Framing a Critique of Reality Based Games

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Abstract

In the last two decades, a series of games that interweave fiction with reality and often involve real world outcomes have appeared. Encompassing serious games, ubiquitous games, location based-games and gamification, these reality-based experiences seem entirely new. But what I here collectively call reality-based games have a past. Threading though the Surrealists strategies of automatism; the cybernetic utopian visions of Marshall Mcluhan, Buckminster Fuller and Stewart Brand; the social change objectives of the serious games movement; and the engagement strategies of gamification; there is a persistent motivation connecting the history of reality-based games. Specifically, the desire to put play to work. But too often the bodies that develop and promote these experiences work in isolation from each other. As a result, their knowledge and findings lack the self-reflection and critique deserving of the powerful experiences they create. This should not be, as the stakes are high given these game types are often global in scale. This paper connects the ambitions of reality-based games in artistic, progressive and corporate contexts and calls for a productive framework of critique for these game types, one that can be universally applied.

Introduction

Today, games are ubiquitous. This statement encompasses both the popularity of games, as well as their capacity to interweave throughout physical and digital realities. Mobilising ubiquitous technology, these games appear to appear everywhere at once, harmonizing with a player's everyday life and offering the capacity to improve it with feedback. The now common blending of transmedia storytelling, ubiquitous computing, social networks and games purportedly holds the ability to deliver a significant impact on a players understanding of the world, and their place in it. This flourishing of reality-based games is more than a celebration of contemporary games culture: it is testament to the exasperation at traditional ways of achieving things. Today's gamified experiences aim to address problems in the real world at personal and local levels, but also to reinvigorate participation in global issues. Such experiences resonate among those who are at once disenchanted with established methodologies and daunted by the scale of the problems faced. Through serious games, for example, players can re-approach the difficulties of the real world with a playful spirit of inventiveness, allowing for a productive reimagining of

reality by reconceptualising global dilemmas (such as hunger, poverty, financial inequity and environmental degradation) as game challenges to be solved. These ambitions are not new. The provenance of such gamified enterprises - and of the exasperation at existing systems - is located in the techno-utopian forecasts of Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan, who saw the possibility of a networked planet operating as a self-correcting organism capable of solving the significant problems it faced, and the influential 1960's polymaths: Buckminster Fuller and Stewart Brand, who took McLuhan's cybernetic concepts and applied them to games. But the prehistory of reality-based gaming can equally be found in the work of the modernist avant-garde – the Fluxus, Dadaists and Surrealists artists detected in games the possibility of opening up new ways of thinking about reality. Given these histories, is highly appropriate to discuss the application of games to real-world scenarios in a context of art and technology.

Reasoning

This paper considers how an interdisciplinary framework can be developed in order to constructively critique the multitude of games that travel under the name of reality-based games. These experiences include serious games and gamified experiences, but extend to all interactive phenomena created with ambitions to bring about societal improvement at various scales. The drive behind such a framework is the all-too-common appearance of games whose evocation for change is really little more than just a change in perception, a mental shift toward feelings of satisfaction and contentment. These games constitute a deceptive distraction from the very real problems at hand. As writer Heather Chaplin has detected of such experiences: "In a gamified world, corporations don't have to reward us for our business by offering better service or lower prices. Rather, they can just set up a game structure that makes us feel as if we're being rewarded." [1] Of most concern are experiences that operate under the banner of serious games: but that amount to little more than marketing, data collection or participatory pubic relations, sometimes successfully combing all three. Not withstanding the issues of privacy and persuasive influence, the great problem of these experiences is that they drain the often well-intentioned actions of participants. Elsewhere, I have termed these experiences "Exhaustive Games", so called as they

exhaust a players' compulsion to affect change, by exercising it safely within a virtual realm of a game, ensuring that no actual change in the real world occurs. So can, and if so how can games be productively applied to the ambitions of problem solving at a global scale? Here, I call for an open and ongoing discourse that is both transdiciplinary and transhistorical in scope, one that critically considers the opportunities and issues of a broad spectrum of games and play. Games are, and are able to present complex systems, yet thus far, much of the popular discussion of the field has relied on reduction and oversimplification to appeal to a broad audience.

Oversimplification

Accompanying the seismic shift towards games in recent decades is both the valorization of games, but also of the more ambiguous phenomenon of play. Play is easily connected with openness, independence, child-like behavior and abstraction from everyday. As a result, the very mention of play often evokes imaginings of innocence, freedom, and escape. Yet, we need only witness a cat toying fatally with a mouse, a child brutally bullying another, or the concentrated slaughter within a first-person-shooter to recognize that play is not an innately innocuous act. Play is a malleable ontology, a mode of being that heightens, presence, focus and enjoyment, a state of consciousness that can be as comfortably applied to war and torture as it is to music and games. However, as play theorist Thomas Henicks has noted, both scholars and designers tend to focus on play as a constructive, fair and friendly activity and are less inclined to use the term in contexts of destruction, humiliation and torture. [2] The framing of play should be attentive to who is playing, who gets to play, and at whose expense.

Oversimplification and valorization of games and play is at its most reductive when these experiences are regarded in terms of being 'good', without also asking: 'what constitutes good?' and 'who is it good for?' Some observers have detected an inherent optimism and utopianism in the serious games movement, optimism which it not without value in itself, so long as celebratory rhetoric does not loose sight of the critical aspects of games and play. These aspects include, but are not limited to: the privileges of play; the ideologies that games transmit; the transparency of designer motivations; the methodologies of engagement; and the entanglements of technology device production and supply chains.

