

# News gamification as a way of improving engagement

## How We Made Our “Best Town” News Game

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### ABSTRACT

News gamification is the use of game mechanics to drive audience engagement in journalism storytelling. Introducing playful elements to data journalism provides a new way to fascinate and engage audiences.

In our case, we created a Sim-City-like game, which allows users to select their preferred categories and generate a personalized ranking to help them find the best location. It was one of our biggest hits. The average engaging time of 40,000 users was approximately 5 minutes.

Our newsroom had published dozens of “best towns in NJ” ranking stories and the audiences were getting fed up with it. We were looking for new ways to engage our audiences. Erin Petenko, the data reporter at NJ Advance Media, wanted to create an interactive suburbs ranking game for millennials.

Petenko compiled ten categories from the Census, the NJ Department of Education, and the NJ State Police. We then created a database with each town's values for each category and its percent “rank” in that category. For example, the town with the highest income in the state would receive an income rank of .99, because it was better than 99 percent of towns in New Jersey.

Most of the data are from American Census Survey (ACS) but a few were stumbling blocks. Steve Stirling, a data reporter at NJ Advance Media and Petenko spent hours lining up every NJ school district with Census codes to get the education data. Stirling also helped get greenery data based on satellite imagery.

Our editor wanted us to create a [Sim-city like game](#), so I started to do research about design and user experience. We realized that it would not be an accurate tool as we were unable to create the perfect algorithms. So we decided to make it playful and made sure our design could reflect that concept.

As I was taking some online courses, the combination of isometric illustrations and SVG animation looked promising

techniques to achieve our goal. So I found some online code snippets, purchased an illustration and started fiddling around.

I used Illustrator to redesign the isometric city and exported SVG, then imported it into HTML and used TweenMax.js to animate the paths of the illustration. I used D3.js to create the radar chart and ranking list. In the process, design and development inspire each other's evolution and iteration.

The original idea was putting the choosing and rating system in one place, to allow users to rank their preferences while making choices. But it would require more explanations of the play rule, so I split them up. By allowing users to choose three to five categories, it could potentially generate 153,192 different results.

We use users' ratings to weight the different categories. Categories with different numbers of hearts were assigned weights of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, respectively. Then we add up the weighted ranking and generate the list. The tool gave users immediate feedback when interaction happened and pop up a congratulation message once finished picking and rating.

By adding playfulness and cuteness to the design and user experience, the tool also communicates the idea of entertaining and a kind of uncertainty. It was more about finding your Jersey identity than a moving guide.

### KEYWORDS

Isometric Illustration, news game, SVG animation, data gamification

### REFERENCES

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