Play to Order: What Huizinga Has to Say about Gamification

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Abstract

In this paper, based off his Pecha Kucha micropresentation, the author discusses the lack of attention to Johan Huizinga's work in the debates on gamification, or the use of game mechanics and design to engage students. Huizinga's definition of play and concept of a magic circle surrounding play spaces can help shift our understanding of gamification from contested to productive. The presenter argues that because we can already view education and life as a game, our goal is not to apply a glossy veneer to class work, but to reveal the ways in which class work is already a game.

Gamification is the application of game mechanics and design to make a mundane task more engaging. In the past two years or so there have been numerous resources and arguments springing up about gamification. TED talks and wikis, numerous blogs, a panel at this past GDC, and several presentations at conferences are all discussing how and whether to use game mechanics such as point systems, badges, leaderboards, and the like to improve student, client, or customer engagement. However, the nascent scholarship on gamification has yet to bring Dutch play theorist Johan Huizinga—whose book *Homo Ludens* (1950) has been germinal to game studies—into the discussion. This paper will attempt to address the gap.

Due to obvious time constraints, I can't wax scholarly about the background of gamification and its connection to token economies and incentivization, but it's important to note that the current tenor of the conversation surrounding gamification is contested. At this past GDC, Ian Bogost and others have argued that gamification is not the way we want to integrate videogames (even principles or mechanics) into education or other industries. In a blog post, Bogost (2010) even went so far as to advocate relabeling the term "exploitationware" because he feels its sole principle undermines the difficulty and complexity of game design and works to exploit its users.

Detractors of gamification make some excellent points. They are concerned about gamified classes using Skinner box psychology, about deontological imperatives being devalued, about what Jesse Schell (2010) has called the "gamespocalypse" (a time when everything is gamified), but my main concern is about how we can bring games or game design into the classroom that won't result in another failure like edutainment. And I'm not sure serious or persuasive games or even virtual worlds have sufficient cultural capital to ride the growing wave of enthusiasm for games.

The early talk about gamification was concerned with aesthetics and surface level quick-fixes. The formula as it has been presented thus far in the majority of venues has been, Step 1: Slap points, achievements, badges, leaderboards, etc. on task. Step 2: ? ? ? Step 3: Profit. It's the question marks we need to be concerned with. Surface level fixes, such as calling assignments quests or grades levels won't do anything to motivate students.

More recently, critiques of "pointsification," (Robertson, 2010) and well-reasoned arguments about the complexity of game design in applying gamification have begun to steer gamification in a more appropriate direction, one that won't crush the current enthusiasm for games by turning gamification into another edutainment. We need to continue down the complex path and shun the cosmetic, glossy game veneer that others think of when they hear the term gamification.

Gamification is not triage for poor lesson plan design or apathetic students. Instead, it might offer us real ways to aid our students in navigating the education system which, as Alex Layne (2011) has argued cogently, can already be considered a game. But it can only provide such aid if we take gamification seriously and think about difficult questions that many have attempted to answer—some better than others—in numerous books, essays, and other publications.

The questions might be put forward as "what makes games fun?" or "what motivates play?" Few have discussed these questions with as much authority as Huizinga does in his influential book on the play element in culture, *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga has influenced the nascent area of game studies from its birth, but in all that I've read about gamification, nobody has consulted his works. I find this surprising, especially when what we're seeking with gamification is a means to get students to "play" the game of education.

Huizinga tells us that "play to order is no longer play" (p. 7). This means that we cannot require students to play a gamified classroom. Game mechanics do not a game make. Adding achievements to a syllabus does not make students want to play. Gold stars stopped serving as incentives in third grade. If we want students to play our game, we need to consider gamification not as a means to engage students, but as a means to reveal the ways in which education or school is already a game.

Thinking about Huizinga's magic circle can help us recast gamification from a means of external motivation to a means of making school a place that encourages play instead of orders it. The magic circle, we are told, is in form and function a play-ground, "a temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (p. 10). When we play a game, we enter or create this magic circle where special rules apply. In *Unit Operations*, Bogost (2006) correctly stipulates that there is a gap in the circle "through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space" (p. 135).

The gap is noted by nearly every game studies scholar who mentions the circle. Bonnie Nardi (2010) explains in her ethnography of *World of Warcraft* that "play does not, and cannot, exist in an imperturbable magic circle; it is always in dynamic relations of tension to other activities in which a player might engage" (p. 108). That is, the circle is porous.

When we begin to think about the procedural rhetorics and logics of a game, we are stepping—perhaps only tenuously—inside the circle. But how does this influence our reconception of gamification? My contention is that we need to think of gamification as a means not of motivating students, but as a means of revealing the potential for a magic circle in the classroom. We cannot order students to play, but we can create a space where play is encouraged through game mechanics.

Huizinga tells us that play exists in a continuum between levity and severity. Play can be serious. In a way, games *are* serious business. Students already have external motivators to play

the education game—they're called grades and parents. Granted, grades and parents don't motivate every student, but my point is that mechanics won't necessarily do so either. What gamification can provide—and better than motivation—is a means for making clear the magic circle surrounding the game.

Instead of mechanics emphasizing competition such as leaderboards, which social cognitive theorists have agreed hinders motivation, we need to focus on game principles and mechanics that provide constant, clear feedback. The logic behind the mechanic is more important than the name of the mechanic. Talent trees which track progress can keep students in what Vygotsky (1978) called the Zone of Proximal Development while *showing* students their path.

Constructing a talent tree of tiered skills necessary to complete a project or assignment is perhaps as hard as designing a good game mechanic, but it's these types of complex mechanics we should be concerned with when we talk about gamification. Designing such a tree requires breaking down complex skills into their base components and figuring out how they scaffold to produce the desired result. There are other mechanics and design elements which can help reveal or create a magic circle within a classroom, making it more conducive for play. We need to figure out what they are, put them to the test, and figure out how to encourage play without ordering it.

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