

# Gamification as 21st Century Ideology

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## Abstract:

Gamification as the process of turning extra-ludic activities into play can be seen in two different ways: following Bataille (1975), we would hope that play could be a flight line from the servitude of the capital-labour relationship. Following Adorno (1970) and Benjamin (1939), however, we might discover that the escape from the drudgery of the worker leads to an equally alienating drudgery of the player. I argue that gamification might be seen as a form of ideology and therefore a mechanism of the dominant class to set agenda and to legitimize actions taken by this very class or group. Ever since the notion of gamification was introduced widely (Reilhac 2010; Deterding et al. 2011; Schell 2011), scholars have suggested that work might be seen as a sort of leisure activity. This article analyses the controversial dialectics of play and labour and the ubiquitous notion of gamification as ideology.

Keywords: gamification, ideology, false consciousness, labour, ethics, counter-gamification

## Introduction

The list of promises that the evangelists of gamification espouse is long:

- ‘Gamification can make work more interesting’ (Gartner 2013, n.p.);
- ‘Gamification techniques can increase productivity of employees by 40%.’ (Zichermann 2013, n.p.);
- ‘When we’re playing games, we’re not suffering’ (McGonigal 2012, n.p.);
- ‘Gamification is projected to be a \$5.8 billion market for 2018’ (Markets & Markets 2013, n.p.);
- Gamification can ‘combine big data with the latest understanding of human motivation’

(Paharia 2013);

- ‘Gaming makes living eco-friendly a lot more interesting’ (Sexton 2013);
- ‘Gaming can help children learn in the classroom, help build and maintain muscle memory, fight against some of the effects of aging, and distract from pain and depression’ (Ramos 2013);

Similar to the cure-alls of medieval charlatans, the panacea of gamification seems to have an unlimited range of possible application areas and unrestricted trust and loyalty by the consumers. It is difficult to prove any of the announced effects of gamification as false because the inherent logic of the *apparatus* of gamification is consistent. Michel Foucault uses the notions of *apparatus* and of *dispositif* for powerful societal frameworks of thought and understanding and defined his concept of *dispositif* in an interview that has been published as “The confession of the flesh” in the 1970s (Foucault in Gordon 1980).

Nowadays gamification has turned into one of the systems that the philosopher described as ‘a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, [. . .] administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid’ (Foucault 1977: 194). Gamification as a *dispositif* or *apparatus* supports the current power-structure: gamification is used as an administrative measure, it is talked about on blogs and in academic journals like this one, it is used and misused by journalists, and it is applied to work as the rationale for propositions that contain a *promesse du bonheur* (wealth, health, end of suffering, reduction of the effects of aging) like religious salvation once did.

### **The Hype**

The *dispositif* that supports gamification is a heterogeneous ensemble in Foucault’s understanding of the apparatus because it contains multiple fields of application. Gamification can nowadays be spotted almost everywhere: When we look at theatre theory, we will find ‘game theatre’ (Rakow 2013, n.p.); when we look at religious blogs, we’ll find ‘gamifying religion’ (Toler 2013, n.p.); when we look at the information from health services, we’ll find ‘fun ways to cure cancer’ (Scott 2013, n.p.) or ‘dice game against swine flu’ (Marsh and Boffey 2009, n.p.); and when we investigate collective water management, we’ll find ‘games to save water’ (Meinzen-Dick 2013, n.p.). Most of the suggestions to gamify this or that benefit from the hype of gamification—a hype that, according to Gopaladesikan (2012), will give way to a low and then steady and sustainable rise. Notions that are on the ascending branch of ‘the hype function’ suggested by companies that label themselves as ‘world’s

leading information technology research and advisory company' ('About Gartner' 2014) are so attractive to investors, governments, and opinion makers that most social sectors will try to embrace these notions—however absurd it might sound in each particular case.

