

# Gamification versus Ludictatorship

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*\*For a Spanish version of this article [click here](#) (not just the same article).*

*\*\*Despite of this article missed the cut for [Rethinking Gamification](#) I'd like to thanks to all the edited book staff for their assistance and corrections.*

## Abstract

Since 2011 gamification has been bound to definitions in attempts from scholars across many different disciplines. Research has revealed that this new word refers to processes that have been with us a long time. The birth of gamification drives us to re-think our relationship to playing games throughout history. A key issue is its perceived newness, which clouds visions for its effective use. With the discussion of gamification throughout history, I intend to show how ethical issues affect the potential for this phenomenon.

## Catchphrase

As gamification acquires a political and ethical character it should finally gain attention in public, social, and participatory spaces.

## Keywords

ethic, ludictatorship, fordism, childhood, industrialisation, digitisation, simulation, simulacrum, serious games

## Gamification Versus Ludictarorship From Industrial De-Gamification to Digital Ludictatorship

### Introduction

In this article I will give a brief review of how games have influenced human communities' day-to-day existence throughout history in order to elucidate how gamification is not actually a new concept. I also introduce a graphic presentation to establish relationships between the seriousness of games and their social and individual/personal development purposes. The graphic reinforces that gamification has been present throughout human history, with the industrial age being a significant exception. In conclusion I incorporate an update of a natural, technological, and forced classification of gamification, which I have previously put forth (Zackariasson and Wilson 2012). This classification drives us to consider an ethical approach to applying gamification in order to avoid falling into what I call the "ludictatorship" phenomenon.

### Examples of Gamification

There are abundant examples of gamification across various sectors, from education to human behaviour, biomedicine, etc. From these examples some stand out, such as the interesting proposals by Volkswagen's Fun Theory, which usually involve manipulating aspects of everyday life with the intention of changing people's behaviour – nudging them to be healthier, more societally aware, and respectful. Another project called m.Paani is active in impoverished areas from developing countries. It attempts to combine loyalty programmes with spending on mobile calls so as to involve telecommunications companies in solving the problem of access to potable water in such areas. One more example is Foldit, an online game about manipulating biomolecular structures, thanks to which advances in HIV research have reportedly been made. The last example is a game called SPENT, a collaboration of Urban Ministries of Durham and McKinney Marketing Agency. In the game one assumes the role

of a low-income wage-earner with a monthly income of 1000 USD who has to resist social exclusion through complex decision-making.

These are only a few examples of gamification, which is a powerful tool that can be used in manifold contexts. Today, for instance, military and video-game industries share information about technological innovations and content (e.g. details on military missions for creating realistic gameplay). In some cases good video-game pilots need comparatively few training sessions in order to pilot real combat drones. In fact, the graphic interfaces of drone cockpits are almost indistinguishable from those of combat-flight simulator games, and this has been evident for quite some time:

“I recently learned something quite interesting about video games. Many young people have developed incredible hand, eye, and brain coordination in playing these games. The Air Force believes these kids will be outstanding pilots should they fly our jets. The computerized radar screen in the cockpit is not unlike the computerized video screen. Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing Space Invaders, and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow’s pilot.”

– Ronald Reagan, 1983 (cited in Halter 2006, 118)

But the military isn’t unique; workplace gamification has many facets and iterations. There are well-known attempts to introduce game elements and even playgrounds into the workplace to make it more pleasant and employment there more desirable. Rigid work schedules, however, often do not permit use of these in-workplace playgrounds, especially when they are most needed. Other applications of gamification in the workplace try to stimulate workers to improve their efforts and results, even though this kind of gamification could prove counterproductive (i.e. it is senselessly implemented instead of trying to solve real workplace problems with more resources or improving workplace intercommunication).

### **Gamification as the Great Promise**

Think for a moment about the different kinds of physical and mental energy that are needed to perform each of the activities visualised in figure 1. Here, I intend to depict how we use both mental and physical energies across the spectrum of human situations. On the top right we have very extreme situations such as warfare, martial arts, or high-performance sports. Other activities like driving heavy vehicles can be found in the middle. These include road construction work, which demands more physical than mental energy. Computer design, artistic painting, playing video games, or chess require great investments of mental and less physical energy. Finally watching TV, listening to music, or sleeping require the least amount of both types of energy.

