Total Gamification

Mathias Fuchs

When a former US vice president calls games "normal", it is most likely that the medium he is talking about has lost its innocence. Al Gore's statement that "games are the new normal" (2011) indicates that the early days when games were new and nice, harmless, or neat and niche, are gone. Games have had their coming of age and the days of ludic infancy are long since past. Through the maturation of games as a medium, we have realised they can serve a purpose and have lost their naïveté. Games can simulate battlefields, games can predict disaster, they can increase profit, and they can crunch markets. On their way to maturity games have lost their enchanting non-intentionality. The original naïveté of being good for nothing but play has vanished into thin air. It has, however, been replaced by a second order naïveté: the interests of games are no longer challenged.[1] Nobody would call a game "corrupted" (Caillois 1958) if money was involved in the gameplay. There are also no taboo areas for gaming. Gaming scenarios include warfare, pornography, financial transactions, espionage and counter-espionage, theft and antisocial behaviour. Welcome to the days of total gamification!

What we experience today is a diversity of play and the ubiquity of games, making them not only a popular medium but also a key medium and probably *the* leading medium of contemporary society.

The coverage of games across media sectors and social niches also makes them a super-medium, a medium that can easily adopt the styles and modes of predecessor media. Games can cannibalise sister media and pretend to be film, radio, narration,

---

1   I pick up an idea here that Adorno formulated in regard to art and its lost "naïveté" (Adorno 2004, 3).

performance or sculpture. Games can adopt genres, or masquerade as medieval, futuristic, elegant, brutal or Gothic. In this book Tanya Krzywinska casts a critical glance upon the pleasure that Gothic forms invoke, and investigates the horror games subculture, a segment that amounts to 20 percent of digital games. Markus Rautzenberg (this volume) describes video games as "an explorable universal metaphor of the digital medium" and points out that we "look through" games to see content without realising that it is the medium we are looking at while at the same time we acknowledge an indispensable distance from the medium. On one hand we can explore simulated worlds without being distracted by pixelation or other display peculiarities, but on the other hand an "uncertainty" still remains about whether we are inside the medium or outside (Rautzenberg, this volume). Our contemporary perception differs from how we experienced games in the days of eight-bit computing: a pixelated view guaranteed a permanent distance from the medium. It can be demonstrated in many instances that distance from a medium accompanies the reception of that medium in its early stages. Irony, laughter and mockery are fuelled by the artefacts, the glitches and the distortions that media, in their infancy, initially produce in abundance. This was the case for the car with its "horse-carriageness", for early radio with its crackle and hiss, and for television with the constraint of 625 horizontal scan lines and half-images.[2] Mature media lose their obvious mediality. Games have grown up and today we consider them "normal" in a way that is not unlike the "normality" of television in the 1960s and '70s.

Astrid Ensslin (2015) looks at the ubiquity and normality of games when she states that she is:

> Not sure whether you can say that (print!) literature was ever as popular and all-pervasive as games are nowadays. Of course there's still the digital divide, but even before

2   This is the case for most PAL television format variants.

radio, television and film came to be mass media, literature
never had the kind of "mass effect" and the kind of creative,
user-driven popular culture that games have today – due to
low literacy levels and social discrimination in centuries past.
Perhaps you could say that games (and particularly mobile
games) are the new television. (Ensslin 2015)

Very much like television was a *conditio sine qua non* in the '50s,
games are a must-have now. Today's grandparents have to pos-
sess skills in *Angry Birds* (2009) to demonstrate they are cool – and
schoolchildren have to be able to cope with gamified learning
apps to prove they are clever. Firefighters need serious games
to learn how to extinguish fires and the terminally ill have to
keep playing to stay in shape. There is hardly a social group or a
niche within a population that can do without games. Maybe the
insane. But then this only proves what Al Gore told us. If "games
are the new normal", then only those who are not normal will not
play them.