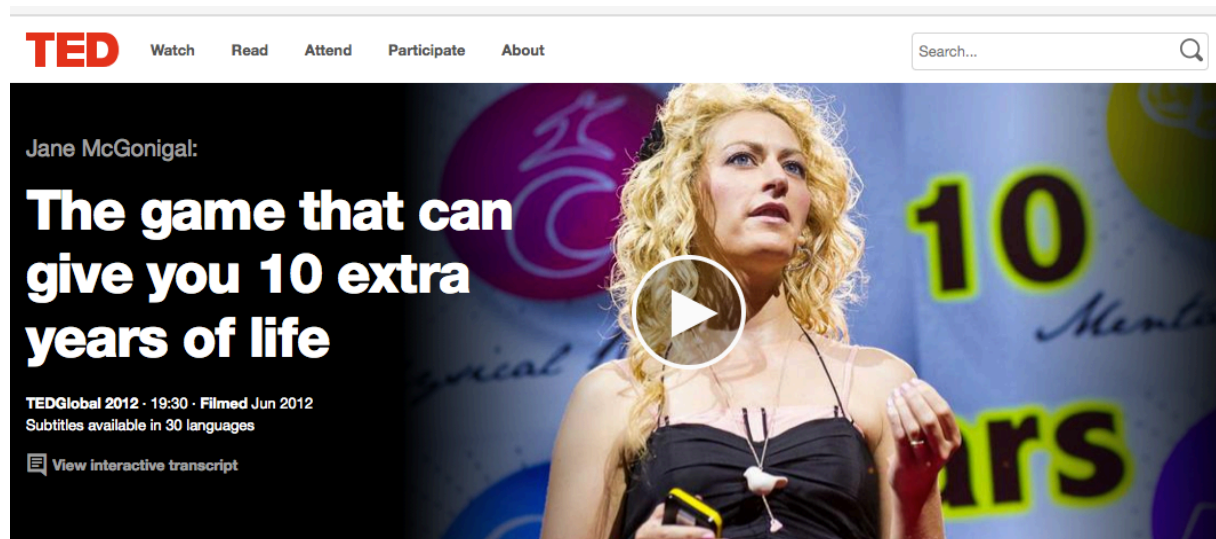
As Foucault observed, the cornerstones of a new *dispositif* are not built upon rational decision only but take from and produce 'administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' (1977: 194). Let us look at an example from contemporary political decision-making. The European Commission's technology trend-spotter organisation CORDIS conducted research on directions for future and emerging technologies. This sounds like a business that should be carried through with objective empirical methods, cold blood, and a critical distance to subjective opinion. As Figure 1 shows, the web-based part of the investigation uses the familiar 'Like' and 'Dislike' buttons that we know from social media and social gossip pages and that we can attribute to the style and methods of gamification. How can one find out whether scientific cutting-edge research is of relevance by asking competitor scientists whether they would put their thumbs up or down? There are many problems with such a method: Conflict of interest is one, reproducibility of data is another one, and a logic circle is a third problem. As evidenced in Figure 1, the question of whether gamification is a relevant research topic is asked with a gamified method. This is as if the Academy of Sciences were trying to find out whether the method of reading tealeaves is a valuable scientific approach by reading tealeaves.



**Figure 1: Consultation on directions for Future and Emerging Technologies (screenshot from [http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/ict/fet-proactive/fetconsult2012-results\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/ict/fet-proactive/fetconsult2012-results_en.html))**

I hope to have been able to demonstrate or hint here that gamification is invading discursive fields by virtue of hype rather than by virtue of appropriateness. There is another aspect to calling gamification a *dispositif*. When Foucault speaks about ‘philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’ (1977: 194), he reminds us of the variety of statements that contribute to the persuasiveness and plausibility of the apparatus. When Jane McGonigal (2012a; see Figure 2) promises the audience of the popular TED talks to know how to increase the life expectancy of every single person in the room by ten years, she is of course telling a lie. But her statement that is firmly and intentionally integrated within the *dispositif* of gamification carries a philanthropic utopian promise that connotes with moral statements, quasi-empirical data, and light philosophical speculation. Nobody cares whether one year, ten years, eleven years, or no time at all of added lifetime results from her gamified self-control therapy. And nobody will ever know. This is the nature of ideological statements: whether they are true or false does not really matter. What matters here is an ensemble of references (‘I am a game designer’), of status symbols (TED talks), of power (R&D director of the Institute for the Future), commitment to rationality (‘I have maths to prove this’), and an

endearing naïveté that announces big changes to come with only minimal efforts to be undertaken.



