

# Punk gamification

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**Abstract.** This paper aims at proposing an alternative take on gamification, based on bottom up approaches and critical design. In the first part of the paper, several issues concerning gamification are reviewed: the claim that it is exploitative, the problematic definition of game elements as well as gamification's connections to power and discipline and the utopian stance on games that is generally adopted. The second part of the paper is dedicated to overcoming these issues by situating gamification in the larger context of play and to trace its roots in the ludicisation of culture. The last part of the paper proposes the institution of a punk gamification, as an ideological alternative to mainstream gamification that focuses on freedom more than rules, is bottom up, critical and, sometimes, unpleasant.

**Keywords:** Gamification, game elements, power, critical gamification, bottom-up.

## 1 Never mind the bollocks

“Gamification is bullshit”. With this rather strong statement – which since then has become infamous among gamification scholars - Ian Bogost introduced his position statement at the Wharton Gamification Symposium in 2011. The piece – translated also in Portuguese and Japanese – was then published on the Atlantic and Kotaku before becoming a chapter inside *The Gameful World* [1].

Bogost criticized ferociously the concept of gamification and especially its marketing origins. Gamification, according to his perspective, is only a keyword invented by consultants, tapping into the economic and cultural success of digital games in order to sell half-baked marketing strategies to “Vice Presidents and Brand Managers”. Bogost also labelled gamification efforts as “exploitationware” to dissociate them from games and to connect them with software fraud and other pernicious practices in the high-tech marketplace [2]. They are: “a grifter’s game, pursued to capitalize on a cultural moment, through services about which they have questionable expertise, to bring about results meant to last only long enough to pad their bank accounts before the next bullshit trend comes along” [1].

This harsh criticism found some fertile ground and other voices raised to attack the idea of gamification and to delegitimize gamifications studies. Among many, we should mention Klabbers [3] who claims that gamification is nothing more than a “behavioral management technique” and that its study is not a legitimate scholarly enterprise.

If we contextualise it, Bogost’s criticism can be read as a defensive reaction towards the increasing attention around digital games in the last decade: games were becoming mainstream, and people that were involved in them for a long time wanted to protect their specificity<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, these criticisms should not be dismissed or ignored. Because it is indeed true that many early forms of and approaches to gamification were little more than scam, using games as a purely cosmetic layer and often theorized and implemented by people with very limited knowledge and understating of games and game culture altogether. Often, barely-scientific and extremely exploitative techniques such as “dopamine loops” (based on creating addiction to biochemical rewards) were advertised as good design solutions or simplistic strategies (the infamous “PBL triad”, composed by points, badges and leaderboards) applied blindly.

It is also true, however, that – although these poor attempts of gamification still exist – in the last years gamification scholars worked relentlessly to outline a framework for studying, designing and implementing gamification in a way that is much more scientifically sound and much less ethically shady. If some gamification is indeed “bullshit”, however, not all gamification is. Several approaches to gamification have been proposed over the years, many of them based on honest and rigorous academic work and with the genuine objective to use the potential of gamification to do something else than try and exploit customers. This does not mean, however, that these approaches do not have issues.

## 2 Problems

Since its beginnings as a marketing tool, gamification has been applied more and more often in a rather diverse set of contexts such as education [5], health [6] or civic engagement [7] in order to support progressive agendas. These projects may also try to shine with the reflected light of the digital games industry, but they also propose gamified systems that are not exploitative and can be genuinely enjoyable.

Despite overcoming the nature of “exploitationware” that gamification might have had in its beginnings, most of these approaches remain significantly flawed and one of their biggest issues rises from the definition of gamification itself.

One of the most common definitions of gamification [8] describes it as the use of game-design elements in non-game contexts: these elements should increase user-engagement by making such contexts more game-like. This definition, however, is highly problematic, especially in delineating what these game elements are.

First, the “elements” generally indicated as examples are of very different nature and scale. They range from progress bars and badges to themes and narrative [9], from points and levels to role-play and avatars. This is an extremely inhomogeneous mix of things that can be hardly put on the same level. Just to make an example: progress bars are a device providing specific information on the quantity of a predetermined element,

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<sup>1</sup> A similar defensive position was behind the excessively long debate around games and narrative that took place in the previous decade, were “ludologists” asserted the independence of game studies from other disciplines [4]

while narrative has been argued to be one of the primary ways humans make sense of the World [10].