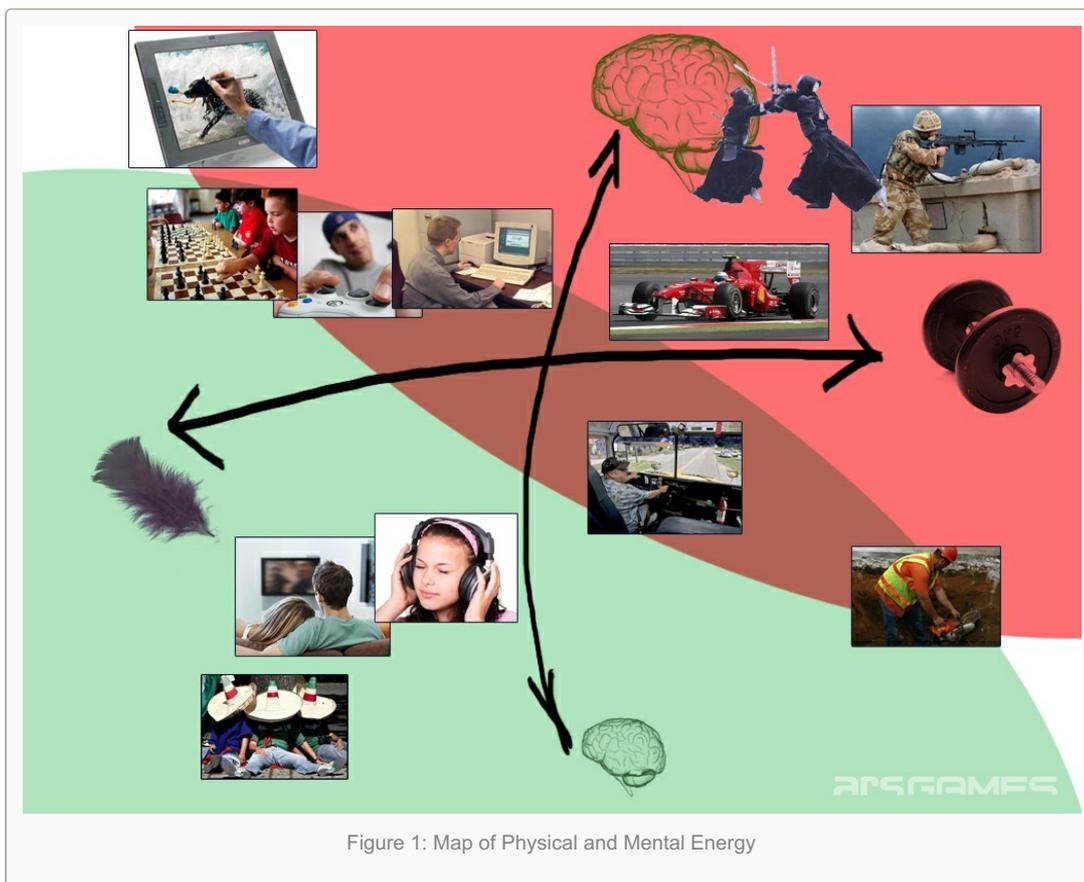
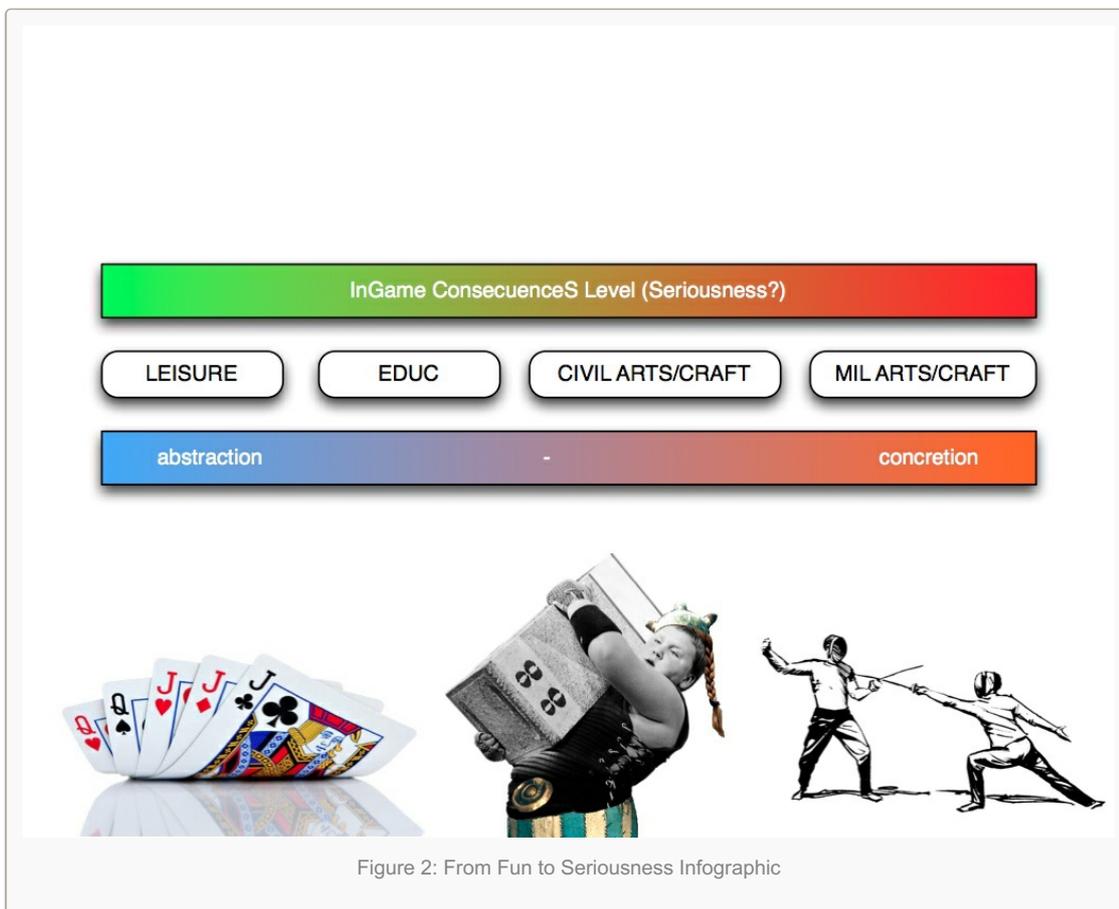


