CHAPTER 10

Exploitationware

Ian Bogost

In April 2011, I spoke at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC or 4Cs). This was the first year I was invited to speak at the conference, and I was eager to present my theory of the rhetorical aspects of procedurality (Bogost, 2007) to this large and influential group of composition-rhetoric teachers and scholars. But during the Q&A session following my panel, I was surprised to hear one of the attendees ask explicitly about the possibility of using "gamification" to improve students' performance with and engagement in the writing classroom.

I had been trying to ignore *gamification*—a recent marketing buzzword for making products and services more "gamelike"—hoping it would disappear like an annoying party guest. But when marketing terms mutate enough to gain currency in scholarly contexts, plugging one's ears becomes a losing battle. In the case of my 4Cs panel, here was a scholar of rhetoric who didn't know my ongoing work on procedural rhetoric, but who was familiar with a very recent marketing gimmick. What was going on? Gamification has a clear appeal, and we need to better understand that appeal before opposing the concept effectively.

The Power of Words

Ironically, the answer has everything to do with rhetoric, and nothing to do with games. We like to think that the substance of ideas matters more than

R. Colby et al. (eds.), *Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games*
© Richard Colby, Matthew S. S. Johnson, and Rebekah Shultz Colby 2013

the names we give things, but that's not true. Names offer powerful ways to advance a position.

University of California, Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2002) has built much of his reputation on this principle, arguing that the way people conceptualize or "frame" the world in their own discourse has a greater effect in politics than do politicians' actions.[1] For example, conservatives oppose social welfare programs partly by framing taxation as theft. Conservative political scientist Frank Luntz has built a business around carefully developing these verbal contexts.[2] He's the guy you can thank for terms like "war on terror" and "climate change," phrases that have enjoyed general adoption across the political spectrum even though they advance deliberate partisan positions.

War on terror suggests that the complex extragovernmental motivations of ideological groups like al-Qaeda are winnable conflicts between "good" and "evil," clashes identical to two-party state-based conflicts. And climate change suggests that global warming is a phenomenon of adjustment rather than disaster. After all, change can be good!

As Luntz (2006) puts it, what matters is not what you say, but what people hear. And when we're talking about games, people often hear nothing good. Making games seem appealing outside the entertainment industry is a daunting task, and a large part of the challenge involves deploying the right rhetoric to advance the concept in the first place.

The Rhetoric of "Serious Games"

In the field of game design, we've been through this scenario many times before—political simulation in the 1980s, and edutainment in the 1990s, for example. Most recently, serious games have offered another, more general attempt to expand the scope of games. These are games made and used "beyond entertainment," to use Serious Game Initiative cofounder Ben Sawyer's latest tagline.[3] Application domains for serious games include business, health, the military, education, and public works, to name but a few.

The games industry has never much liked the phrase "serious games" because it seems reductionist and derogatory, as if to claim that other sorts of games are worthless or pointless. Even among those of us who have worked to bring games to other domains, the name "serious games" has sometimes posed problems.

People know that there's something magical about games. They don't always express that opinion positively, but even condemnations of video games acknowledge that they contain special power, power to captivate us and draw us in, power to encourage us to repeat things we've seemingly done

before, power to get us to spend money on things that seem not to exist, and so forth. While not everyone agrees that games are culture, or media or art, everyone seems to agree that games are powerful. And that power is mysterious and wild, like black magic. You don't have to like games to want a piece of it. But games are also terrifying, for just the same reasons. "Games" seem both trivial and powerful all at once.

The phrase "serious games" has a specific rhetorical purpose. It is a phrase devised to earn the support of high-level governmental and corporate officials, individuals for whom game implies the terror just described, something trite and powerful, something that trivializes things, even if that trivialization is precisely part of its power.

Whether you like the term or not (I don't, for the record), "serious games" has served this purpose reasonably well (Bogost, 2007, pp. 54–59). It has given its advocates a way to frame the uses of games in governmental and industrial contexts, by making the claim that games can tackle consequential topics and provide profound results. When people complain that serious games is an oxymoron miss the point: it's *supposed* to be an oxymoron. When people hear serious games, this contradiction is foregrounded and silently resolved.

