2   WHY GAMIFICATION IS BULLSHIT

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In his tiny treatise *On Bullshit*, the moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005) gives us a useful theory of bullshit. We normally think of bullshit as a synonym—albeit a somewhat vulgar one—for lies or deceit. But Frankfurt argues that bullshit has nothing to do with truth. Rather, bullshit is used to conceal, to impress, or to coerce. Unlike liars, bullshitters have no use for the truth. All that matters to them is hiding their ignorance or bringing about their own benefit.

In a short position statement presented at a small, invitation-only conference on gamification at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, I argued that "gamification is bullshit" (Bogost 2011a). The idea proved popular, and the article was quickly republished and translated online. Apparently tired of hearing the constant refrain of gamification as a salve for all ills, the technology community proved particularly receptive to my neutralizing opinion. As a result, my diatribe's message became confused. Too many have read just that short statement (or perhaps just the title) and walked away with a sense of glee or disfavor after finding that someone might hope to sabotage another rising trend. I intended to provoke, but not through mere cantankerousness: I really did mean what I said on an intellectual as much as a visceral level. In this article, I describe that position more fully and demonstrate its implications.

Let's start by rehearsing the argument without the theatrics. Gamification, I suggested, is primarily a practice of marketers and consultants who seek to construct and then exploit an opportunity for benefit. The opportunity in question is games, which remain a terrifying yet appealing medium for businesses. Terrifying because traditional organizations don't understand games and therefore fear them: for example, why do people spend so much time in such concentrated attention when playing video games, while they are so distracted or easily disengaged from other media? And appealing because there is some possibility that power can be harnessed for corporate benefit.

Bullshit enters the picture in the space in between, where games become a business opportunity for those who might harness the fear to help corporations believe they are benefiting from the power. When understood in the sense Harry Frankfurt helpfully provides, bullshit is a coercive strategy rather than one that has anything to do with the true value or promise of something. In late summer 2011 when the Wharton symposium took place, the trend itself was still relatively new, only having entered the trend repertoire a year or so earlier. Gabe Zichermann organized the first of his gamification "GSummits" in January of that year, and by the time I called

bullshit in August, technology research firm Gartner had added gamification to its "hype cycle" chart, declaring it "on the rise," nearing its peak (Brock-meyer 2011).

By that time, gamification's proponents had been working for eighteen months to transform the idea into a trend, a thing that couldn't be ignored, a question that would come up in a brand manager's meeting with her chief marketing officer or that a vice president might have heard enough times to warrant signing up for a conference with

the leftover, expiring funds on a fiscal year's budget. In this sense, gamification's rise entailed its rhetorical advance more than its application. By promoting it as a trend that the future clients of gamification service providers and consultants couldn't possibly ignore, gamification's proponents were able to focus on ideas and promise. Once sufficiently established, the use, value, and details of the practice became less important. As with most business consulting activities, in the end they never would be.

Consulting as Bullshit

Consultants are excellent bullshitters. That's not because they lie—although they sometimes do that too. No, it's because their primary purpose is to justify and better their own existence. Those of us who have worked as, for, or with consultants will know immediately what I mean. For the more fortunate, pop culture offers an adept introduction.

The Showtime television series *House of Lies* chronicles the lives of a "pod" of business consultants at the fictional firm of Galweather & Stern who are continually challenged to validate their own existence. They do so not by solving the problems of the companies who hire them (in many cases, they create more problems than they solve), but by helping the executives who hired them justify an existing plan, appear clever in the face of a rival, or feel comforted in the wake of a hardship.

In the show's second season opener, the pod takes a call with a potential client for which they have failed to prep. They know a "Mr. Pincus" is on the phone but don't have enough time to figure out what company or even what industry he represents. The

group throws out a series of filler nonsense meant partly to hook him, but mostly to stall until they can use clues in his responses to home in on a match. They identify the client definitively only after he arrives for a face-to-face meeting, when the pod tricks him into revealing the industry he represents— "We are going to build a better goddamn casino!" he finally proclaims.

A generous characterization of the consultant's life might reason that Pincus's industry doesn't really matter because any solutions Galweather & Stern will provide are so general as to apply to all businesses. Such is the argument a gamification consultant or service provider would likely make, after all. The more suspicious might wonder if a solution meant to apply to everyone would ever really be of use to anyone in particular.