Figure 1: Map of Physical and Mental Energy

What is the relationship between this map of human activities and playing games? I would like to draw a parallel between ludic or leisure activities on one side and work activities of the past on the other.

Competitions exist in the “Basque Olympic Game”s, such as a Harrijasotzaile lifting a heavy stone or an Aizkolari cutting a log in half, that represent activities whose origins may trace back to the Neolithic. Archaeological records show a large number of heavy stones were used in the construction of Neolithic houses and wood for in-house furniture, structures, and roofs. I believe these “concrete” games (Zichermann 2011) are a way of giving a job stimulus to compete and thereby improve task accomplishment within a community, a kind of mental and physical striving for improvement that helped us to survive.

I’d like to point out games have been evolving from these more concrete and utilitarian forms into other more relaxed, abstract forms that are not so directly related to work purposes exclusively. For example, card games spread rapidly throughout Europe during the Renaissance. But the first mention of playing cards in Europe dates back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, presumably introduced by Crusaders returning from the Far East. I postulate that card games began to spread as entertainment became less physical than mental and social, and represent thus a clear example of the penetration of other kinds of game.



In my opinion the seriousness of these games depends largely on how they are used as tools to support community life. Following this line of thought, it is interesting to imagine a scale that ranges from the games played for pleasure or at leisure to those used in education, those in the arts/crafts or in civilian work and finally in the military. On this scale, puzzles or card games can be viewed as the most abstract and are played for pure pleasure, using almost only mental energy; whereas, games like both Basque stone lifting or wood chopping are more concrete, related to social construction, and furthermore require a huge amount of both physical and mental energy. Finally, military simulations are principally exercises of seriousness and physical and mental effort, as they are ludic exercises of life and death.

For all of these reasons, I consider gamification a natural and native process that has been going on since the beginning of human history and, perhaps, prior to culture. It feels like all along we have gamified our relationship with the environment and between each other as well as the construction and destruction of our societies. Thus playing games has always had a pivotal role in education, society, and labour. Owing to those simulations of supporting life situation we gradually become aware of the need to deepen our practical and theoretical knowledge about those everyday life tass through oral or written education. Then we transform our ludic activities into work or craft activities. My theory is that this has occurred innately since the beginning of time until the industrial era.

If we behold as the childhood to be the custodian game foundations, then it is important to take into consideration how *A History of Children's Play and Play Environment* (Frost 2009) analyses significant changes have occurred between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States (massive migration from the countryside to urban areas, the growth of large production factories, institutionalisation and centralisation of education, etc.) and how these factors influenced the culture of children's play. In the section "Victims of a Stolen Childhood" (ibid., 63) we learn about the efforts of reformers to reroute this forcibly urbanised childhood in which young victims of powerful culture shock grew up. Needless to say, the culture of play also suffered greatly as a consequence.