**Figure 2: Jane McGonigal at the TED talks (detail of screen capture from [http://www.ted.com/talks/jane\\_mcgonigal\\_the\\_game\\_that\\_can\\_give\\_you\\_10\\_extra\\_years\\_of\\_life](http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_the_game_that_can_give_you_10_extra_years_of_life))**

### **Gamification as Ideology**

It is too tempting to conceive gamification as the latest form of ideology. When the evangelists of gamification tell us that work must be play, that our personalities will be playful, that the whole economy is a game, and that each and every activity from cradle to grave can be turned into a game, we encounter false consciousness that is socially necessary. Today, gamification is used to tell people that if reality is not satisfactory, then at least play might be so. McGonigal (2011) phrased this aptly in her popular proposal that ‘reality is broken’. Replacing reality-based praxis with storytelling, gaming, self-motivation, or ‘self-expansion escapism’ (Kollar 2013) is what Marx and Engels would have labelled as ideology. McGonigal’s ‘[w]hen we’re playing games, we’re not suffering’ (2012b , n.p.) is the cynical statement of somebody who is definitely not suffering economically and has probably little reason and even less time to play games any longer.

But gamification concepts did not start in the current decade, and they were ideologically loaded even before computer games came into existence. In 1934 Pamela Lyndon Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*, and when Disney adapted this novel to a movie in 1964, they had Travers’ famous novel’s main character say:

In ev’ry job that must be done  
There is an element of fun  
You find the fun, and snap!

The job's a game! (Mary Poppins 1964)

We cannot but disapprove of this statement. It was far from useful or poetic; rather, it was a cold-blooded statement of ideology that anticipated the *gamification* evangelicalism of our days. It was a few years after the *Black Thursday* of 1929 when Lyndon Travers conceived the character Mary Poppins that suggested work could be considered fun. Almost a century later, the notion of gamification was introduced widely (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011; McGonigal 2011; Deterding et al., 2011; Schell 2011) to suggest that marketing, design, health, and work might be seen as some kind of free play or leisure activity. This was just a few years after the so-called credit crunch deprived many of work. In analyzing the controversial dialectics of play and labour and the ubiquitous notion of *gamification* as ideology, I raise the question of whether the affirmative process aiming at gamification of society has a counterpoise of subversive gamification. Subversive gamification could provide a glimmer of hope in a situation that has been described as a 'ludictatorship' (Escribano 2014).

There are two complementary reasons to conceive of gamification as ideology<sup>1</sup>:

1. Gamification is false consciousness: The proposition that game design elements can change the nature of labour and successfully cope with exploitation, 'alienation' (Zichermann and Linder 2013, n.p.), or 'suffering' (McGonigal 2012, n.p.) is proven on the basis of subjective assessment or mere speculation and not based on empirical economic analysis.
2. Gamification is socially necessary: concluding from market analysis and market predictions data that Saatchi & Saatchi (Ipsos OTX MediaCT 2011), Gartner (Burke 2012), and Ernst & Young (2011) offer, the industry needs to implement gamification in most of the sectors that drive our economy. The reason for that, according to the aforementioned sources, is increasing demand for customer loyalty and customer motivation in order to guarantee sustainable economic growth. It will, therefore, be mandatory for consumers and prosumers to embrace gamification as well.

Gamification is not a choice; it is necessary for the political economy of this decade.

### **False Consciousness**

Ideology works best when it distorts reality in such a way that we do not notice the distortion because everything seems to be alright. While in fact a mistaken identity and a unification of play and labour serve the needs of the economic system, the ideas of ideology make it appear natural. It makes the subordinate classes accept a state of alienation against which they would

otherwise revolt. This state of alienation has also been referred to as ‘false consciousness’. In the closing chapter of Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1978, pp. 196), the author invokes the concept of ‘necessary false consciousness’. This is a type of false consciousness that is not just faulty consciousness; necessary false consciousness is rather a type of false consciousness that is logically correct. However cruel, meaningless, or destructive it might seem, it is necessary for the system in which we are working to keep working until we die so that we will shop until we drop.