This is the logic bullshit characterizes, that of the swindler or huckster who seeks his own advantage at all costs. A consultant isn't a petty criminal, of course, things are more complicated than that. While street grifters are always out to swindle, consultants

certainly don't mind if their efforts benefit a client. It's just not their primary concern. Or their secondary one. Really, it's not a concern at all, except insofar as some examples of success are necessary so as not to bring the whole house of cards tumbling down. The consultant makes appeals to the client's feelings of inadequacy, confusion, or weakness, then fills that imagined chasm with a pre-prepared or stock solution that can be tuned to oscillate on just the right wavelength to mesmerize the customer into submission. And given that the consultancy client's primary goal is to appear competent, supported, and powerful in the context of a business, the outcome of a consulting arrangement may not be of primary concern to the client either. Such is the strange dance of business consulting. Philosopher turned consultant turned management debunker Matthew Stewart explains it this way, discussing a shape of chart called "the Whale" he would often use with his consulting clients:

> By the time I had produced the fifth or sixth version of the Whale, I realized that I could do the same for just about any business anywhere. It made no difference whether the business was inherently good or bad, well-managed or in the hands of chimpanzees. It didn't even have to be a business—it could be a football game or a population chart. In fact, I didn't even have to do the analysis. I could save 80 percent of the effort by just borrowing data from some previous analysis. There was always going to be a skew [the whale shape]. In most cases most of the time, the skew chart merely records a curious fact of economic life. It isn't science; it's a party trick. (Stewart 2009, 61–62)

Gamification plays a similar kind of party trick, but it does so with ideas instead of numbers, at least to start. There are two moves this trick entails, both of which are represented in the admittedly brilliant term *gamification*. The first is the "game," of course, that strange, dark medium that captures attention in entertainment contexts yet somehow withholds it from business ones. If only we could capture the magic and power of games and apply them to other contexts, imagine what we could achieve! Games are appealing yet terrifying to businesses because they seem like magic attention machines, inspiring players to devote tens or hundreds of hours to them. Yet, the cost, complexity, and unfamiliarity of games makes them seem risky, expensive, and confusing. By putting games up front, gamification perks up the ears of its potential customers, offering a pique that stands out in a noisy environment of possible business solutions.

The second move tames games, making them safe and predictable: the "-ification" suffix. As I've previously argued, "-ifying" things "makes applying that medium to any given purpose seem facile and automatic" (Bogost 2011c). To beautify or falsify, for example, assumes that simple processes or devices can be put to use to render the ugly attractive or the counterfeit authentic: "-ification" assures the customer that the process is easy and achievable. At the same time, it allows the gamification provider to take a page from Matthew Stewart's consultancy handbook, recycling similar solutions for any situation.

When combined, gamification's sleight of hand is hard to see as illusion, just like Stewart's Whale graph appears customized for a particular circumstance despite really having been copied from the past gig. Gamifying a business process or customer experience says far less about that process, business, customer, or experience than it does about the way two concepts, "game" and "-ification," produce rhetorical force.

In the traditional version of gamification, the process involves the adoption of simple, repeatable, scalable feedback systems such as points, levels, badges, and other rewards. Game designers and critics might lament seeing this particular selection of features assigned to the category of "key game mechanics" (Zichermann 2011), but in their effrontery they fail to notice that the gamifier's idea of centrality is different from the designer's. Game designers naively interpret "key mechanics" to refer to elements of a game central to the design aesthetics of the medium or to the player's experience. But in the context of "-ifying" games, of performing the consultant's maneuver, being "key" just means being "-ifiable." That is to say, for the gamification advocate, the nature of games is whatever is most easily abstracted, packaged, and sold as business services or software, most easily fashioned into a "solution." Just like Stewart's Whale chart.

Gamification Is the Goal of Gamification

One reason designers, consultants, and businesspeople are confused about gamification is because the term's utility and increasing popularity has helped it expand into areas beyond the usual scope of points, leaderboards, and badges. Where previously someone might have discussed a non-entertainment game by means of its context—an educational game or a training game, for example—now the generic term *gamification* is sometimes used instead. For example, I once saw someone use the word *gamification* to describe the weird and delightful game Vim Adventures, which uses a Legend of Zelda–style adventure motif to help players learn the intricate keyboard shortcuts in the Vim text editor. When used in the "loose and popular" sense, this title counts as gamification because it takes a non-gaming task, namely learning a text editor, and turns that task into a game.

