Stanley Zuo
Prof. Blatter
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Towards a Gamified World

Introduction

In recent years, gamification has become a buzzword for marketers and business executives alike. Not only has gamification permeated the digital industries, it has given rise to an industry of its own. In what follows, I will attempt to conceptualize gamification through various definitions, assess its efficacy, offer critique from various academic and game design perspectives, and finally, analyze two examples of gamification in my own life. In my conclusion, I offer my perspective on gamification and its relationship to culture and what this relationship means for the future.

Conceptualizing Gamification

The first documented use of the term "gamification" dates to 2008 but it was not until late 2010 that gamification gained widespread adoption (Deterding et al, 9). At the basic level, gamification can be defined as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al, 10). In other words, gamification can be understood as the application of elements traditionally found in games, such as scores, leaderboards, and badges, to contexts outside of games proper, or games for the express purpose of entertainment. However, gamification can also be viewed from a broader socio-cultural perspective, in which "games and playful experiences are understood as essential components of society and culture" (Fuchs et al, 7). In this view, we can conceive of gamification as being rooted in historical cultural practices and rituals that resemble the form of games. The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga named play as the primary formative element of human civilization (Fuchs et al, 8). This cultural

perspective of play allows us to view gamification as a much broader phenomenon, and one which we can trace back to the beginnings of our civilization.

When gamification first came into prominence in 2011, industry use of the term fluctuated between two related concepts. The first was the "increasing adoption, institutionalization and ubiquity of video games in everyday life" (Deterding et al, 10). Over the course of the last decade or so, video games have seen a surge in popularity driven by advances in mobile technology that make them increasingly accessible to larger audiences. Their increased adoption has effectively normalized video games within the cultural discourse. Media scholars such as Joost Raessens have observed the "ludification of culture", which asserts that video games have become a "cultural medium and source of formative experiences on a par with literature, movies, or television in earlier generations" (Deterding et al, 10). The assertion that video games have become a dominant cultural medium for the current generation can be evidenced by the infusion of video game tropes, references, and practices in our contemporary media culture.

The second, more specific, concept was that "since video games are designed with the primary purpose of entertainment, and since they can demonstrably motivate users to engage with them with unparalleled intensity and duration, game elements should be able to make other, non-game products and services more enjoyable and engaging as well" (Deterding et al, 10). The second notion reflects marketers' hope that by applying video game mechanics to their product, they can generate similar levels of interest, enthusiasm, and engagement towards their product as the games they drew inspiration from. This notion is reflected in how gamification vendors have described their practice in terms of client benefits. For example, a vendor described gamification as, "the process of using game thinking and game mechanics to solve problems and engage

users" (Deterding et al, 10). This example clearly illustrates how industry practitioners present gamification as the practice of providing game-based solutions to solve marketing problems.

An alternative approach to defining gamification places the practice within the context of service marketing. Hamari and Huotari define gamification as, "a process of enhancing a service with affordances for gameful experiences in order to support user's overall value creation" (19). Gameful experiences can be understood as experiences that invoke in the user similar psychological responses as in games. Value creation in this case refers to the amount of utility the user receives from using the service. This definition of gamification emphasizes the goal (providing affordances for gameful experiences) rather than the methods (application of game elements) of gamification because the authors felt that there was no set of clearly defined game elements that were exclusive to games (Hamari and Huotari, 19). The authors note that what constitutes a gameful experience is determined by the player's subjective experience. In other words, if the same gamified service is presented to two users, it may only produce a gameful experience in one user and not the other. This variance in outcomes may be due to factors such as differences in the skills of the two players and the perceived level of fun and enjoyment experienced by the players.

Our first definition of gamification, as using game design elements in non-game contexts, attributes gamification to design decisions made by the designer. Our second definition of gamification in the context of service marketing attributes gamification to the subjective experience of the user. While both perspectives offer their own insights and limitations, a third perspective attempts to reconcile these two views and proposes an alternative model, "it is not so much computer hardware or the computer's software, and to a disputable amount only the user, that determines direction and pace of gamification, but in the first instance the interfaces that

mediate in between human and machine" (Fuchs). Fuchs argues that it is not sufficient to study the effects of gamification by exclusively examining the "material" characteristics of gamified experiences or the subjective experiences of individual players. He proposes to study gamification at the interface of the player and the gamified experience. By examining the interface of gamified experiences, we can analyze them in terms of their affordances. Rather than speculating on the designer's intention or the player's experience, we can approach gamified experiences with the view of the possible actions and behaviors they present to the user. This approach can be useful in helping to identify game elements that are conducive to gamification.