An especially interesting approach can be found in Jon Savage's book *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*:

"Most of the recent arrivals were immigrants: 78 percent of the city's population were the children of parents born

outside the United States [. . .]. The pressures of adaptation from a European past to the city of tomorrow bore down particularly hard to immigrant children [. . .]. Second-generation Americans instinctively itched to break with what [. . .] Jane Addams called “Old World customs” but did not have the parental support to become functioning citizens.” (Savage 2007, 58)

They did not have the help of the Old World social games either, according to Addams, as quoted by Savage:

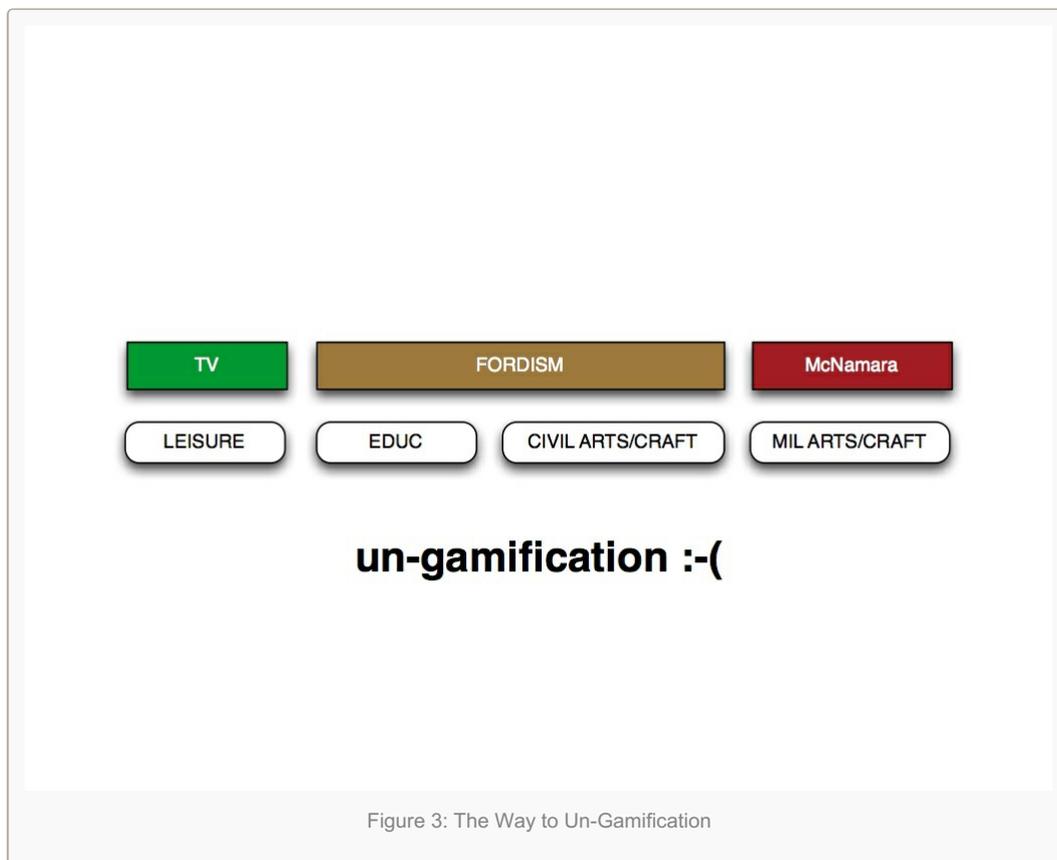
“Industrialism has gathered together multitudes of eager young creatures from all quarters of the earth [. . .]. The sterility and filth of the work environment curdled the spontaneous joy of the young into loneliness [. . .] the perennial youthful desire for excitement was heightened, if not actively over stimulated.” (Ibid.)

On the one hand, factories and assembly lines – contrary to what happened in old European traditional ateliers – prevented the unproductive presence of children within their facilities. That is, from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century children were in factories because they were working (and never playing). On the other, factory work was highly automated in every way. One usually learned a single and very limited task in the line of production consisting of other similarly mechanical and limited tasks. Thus, society moved from the traditional and almost artistic work/craft (where extensive knowledge was needed to create a product) to learning simple mechanical gestures that did not require great expertise. In my opinion, the ludic faded into insignificance with the rise of industrial labour.

Concurrently, educational environments, and specifically schools, also began to look more like factories than recreational and community environments where children and adolescents practiced the “games to learn” (and did so in close proximity to the adults in the community to which the children belonged). In modern schools playing games was removed altogether in order to mechanise and automate learning and reshape future generations of workers and factory workers.

To make matters worse, in the 1930s the most passive and individual form of entertainment became highly popular: TV. Television eliminated social and abstract playing – playing just for fun or being accompanied by other people.