Seriousness as a Problem

When games started to be considered as being "serious" at least
one of two essential sources of resistance[3] against the false
notion of a whole, all-encompassing, eco-sociological system
became apparent: Games could no longer claim a "resistant"
distance to empirical reality. Serious games, on the contrary,
increasingly mingled with empirical reality and with the "regime
of representation" in a way that was unprecedented. For years,
children have been playing doctors and nurses or soldiers and
police, but never before have games been declared medically
effective or been applied to organise battlefield operations. The
success of gamification and serious games established a deep
belief in the paradoxical notion of serious play and the equally

---

3   Rancière speaks of the regime of representation and of the aesthetic regime
     (Rancière 2008, 15–17).

surprising concept of games in "non-gaming contexts". The evangelists of gamification proclaimed that everybody could live longer by playing computer games (MacGonigal 2011) or that there would be "fun ways to cure cancer" (Scott 2013). An appreciation of statements like these necessitates a liaison between the ludic and empirical reality, and results in a state where "real life is becoming indistinguishable from computer games" to paraphrase a famous statement from Horkheimer and Adorno about movies (Adorno and Horkheimer 1993).

From Friedrich Schiller to Al Gore

Al Gore's before mentioned declaration of the normality of computer games is rooted in a philosophical tradition that tries to enoble playfulness as a universal source, medium or pharmakon of culture (Huizinga 1938). Friedrich Schiller's claim about humans being human only when playing[4] neglects non-ludic activities of men and women that constitute the human "in the fullest sense of the word" (Schiller 2013). To be able to work, sleep, love and hate without any playfulness in mind makes humans human. The inevitability of dying and the uncertainty about the time of death constitute humans in the fullest sense of the word as well. Markus Rautzenberg (this volume) refers to Jacques Lacan when he points out that it is not of course "uncertain if we die or not but that we live *as if* that was the case". Play might create situations that suggest certainty, but only within *de facto* uncertainty. This becomes apparent in the experiments on confidence, trust and unconsciousness that Karen Palmer stages brilliantly in her ludic performance *SYNCSELF 2* (2014). The *parkour* runner is challenged by uncertainty about the success of the next leap he or she is going to undertake. Will the concrete wall he or she is

---

4   "For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays" (Schiller 2013).

trying to reach crumble? Will he or she slip because of unforeseen moisture on the ground? Will a sudden gust of wind change the direction of the leap by a few crucial millimeters? The physical environment that *parkour* runners are acting in is loaded with uncertainty and with true randomness that a computer game is incapable of providing. Of course, the consequences of failing are of a different nature in the concrete (in both meanings of the word) world of parkour and the simulated physicality of worlds like the ones we know from *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and the like. The way the runner can accomplish a subjective feeling of certainty about his or her leap is by "framing the uncertainty" (Rautzenberg, this volume) as a game.

I wouldn't go as far as Espen Aarseth when, in an interview once, he stated that the only two conditions that could not be played are sleeping and dying (Aarseth 2009). I would contend that labour is another other human condition that cannot be played. I can of course imitate actions that are reminiscent of work and play a game of *mimicry* (Caillois 1958). But this does not play labour. Bataille states that the regime of labour denies play, and Robert Pfaller's reading of Bataille comes to the conclusion that "it does not do so by chance, it is the very nature of labour to be the negative of play" (Pfaller 2010, 20). Hammering on rocks on a theatre stage is therefore just a game about work-related symptoms, but it is not playing work at a substantial level.

For the idealist philosophy of Schiller, death and labour did of course matter less than beauty (*Schönheit*) and living form (*lebende Gestalt*). In the fifteenth letter on aesthetic education, Schiller suggests to closely relate "real and existing beauty" with the "real and existing drive for play" and goes as far as saying that the "ideal of beauty" dictates the "ideal of play" (Schiller 2013, 62). According to Schiller play has to be noble, bloodless and appreciable.

> We can immediately understand why the ideal form of a Venus, of a Juno, and of an Apollo, is to be sought not at

Rome, but in Greece, if we contrast the Greek population, delighting in the bloodless athletic contests of boxing, racing, and intellectual rivalry at Olympia, with the Roman people gloating over the agony of a gladiator.[5] (Schiller 2013, 62)

Obviously for Schiller there are good games and bad games!