Efficacy of Gamification

According to the service marketing framework of gamification, the goal of gamification is to "enhance services with motivational affordances in order to invoke gameful experiences and further behavioral outcomes" (Hamari et al, 3). This goal can be simplified as implementing motivational affordances (game elements) that invoke gameful psychological outcomes (e.g., enjoyment) which ultimately lead to desirable behavioral outcomes (e.g., increased engagement with the service). Hamari et al used the above framework to review empirical studies on the effects of gamification. While they reported general positive effects, as defined by invoking desirable behavioral outcomes in users, they found the results to be highly dependent on the context in which the gamification is implemented, as well as on the users using the service (2). Hamari et al suggests that the context, or the core service is essential to effective gamification. For example, services oriented towards rational behavior, such as e-commerce websites may be difficult to gamify, as users are primed to optimize economic exchanges (7). Additionally, the results of the review reveal distinct user types. For instance, on a social networking service, some users wanted to be at the top of the leaderboard, while for others, it was sufficient to simply

appear on the leaderboard, regardless of rank. These results suggest that the same motivation affordance, in this case, a leaderboard, can produce varying behavioral outcomes in different users (Hamari et al, 7).

Criticism of Gamification

Despite its popularity, gamification has had its fair share of critics, many of whom are game developers and designers. Game designer Margaret Robertson has criticized gamification on the basis that it is, "taking the thing that is least essential to games and representing it as the core of the experience". Robertson argues that points and badges are secondary to qualities such as gameplay and narrative, which make games compelling. Robertson goes on to say that games present players with meaningful choices that will have significant impact within the game, whereas gamification only presents users with a quantity, a measure of how much they use the product or service. Robertson concludes her critique by asserting that gamification does not offer a faithful representation of games and instead offers "pointsification" as a more accurate term to describe the practice of gamification.

Games journalist Heather Chaplin argues that gamification is "an allegedly populist idea that actually benefits corporate interests over those of ordinary people". While users may conflate points and achievements in gamification with personal accomplishment, they are merely consuming more of the company's product or service. Chaplin also cautions against alternate-reality games that can provide a false sense of comfort, as they can erode our grip on reality.

Perhaps the most vocal critic of gamification is scholar and game designer Ian Bogost. Bogost compares gamification to the practice of management consulting because its interest is self-promotion and self-justification rather than addressing the problems it purports to solve (66). Bogost cites the Deloitte Leadership Academy as an example of how gamification was used as a

distraction to superficially increase participation without improving the underlying product (69). Bogost believes that the sole purpose and endgame of gamification is generating more demand for itself, and as a result, an entire industry has emerged to sell gamification as a one size fits all solution for a multitude of problems (68). Bogost suggests the term, "exploitationware" to describe the practice of gamification because it appropriates games to create a technique that produces compliance (72). Finally, Bogost argues that gamification exclusively benefits consultants at the expense of their clients and their customers, as well as the video games industry at large (77).

In his critique of technological solutionism, the idea that all problems can be reduced and solved by technology, Morozov argues that with gamification, "getting people to do the right thing is not enough - we need to get them to do the right thing for the right reason". Morozov states that even though virtual rewards may motivate citizens to do "good" things such as recycling, rewards should not substitute morality. Once we introduce extrinsic incentives such as badges and points, intrinsic motivations such as morality might disappear. This is problematic for two reasons. First, we may be unmotivated to engage in moral behavior in the absence of extrinsic rewards. Second, acting on the basis of extrinsic rewards can be seen as an infringement on free will, because as Bogost suggests, rewards in gamification are a mechanism for producing compliance.

Primary Source Analysis

I will go on to analyze two examples of gamification I encounter in my life. The first example is the Google Fit health tracking mobile application. The Google Fit app tracks its user's activity, including duration of activity, distance travelled, calories burned, and steps taken during the day, week, and month. The first item on the Google Fit dashboard is a circular

progress indicator that displays how many minutes of activity I have towards my daily activity goal of 60 minutes. Below the daily progress circle are seven smaller circles for each day of the week. The days that I reached my activity goal are indicated by check marks within the circle, whereas the days I fell short are indicated by semi-filled circles.