Second, it has been observed that these “game-design elements” are neither strictly unique to games nor automatically give rise to “gameful experiences” [11]. None of these elements alone make a game, and several games feature very few of them. In fact, many of the elements exploited by gamification are not even particularly important: Bogost [2] attacks Zichermann [12] for claiming that badges, levels, leader boards, and rewards are “key game mechanics” asserting that, instead “Points and levels and the like are mere gestures that provide structure and measure progress within such a system” [2].

Many of these elements, furthermore, have originated in non-game contexts and several of them have been included in games fairly recently. Some have come very far: game badges are an imitation of those given by the Boys Scouts of America to reward their members, which in turn are inspired by military medals and decorations which are probably heirs of prehistoric hunt and war trophies. Other elements are more recent, such as loading bars which are inspired by thermometers and mechanical displays measuring pressure and similar. Even storytelling, which is as ancient as spoken language, only recently become an important element in many games.

The picture, then, appears reversed. It have been game designers that, in the past, have introduced non-game elements into their games to make them more interesting and engaging! Gamification, from this perspective, would actually mean reverse engineering the work of such designers in identifying motivational techniques or interesting semiotic devices – not to make anything more “game-like”.

The biggest issue about the whole idea of “game elements” however, is that underlined by Bonenfant and Genvo [13]: this is an essentialist approach. This concept implies that certain elements of a game situation would be intrinsically playful and that it would be sufficient to export them to other situations in order to make the latter more game-like in turn. This is based on the idea – often supported by the so-called ludologists – that games are “things” that can exist outside of the human experience of playing them. This is a problematic stance, which cannot be upheld against the fact that no definition of “games”, despite the innumerable attempts, can ignore that, besides a systemic component, games also need an experiential component [11].

This misconception is rooted in a common misunderstanding of Caillois’s concepts of *ludus* and *paidia*. These are often imagined as juxtaposed and fundamentally interchangeable with the concepts of “game” and “play”. This (as we will see better in section 4) entails the idea that games are essentially systems of rules and, therefore, that the rules *are* the game, ignoring or downplaying the necessity of a playful behaviour in order to play the game.

There is, nevertheless, an approach to gamification that focuses precisely on the experiential component of games: that proposed by Huotari and Hamari [11]. If the choice to base their definition of gamification on service marketing could seem odd at first – almost a return to the exploitative marketing origins of gamification – this choice allows the authors to outline a quite elegant definition of gamification without incurring in the aforementioned issues. As service market theory claims that “the value of a service is determined solely by the customer’s subjective experience” [11, p. 25], this approach

to gamification focuses on how to create affordances that might enable users to have a “gameful experience”. Affordances are, by definition, an invitation more than a con- striction, and therefore should work as cues and potential triggers of gamefulness.

Huotari and Hamari’s definition, then, state that “gamification refers to a process of enhancing a service with affordances for gameful experiences in order to support users’ overall value creation” [11, p. 25]. This definition of gamification is centred on giving rise to “favourable” motivations and psychological states using affordances and, there- fore, underscores the importance of the psychological outcomes rather than specifics of design.

The virtues of this definition are that gamification is imagined as non-coercive and that games are not approached in an essentialist way. In fact, the authors prefer to avoid a complex confrontation with the detailed definition of what is a game and what are game elements and prefer to rely on previous literature and on the general trend of defining games as something that features both a systemic and an experiential compo- nent.

Nevertheless, the fact that the experiential component is identified with “gameful- ness” (instead of playfulness) and that the systemic component is associated with things such as rules, conflict and measurable and uncertain outcomes seem rooted in the rather successful idea (at least within game studies) that games are essentially enjoyable sys- tems of constrictions, pleasurable grammars. While there is some truth in it, this concept is not unproblematic, and it relates to another of the big issues of gamification as we know it: its relationship with power.

### 3 No feelings

It is fairly common, in gamification literature, to read a sentence along the lines of: “gamification aims at influencing behaviour”. Some approaches to gamification aim at outlining “functional compounds of design features and user dispositions that give rise to particular desirable experiences and behaviours” [14, p. 109]. Others claim explicitly that the goal of gamification is “to understand how to best influence human behavior, attitudes, and other states with designed interventions derived from games.” [15, p. 318] and that “gamification is intended to change specific outcomes in specific ways; de- signers want to use lessons from game science to change human behavior.” [15, p. 331].