What Schiller tries to accomplish in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1795) is to declare play as the essential super-category encompassing and harmonising life and form. Life, according to Schiller, is the object of the sensual, bodily drives.[6] Gestalt is the object of the drive for form.[7] Both of those, the sensual drive and the form drive, exclude each other. That is why Schiller is searching for another drive, that he calls *Spieltrieb* (play drive) to aim at objects that could be labelled "*lebende Gestalt*", or "living form" (Schiller 2013, 58). Why?

> There shall be a communion between the formal impulse and the material impulse – that is, there shall be a play instinct – because it is only the unity of reality with the form, of the accidental with the necessary, of the passive state with freedom, that the conception of humanity is completed.[8] (Schiller 2013, 59)

---

5   German original: "Wenn sich die griechischen Völkerschaften in den Kampfspielen zu Olympia an den unblutigen Wettkämpfen der Kraft, der Schnelligkeit, der Gelenkigkeit und an dem edlern Wechselstreit der Talente ergötzen, und wenn das römische Volk an dem Todeskampf eines erlegten Gladiators oder seines lybischen Gegners sich labt, so wird aus diesem Zuge begreiflich, warum wir die Idealgestalten einer Venus, einer Juno, eines Apoll nicht in Rom, sondern in Griechenland suchen müssen" (Schiller 2013, 62).

6   German original: "Der Gegenstand des sinnlichen Triebes, in einem allgemeinen Begriff ausgedrückt, heißt Leben" (Schiller 2013, 58).

7   German original: "Der Gegenstand des Formtriebes, in einem allgemeinen Begriff ausgedrückt, heißt Gestalt" (Schiller 2013, 58).

8   German original: "Es soll eine Gemeinschaft zwischen Formtrieb und Stofftrieb, das heißt, ein Spieltrieb seyn, weil nur die Einheit der Realität mit der Form, der Zufälligkeit mit der Nothwendigkeit , des Leidens mit der Freyheit den Begriff der Menschheit vollendet" (Schiller 2013, 59).

Note the language. Schiller does not say that there is a unity of gestalt and life. He proclaims instead: "There shall be a communion between the formal impulse and the material impulse". Play and the play drive are constructed in order to optimise the ideal of humanity. That is why idealised play has to become normal and corrupted play (for example, the Romans and their Circus Maximus) or non-play has to be relegated to a second-class activity. It took some 230 years for Al Gore to arrive at a similar proposition: games are the new normal. Implicitly they are declared to be of prime importance and to be the only important human occupation.

From Diversity to Totality

The diversification of games can be seen as the maturing of the medium. The popularity of games has increased dramatically, games have become much more diverse and gaming is taking place in a wide range of practices, from e-sport to gamification. In addition, the gamer position includes a number of roles and identities such as: players, learners, time-fillers, users, fans, roleplayers, theory crafters, speed runners, and many more. Yet, the integration of games into everyday life absorbs the variety that once constituted the medium's strength. The more advanced the integration the more it turns into a mere spinning of gears. One might argue that the extension of play into all kinds of non-gaming contexts leads to an over-accumulation of play.[9] This is to suggest that play loses its liberating dynamics and becomes characterised by a quantitative increase of games and gaming, to a point of saturation. A situation could arise where the system's capacity to cope with further increase of playful-ness is exhausted. This might lead to a qualitative leap that turns diversity into totality, and free play into total play. As a perversion

9   Schell used to call the over-accumulation "over-gamification" in his talk at the DICE summit in 2010 where he sketches an Orwellian scenario (Schell 2010).

