

A Game of life where you play to work: A critical analysis of “Gamification” manifestos

At the recent Futures of Entertainment Conference at MIT, a panel of gaming experts from industry and academia playfully refused to respond to a persistent question rising to the top of a crowdsourced backchannel - “What is the future of Gamification?” Dismissed by these experts as a fancy name for customer loyalty programs that is a perversion of game mechanics and disdained by some game designers as “marketing bullshit,” (Bogost, 2011) it is easy to write off this elephant in the room as a management craze, and as the latest marketing buzzword. However, as digital media scholars have witnessed in half a decade of critical deconstruction of what was known as “Web 2.0,” technological buzzwords are never empty - they are ciphers for configurations of cultural values that iteratively shape the sociotechnical relations between actants. And as gamification continues to energize marketers, inspire startups, oblige reports, and as its discourses iteratively shape our media experiences through a variety of web and mobile platforms, our professional lives through (often) technologically-assisted incentivization schemes and training programs, and our psychic lives through the habituation of structures that pair extrinsic rewards to tasks perceived as intrinsically unrewarding.

Notably, this is not an exhaustive categorization of gamification examples, which is part of the intellectual work that needs to be undertaken at forums such as this workshop. Nonetheless, one common factor of this range of examples is their application of game design *elements* - such as interface design patterns, game design patterns, game mechanics, design principles or heuristics, conceptual models of game design units, and game design methods - in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). This experience might be interacting with the NBC website for the TV show *The Office*; it may be uploading your fitness milestones onto *Nike+* and syncing it with your workout on the *Wii*; it may be boosting productivity at a call center by using leaderboards and badges; it may be challenging yourself and collaborating with allies and antagonists to meet therapeutic or personal achievement milestones in Jane McGonigal’s *SuperBetter*. In all these examples, there is a representational structure linking reward to achievement, cause to effect, (sometimes with a mix of chance, effort, and skill) - a structure that gamification enthusiasts claim produces unprecedented behavioral change. Importantly, this contribution will focus on gamification as defined by examples that specify tangible outcomes; I will exclude serious games or gamification used for training and educational purposes, though it may be argued that all behavioral change has an educational purpose.

On a gamified website for NBC’s *The Office*, using a storyline in the show, users signed up on a social network as employees of the Dunder Mifflin paper company. Users earned “Schrote Bucks” for making comments, posting photos and performing tasks that built engagement and buzz for the show. Before long, the site was populated with user-generated content. The gamification developer offered that “NBC loved it because they were paying all these users fake money to do real work” (Laird, 2012). This example highlights a persistent thread in the aforementioned cases - since the outcome of gamification is often a specific and

compartmentalized task within predefined parameters (by the developer and/or user), gamification could be interpreted as a framework for production, guided by the principle of productivity, habituated through technology (defined broadly), into a way of life. This way of life can be related to what Dyer-Witthof (2009) and others call ludocapitalism – a configuration of capitalism that is geared towards play as an organizing principle.

My contribution will use concepts from science and technology studies to understand gamified applications as artifacts that predicate sociotechnical relations between users, designers, and commissioners (Akrich, 1991), vis-a-vis an ecology of social media platforms and networked infrastructures these artifacts are embedded in. I would like to engage with workshop participants in discussions about gamification's definitions, typologies, and discourses, in order to refute and/or refine the proposition that gamified artifacts are rationalized systems for capture and conversion of communicative energies into circulating units of productivity. Accordingly, these units of productivity include measurable units of user engagement and brand loyalty, user-generated data and user-generated content, which are designed to circulate in visible and invisible ways through social, corporate, and public networks on as well as offline. Crucially, whatever their ethical stance - whether they are playfully manipulative or reassuringly “gameful” (a term coined by McGonigal) - these systems of capture and conversion are underscored by discourses about intrinsic and extrinsic motivations informed by positive psychology, neoliberalism, and the cybernetic paradigm.

This proposition will draw from a discursive analysis of bestselling “manifestos” of gamification such as “For the Win” by Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter (2012), “Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World” by Jane McGonigal (2011), and “Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers” by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo (2010), and selected others. I will also use online paratexts such as conference presentations, promotional materials, and journalistic reports to systematically compare the dominant visions of gamification, while paying careful attention to the interplay of perspectives from marketing, gaming, and social media representatives. Some of the questions I hope to work through with workshop participants are: How can this a productivity-centered understanding of gamification contribute to theoretical and policy debates about digital labor and its systems of circulating value? What are the power asymmetries across different deployments of gamification? What are the social and psychic implications of these layers of technological, social, administrative regimes of rationality? What can this line of questioning they tell us about the diverse and adaptive collective understandings of games as organizational metaphors, and about play as a culmination *and* origin for human social, cognitive, and physical activity?

Bio: Aleena Chia - I am a PhD candidate at Indiana University's Communication and Culture department studying translations between live-action and digital roleplaying games, by using

ethnographic and textual methods to study games as socio-technical artifacts and practices. My work is concerned with questions regarding post-Fordist regimes of productivity, affective configurations in virtual worlds, as well as discourses of technological mysticism and utopianism. My ethnographic fieldwork with live-action and video gamers and developers have taken me from Boston, New York, Portland, and Toronto, to Reykjavik, where I will be traveling from, if accepted to participate in the workshop. I am a current recipient of the Wenner-Gren Foundation's dissertation fieldwork grant, a sponsored participant at Cornell University's School of Criticism and Theory. My work has been published in the *American Behavioral Scientist* and the University of Wisconsin's media studies blog *Antenna*.

Works Cited:

Akrich, M. (1991). The De-description of a Technical Object. Shaping technology/building society studies in sociotechnical change. W. E. Bijker and J. Law. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press: vii, 341 p.

Bogost, I. (2011) "Gamification is Bullshit."
http://www.bogost.com/blog/gamification_is_bullshit.shtml Accessed 5 March 2013.

Deterding, S., Kahed, R., Nacke, L. and Dixon, D. (2011) "Gamification: Toward a definition." CHI 2011, ACM, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Dyer-Witford, N. and G. De Peuter (2009). Games of empire : global capitalism and video games. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Laird, S. (2012) "Why Gamification Can't Be Stopped." [Mashable.com](http://mashable.com). Apr 07, 2012
<http://mashable.com/2012/04/07/gamification-bunchball/> Accessed 5 March 2013.