Chapter 1

Ambiguous Play: Towards a Broader Concept of Gamification

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a critical-conceptual introduction to the topic of gamification from the standpoint of game studies (the study of games) and ludology (the study of play). A secondary task is to move the definition and conceptual history of gamification away from essentialist notions of play and games and towards a more nuanced understanding of gamification as a philosophy of design with situational outcomes. By examining the controversy surrounding gamification as a complex history of concepts, the chapter aims to give the reader an overview of how gamification aligns with or deviates from various definitions of games and play. Gamification can be controversial when using traditional ludological concepts largely because traditional ludology is pre-digital, and does not account for the current technological and cultural shifts driving gaming and gamification. Finally, the chapter ends with the suggestion that the current cultural turn in game studies provides a way to analyze gamification as an example of the “gaming of culture.”

INTRODUCTION

This chapter, in part, serves as a conceptual introduction to the study of Gamification from the standpoint of Game Studies and Ludology. Particularly, I focus on how gamification can be controversial when using traditional approaches to the study of play commonly referred to as ludology. By examining gamification’s conceptual controversy as a history of ideas, I also aim to give the reader an overview of how gamification aligns itself with or deviates from ‘standard’ definitions of games and play. Gamification has been controversial since its inception, often clashing with proponents of the so-called “serious games” movement (Ruffino, 2014). The supposed conflict of interest between serious games and gamification prompted Ian Bogost, a prominent scholar, game designer and serious games proponent, to call it “bullshit” (Bogost, 2011). Gamification has been linked with governmentality (Schrape, 2014), behaviorism (Ruffino, 2014) and, according to Bogost (2011), a complete perversion of play. The lit-
erature on gamification, scholarly or otherwise, represents a major split between utopian and dystopian interpretations of gaming. This chapter hopes to conceptually and ontologically ‘ground’ gamification as a set of practices that have no overriding ethical code.

First, I begin with a brief definition of gamification as it stands today, in which it is primarily utilized as a tool for marketing and consumer surveillance (Whitson, 2013). Next, I will examine ludological currents in a variety of scholarly fields from historical standpoint, including in-depth analyses of the definitions of play and games put forth by ludologists such as Johan Huizinga (1950), Roger Callois (1961), Mihai Spariosu (1989) and Eugene Fink (1968). I then contrast these definitions of play and games against the concept of “life-as-play” put forth by practitioners and scholars, particularly Alan Watts (1995), James P. Carse (1989) and Charles A. Coonradt (2007). I will explore the controversy associated with gamification, while avoiding dystopian and utopian takes on Gamification and related practices (Bogost, 2011; McGonigal, 2011). I suggest that the primary reason that gamification is often separated from gaming is the inability of traditional ludological theory to deal with the technologically-driven convergence of life, leisure and labor. This chapter does not propose a ‘new’ definition of gamification. Rather, it proposes that the current definition creates controversy because of the way play and games have been treated in Western thought, largely due to the supposition that play is inherently ethical. However, any ‘ethic’ of play is ambiguous. Presenting arguments for or against gamification based on faulty ethics-based assumptions only serves to obscure gamification’s ontological status. Second, I will consider contradictory definitions of games and play put forth by tertiary ludologists such as Jean Baudrillard (1979, 1981b, 1998a) and Lewis Mumford (1934). Finally, I will propose that Gamification’s unstable position as both game and anti-game rests in ambivalent discursive frameworks surrounding “play” and “fun.” I suggest that the Gamification produces examples of “ambiguous play” (Sutton-Smith, 1997), in which play is reimagined as a set of situational practices rooted in notions of power and control. Reimagining play as an ambiguous act moves towards an inclusive and complex notion of play that invites a more nuanced view of gamification as it stands currently. Gamification is not necessarily a question of “game culture” but rather an example of “the gaming of culture” (Boellstorff, 2006), where game thinking permeates wired culture in the 21st Century. In conclusion, I make the call for a nuanced position regarding what gaming and gamification can tell us about games and play.

SITUATING GAMIFICATION

While no expansive critical histories of gamification have been produced, most general histories of the so-called “trend” begin with the inception of the term. Some exceptions include Raczkowski (2014), who examines the history of point-based economies and flow in gamification and Fuchs (2014), who offers an explorations gamification’s history in terms of different fields of practice such as music, magic and art. Both authors reiterate the need to historicize gamification. Starting scholarly inquiry with the term “gamification” is the root of most arguments surrounding gamification. Any time a novel technology is introduced, the first scholarly reactions to the “new” technology or technique are often diametrically opposed between utopian and dystopian notions (Carey, 1989). As I stated in the introduction, gamification is not exempt from this controversy. However, to construct gamification as a viable academic and professional concept, we must utilize the conceptual histories to produce a fair and useful conceptualization of gamification beyond business, education or marketing. I argue a good place to start is ludology, or the study of play. Ludology a continuous undercurrent in sociology, anthropology and other life/social
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