of the original play drive that is sensuous, liberating and free, a model of total gamification could be prefigured by a conception of games as the new normal and in which games are the only normal. Exclusive normality leads to totality. Total gamification would describe a situation where all human and technical resources have to be gamified. In regards to human resources we are already facing a situation where the old and the young, men and women, various ethnic groups and a huge reserve army of minorities and niche populations are drawn into gaming arenas. The main games industries work with their brothers in arms of the indie games industry to incessantly recruit new audiences: the homeless, black teenage mums, those with depression or Alzheimer's. But also on a technical level total Gamification takes its toll. In his essay *"Gamification as the Post-Modern Phalanstère"* Flavio Escribano describes a sector of gamification that he calls "technological gamification" (Escibano 2012, 206–7). This is a type of gamification that is triggered and driven by technological innovation.[10] Escribano describes how large-scale simulations, medical research, sports training, or military operations are run on games technology to benefit from gaming's ease of use, low cost, efficiency, legal status and design appeal.

The legitimisation for games being the "new normal" or the pick of the day is not social desirability, but a new mode of power. Alex Gekker calls this mode of technology-supported power "casual power". His understanding of the concept relies on "designers inscribing certain affordances into sociotechnical assemblages that aim to nullify users' reflexive capacities towards the object in question and enhancing its black-boxed condition" (Gekker 2015, 1). As soon as games are accepted as normal the question of why they are played at a certain point in time and at a certain place by certain people is not asked any longer. It is the alleged normality

10 Technological gamification differs from what Escribano calls "natural gamification" and "forced gamification" as it is accepted on the basis of a hegemonic status of technology versus other forms of knowledge or belief (Escribano 2012, 203–6).

that keeps players and non-players alike from asking the question. Casual power transforms quotidian realities of everyday users, supplementing thinking or pre-thinking with suggested actions (Berry 2014).

The rationale of total gamification can be compared to the rationale of total mobilisation that was introduced by the director of German electric company AEG, Walther Rathenau and by General Erich Ludendorff one hundred years ago. Both for industrial resources and human resources (Ludendorff 1935) total mobilisation was demanded to progress in the war.[11] The request was not only to have more soldiers to fight, but to extend the resources for production and warfare to non-Germans, to women and to the youth.[12] Thirty years later Goebbels specified quite clearly what he had in mind when talking about the prospective participants of a total war: invalids from the eastern front, men and women working in the military industry, medical staff, scientists, artists, teachers, women, the young and the extremely old.[13] The expansion of core human resources to include a wide and diverse range of age groups, ethnicities and genders sounds like a target audience analysis by a gamification consultant of the twenty-first century. I do not, of course, want to say here that gamification is of the same nature as total mobilisation or even

11   In an even more brutal form Joseph Goebbels pronounced "total war" in his speech at the Berlin Sportpalast on February 18, 1943. Once more, a concentration and mobilisation of human resources (women and children) and of technology was asked for to progress the war in a state of allegedly temporary crisis. "The crises that our east front is momentarily suffering from" (translation by the author, German original: "Die Krise, in der sich unsere Ostfront augenblicklich befindet").

12   Cf. Imbusch (2005, 526), who identifies the following elements of total war: total mobilisation, total control, totality of methods, totality of the aims and objectives.

13   Translation by the author, German original: "deutsche Verwundete von der Ostfront [...] Rüstungsarbeiter und -arbeiterinnen aus den Berliner Panzerwerken, Ärzte, Wissenschaftler, Künstler, Lehrer [...] Über das ganze Rund des Sportpalastes verteilt sehe ich Tausende von deutschen Frauen. Die Jugend ist hier vertreten und das Greisenalter".

total war. It is, however, quite striking how the radical integration of broader audiences into serious gaming and the radicality of wartime recruitment follow similar rhetorics. Evangelists of gamification like McGonigal (2011) talk about "gaming as a spiritual practice", others pretend that "gamification design is largely about what is pleasureable" (Schell 2010)[14] and obscure economic objectives and interest. Erich Ludendorff talks about the "spiritual unity of the people"[15] and obscures the firing quota that he aims at in the first instance.

I have to clarify here, that I do not think that the current state of gamification has already reached a level of societal permeation that would justify talk of total gamification at the present time. What I have tried to point out is a tendency or a risk for the liberating power of playfulness to turn into a doctrine. In a situation like this it is so much more important to point out lines of flight from a totality of play. This is exactly what the authors of this book are concerned about.