As far as I understand it, in every human activity (from pleasure for pleasure’s sake to the exercise of military acts or the educational and civil works) play was losing ground in favour of mechanised industrialisation and, more specifically, of Fordism. We witnessed an unprecedented de-gamification process that has lasted for about a century.



### Then, the 1970's Came

After the Summer of Love and the psychedelic explosion of new ideas, both in the United States and other developed, westernised countries a number of coincidences began to occur which would transform the role of play and game in society.

(In a pre-1970s era) in 1962 Steve Russell and Martin Grotz developed Space War! in order to check DEC PDP-1 routines at MIT, maybe the first act of digital gamification ever.

In 1970 Clark C. Abt publishes Serious Games, a declaration of intent regarding the usefulness of games in educational contexts and call to transform the classroom so that it does not look like a factory for students (remember that video games did not exist at that time).

Later, in 1972, the first console game called PONG is released. This game hardware parasites television, making it no longer a passive entertainment device but an active (and interactive) one.

In 1973 the United States proclaimed the abolition of conscription and demilitarised much of the American population, changing welfare and warfare status.

In 1974 retired soldiers played board games and "civilised" war games at special clubs for those adjusting to the major change. In this context, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson invented the first role-playing game, Dungeons & Dragons. This is the forerunner and source of a genre that has since given rise to very successful digitised offspring.

In 1977 the first Apple II computer enters the market, the most complex appliance (the personal computer) to date started its unstoppable expansion in all areas of life.

Since the 1970s (especially near the end of the decade) all areas of life (leisure, education, labour and military) have been complemented with digital aspects, each of those forms sharing the computer as a form of mediation, which from its earliest beginnings has inextricably been linked to the (video) game.

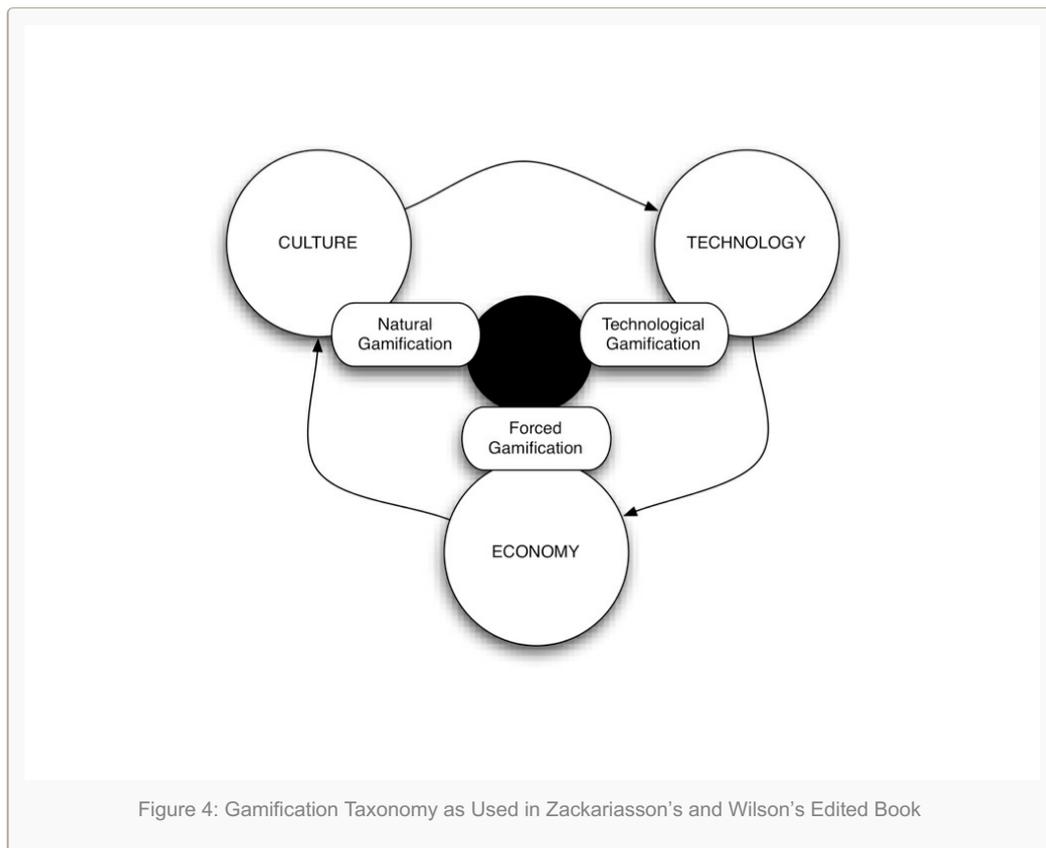
This new digital space creates new opportunities for games according to the different facets of human evolution. In other words this digital space becomes an indissoluble new game space. The expansion of this new re-

gamification is now unstoppable, not as a new phenomenon, but as the unstoppable resurrection of a human characteristic that had been suppressed for about a century in digital form.

