about their actions, Game-O-Matic automatically proposes game rules and images. Once created, users can publish their games to Game-O-Matic's site or to their own website or Facebook profile.

IMPLEMENTATION

Because Game-O-Matic set out to create a technology from scratch, the project spent its early months conducting research into game design platforms and working to find ways in which the platform could interpret user input to generate games. After a conducting survey of available game design platforms, Game-O-Matic chose to use PushButton Engine, an open source framework for building Flash games. The project spent a significant amount of time developing a theory of meaning and rhetoric for two-dimensional, arcade-style games. No one had undertaken this research before, and the development of Game-O-Matic took longer than the project team anticipated since they had to conceptualize the types of stories the tool could process, the basic structures of the news, how the tool could combine video-game elements to create meaning, and how to make the software usable.

Game-O-Matic's project team programmed an early version of the tool after they determined the video-game elements that one would need to portray events, coded ways these pieces could be combined, selected a method by which events are broken down into actors and relationships, created interpretations of relationships that can suggest nuance in a story, and coded an interface that allows journalists to input stories. As the project rolled out an early

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[1] Other new games-focused projects include 2007 Knight News Challenge Winners New York News Games, Oakland Jazz & Blues Clubs Video Game, and Playing the News.

version of Game-O-Matic, called the The Cartoonist, it received a number of angry messages and comments from editorial cartoonists who viewed the tool as way for newspapers to replace them. As a result, the project was forced to reconsider its branding and to spend time explaining that it intended the tool to reference editorial cartoons' ability to convey bite-sized commentary on current events rather than replace cartoons entirely. The project ultimately chose the name "Game-O-Matic" to convey its automated process for creating games and the complex, generative nature of the tool.

The project intended to market Game-O-Matic to the editors, reporters, and designers of local newspapers and media groups. However, later on it expanded its target audience to include the general public in order to create greater adoption and awareness. Game-O-Matic reached out to local news organizations in Atlanta, GA and Santa Cruz, CA to test the tool and inform its development. It also approached individuals from other local news organizations and presented on the project at various game developer conferences and to the World Newspaper Congress and World Editors Forum in Vienna, Austria. Many of these target groups were initially receptive, but Game-O-Matic found it difficult to promote a novelty product, and the project struggled to find highly-visible partners who would create a game to serve as an example for other potential users. The project developed a beta site, http://game-o-matic.com/, but is waiting to publicly launch until the tool is more polished and easier to use.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

Game-O-Matic has yet to launch publicly and is still in the very early stages of its lifecycle. By the end of the grant period, adoption of the tool had been low: by August 2012, 450 games had been produced and news media groups were experimenting with the tool. Anecdotally, user reception of the tool was largely positive, but Game-O-Matic found it difficult to motivate these partners to actually use the tool to create games that they posted on their websites. As of

mid-October 2012, Game-O-Matic was still struggling to find a user-created game to serve as an example of the tool's use to promote to local newsgroups. Overall awareness of the tool is also low. Social media monitoring captured about 50 mentions of "Game-O-Matic" between March 2012 and November 2012, with mentions spiking around times when the project gave presentations during conferences and events, including the Game Developer's Conference, Games for Change, and the workshop on Procedural Content Generation in Games.

The project's ultimate aim was to create a tool which would increase the use of news games, resulting in readers' increased interest in the news. To date, there is no evidence to suggest that Game-O-Matic has significantly helped to increase the use of news games in local news or raised reader interest in the news. Perhaps the project's greatest achievement, however, was the successful completion of a beta version of its platform. Game-O-Matic proved itself to be a versatile way of thinking about meaning and games and even produced a white paper on the theory of meaning and rhetoric for two-dimensional, arcade-style games.[2] Its model established a flexible framework which can be updated with new templates, variables, assets, and logics, and could inspire the design and creation of other news game authoring systems in the future.

Game-O-Matic's future plans include pursuing bridge funding of $50,000 for the next year in order to revise the tool according to initial users' feedback, to eventually launch the platform to the public, and to continue pursuing partners who could market games made with the tool to other potential users.

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[2] Game-O-Matic's white paper is available here: http://mtreanor.com/research/micro-rhetorics.pdf