Karen Palmer draws lines of flight for bodies and brains to escape traps. Tanya Krzywinska opens the discourse of playfulness towards the uncanny and the dark when she talks about the gamification of Gothic. Astrid Ensslin makes us aware of the power of narratives when we deal with worlds that are often mistaken as visual worlds, and the philosopher Markus Rautzenberg casts a critical glance at essentialisms that prevent us from looking for exceptions, uncertainties or the lack of supposed uncertainties.

14 Schell ideologises gamification by saying: "We are moving from a time when life was all about survival to a time when it was about efficiency into a new era where gamification design is largely about what is pleasureable" (Schell 2010).
15 German original: "Seelische Geschlossenheit des Volkes" (Ludendorff 1935).

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen. 2009. *Unpublished Interview with Espen Aarseth by Mathias Fuchs (*December 3)*. Potsdam Hotel, Altstadt.

Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. 1993. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception". In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.

Adorno, Theodor. 2004. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Continuum.

Berry, David M. 2014. *Critical Theory and the Digital: Critical Theory and Contemporary Society.* London: Bloomsbury.

Caillois, Roland. 1958. *Les jeux et les hommes*. Paris: Librairies Gallimard.

Ensslin, Astrid. 2015. "Keynote-Sprecherin Astrid Ensslin im Interview". Accessed June 25, 2015. http://cdc.leuphana.com/news/news/blog-article/interviewserie-digra2015-gothic-games-und-erste-spiele-keynote-sprecherin-astrid-ensslin-im-in/

Escribano, Flavio. 2012. "Gamification as the Post-Modern Phalanstère". In *The Video Game Industry*, edited by Peter Zackariasson and Timothy L. Wilson, 198–217. London: Routledge.

Gekker, Alex. 2015. "*Casual Power: Understanding User Interfaces through Quantification".* Unpublished extended abstract for DiGRA2015. Lüneburg: DiGRA Abstracts.

Gore, Albert Arnold. 2011. "Keynote Lecture". *Eighth* Annual Games for Change Festival (June 20). New York.

Huizinga, Johan. (1938) 1985. *Homo Ludens: Proeve Ener Bepaling Van Het Spelelement Der Cultuur.* Reprint, Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.

Imbusch, Peter. 2005. *Moderne und Gewalt: Zivilisationstheoretische Perspektiven auf das 20. Jahrhundert.* Berlin: VS Verlag.

Ludendorff, Erich. 1935. *Der Totale Krieg*. München: Ludendorff's Verlag.

McGonigal, Jane. 2011. "Gaming as a Spiritual Practice". *Buddhist Geeks Podcast* 205. Accessed June 19, 2015. http://www.buddhistgeeks.com/2011/01/bg-205-gaming-as-a-spiritual-practice/.

Pfaller, Robert. 2010. "Der Exzess des Spiels als Begünder der Kultur". In *Das Spiel und seine Grenzen. Passagen des Spiels II*, edited by Mathias Fuchs and Ernst Strouhal, 9–30. Vienna and New York: Springer.

Rancière, Jacques. 2008. *Ist Kunst widerständig?* Berlin: Merve.

Schell, Jesse. 2010. "*Design Outside the Box". DICE2010 Summit (February 18).* Las Vegas. Accessed June 19, 2015. http://www.g4tv.com/videos/44277/dice-2010-design-outside-the-box-presentation/.

Schiller, Friedrich. 2013. *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen.* Stuttgart: Reclam.

Scott, Hilda. 2013. "Amazon, Facebook and Google Design Fun Way to Cure Cancer". In *Reuters/iTechPost* (March 1). Accessed June 19, 2015. http://www.itechpost.com/articles/5935/20130301/amazon-facebook-google-design-game-cure-cancer-research-uk.htm

Ludography

Angry Birds (2009). Rovio Entertainment.
Assassin's Creed (2007). Ubisoft.
SYNCSELF 2 (2014). Karen Palmer and If Interactive Film.