Making Games Is Hard

The name "serious games" may help organizations overcome an initial fear of the form, but it does little to address the terrifying reality of actually making a game. Executives and military brass and doctors and politicians aren't idiots, and they realize that good games are hard to make. They realize that commercial games are big and shiny and cost millions or tens of millions of dollars. They realize that hundreds of people are sometimes necessary to create them. They realize that games are different from the kinds of products most organizations produce, and that they are therefore fundamentally incompatible with existing ways of doing business.

After the initial calm the term provides, "serious games" fails to quell the resulting storm. And unfortunately, as serious games have progressed only a few have succeeded at riding the thunder. There just aren't enough high-quality games that also serve serious purposes effectively. Making games is hard. Making good games is even harder. Making good games that hope to serve some external purpose is even harder.

Efforts like the Serious Games Initiative, the Serious Games Summits at the annual Game Developers Conference (2003–2010), and the many efforts in research and design around games beyond entertainment by people like me, James Gee, Jane McGonigal, Katie Salen, Ben Sawyer, and others had

already made the idea of using games for broader purposes more appealing. But serious games and their ilk had done a terrible job making games seem viable to create, deploy, and use.

The Rhetoric of Gamification

This is why "gamification" is such an effective term. It keeps the term "game" and puts it right up in front, drawing attention to the form's mysterious power. But the kicker comes at the end: the "-ify" suffix makes applying that medium to any given purpose seem facile and automatic.

When you *-ify* something, you put it in a particular state, or you fill it with a particular quality. We can *purify* water by running it through a filter. We can *clarify* a confusing topic through explanation. We can *amplify* a signal by boosting its oscillation rate. We can *beautify* a city by planting trees or removing litter. We can *falsify* a report by interweaving lies with truth. We can *humidify* a dry bedroom by introducing water vapor into the air. We can *magnify* an image by placing it behind an optical instrument. We can *terrify* a child by jumping out, unseen, from behind an obstruction.

In some of these cases, we've invented devices that perform the actions, solutions that represent definitive answers for a particular problem, be it increasing the amplitude of a signal, removing impurities from a liquid, or increasing moisture in a room. But in most of these cases, the details of -ification are abstracted, left vague. Does urban beautification really just involve new green space, or does it also relate to the underlying planning of a city? By taking a goal or a quality and framing it as *-ification*, a speaker makes something *seem* easy to accomplish, even if it is, in fact, difficult.

And this is precisely what gamification is all about. Here's a characteristic excerpt from the gamification movement's Dark Lord, Gabe Zicherman (2011):

> Gamification can be thought of as using some elements of game systems in the cause of a business objective. It's easiest to identify the trend with experiences (frequent flyer programs, Nike Running/Nike+ or Foursquare) that feel immediately game-like. The presence of key game mechanics, such as points, badges, levels, challenges, leader boards, rewards and onboarding, are signals that a game is taking place.

Note how deftly Zicherman makes his readers believe that points, badges, levels, leaderboards, and rewards are "key game mechanics." This is wrong, of course—key game mechanics are the operational parts of games that produce an experience of interest, enlightenment, terror, fascination, hope, or

any number of other sensations. Points and levels and the like are mere gestures that provide structure and measure progress within such a system.

But as Frank Luntz has shown time and time again, reality matters far less than perception. When people hear gamification, it's this incredible facility that registers, the simplicity, smoothness, and ease with which the wild, magical beast of games can be tamed and integrated into any other context at low cost and high scale.

The designer and critic Margaret Robertson (2010) has critiqued gamification on the basis that it takes the least essential aspects of games and presents them as the most essential. Robertson coins the derogatory term *pointsification* as a more accurate description of this process.

As compelling as we might find Robertson's critique, it attacks a problem that just doesn't bother gamification's proponents. The sanctity of games' unique means of expression is just not of much concern to the gamifiers. Instead they value facility—the easiest way possible to capture some of the fairy dust of games and spread it upon products and services. Games or points isn't the point—for gamifiers, there's no difference. It's the *-ification* that's most important. Zicherman makes the point for me: "What gamification does is allow marketers to focus on what they know best—convincing consumers to take loyalty and purchasing actions—using a powerful toolkit of engagement gleaned from games."