I feel very strongly that the idea born in a “new” nation (as the United States is) – with its vast research and development capacities but also with its “Fordist” ability to nearly destroy a phenomenon inherent to the human being (as gamification is) – sees in this rebirth something altogether novel, when, in fact, it was always there: a native or natural gamification now extended by the use of both new (and digital) technologies and marketing.

### Gamification Versus Ludictatorship

When I wrote my article about gamification for Zackariasson’s and Wilson’s [The Video Game Industry. Formation, Present State and Future](#), I considered it useful to create a taxonomy of gamification, dividing it into three types: natural, technological, and forced gamification (Zackariasson and Wilson 2012, 203). These three kinds of gamification mirror the three essential elements of every ludic manifestation: the cultural, technological, and economical aspects of today’s games.



It is now time to attempt to revise the accuracy of the hypotheses advanced on that occasion (almost two years back). Following the arguments above, I propose a new hypothetical definition for playing games: the human capacity for incorporating simulation and simulacrum into our culture – that is, the techniques and strategies that are used by human beings to introduce simulation and simulacrum into the set of knowledge, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of a human community and even to transcend such a community due to limitations in the communicative resources it employs. . According to this definition of playing gamee, what would gamification amount to? I argue that gamification would thus be the extent to which simulation/simulacrum is employed, depending on the activity, within such a community.

In Zackariasson’s and Wilson’s book I summarised three types of gamification closely related to one another (originally not in this order):

1. A natural gamification linked to the capacity inherent in video games for generating culture, not only in an aesthetic sense, but in the form of mental wiring of the youths of this generation, the adults of tomorrow. A gamification that shares semantics with other human activities.
2. A technological gamification – somehow also natural – connected to the video game’s capacity for inspiring new digital technologies (which in turn produce new semantic possibilities in the video game’s own language) that

progressively invade our lives every day in a form similar to that of natural gamification.

3. A forced gamification obsessed with introducing artificial and conscious elements of the video game language, attitudes, and habits of video gamers into business processes and methodologies of production.

However, I would like to update both the implications and relationships of all these three kinds of gamification approaches:

1. With regard to natural gamification – which can only be attributed to the non-artificial, non-human, i.e. the animal –, I prefer to use the phrase “socially accepted gamification” or “gamification with benefits distributed throughout a community”. This is free gamification – regarding the degree of freedom allowed by this world and its prejudices –; the “freedom” of the Basque stone lifter, the “freedom” of the Aztec football player, the “freedom” of the Russian roulette player, the “freedom” of those who play games of seduction in a disco.

Play comes naturally, as it is inscribed in our genetic code as mammals endowed with soul. For example, six out of the 21 most famous IMDB quotes from the TV series *The Wire* (Blown Deadline Productions. 2002–2008) mention the words “game” or “play the game” (IMDb 2014). There are also numerous TV series characters and politicians appearing on TV that mention both of them. Even well-known films like the 1983 *WarGames* (Lasker, Parkes, and Green 1983) mention games as something considerably serious.

In the *Odyssey* (Homer, around 800 BC) Penelope’s suitors come forward to complete the bow challenge they play voluntarily. They do so by assuming and meeting the challenge of participating in a comparative simulation (the comparison being established through the set of rules) of the use of the weapon (the bow) without engaging in combat – which would no longer be ‘just’ a game.

Lesser-known games like *Jogo do Bicho* (“game of animals” in Portuguese) – despite the legal issues surrounding it – has proved to be a powerful tool with great influence on the political and social structure of the huge country of Brazil (Chazkel 2011).

My own view on the matter is that human beings have introduced playfulness in every aspect of their lives, and even in death, at least from the beginning of the history of human culture. Play is even related to human’s reproductive function: We use sexual toys and dildos date back to 23,000 BC, which means “they are older than agriculture” (Morris 2013).

There is a very funny and illustrative example in the Spanish comedy film *Airbag* (Elejalde 1997). It depicts a Russian roulette variation called “the Russian omelette”, which uses poisoned omelettes instead of guns. Examples like the Russian roulette/omelette show us how even in deadly situations we introduce playful elements.

