MBAEx Business Review

Vol.4

INDIA @ 75

JokaWild

MBAEx

CLASS OF 2023

Cover Story
India's economic Journey

Business Conclave
Lattice 22

IS GAMIFICATION BULLSHIT ?

Prof. Nandita Roy

PROF. NANDITA ROY

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR FOR BUSINESS ETHICS AND COMMUNICATION GROUP AT THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT CALCUTTA

Ah well. I didn't say that. These are the words of author and game designer Ian Bogost. What does it mean, though? And does it make sense at all?

To answer that, we might just have to open the hatch of our time-machine and travel to 1938, Leiden - a quaint municipality in the province of South Holland, where Johan Huizinga professed at the local university.

Huizinga published *Homo Ludens* (1938) where he posited that play is integral to our lives. In fact, there was a tiny bit of academic controversy when he took offense at the grammatical correction of his 'play element of culture' to the 'play element in culture'. What he meant was that play precedes culture, and thus, could not be relegated to one of the many elements of human culture. Play may be defined as the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles. That, right there, is the crux of play - a potentially subversive space of freedom where you act not out of necessity or profit, but out of the play impulse…just for the fun of it. Think of how we get immersed in play - drawn into the magic circle of a precious time and space, thieved deftly from the snares of the real world. The politics of play is the politics of the Bakhtinian 'carnivalesque' - a sacrilegious, sticking-out-the-tongue to the rules of reality.

Play is thus carefully controlled by society and culture. How many times have children heard that play-time is over and they need to get back to their books? Play stands as the ludic opposition to all that is productive, all that is work. Interestingly, the word 'ludic' bears the same roots that spread and breathe life into the words 'ludicrous' and 'illusion'...

...Our time-machine beeps in indescribable panic – some work-shaped monstrosities have invaded Leiden and we must leave at once. The thing with time travel is – you can never be sure where you will end up. In its panic stricken tumble, it has brought us to Upton, New York at the Brookhaven National Laboratory.

It was here in 1958 that the first video game was exhibited. Called 'Tennis for Two'. It was created by physicist William Higinbotham to 'liven up' the exhibit and get more people interested in science. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Video games have since become one of the most popular modes of entertainment, education and persuasion. Billions of people enjoy playing video games - on their consoles and computers and mobile phones while many others toil at making them engaging, interesting and fun to play.

I'm beginning to sense a pattern here. At the mention of the word 'toil', the time-machine loses it again. The work-shaped monstrosities are now more horrific – I think I saw one of them and it was grinding and munching the lab away. We must run before the grind gets us...
We traverse through a difficult chronotope to reach 2011 at...an university conference, it seems.

Games are making a lot of money now. And since they draw people into a magic circle, they also make people do things and repeat actions as they keep trying to overcome the 'unnecessary obstacles'. However, there is a lot of profit to be made from this. Your life, and mine, is already 'gamified'. Have we ever stopped to think about why the mobile phone is such an addictive device? Why do we get the urge to check our notifications on the phone? What perverse pleasure do we derive from watching our cab travel on the little map on the screen before it reaches us? In 1938, we were talking about the subversive, magical power of games. Their power lay in the ludicrous, the illusionary and the 'sentiment of as-if' that we inhabit the minute we step out of reality and step into play.

But then… the problem spawns, like many video game villains, when game-like elements are added to capitalise on the persuasive power of play. Often, gamification (another suggested term for gamification at this conference was 'exploitationware') is perhaps a dangerous mutation of play. A mutant, because it chooses to use only some aspects (primarily those of extrinsic motivation like leaderboards and badges) that make play engaging, without paying heed to the others. Is gamification making play work - not just work at, but work for? But then, is this the future of play? Or is there something…

...I should not have used the taboo word. I have read Harry Potter. I should know better. Resigned, I glance from the sole round window of my lonely time machine as scholars run for shelter while the monsters, now bigger and more intimidating, rain down 'for-the-win' shaped flames on them. Soon, I land in a strange city, bathed in a light fantastic. They call these parts the swamps of Joka Management. But what does it have to do with play?

Everything, now that I remember, suddenly, where it all began. Gamification is bullshit - that's where. The purest form of play is that precious corner of the human imagination that subverts all profit. It fills up the empty time of 'doing nothing' and rescues the nihilist, if I am admitted to make such an ambitious statement. The erasure of this quality of play leads to gamification. However, it is worth mentioning that the extrinsic motivations of play that are so frequently used and over-used in gamification do not hold attention for long. The human mind grows weary, and disengages with such content rapidly. Every time you delete an app on your phone, you are actually disengaging from gamification. Is there a way out of this boss battle between play and gamification? There might just be.

Play elements can create better content, better video games and by extension, better products and applications. To concentrate only on gamification would be striking at the very crux of that activity which I shall not name. Instead, what could be done is to go back to the roots of what makes play engaging and fun. What made Mario Kart a legendary game? Why did so many people absolutely fall in love with Halo? Why is *The Last of Us* a modern masterpiece? There is a lot of fun to be had and lessons to be learnt through playing. And the industry that looks at 'gamification' merely as a use-case buzzword needs to do just that. Going back to the subversive, impish nature of play might give us all something that is even more powerful than what we have today. Play has stood the test of time. To do the same, gamification needs to 'level-up'!