Making Things Easy, Making It Hard

I mentioned that frames like serious games and even my own "persuasive games" had done a terrible job making games seem viable to make and use in organizations. The problem is, they *should* be difficult to make and use in such contexts. In fact, games undermine many of the practices of industrialization that gamification silently endorses.

There are good reasons for this: because games are systems, they offer a fundamentally different way of characterizing ideas. They can inspire a different kind of deliberation than we find in other forms of media, one that considers the uncertainty of complex systems instead of embracing simple answers. It's this potential that has inspired me to advocate for the uses of games in areas like learning, politics, journalism, and business.

But for educators, politicians, newsmakers, marketers, and really just about anybody working in institutions that ossified during industrialization, such change is undesirable. It would require the partial or even wholesale reinvention of the way things get done.

I offer a number of examples of this problem in *Persuasive Games*, one of which is the advertising industry. When done well, games offer an opportunity

to give customers an experience of the features and functions of a product or service. But such a proposition runs counter to the last four decades of marketing, an era that has focused on branding and messaging as a way of creating desires through affinity rather than helping people understand how specific products and services might benefit particular wants and needs.

In the modern marketing business, the best solutions are generic ones, ideas that can be repeated without much thought from brand to brand, billed by consultants and agencies at a clear markup. Gamification offers this exactly. No thinking is required, just simple, absentminded iteration and the promise of empty metrics to prove its value. Like having a website or a social media strategy, gamification allows organizations to tick the games box without fuss. Just add badges! Just add leaderboards!

How to Talk about Gamification

Gamification's detractors make their cases with passion. They argue that gamification mistakes games' secondary properties for their primary ones. It insults and violates games. It confuses the magical magnetism of games for simplistic compulsion meted out toward extrinsic incentives. It fails to embrace the complex responsiveness of "real" games, games that make solutions seem interestingly hard rather than tediously so.

But none of these objections bother the gamification set. They don't *want* to use the hard, strange, magical features of games. Instead, they want to use their easy, certain, boring aspects. Those are the gimmicks that can be leveraged into "monetizable APIs" and one-size-fits-all consulting workshops.

To oppose gamification on these grounds is a losing battle. To use one of George Lakoff's favorite examples, it's a bit like countering antiabortion's "pro-life" frame with the "pro-choice" alternative. For someone who holds the position that abortion is murder, the idea that people should have the choice to do it is nonsensical. Likewise, for gamification proponents, the idea that adding points and incentives to things fails to engage the power of games as interactive systems is likewise nonsensical. Doing *that* would be *hard*. It would require changing the practices of entire industries. It would take time and effort. That's not what marketers and educators and politicians and executives want. They want easy answers and fast results.

It's not what gamification consultants want either; they want to sell off their businesses before anybody discovers that they have been erected on swampland. And they want to associate this easy-bake, fast action marketing schlock with the totally unrelated magic of games.

"Pro-life" is a powerful phrase because it is so hard to oppose. To begin an argument by implying that you are "antilife"—that's a bad start indeed.

Lakoff points out that liberals lose elections largely because they spend most of their time embracing the terms of their opposition, repeating those phrases and giving them implicit support. Instead, Lakoff argues, liberals should invent their own concepts that reflect their core values, setting the debate accordingly.

For advocates of games who oppose the insidiousness and infantilization of gamification, the same advice applies. But just like Lakoff's liberals, we've got our work cut out for us. Gamification is winning the rhetoric battle; in fact, it's increasingly common to hear people use the term in reference to any nontraditional use of games.

Alternate terms aren't nearly as powerful. There's Ben Sawyer and Dave Rejeski's serious games, of course, McGonigal's notion of "gameful design," my concept of persuasive games, and the loosely connected "games for good" movement, among others. None of these have caught on like gamification has done. We have to do better.

Exploitationware

In the meantime, there's another lesson to learn from Frank Luntz: don't let the opposition set the terms of the debate. Instead, concoct better concepts with which to oppose them.

