Games vs. Gamification: The Ultimate Showdown

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Micropresentation Full Script

The full script from this talk is included below. Please contact the author (moses.wolfenstein@uwex.edu) if you would like a list of references in this talk and additional works that influenced its development.

When I proposed this talk, I intended to discuss the ongoing issue of conflating the gamification of learning with the design of games for learning, and it is a topic worth addressing. However, as I thought more about games and gamification, the full implications of the title of this talk began to dawn on me. I realized that confusion about terminology is the least of our problems.

...and that an "ultimate showdown" means getting into some much heavier stuff. It also means not pulling any punches, so I'm gonna go big here, and say that while using games for learning is challenging, there are serious problems with the gamification of learning, and even more serious problems with the ways in which the gamification of learning is being marketed.

Let's start there. It's not uncommon to hear about gamification being associated with increasing engagement, making learning more enjoyable, increasing a sense of autonomy, and a whole spate of related outcomes that we often associate with games. But here's the thing, as a designer, I see some serious fundamental problems with that idea.

All of those outcomes, and almost everything else that we have described and documented as positive features of games for learning including most of Jim Gee's 36 principles, are either associated with play activity in relation to games, or with the construction of social spaces around games, or affinity groups as they're commonly known in these parts. There are a few exceptions like amplification of input (which is to say feedback in games), but they are very few.

Before I go any further, I should mention that I'm defining gamification of learning pretty narrowly here based on the most common conversations and examples I've seen in the last few years. I'm not using it to mean just any attempt to bring game principles into the classroom to make it more immersive, and I'm definitely not using it to refer to game design as a learning activity.

When I talk about gamification, I'm talking about the design of a system of rules and rewards, and possibly an interface. In this sense, gamification is about structuring and tracking activity, it's about creating a sense of progress, it's about giving rewards, and at its best it's about giving effective feedback and creating some sense of transparency for the user with regard to activities, goals, and outcomes.

So, when I say that gamification doesn't produce the outcomes for learners that some of its proponents would like you to believe, there's a very simple reason for this. The one thing that the gamification of learning (or really of anything else) is definitely not about, and that good games are fundamentally about is play. From where I sit, play (not to be confused with fun) really is the thing when it comes to learning.

The other thing that gamification has a hard time doing as a design activity is creating that essential sense of affinity, or for that matter a shared set of practices, because frankly, even at its best, gamification is just a shell. When you do a gamified activity, what you actually do is not gamification. Gamification is just the system around what you're doing.

That doesn't mean that people can't identify with one another through a system of gamification. I have friends who have used Progress Quest together, and they shared approaches to dial in the system and leveraged challenges to achieve the sorts of habit formation they wanted. It definitely qualifies as working together to improve a shared set of practices, and I mention it because I'm not actually anti gamification. Still, Progress Quest isn't designed to gamify learning.

So, this next part is where anyone who is really deeply pro-gamification might want to leave the room, because what I'm going to say might be perceived as inflammatory. I'm not the first one to say something in this vein, but I have come to believe that gamification is essentially a system of control. It's just another way to encourage users to do what you want them to do they way you want them to do it.

Now in fairness, all games have rules that limit the choices we can make, so in some sense the idea that games grant any real autonomy in the first place is suspect. Obviously, some games give us a lot more autonomy than others do, but I think it's worth taking a moment to recognize that most of the time games may give us a *sense* of autonomy, but the biggest choices we actually get to make are deciding which games we want to play, or whether or not to play at all.

So, games often only give us a sense of autonomy, but this isn't necessarily that problematic because, among other things, we generally choose to play them in the first place. Even if we're talking about playing a game for learning because it's an assigned activity, the sense of autonomy within the game space is internally bounded within the activity of playing the game.

By contrast, if we layer gamification on top of a required set of learning, or performance, or compliance objectives, and claim that learners are enjoying autonomy, there's something fundamentally disingenuous about it. We may be allowing learners to track activity and progress, but unless the curriculum actually gives them choices in meeting those objectives (which is an instructional and not a gamification design decision), there's no real autonomy.

I've spent a lot of time on the autonomy question, so let me say something about engagement and enjoyment before putting in a final word about play. First, on engagement, I don't believe that either gamification or games inherently enhance engagement. The difference is that when games are engaging the learning is in the game, so if the learner is engaged with the game they're engaged with the learning.

On the other hand, if a learner is engaged with the gamification system wrapped around the learning experience, they're not engaged with the learning itself. They're focused on their progress, or they're focused on their status, or they're focused on getting that next reward, but this mirrors the core issues that happen in bad learning games where mechanics and learning aren't connected, or duplicates and reinforces the worst aspects of grade fetishism.

How about enjoyment? While, gamification may increase enjoyment for some, but the notion of it as a universal palliative for improving inherently dull learning (and never mind the problems that phrase suggests), is definitely flawed. To deconstruct this just a little bit, I'd like to turn to the science fiction author Charlie Strauss and his book *Glass House*

Glass House, published pre-gamification in 2006, is a tale of a post singularity future and some people trapped inside a generations ship where an increasingly sinister entity awards points to the inhabitants for completing a variety of actions. The main character uses the wildly politically incorrect term "score whores" to refer to people who chase points unquestioningly.

In other words, reward systems can create perverse outcomes. Anyway, I don't have much time left, so let me say just a little bit more about games and play. When it comes right down to it, there's very little question that play as an activity is fundamentally tied to learning. I would assert that play can even be essential for adult learning in addition to its well documented role in child development.

To borrow Deterding's terms, the thing about great games is that their ludic elements don't obscure their paideic ones. To be clear, unless you define fun as the neurochemical response to learning the way Raph Koster does, I'm not saying that games can "do" learning better than gamification because they're fun. What I'm saying is that gamification can be about many things, but it isn't intrinsically about play.

You gamify an activity, but you don't play gamified activities. Gamification can enhance a sense of competition or progress, but neither of these things is inherently playful. More than anything else, play requires a space set aside, where the consequences are somehow different from those we face in our day to day. That's something that games can give us that gamification never can.