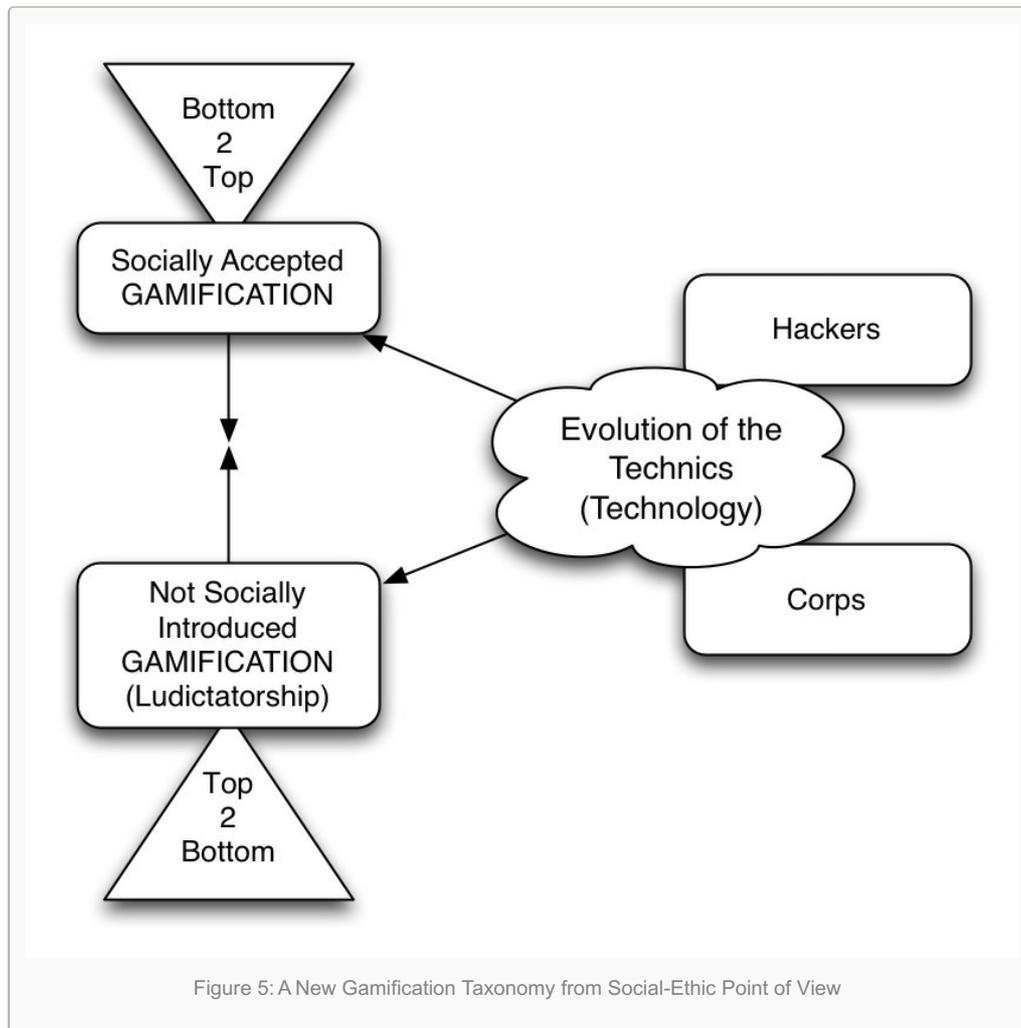
However, I believe even in extreme situations gamification must also be freely accepted and shaped by each of the players. Regardless of the aim or potential benefit of the aforementioned games, in every case all players accept to play: If someone is forced to play a sexual game, then this person is being assaulted; similarly, if forced to play Russian roulette/omelette, they are being tortured.

2. With regard to technological gamification, I prefer to shift the focus to the influence that technical evolution (technology) has had on simulation, simulacra and, finally, on playing games – and, therefore – on gamification.

The history of card games may serve as an example worth analysing: “Cards from even earlier times, which were more varied in form and content, inspired commentaries, fables, romances, satires or burlesque scenes from daily life. In a humble way, playing cards can be seen as conduits of popular culture and taste” (Wintle and Wintle 2014a). For different reasons an upsurge of this ludic technology took place during the Renaissance, precisely when an unprecedented explosion of knowledge took place, which perhaps has not been equalled until our Internet age: “Man’s mind likes to categorise and classify experience... the elements, cardinal points, lunar cycles, virtues, heavenly spheres, temperaments, taxonomies and hierarchies. Many packs of playing cards have been designed as a practical ‘mnemonic’ or device for representing life’s basic facts, a memory aid or teaching tool, a means of condensing knowledge.” (Wintle and Wintle 2014b).