In addition to his many verbal offensives, Luntz is also the architect of defensive phrases like "death tax," which invokes considerably more dissatisfaction than "estate tax." The latter phrase sounds like it applies to the wealthy (which, as a matter of fact, it does), but Luntz managed to help win much more mainstream support for its possible repeal by removing resentment about its association with wealth and replacing that resentment with disgust at the idea of being taxed just for dying. And more recently, Luntz has advocated that Republicans opposing Obama's health care reform by calling it a "Washington takeover" that will force citizens to "stand in line" for care (as cited in Allen, 2010).

For gamification detractors, the best move is to distance games from the concept entirely, by showing its connection to the more insidious activities that really comprise it.

In particular, gamification proposes to replace real incentives with fictional ones. Real incentives come at a cost but provide value for both parties based on a relationship of trust. By contrast, pretend incentives reduce or eliminate costs, but in so doing they strip away both value and trust.

When companies and organizations provide incentives to help orient the goals of the organization against the desires of its constituency, they facilitate functional relationships, one in which both parties have come to an

understanding about how they will relate to one another. Subsequent loyalty might exist between an organization and its customers, an organization and its employees, or a government and its citizens.

For example, an airline offers a view of its business model, and frequent flyers who advance those expectations get rewards. An employer offers a view of the company's goals, and employees who help meet those goals enjoy raises, perks, and promotions. When loyalty is real it's reciprocal. It moves in two directions. Something real is at stake for both parties.

Gamification replaces these real, functional, two-way relationships with dysfunctional perversions of relationships. Organizations ask for loyalty, but they reciprocate that loyalty with shams, counterfeit incentives that neither provide value nor require investment.

When seen in this light, gamification is a misnomer. A better name for this practice is *exploitationware*. And as a concept, exploitationware has numerous rhetorical benefits:

- *It disassociates the practice from games.*
  This is the most important position of all, because it makes room for games to move into the same areas of application while giving them a natural response to the gamification option: "What about gamification? That seems cheaper and easier." "Oh, you mean exploitationware? It's great if you don't mind swindling your customers."
- *It connects gamification to other, better known practices of software fraud.*
  These include malware, spyware, and adware. While some uses of -ware still have positive or neutral associations (shareware, freeware), the people are more familiar with the more nefarious variants thanks to negative press coverage of software exploits.
- *It kicks the fulcrum out from under gamification's lever.*
  Gamification is appealing to consultants and organizations because it's easy, cheap, and replicable. It's high leverage. Some companies will follow any trend, but most are smart enough to understand the medium- and the long-term cost of bad decisions. Just the threat of negative customer perception of gamification techniques offers a good method to argue against them.
- *It allows us to situate gamification within a larger set of pernicious practices in the high-tech marketplace.*
  These include the general practice of extracting personal information from customers by pretending that one's product is actually one's customer. Google and Facebook's seemingly free services also could be called exploitationware of a different kind, since they use the carrot

of free services (their purported product) to extract information that forms the real basis for their revenues (their real product).[4]

- *It opens the door for more earnest, beneficial uses of games.* Characterizing gamification as exploitationware gives games-as-systems advocates an opportunity to present alternatives. Doing real, meaningful things with games is hard and risky, but it offers considerable reward, reward that responds to the underlying shift away from the logic of industrialization that gamification takes for granted.

For those who lament the rise of gamification, the most important thing you can do is to stop saying gamification entirely. Reinvest that energy partly into arguments against the scourge of expoitationware, but mostly into your own approaches to the use of games in different contexts. And to the crass marketers and spineless consultants who embrace it, I leave it to you to defend your villainous reign of abuse against customers, employees, and the general public. Thankfully, for those of us concerned about the growing threat of expoitationware, games offer a positive alternative.

Notes

1. Best described in *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think* although similar ideas pervade Lakoff's work as well as his collaborations with Mark Johnson.
2. The business is Luntz Global, and can be found at http://www.luntzglobal.com. Luntz has also written popular and business books on the subject, including *Words That Work: It's not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (Luntz, 2006).
3. See http://www.gamesbeyondentertainment.com.
4. For more on the phenomenon of customer-as-product in contemporary high-tech companies, see Siva Vaidhyanathan's *The Googlization of Everything* (2011).