This approach – often marked by clear positivistic undertones<sup>2</sup> - implicitly describes gamification as a form of power. The Oxford English Dictionary describes power as “The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of

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<sup>2</sup> Landers and his co-authors [15] claim their approach to be “post-positivist”, nevertheless it shares many of the problematic aspects of positivism, among which the belief of the existence of “underlying truths about gamification” (331) that could be discovered although through the lenses of subjective interpretations. Furthermore, the claim that gamification is a science and that the goal of scientists is “to discover, measure, and predict these effects” (318) seems to accept that human behaviour follows in some way the laws of necessity – also a quite contro- versial statement.

events”. Gamification, then, appears to be a strategy to use games or game design in order to gain power over users.

It must be noted, that this is a different issue from that pointed out by Bogost. Power does not equal exploitation and it is not something bad *per se*: many gamification efforts focus on “good causes” such as learning, health, job performance, or civic engagement, while others, even if they aim at increasing revenues, try to do it by making the services they offer more enjoyable, not by “tricking” their users into spending more time or money on them.

These efforts – along with those of adjacent techniques such as serious games, games for health and game-based learning – attempt to exercise a form of soft power in order to encourage users to “do the right thing”. However, it is from this point onwards that issues start to arise, because: who chooses what is the “right thing”? Why would designers, institutions, companies be entitled to decide on their own what is best for their users? And if such a thing as the “right thing” exists, why would it need an extrinsic motivation to be done? Are users too silly, too childish or too weak to make their own choices and to carry them out?

Gamification aiming at behavioural changes, be it for a good cause, end up being rather paternalistic, patronising and definitely top-down. It is the main point of “games against health” [16] a witty article that parodies the “games for health” paradigm and imagines games designed to have nefarious effects on their players’ health. The claim that it is more natural for digital games to be unhealthy is not the effect of some sadistic intentions or of a negative take on games, but it is meant to be thought-provoking. Why should game designers – and gamification designers for that matter – be entitled the position of deciding what is right or wrong for their players?

Some approaches to gamification try to avoid this problem. Huotari and Hamari [11] propose a definition of gamification that is meant to improve motivation and value creation without aiming directly at a behavioural change, and they even warn about the fact that gamification designed exclusively to affect behaviour instead of focusing on creating gameful experiences might lead to conflict between “the goal of changing people’s behaviour and that of creating valuable experiences” as “one of the defining elements of gameful experience (...) is that it is voluntary, autotelic and an intrinsically motivated” [11, p. 26]. If several of the examples of gamification made in the paper are still aimed at manipulating users’ behaviours, the authors choose as their main example a case of gamification that does indeed aim at improving the experience of a service without any behaviour-change (the gamification implemented at the Trader Joe’s grocery store in Berkeley, California, [11, p. 28]).

Nonetheless, the aim of making a service easier and smoother is not exempt from possible criticism. Several of the points raised by Virilio [17] or Dunne [18] against user-friendliness can apply also to these approaches. While Virilio defines interactive user-friendliness as a form of “enslavement”, Dunne proposes that it is not an enslavement to the machines, but to “the conceptual models, values, and systems of thought the machines embody” [18, p. 21]. User-friendliness is rooted in a rhetoric of transparency, while it is in fact charged with ideologies that direct the actions of their users and restrict them in the name of simplicity. Similarly, gamification can be used to increase the enjoyment of a task but, by doing so, reducing the opportunities to think critically

about the task itself. It can be a way of naturalising actions and services where instead awareness would be advisable. To make an example, while gamified learning could be more effective in increasing the knowledge of a person around a certain topic, it could also lead said person to accept uncritically that knowledge instead of questioning it.

The problematic relationship between gamification and power becomes far more dangerous when gamification makes use of the many data that are made available by current information and communication technologies. Metrics and geo-localisation transform gamified apps in what Foucault [19] calls “instruments of discipline”, as it is becoming painfully obvious with the gamified social credit systems allegedly being currently developed by the Chinese Government<sup>3</sup>.

A world where discipline through gamification has been achieved has been hyperbolically described in Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel *Brave New World*. In this dystopia hedonistic playfulness and games are used to build an inescapably strict society which remains unquestioned and unchallenged by its inhabitants exactly because every action is designed to feel natural and to be enjoyable. This example obviously brings to the extreme consequences some principles that much later have become part of the paradigm of gamification, and I do not wish to claim that gamification will eventually be used to create such a dystopia. Allegories, however, with their ability to deform reality into a grotesque but accurate description, give us the chance to realise the very ideological grounds upon which gamification is built.

