

(Re)Defining Gamification: A Process Approach

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Abstract. Gamification is a growing phenomenon of interest to both practitioners and researchers. There remains, however, uncertainty about the contours of the field. Defining gamification as “the process of making activities more game-like” focuses on the crucial space between the components that make up games and the holistic experience of gamefulness. It better fits real-world examples and connects gamification with the literature on persuasive design.

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1 Gamification as a Process

There is a long history of organizations leveraging games, play, and competitions in the workplace, school, and elsewhere. Around 2008, a variety of examples combining game-derived concepts and digital platforms for motivation suggested that a new field was emerging. Practitioners settled on the term “gamification” to describe it [11]. The term has stuck, despite criticisms of both the word and the phenomenon [12]. Over the intervening years, gamification has enjoyed significant growth in both adoption and academic interest.¹ Yet questions remain regarding what is unique and valuable about gamification. Some critics even argue that gamification is inherently exploitative [3].

If gamification is to mature as a field, its boundaries must be better understood. Gamification should be understood as a process. Specifically, it is *the process of making activities more game-like*. Conceiving of gamification as a process creates a better fit between academic and practitioner perspectives. Even more important, it focuses attention on the creation of game-like experiences, pushing against shallow approaches that can easily become manipulative. A final benefit of this approach is that it connects gamification to persuasive design.

Of course, defining gamification in certain ways will not necessarily alter practices. The “correct” understanding of gamification is ultimately what exists in the world. The goals of the exercise here are two-fold. First, in a new and contentious field, designers, users, and commentators sometimes do look to prevailing definitions to understand what is considered mainstream or a best practice. Second, investigating

¹ As of February 27, 2014, Google Scholar returned 6,120 results for the term, “gamification.”

definitions can reveal aspects of gamification that are not obvious from examples themselves.

In the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, this paper takes the view that a gamification definition should be evaluated based on the common usage of terms. Specialized language may enhance precision within discourse communities, but when a phenomenon cuts across many such communities, it can obfuscate more than it clarifies.

In the existing literature, the most widely-used formal definition of gamification is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts,” as proffered by Sebastian Deterding and three co-authors in 2011 [5]. Others, including myself, offered similar definitions around the same time [17]. Because the distinguishing feature of this approach is the emphasis on game design elements, I label it the *elemental* definition.

This definition is valuable in many ways, but the concepts of “game design elements” and “non-game contexts” are both contestable. As Deterding et al concede, there is no universal list of game elements. This inherent uncertainty is problematic. For example, if, according to Koster, narrative is not a game mechanic [9], but it is to other game design theorists, does applying narrative to business processes constitute gamification? In fact, some definitions of game mechanics expressly exclude the points and reward structures that are typical features of gamification.

A related problem concerns the relationship of elements to experiences. Clearly not everything that includes a game element constitutes gamification. Examinations in schools, for example, give out points and are non-game contexts. If virtually every test were an example of gamification, the term would lose all meaning. Worse, by singling out atomic elements, the definition reinforces the notion that they are the most important aspects of games. Critics of gamification have effectively attacked this perspective [12].

By defining gamification as a process, we can talk about activities being more or less game-like, without needing to define a point where the designed system crosses over into gamification. This framing encourages designers to think about how to enhance and deepen the game-like aspects of their designs, rather than thinking their job is done once they drop in points or badges. Moreover, a key aspect of games is that they are voluntary [4][14]. If gamification designers view their task as pushing towards experiences that players engage with voluntarily, it may help to combat the possibility for manipulation or exploitation highlighted by Bogost and others [3].

Moreover, with this approach there is no need to limit the definition of gamification artificially. Deterding et al separate gamification (involving parts of games) from serious games (involving whole games). However, the dividing line is often difficult to see. Systems such as Foldit (for crowdsourced protein folding research) and Duolingo (for language learning) are game-like but not immersive simulations like the typical serious game. With the process approach, these can be seen as gamification examples, without struggling over whether they involve “non-game contexts.”

Similarly, there is no need to insist that games cannot be gamified. Microsoft’s Xbox Live online service, for example, incorporates an additional experience of gameful achievements on top of an existing game environment. It operates exactly