Theoreticians like Huizinga, Bataille, and Marcel Mauss were desperate to identify an element in society that would have the potential to disrupt or to even break open this cage of necessities effected by the system. Marcel Mauss (1923/24) believes that a fundamental quality of human interaction must exist outside the rationality of exchange and of monetary interest. Based on ethnological research, he proposed the notion of the gift as an alternative to the rationalist calculation of capitalist exchange (1923/24). Giving away without any expectation for payback allows us to act in a way that is non-alienated and differs considerably from the exchange of commodities with the aim of profit making. George Bataille’s (1975) perspective on economic structure used the concept of the gift developed by Mauss in order to support his affirmation of the possibility of human sovereignty within economic systems. For Bataille, play was one of the conceivable frameworks that foster a type of sacrifice that resembles a gift. The game in a Huizingian (1938) sense of a free activity was therefore interpreted as opposed to alienated work. *Gaming* and *labour* would be diametrically opposed, and the ‘sacred’ within play was a source of hope to escape the master-slave dialectic of capital-labour relationships. As Robert Pfaller demonstrates in his article subtitled ‘Bataille reads Huizinga’ (2010), the Bataillian logic is built upon the dialectics of work and play, and one cannot have one without the other. That is why Georges Bataille, with all his sympathies for Huizinga, differs considerably from the Dutch anthropologist when it comes to the implications that follow from the assumptions made in *Homo Ludens*. The idea that animals can play, for example, is an idea that Bataille cannot share with Huizinga because a playing animal would imply that animals can also work in the sense of engaging in labour processes (Pfaller 2010: 23). No playing animal without a working animal is what Bataille insists on.



Figure 3: Cover Images of *Wallpaper* magazine no. 111 (2008), presenting an ideological message (full page reproductions available at <http://www.wallpaper.com/covers/limited-edition/work-is-play/52#nav>)

Gamification propaganda in the style of ‘work is play’, ‘work can be play’, or ‘work harder, play harder’, are suggesting that work can be contained within the ‘sphere of play’ (Huizinga 1949). Such statements and consequently the whole concept of gamification are ideological as they express false consciousness of the nature of work and play (see, for example, the magazine covers in Figure 3, designed by Anthony Burrill 2008). Gamification ideology wants to tell us that we can play when we work. Bataille, on the contrary, thought that play might disrupt the servitude of unfree labour, and he had hope that the individual’s sovereignty could find its way from servitude via radical play. In Bataille’s words, it is ‘l’homme qui excelle’ (man who is aglow) when he lets go of his material interests in a game.<sup>2</sup> This is perfectly contrary to play settings resulting from gamification apps. A gamified work process, a gamified consumer service, or a gamified learning experience will always try to keep the customer accumulating points, badges, or money. In regard to the gifts offered by

gamification apps, there is also a substantial difference to freely giving away (in the sense of Mauss and Bataille) on one hand and the pointsification-oriented incentives on the other hand. Bonuses and badges handed out to increase customer loyalty are the opposite of generous gifts. If gifts, as they are given in environments like *Farmville* (Zynga 2009), *SuperBetter* (SuperBetter Labs 2011), or the Starbucks App (Starbucks 2014), only serve to increase the profits of some and the exploitation of others, then they are far from sovereign praxis. They are contributing to servitude in the Hegelian sense of the ‘Herr-Knecht’ (master-servant) dialectics. This is to say that sovereignty and servitude remain attributed to one side of the provider-consumer relationship exclusively. When consuming *Farmville* playtime, the player remains a ‘Knecht’, and Zynga Corporation continues to be the ‘Herr’. Other than what the ideological message promises, it is not the player who is visited by the cash cow; the player is the cash cow, and he or she delivers monetary benefits to Zynga. The difference from the false statement to the right one is only minimal: Instead of Figure 4’s statement ‘Triple your money in a year!’ it should say ‘Triple *our* money in a year!’



Figure 4: Screenshot from Zynga's *Farmville* app

A gift in a gamification context is never 'le don' as Mauss conceived it (1923/24). The gamified *homo ludens* is just an advancement of the *homo economicus*. The former might have a smile on his face, but the smile is a sarcastic one. Mauss' gift and even more so Bataille's excessive gift held a promise for the possibility to escape the cage of traditional economic reasoning. Bataille was hoping for a Copernican revolution that turns an economy of scarcity into one of excess: '[c]hanging from the perspectives of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking—and of ethics' (1991: 25). Bataille identifies the gift, excessive play, and sexuality as areas where his 'general economy' can already be observed nowadays. The French philosopher thinks of playing games in the wider sense as a nucleus of emancipation.<sup>3</sup>

In this regard, Bataille differs essentially from how Adorno and Benjamin thought about gaming: for Adorno, the 'repetitiveness of gaming' is nothing but 'an after-image of involuntary servitude' (1984: 401; Adorno, 'Nachbild von unfreier Arbeit', 1970: 371), and for Benjamin, the gamer's actions resemble those of the proletarian worker as they perform what is derived of all meaning: 'drudgery of the player' ('Fron des Spielers', 1939: 72 -73). Like Bataille, Adorno was aware of the importance of Huizinga's writing and developed a critical standpoint vis-à-vis the catchy yet misleading notion of *homo ludens*. Adorno did not allow for a difference between magic circle and 'common world' when he wrote about the 'repetitiveness' of play and followed up on the suggestion of Benjamin to compare players' activities with those of the workers in a factory.