At this point, seeing the criticisms advanced to the different approaches to gamification and the ideological issues that they are related to, it may seem that the aim of this argumentation is to prove that gamification is a bad enterprise and that it should be abandoned altogether. In fact, the objective of this argumentation is the opposite: as gamification appears to have a real effect and efficacy [20] we should not deviate from our efforts to study and understand it while we should indeed vary our *ideological* approaches to it. In other words, we might need a punk gamification.

#### 4 Silly thing

The theorisation of a punk gamification emerges from a word that is insufficiently used in gamification: “play”. Play and playfulness have often been relegated outside gamification, confined to the domains of “playful design” [14] or “meaningful play” [21]. Play, in other words, is often considered as something different from games.

I have mentioned that this misconception is based on a confusion of the concepts of “play” and “game” to that of the two polarities of play proposed by Caillois: *ludus* and *paidia*. On the one hand, we must remember that Caillois is very firm in stating that he is not drawing a typology but highlighting two tensions that permeate every form of play. Even in the most structured and institutionalised game session there is always the temptation of changing the rules, bending them, even cheat. On the other hand, even the most wild and free play activity will end up instituting some custom, tracing some

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<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with the Chinese fidelity programme “sesame credit”, a private credit scoring application by Alibaba Group

patterns, creating some rules. Seeing ludus and paidia as alternatives to each other, then, would be incorrect.

On the other hand, these two concepts are in no way assimilable to “play” and “game” which aren’t two polarities for the simple fact that games are “played”. Play is a larger (and much older) thing than games, and games are one out of several ways of playing. Certainly, one of the most interesting ones for a number of reasons, but still a sub-set of play.

This point might seem irrelevant, but it is fundamental to explain our understanding of games. As a matter of prestige, games have always been much more readily accepted, both as an element of our cultures and as deserving academic enquiry, than play. After the wave of moral panic that digital games encountered in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>4</sup> both pop culture and academia were more than willing to embrace this new cultural phenomenon – the same cannot be said about play. Play is often surrounded by stigma. Adult-play is scary. Adult toy-play has been accused of being a form of regression and it is generally ignored<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, play is accepted as a part of childhood, but in that case the attempts to control it and to direct it, to use it for teaching or for therapy, become the norm. In other words, play is a silly thing and, with the freedom and weirdness that it entails, it is sometimes considered almost anti-social.

Play is also difficult to define (or impossible, as famously claimed by Wittgenstein) so that game studies – already fighting for establishing themselves as a proper discipline – often preferred to ignore it or to describe it as something different from games. Gamification studies has generally followed that direction.

There have been efforts to bring back playfulness into gamification, but they have often been masked (Werbach and Hunter’s [22] “fun” is obviously a euphemism for play) or gave life to horrific expressions such as “meaningful play” suggesting that play – one of the fundamental drives of all vertebrates – is essentially meaningless if not manipulated to some specific goal. In order to encompass proficiently the idea of play in gamification we will need, first, a sound definition of play.

Defining “play” as a set of things, would be problematic: as Wittgenstein claimed, it is impossible to find a common characteristic to all the activities that we describe as play<sup>6</sup>. We can, however, try to describe a playful behaviour (sometimes also called paratelic attitude [23]). According to Lotman [24] a playful behaviour emerges when a subject activates simultaneously two different interpretative behaviours: a conventional one and a practical one. On the one hand, the players will attribute some conventional (fictional) meaning to the objects involved in play, as a toy being a tiger or a chess piece being a queen; on the other hand, the players will still maintain a practical behaviour,

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<sup>4</sup> Think, for example, about the moral panic of the early 1980’s against Dungeons & Dragons (accused to be a Satanic tool) or about the late 1980’s and early 1990’s outcry against digital game violence desensitizing youth and its correlation with mass-shootings.

<sup>5</sup> Adults can shamelessly buy a Lego set for themselves, as long as they only build them (best if following the instructions) and never play with it.