Ongoing Discussion

In September of 2011, a spirited discussion occurred on the Games for Change listserver that took up some of these issues. The original topic line arose when a member queried how best to market a free online game that would educate youth on career opportunities in nuclear energy. This question provoked another user to reply critiquing nuclear power, stating, "G4C members should seriously question whether to help a game that promotes such an industry." [3] Another forum member

observed that, "the definition of 'doing good' seems to be what is under debate here." [4] The discussion continued for sometime, and remains online at the time of writing. It provides an excellent primer on some of the issues and antagonisms of serious game production and discussion. Reflecting elsewhere on this listserver posting, blogger Jorge Albor considered how to decide whether a 'game for change' promotes positive change, and takes up the inherent slipperiness of the term 'good'. Albor writes: "Games can both educate and indoctrinate. Indeed, we imbue all our cultural constructions with our own personal beliefs and ideologies, both intentionally and unintentionally. As one G4C member astutely pointed out, 'education is a political act.' The difference between persuasion and propaganda is a thin line, particularly when it comes to digital systems that can all too easily hide their intent behind a shroud of 'fun.'" [5] The welcome aspect of this conversation thread was not the answers it provided – there were no clear answers – instead the great value was in the questions it posed. Here I am unavoidably reminded of the ambitions of surrealist automatist games: not to arrive at new answers, but instead at new questions and aesthetics. However, a great many reality-based games appear to be solution rather than problem or question oriented. Games are too often offered as answers to issues. Nowhere has this been more so than in the field of gamification.

Gamification

In 2011, the term gamification pulsed white hot. Seeking to capitalize on the so called 'explosion of games', corporate entrepreneurs and marketing gurus created a confidence bubble around the idea that game mechanics applied to non-game products, could increase productivity, loyalty and revenue streams. This vision of games was completely foreign to games scholars, the broader games industry, as well as its many consumers, who collectively looked on with increasing irritation as corporate consultants who knew little of games and play, invented a gamification jargon to present a flimsy yet bewitching hallucination of games. Within this troubling vision, unsuspecting players would purportedly be rendered helplessly engaged in any activity, product or idea through the application of a thin lacquer of activities presented games. This concept of gamification received much condemnation, most significantly from games scholars Sebastian Deterding and designer and critic Ian Bogost, who wrote a series of articles on the matter, culminating with the article by the later titled: Gamifiction is Bullshit. [6]

The term 'gamification' enjoyed a giddy few months of before the hyperbole shifted onto new buzzwords. While gamification continues as a business concept, for many, it is forever condemned. Popular sentiment towards gamification in the academic community can be summed up by a PhD abstract that appeared in 2015 denouncing it as "a seductive strategy that utilizes play to promote control in the form of ludic protocol. Additionally, it is an ideological and design-based approach to surveillance that eschews disciplinary techniques of control; rather, gamification uses

seduction, in the forms of games and play, to encourage people to perform, track and submit to the data of everyday life." [7] While Lamar Hulsey's words express a now common attitude toward gamificaiton, one that may be well justified, I suggest the time is right to resurrect some of the ideas around gamification, and to potentially undertake what Professor T.V. Reed has tenuously titled 'critical gamification', an effort to "to take the word gamification back from the corporate world." [8] In other words, to re-appropriate the mis-appropriated territory.

Critical Gamification

A significant body of work in along trajectory has already taken place and appears in the collection of essays titled: Rethinking Gamification, edited by Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino, Niklas Schrape. [9] Moving well beyond existing critiques, this book provides a thorough dissection of the terminology around gamification with sustained theoretical attention to some of the keywords that whizzed around all too fast. But of greater value is the books its historical contextualisation. Alexander Fuchs examines the history of gamification, and diffuses the contemporary "explosion of games" by recalling Johan Huizinga's work from 70 years earlier in which the substantial influence of games on business, society and culture is mapped throughout history. Gamification, Fuchs soberly reminds us, names a very small and recent development in a much larger historical process. Likewise, Felix Raczkowski's chapter investigates looks again into the past to consider gamification's economy of points systems finding it legacy in 1960s behaviorism and experimental psychiatry. One of gamifications greatest detractors: Sebastian Deterding admits the term remains a marketing buzzword, and a device of rhetorical persuasion, yet nonetheless opts to retain it, but alter its meanings. To re-hijack the concept of productively applying games to reality. In a media environment in which the discussion of games remains caught between describing them in alarmist and celebratory terms, what this book offers most of all is an insightful, reasoned and wide ranging discussion of reality-based games, a discussion and framework that this paper seeks to promote.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, reports are emerging of a game called *Sesame Credit*. This Chinese app gamifies a players' life by drawing information from their social media accounts, online profile and activities to score their real world credit rating. [10] According to British media outlets, the game engages a strong ideological component that ensures players obedient to the Chinese Communist party line will be rewarded while perceived dissident activities will reduce a players score. [11] Thus far, across the Western press at least, *Sesame Credit* has only been described in alarmist terms, but given claims that by 2020, Chinese participation in such an experience will become compulsory, perhaps appropriately so. Yet,

the very appearance of this game attests to the indefatigability of gamification, and highlights the ongoing need for a broad ranging and interdisciplinary discourse about the critical application of games in real world settings.

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