Policing language is a fool's errand, and I'm not interested in suggesting that this usage is "wrong." Rather, it helps illustrate the reasons why it's been hard for some to grasp the complexity of the "gamification is bullshit" thesis. A game like Vim Adventures seems like an interesting and creative way to help someone practice a rote task like learning keyboard shortcuts in a computer program. But such a use of games isn't really gamification at all, it's just a game, one of many possible games that could be created for many possible situations—in this case, for drilling oneself on the operation of a new and confusing piece of software (cf. Bogost 2011b, 141). The fact that it is a one-off experience that had to be designed and developed from scratch helps separate it from the generalized "solutions" offered by gamification consultants.

Gamification is not really a style of game design or a manner of putting games to use. Rather, it's a style of *consulting* that happens to take up games as its solution. Despite appearances, this adoption is not very interested in the possibilities and potential of games as such, no more than the Galweather & Stearn pod is interested in or committed to any of the solutions they provide. They just want the simplest, fastest route to getting customer sign-off and billing for services. The management consulting business relies on a prescribed course of action in order to produce a predictable recommendation given any set

of business data. It is a process of telling a familiar story—often one that's been chosen in advance—and molding that story to fit the individual circumstances provided.

To someone who might have been casually introduced to Vim Adventures as an example of gamification, the idea that it might be "bullshit" would seem surprising and unlikely. His or her ear would hear "bullshit" in the sense of "nonsense," and it's hard to square such an unlikely, wacky, creative application of games with mere drivel. But this is not what games or bullshit mean in the context of gamification. Bullshit is not mere nonsense, but a name for the process of persuading an audience irrespective of the truth value of the propositions presented. Stewart and his colleagues don't really care if the Whale chart represents the business situation they now propose to solve; rather, they merely hope that it can present a problem convincing enough to demand solution. The bullshit is not found in the product or even the outcome, but in the process of presenting that product or outcome as exactly what it needs to be in order to benefit the agent doing the presenting.

Thus, when a gamification advocate like Gabe Zichermann (2013) speaks about the "hard truths" of the practice in support of its virtues, it doesn't really matter whether individual companies have or have not "succeeded" in their business applications; that is, whether or not the gamification solution in question has "worked." All that matters is that gamification has been *pursued* as a strategy meant to solve a problem, perhaps a problem proposed by the very notion of a gamification solution.

For example, Zichermann cites a bizarrely fractal example of gamification's success: Deloitte Leadership Academy (DLA).[1] By adding badges and leader-boards to the consulting organization's internal training program, which has been in operation since 2008, Deloitte reports having increased weekly return users by 37 percent (Meister 2013). The perversity of a business consultancy deploying gamification on itself notwithstanding, the rationale behind the solution itself already assumes its answer: the fundamentals of DLA are sound, employees just need to be inspired (or coerced) into using it more frequently. Like salespeople (another common gamification target), consultants are intensely competitive, and it's not hard to imagine that a leaderboard set to reset weekly might scratch a compulsion. But it's also possible that *any* sort of novel addition to DLA would have renewed user interest. Leaderboards and badges offered a simple, cheap means to that end, just like Stewart's Whale chart can find a home in any business scenario. A gamification solution simply ends-around any failings in the underlying DLA program; the idea that employees might not wish to pursue a training program because of some defects in the program itself need not be considered. The result might accurately be called "greater engagement," but what good is more engagement with a fundamentally flawed product? For the Deloitte executives who must have invested time, money, and political capital in creating the DLA program, such engagement might be quite valuable indeed. In such a case, gamification offers a simple way to cover over more complex problems, for a time anyway.

The success or failure of the gamification initiative is not of concern to the gamification consultant, if success or failure refers to the accomplishment of fundamental goals. Rather, the goal is to establish a solution that can be applied in many contexts, both increasing the possible customer base for services and increasing the demand for such activities by

forming them into a trend executives cannot ignore if they want to appear up-to-date. The end result of gamification solutions is to justify gamification solutions. And as a business strategy for gamification providers and corporate executives seeking bulletable solutions for PowerPoint presentations, it's a fine one bound to produce results. Just like management consulting.

Gamification Is the Pursuit of More Gamification

In some cases, the consultant's sleight of hand isn't even required: it's easier just to adopt outside work as a credible enough example of gamification techniques. Gamification advocates have proved both adept and willing to embrace the term's increasing ambiguity to their advantage. Even if gamification products and services amount to the simplest possible, iterable, scalable one-size-fits-all solutions, the fact that gamification has increasingly overtaken earlier terms like *serious games* in the (frightfully short-term) public imagination has allowed its advocates to frame more bespoke games as a part of their projects.