<sup>6</sup> While the term “games” is used in the translations, I believe “play” would be a more accurate translation: the philosopher uses it to refer to activities such as ring-a-ring-a-rose: a play hardly definable as a game.

i.e. they won't forget the everyday meaning of these objects. Both these behaviours are needed at the same time in order for play to happen: the lack of conventional behaviour will lead the players to engage in the activity in a mechanical way, while the lack of practical behaviour would entail madness, a loss of contact with reality. From this perspective, playfulness is a semiotic disposition, that gives birth to the experiential state common to every form of play, including games.

Playfulness, then, is the experiential condition necessary to games described by Hutari and Hamari [11]. Although the authors opted for calling it "gamefulness", they do not define the latter and prefer to relate it to psychological states such as flow and mastery. The nature of these concepts, however, is similar to that of the game elements discussed above: they are not unique to games nor their presence is enough to determine if something is or is not a game. Thus, we shall redefine both the so called "game elements" and the psychological states related to gamefulness as semiotic and cognitive resources which are not playful per se, but that can be part of play.

If the experiential component – playfulness – is common both to games and to other forms of play, then the specificity of games will lie in their systemic component. Here it is important to avoid another rather common mistake: that of imagining games as being regulated and other forms of play as being free. The conventional behaviour typical of play is never completely random. While in games it takes the shape of a system of abstract rules to be implemented, in other forms of play it will be determined by a thematic system. During toy play, for example, a toy tiger will be able to do what it is expected from a tiger (roar, fight) or a magic animal (talk, fly), but not things that are completely unrelated to its thematic role (the tiger won't probably be able to program in python). Similarly, if during roleplay, one player decides to be Captain America another will probably embody another Avenger, in order to fight together against imaginary enemies. The thematic system, then, will follow the narrative scripts [25] known and interiorised by the players and adhere to their patterns.

These two polarities are different from those of ludus and paidia: they deal with what kind of rules (explicit systemic or implicit thematic) are followed, and not how strictly structured they are. Therefore we can imagine games with an higher degree of paidia (such as Calvinball, the game in the comic strip Calvin & Hobbes, in which rules are made up and changed by the players while playing) or an higher degree of ludus (board games such as Go), as well as thematic play more oriented to paidia (as in some particularly chaotic session of child toy-play) or to ludus (role-play close to improv theatre).

What has all this to do with gamification? This argument is to point out that the focus on rules by game and gamification studies (probably influenced by game theory) risk to be misplaced. If rules might seem "serious" enough for rehabilitating games from their playful nature, focusing on them distracts us from the fundamental freedom that is experienced in games. It would be like studying poetry by focusing mainly on rhyme structures and metrics and ignoring their content. The structural part is certainly important, but it should not distract us completely from what the poem tries to communicate.

Focusing on rules, objective, goals, rewards and strategy had a bad influence on gamification theories, and part of the problematic relationship with power and discipline we described above is due precisely to this focus.

What this paper aims to do, then, is to propose a gamification based on freedom.

One might wonder if what is here proposed would still be “gamification” and not something else. For typology’s sake it would be possible to further articulate gamification in gamification proper, playfication and toyfication [26]. However, here I prefer to maintain the term “gamification” for two reasons: a practical one and a theoretical one.

The practical reason is that “gamification” is a well-established field, and it would be counterproductive to attempt to reform it by moving outside it.

The theoretical reason is that if gamification today is possible and (sometimes) effective, it is because of games. I am referring to the so called ludicisation of culture [13], the fact that the prestige of games is currently unprecedented and that gamers, from being a subculture, are becoming mainstream.

The ludicisation of culture is a trend that can be described as a steady increase of the modelling ability of games. In Lotman’s theory [27], modelling ability is a characteristic of modelling systems (basically every form of language) to influence the rest of the semiosphere. In particular, modelling systems have both a descriptive ability and a prescriptive ability. The increase of the descriptive ability of games makes them a commonly used metalanguage to understand the world: that’s why we describe people as “winners” and “losers”, for example. On the other hand, the increase of prescriptive ability makes us perceive games as a source of inspiration for designing other things. Making things more game-like – something that would have felt like a terrible idea 50 years ago – starts to become an important design trend.

The fact that gamification is rooted in the ludicisation of culture and the latter is due to the increased prestige of games dismiss also every positivistic and essentialist approach to gamification. Gamifications does not work because games are intrinsically better at motivating people thanks to how they are designed, gamification works because it taps on a cultural obsession [28] of ours. We, as a culture, love games and therefore we are more eager to try things that remind us of games.