Adorno's main critique of Huizinga culminates in the statement that '[h]e fails to realize how much the element of play is itself an afterimage of praxis rather than of semblance. In all play, action has fundamentally divested itself of any relation to purpose, but in terms of its form and execution the relation to praxis is maintained' (1984: 401). Adorno grabs Huizinga's text by the metaphorical notion of 'disguise' and talks about play having 'divested itself' of purpose. He also replaces Huizinga's somewhat blurry notion of the 'common world' by 'praxis', that is socially relevant action. Praxis and labour are in the tradition of materialist Marxist theory key factors for the formation of society; praxis would not stop in front of 'the sphere of play' or a mysterious 'magic circle'. 'The element of repetition in play is the afterimage of unfree labour', remarks Adorno, 'just as sports—the dominant extraaesthetic form of play—is reminiscent of practical activities and continuously fulfils the function of habituating people to the demands of praxis above all by the reactive transformation of physical displeasure into physical pleasure, without noticing that the contraband of praxis has slipped into it' (1984: 401). But neither Adorno's sharp remarks nor

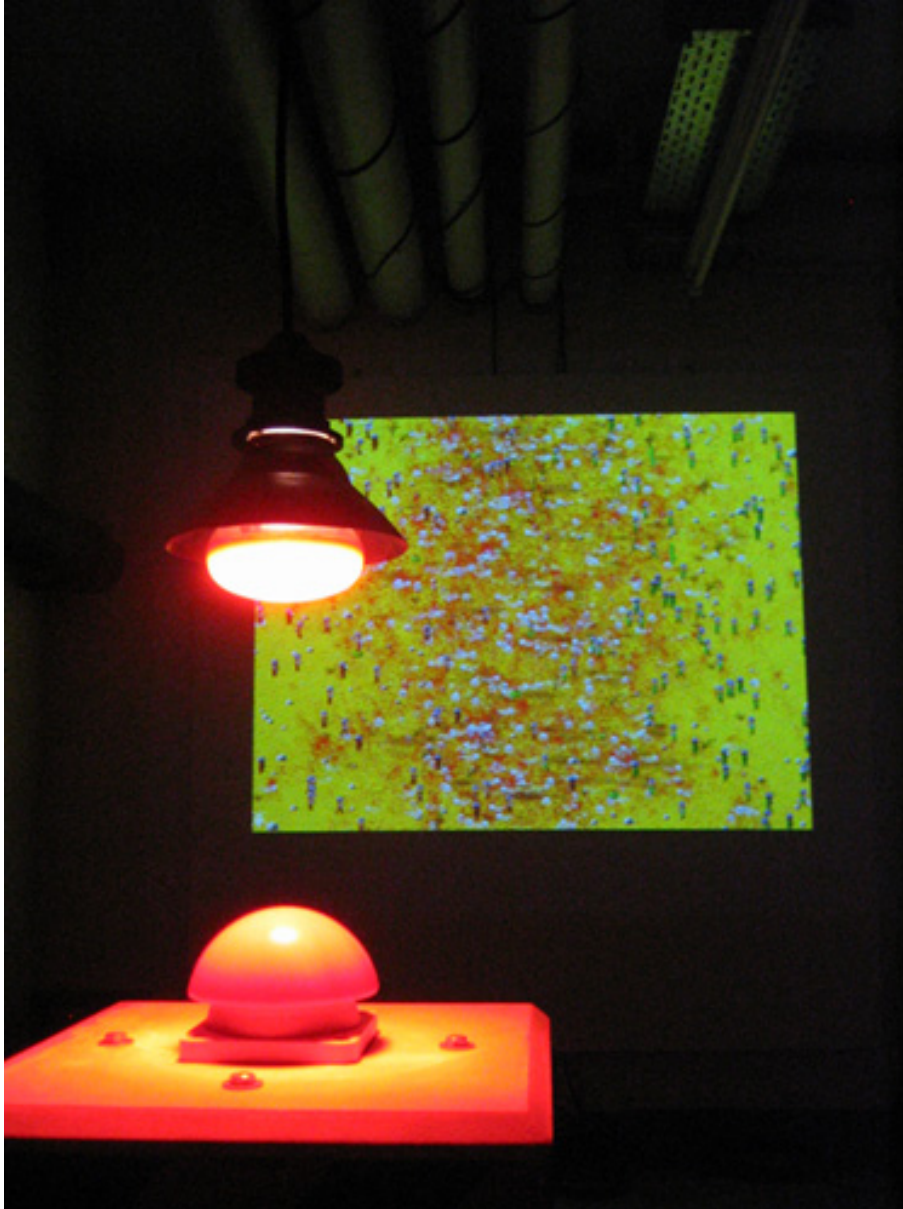
Caillois' (1958) attention to gambling with monetary interests could stop generations of games scholars from repeating the formula of the 'magic circle' and subscribing to Huizinga's dichotomy of work and play. Indeed, Georg Lauteren (2007) finds it 'surprising [. . .] how much effort is spent reconciling an almost 70 year-old model of thinking with a contemporary subject of investigation' and accuses Salen and Zimmerman (2003), Montola (2005), Harvey (2006) and Rodriguez (2006) of doing so (2007: 2).