Google Fit's display of the progress circle in the most prominent location of the app speaks to how the app wants to frame their user's fitness experience around their progress towards their daily activity goal. I think Google Fit's circular visualization of progress is intentional because to me, a full circle signifies completion. Conversely, a partially filled circle invokes feelings of incompletion. It is far more visually rewarding to see seven full circles with checks in a week than to see seven partially filled circles. Google Fit rewards my completion of my daily activity goal by sending me a push notification that says, "You met your goal, nice work!". This reminder serves as positive reinforcement, a pat on the back of sorts. Additionally, Google Fit introduces a competitive element to the app experience by displaying how many percent of New Yorkers I was more active than last week. Although this display doesn't offer the ranked competition of leaderboards, it still serves to provide a benchmark of my activity compared to my neighbors. While it feels good to know that I was more active than 60 percent of New Yorkers last week, I could see how having below average activity levels can lead to feelings of shame and inadequacy.

Google Fit is an interesting example of gamification because it is not visibly attached to another product or service. Though it could be argued that Google Fit is part of Google's overarching network of collecting user data and selling said data to advertisers. In the app, I can see a map of all the routes I had taken during my walks throughout the day. I can only assume that this information will be valuable for brands doing location based advertising. Google Fit is

not immune to criticisms of the Quantified Self movement. Morozov argues that the Quantified Self movement reduces everything to a single number and that, “the person becomes a kind of a black box with an input and an output, but the user himself has no idea how the input relates to the output”. Morozov states that while users can adjust their behavior according to the numbers, they cannot come to any holistic understanding of themselves or the effects of their behavior. I have experienced the blackboxing effect described by Morozov with Google Fit, where the app logged cycling activity even though I had not gone near a bike during the day. In my case, my lack of understanding of Google Fit’s cycling tracking algorithm left me baffled as to why the app’s output did not correspond with my activity input.

The second example of gamification I will analyze is Audible’s mobile application. Audible is a seller and producer of audiobooks and the Audible app allows users to buy and listen to their audiobooks. Audible’s gamification is implemented in the “Stats” section of their app. The Stats section displays four tabs titled, “Listening Level”, “Badge Collection”, “Listening Time”, and “Audible Titles”.

The Listening Level tab displays five ranks ranging from “Newbie” to “Master”, each with their own listening hour requirements to achieve. The stratification of user engagement with the product is a standard way for companies to give users sequential engagement targets to hit. The Badge Collection tab presents 15 badges for users to obtain. The descriptions of the badges are vague and are presented in rhyming couplets. For example, the description of the “Night Owl” badge reads, “O, ye Insomniac! O, ye who listens to drift! This badge will be given after a graveyard shift”. Instead of specifying the time of the day the user needs to use the product to obtain the badge, the description keeps this intentionally vague. I think this is done to create a sense of mystery and give users the sense that they’re solving a riddle or playing a game rather

than using the product to hit an engagement metric. The Listening Time tab is simply a bar graph that displays how many hours the user has listened during the day, month, and in total. Finally, the Audible Titles tab displays a line graph of how many Audible titles the user has purchased each month. I don't think a line graph representation of purchases has any benefit over a numerical representation except for creating the illusion of exponential progress as purchases increase.

Overall, the Audible app offers a pretty standard gamification implementation consisting of levels, badges, and user metric visualizations. I think the Badge Collection is the most game-like of Audible's gamification features, while Listening Time and Audible Titles are merely data visualizations. I don't think the gamification features are detrimental to the user experience, as they are optional. However, these features may appeal to and invoke increased engagement from certain types of users, as suggested by Hamari et al (7).

Conclusion

As I mentioned towards the beginning of this essay, we can view gamification as the specific practice of using game design elements in non-game settings or as a broader socio-cultural phenomenon that can be summed as the "ludification of culture". I tend to lean toward the latter view, as it can sufficiently explain the occurrence of the former. To quote Mathias Fuchs, "Our society is not any longer mainly influenced by the products and decisions Hollywood makes or by the formats and content the television industry imposes upon us, but by innovation and ideology that stems from video and computer games". Fuchs and other media scholars have observed the emergence of games as the leading cultural medium of the current generation. With this in mind, it's no surprise that there are conflicting discourses surrounding gamification happening within game design, business, and academia. However, gamification as a

specific practice will be but a footnote in our history, while gamification as a cultural phenomenon will come to define our future.

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