This obsession is indeed a resource, but one that we should not use to exploit users in a capitalistic way, nor to gain power over them for the “greater good”.

## 5 I wanna be me

Punk gamification is based on two principles: 1) gamification should be more about freedom and less about rules and 2) play is not always as fun and pleasurable as we describe it. The fact that games are as much about freedom than about rules, and that the latter have influenced negatively gamification has been already discussed at length above. So, let’s focus on the ideas that games and play are enjoyable. Deterding and his co-authors claim that “play is the paragon of enjoyable, intrinsically motivated activity, associated with a wide range of positive effects on experience, motivation, social interaction, learning, and wellbeing.” [14, p. 101]. This utopian<sup>7</sup> view of play is rooted in a discourse that sees play as something idyllic but does not have much to do with the reality of playing. Play may be enjoyable, but it can also be greatly frustrating and

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<sup>7</sup> The opposite also exists: a variety of novels and films, for example, propose a dystopian take on play in which people are routinely killed or hurt during violent games.

enraging, it can jeopardise friendships over competitions, provoke “rage quits” or transform people in “sore losers”. Play can also be tedious and boring, and players may endure it in a dull way in order to see what comes next. Play can be extremely serious and tiring, as in a game of chess. Games can make us feel bad with their narratives as anyone who has played *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014) or similar games knows very well.

The utopian take on games having only “positive effects” is unjustified – and that is a good thing. Bad feelings are important, and we certainly don’t want to suppress them. In fact, gamification could be used to propound this sort of playfulness, we could gamify to make things harder or frustrating. User-unfriendliness can be a powerful tool to create a distance between the user and the service, a distance that might be needed to look critically at the activity undertaken [18].

From these two main claims – play should be about freedom and play can be unpleasant – we can outline two main directions for punk gamification.

First, punk gamification should be bottom-up. This includes all forms of gamification that are provided by the users themselves (11, p. 27), who design their own gamification that answers to their own needs. It is the case of practices such as *parkour* or *free running* a playful acrobatic way of moving through the city and reclaim public areas practiced in the suburbs of Paris [29]. Gamification designers in these cases can act as facilitators offering competences to the users while avoiding any interference. Furthermore, gamification made by third-parties can also be punk gamification: as long as the designers won’t assume to know best for their users. Designing punk gamification should mean designing for a space in which the users can find their own answers which won’t necessarily coincide with those imagined by the designers themselves. These spaces are spaces of play, that is, safe spaces of freedom, creativity and experimentation. Different users might have different perceptions of freedom and play, so punk gamification must be designed to be inclusive.

Second, punk gamification should be critical, i.e. instead of reinforcing the status quo it should challenge it [18]. To this end, it is also possible to use the unenjoyable side of playfulness. Play offers a safe frame in which several techniques can be used to reach this objective, as players are generally prepared to face difficulties, high cognitive loads and frustration while playing a game. I suggest that, among these techniques, we can imagine: Designing poetic estrangement [18] in order to augment the distance between the users and the activities to make them less natural (e.g. the pain station by the artistic collective “//////////fur//// art entertainment interfaces”); Abuser-friendly design, which entails the use of objects that are thought to be easily hijacked and re-purposed; Weird and awkward design used against the “media equation” [30] in order to highlight how unhuman machines and social conventions are; Low-fi “gamification povera”, inspired by the artistic movement Arte Povera and its criticism against the art industry and market. Many other possible avenues and framings of punk gamification are of course, possible, this being just a first outline of its potential.

It might seem strange that the premises of this paper – investigating the problematic aspects of the current gamification approaches and situating gamification in the context of play and ludicisation – take most of the space, leaving only few lines to describe what punk gamification is. But, as the name suggests, punk gamification is defined as

much by its features as by what it is up against. Punk gamification exists in opposition to mainstream gamification. It is not meant to delegitimise all the other approaches to gamification, but to criticize their problematic aspects, to propose alternatives and to point out their hidden ideological roots. The purpose of the “critical” side of punk gamification is not only to challenge the status quo of the gamified activities, but also to challenge the status quo of gamification itself.

Presented here are only the first steps in establishing a punk gamification – much work still needs to be done, and I do hope it might become a collective effort – nonetheless describing a form of gamification that is bottom up and free, critical and not-always-pleasant should be able to open up the field of gamification studies to new perspectives. To introduce the idea that gamification doesn’t have to be an instrument of control but can become a tool of resistance.

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