The differences in between Huizinga's appreciation of the play element and Benjamin's, Adorno's, and Bataille's view on play can be traced back to their idealistic or materialistic standpoints respectively. Huizinga never references Friedrich Schiller directly, but the way he contextualises play points directly to the position Schiller developed in the 'Aesthetic Letters' (1794). 'Playing, so we say, has a certain inclination to be beautiful', (1987: 19) writes Huizinga in a Schillerian tone. Huizinga's statement is actually a resonance of Friedrich Schiller's famous phrase: 'man should only *play* with beauty, and play *only* with beauty' (2000: 62). Huizinga differs from Friedrich Schiller's idea of a 'play-instinct' and dismisses it explicitly, but as Lauteren points out, Huizinga sticks to 'the idealistic concept of playing as an inexplicable "last" which remains ultimately resistant to empirical investigation' (2007: 3). Schiller could, in the eighteenth century, still suggest that 'we must not indeed think of the games that are conducted in real life' and continue to present his dismissal of materiality by classifying games that are conducted in real life as 'commonly refer[ring] only to the material plane' (2000: 60 – 61). The 'material plane' of the beginning of the twenty-first century demonstrates clearly that the political factors shaping gaming practices are stronger than beauty, purity, or freedom (Strouhal et al. 2012/2013). In particular, Huizinga's idealistic position that play could encompass 'in a more specialised sense arguably also work', (1958: 55) does not account for contemporary discourses concerning play.<sup>4</sup>

Jürgen Habermas wrote his ultimate anti-gamification statement in the 1950s, when he told us in a somewhat melancholic mood: '[a]nd where it ever had existed, the unity of work and play dissolved' (1958/59: 220). Habermas talks about social practice here and is clearly the voice of the Frankfurt Critical School but also the voice of a materialistic and Marxist view on a possible relation of labour and play. It is not by chance, therefore, that Habermas shares the belief promoted by Benjamin and Adorno that labour and play are two different things that certainly have an influence on each other, but that never can be harmonized as one.<sup>5</sup>

## **Counter-Gamification**

In line with the Adorno's negative dialectics and his detection of an 'afterimage of unfree labour' within play, there are artists that criticise ludic ideology by demonstrating through parody or subversion how games are instrumental in promoting user sovereignty – where there is none. Leif Rumbke's *Wargame* (2005; see Figure 5) is an example of a de-gamified and critical game. Rumbke restricts interface actions to a 'Stop the Game' command only—implemented as a nuclear fire button's binary single function. The interface in striking red and impressive size limits the player's interactivity to one single non-reversible command: to erase the whole population of soldiers in the game and to restart the game from the beginning. In the literal sense of the word, Rumbke's game is playable, but when investigating it on a semantic level, the game is not playable as the operations offered through the interface do not allow for an intentional game start.