Technologies have altered our perception of the environment, have created simulation situations and have

prompted us to imagine new simulacra, which, in turn, has led us to invent new games and, vice versa; thanks to games we have attained better understanding of new technologies, such as computers.



Thus, I correct my previous classification: There is no technological gamification as such – technology is inherent in and inseparable from any human process, including simulation and play, and whenever play becomes a versatile procedure for learning management, then technology tends to take part in that procedure.

3. Non-socially accepted gamification or ludictatorship. This is the most difficult part of the definition. The construction of processes of socially accepted play (or at least that which is accepted by the participants) will be explained below. Although Callois emphasises that play is an unproductive activity (at least from the perspective of the logic of capitalistic monetisation) that has to be freely assumed, I find interesting those gamification processes where the players' intervention consists not only in the act of participating, but also in modifying the rules in order to adjust the game with the aim of obtaining some kind of common satisfaction.

From a modern (social and analogical) gamification, I feel certain that we advance towards digital gamification. Playing contexts are now mediated by machines in that contemporary machines enables play. However, these digital games, despite their pretence of interactivity – communication in both directions –, actually impose a fixed interaction through the same, unchangeable paths. In most cases the rules of digital video games are rigid, except on rare occasions when access to the code is allowed or game editors are provided.

The new digital platforms for gamification intended for marketing or workforce control suffer from a similar problem of inflexibility inherited from video games, which is not found in social gamification. Such platforms are designed vertically (from top to bottom), preventing players/users/consumers/workers from modifying it and even depriving them of the freedom to choose whether to play or not.

On some occasions these gamification platforms turn into tools for assessing personnel with which decisions will be made on productivity, recruitment, and dismissal. Thus, gamification functions as an instrument for control and

coercion instead of being participative, social, and creative – the opposite of a type of gamification that, at least, would respect the freedom-to-play characteristic of social gamification contexts.

In my opinion there are some differences between natural or native gamification, which has existed since the beginning of humanity, and the current forced gamification/ludictatorship that the markets (and marketing) are trying to impose through centralisation, institutionalisation, and instrumentalisation of recreational tools in workplaces or contexts where products are purchased.

A clear example of this was an unfortunate sign that read “Everything will go well” put up at the Cuatro Caminos intersection in Madrid by Bitoon Games with the aim of – according to members of the company – “introducing dynamic entertainment into arid environments” (Lantigua 2013). Due to the economic situation in Spain combined with the fact that it was hung in a neighbourhood with a large immigrant population, this phrase can be interpreted with cynical irony as opposed to the intended beneficial entertainment initiative.

This is what usually happens when gamification is applied from the top down instead of the way that should perhaps dictate social gaming: from bottom to top, democratically, and involving everyone. Self-satisfaction and self-fulfilment, as Maslo argues (1983), arise from the accumulation and development of certain vital aspects, among which are an attractive, well-paid, and creative job. Imagine if this element of fulfilment were replaced by a mechanical, forced type of gamification from above that tries to generate in the employee (or customer, depending on the case) something we could call artificial happiness. That is, when we use a tool like gamification to induce desired behaviours without discussing the reasons for such behaviour modification, or when we do not allow everybody involved to discuss the rules of the game, then we are inducing these behaviours or changes through ludictatorship.

It is this power play in the design that gamification acquires its political and ethical character. Although to date it has only had great relevance in academia, business, and marketing, it should start to gain attention and credence in public, social, and participatory spaces. The purpose of gamification should be to enhance citizen participation, decision-making in human resources departments, and ultimately to promote the rational distribution of power. The distribution of power should let to every participators (player) to be at the same level in order to create a common rules set (rulebook) for quality life improving (either working, researching, family... life)

### **Last Words**

Perhaps now more than ever Huizinga’s ideas become increasingly meaningful: It seems all along we were not homo sapiens but homo ludens. Note that the game has a role in all facets of our life and the very concept of gameplay is integrated in our existence.

About the definition for gamification coined in 2010, I also want to emphasise that gamification is both an ancient and natural process. The emergence on the world stage of a country like the United States as a hegemonic power during the end of the nineteenth and early the twentieth century was closely related to its industrial development, and more specifically to Fordism. Simultaneously, a process of de-gamification took place in that society, so of course, the concept may seem new, owing to the natural (re)blossoming of gamification (stimulated by digitisation), but it is not.

As every tool or device at our disposal, gamification is not good or bad per se. It can be employed in many different ways: We can try to gamify peace-keeping processes but we can also gamify war; we gamify the benefits of healthy eating but we also try to evade our social and labour responsibilities using gamification that are perhaps closer to the concept of ludictatorship. That is why we must set up an ethic framework for gamification processes.

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