**Figure 5: *Wargame* by Leif Rumbke (image courtesy of artist and available at <http://www.rumbke.de/data/art/wargame/wargame.html>)**

*4 Minutes and 33 Seconds of Uniqueness* (2009) is another game with no input or interaction. Its designer Petri Purho tells us: ‘You’ll win the game if you’re the only one playing the game at the moment in the world. The game checks over the Internet if there are other people playing it at the moment and it’ll kill the game if someone else is playing it. You have to play the game for 4 minutes and 33 seconds’ (2010). Clearly inspired by John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952) this game listens to the Internet rather than telling a story or presenting a statement. The game’s interface consists of a single white progress bar on a black background and challenges the player to consider the world he’s playing with as an obtrusive element and his/her own role as an actor within the gaming environment.

The definitive death of playability (and of gamification if we think of the latter as the attempt to motivate the user to participate and interact) can be glimpsed in *The Graveyard* (2008) by Tale of Tales (Figure 6). Tale of Tales is a game art/designer duo consisting of Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn. Here, the player plays an old lady who visits a graveyard and can walk around, sit on a bench, and listen to a song. But however hard the player tries, no meaningful interaction beyond this can be accomplished.



**Figure 6: Screenshot from *The Graveyard* (2008), Tale of Tales**

In contrast to gamification's promise of limitless playability of any social activity, *The Graveyard* is a disillusioning presentation of self-imposed tutelage and the user's impotence to achieve anything via play. Conceptually related but functionally inverse is the game *CarnageHug* (2007) by British game artist Corrado Morgana. Morgana's piece could be understood as a form of counter-ideology or counter-gamification (Dragona 2014).

The game runs in auto-execution mode and does not allow for interactivity except for the minimal 'Start' command. *CarnageHug* uses the *Unreal Tournament 2004* games engine, to set up and run a bizarre, self-playing spectacle (Morgana 2007). Morgana removed the weapons from the level and has the player-pawns attack each other in a ridiculous massacre without player-based gameplay objectives or other constructive teleological human-player commitment. The game exemplifies the opposite of gamification. Other than the ideological

suggestions that we can change the world by playing and by using gamified decision-making mechanisms, this game demonstrates clearly that we are just a pawn in the game of an automated market, automated wars, and of an automated society. What the artist Morgana renders nicely in front of the beholders' eyes is a (games-)world that contains actors who have to work ceaselessly without achieving anything for themselves or for others. The actors in Morgana's game work like the users of *Farmville* or any other gamification apps work when they think they play.

Ultimately, the attempt to harmonize play and labour, however, is ideology. Gamification that has at its core the suggestion that work can be fun is therefore caught in the trap of a self-contained ideological system that is in synch with the development of the relations of production of our society. And that is as glamorous and successful as it is untrue because of its nature as necessary false consciousness.

## Conclusion

The question that remains to be answered at this point is whether gamification has any use-value, now that we have identified it as ideology. It probably has. Similar to other ideologies like catholicism, puritanism or neo-liberalism the ideology enhances performance for the ruling system. With the aid of the unconscious motivational processes that an ideology like gamification can provide, many processes including economical, educational, cultural and political ones can run more smoothly than when governed by persuasion, rational reasoning or brute force. It is up to the reader and up to further research to find out whether the gamification of society is a more desirable form of ideology than traditional ideological systems – or not.

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<sup>1</sup> As Joseph McCarney demonstrates in his text ‘Ideology and False Consciousness’ (2005), Marx never talked of ideology as ‘false consciousness’. Althusser and Sohn-Rethel, however, made a connection between the two. Add references (years of publication) – Althusser isn’t in References.

<sup>2</sup> According to Bataille, this could go as far as risking one’s own life in a game.

<sup>3</sup> ‘A play of energy that no particular end limits’ is a phrase from ‘The Accursed Share’ (1991), which expands the notion of play into something others might call activity, action, or praxis.

<sup>4</sup> Huizinga also said very much in the same tone: ‘[f]or us, the opposite of play is earnest, also used in the more special sense of work’ (1949: 44).

<sup>5</sup> In his statement that ‘[a]ccording to one theory play constitutes a training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on’ (1949: 2), Huizinga approaches Adorno’s worries, but with an altered direction: work follows play. This is the opposite of Adorno’s ‘afterimage of unfree labour’.