Gabe Zichermann's Gamification.co consulting and events organization maintains a news section discussing gamification projects. The group is good at marketing, and they have built an audience eager to see the latest news and examples in the area. While one might be inclined to construe this website as a community advocacy resource, it also serves a strategic purpose for the broader Gamification.co project. By featuring work by others that either resists or deliberately opposes itself to gamification, Gamification.co can nevertheless abscond with some of the value in those projects for its own ends.

In late 2012, I was startled to find one of my own games featured in Gamification.co news. In 2009, my studio Persuasive Games, in collaboration with Traffic Games UK, created Killer Flu, a web-based game about the mutation and spread of seasonal and pandemic flu strains. That was the year of the H1N1 "bird flu" epidemic, and anxiety was almost as high as ignorance about the disease. Our game, which was commissioned by the UK Clinical Virology Network (the British equivalent of the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC), was created to explain the way seasonal flu strains mutate each season and to demonstrate the relative difficulty with which so-called pandemic flus develop and spread over large areas.

Everything about the game is fundamentally different from gamification's usual fare: it was conceived and created for a specific purpose; it was designed and developed from the ground up; it mustered specific subject knowledge rather than general purpose incentives into its design; and it was intended as a tool for public communication and education rather than as a hook for online engagement. In his short discussion of the game for Gamification.co, Ivan Kuo doesn't claim otherwise: "The UK Clinical Virology Network has released the Killer Flu Game as a way of explaining how viral infection works and how it's actually rather difficult to infect everyone in a given area despite mutating strains" (Kuo 2013a). Other non-gamification games have also made the "gamification news," including SimCity EDU, a special edition of the classic city building game for use in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classroom education (Kuo 2013b).

Even though the typical points-and-badges client would likely never pursue such projects, by covering such games Gamification.co can associate itself with works of greater complexity and ambition while also benefiting from providing timely information about the uses of games: Kuo likely linked to my four-year-old game about the flu because a particularly virulent seasonal flu season had increased media coverage of anything related to the illness. Once the attention of those readers is captured, it can be motivated toward other Gamification.co projects. During 2013 and 2014, all the Gamification.co news pages end with a prominent logo, description, and link to that year's GSummit, the main gamification conference put on by Zichermann and crew. In 2013, registration fees ranged from $895 to $2,095, and registrants could preorder Zichermann's then-latest book, *Gamification Revolution*, along with their registration. In 2014, the prices rose to $995 to $2,195. The highest fee also covered Gabe Zichermann's Advanced Gamification Certification Workshop.

Zichermann might argue that the interests of gamifiers have broadened, that gamification is ready to expand from simple points and badges to more sophisticated, "traditional" games. After all, they even managed to get game designer Will Wright (SimCity, The Sims) to keynote the GSummit 2013, and celebrity astrophysicist and education advocate Neil deGrasse Tyson to keynote the 2014 event. The summit's website uses terms such as "engaging design" to suggest this expansion, while perhaps also helping the organization distance itself from—or at least set up a potential hedge around—gamification in the abstract, highly iterable sense.

But a quick view of Gamification.co's "getting started" guide reveals just how much Zichermann and his many intertwined organizations have to gain

from colonizing as many related works as possible and claiming them for gamification's empire.[2] Of the seven steps in the gamification getting started guide, five of them involve consuming products from Zichermann and his companies: watching a video of Zichermann speaking (step 1); buying his books (step 4); paying to attend his conference (step 5); paying to attend more workshops at that conference (step 6); and paying to earn his gamification certificate (step 7). Naturally, should you require further or more detailed assistance, Zichermann also provides gamification consulting via his "gamification agency" Dopamine, whose website (http://dopa.mn) used to feature an enormous photo of Zichermann's head on a gray background, one eyebrow petulantly raised.

The core of gamification's bullshit is not abuse or falsehood, but activity "unconstrained by a concern with truth" (Frankfurt 2005, 38). It's easy to get wrapped up in the word *truth* here—for Zichermann and his cronies, pointing to a few examples of businesses who may have benefited from their approaches seems like enough to issue an effective wet cleanup on my critique. One response might argue that such successes are really tautological: like the Deloitte Learning Academy, they are successful only when framed in the terms already given for their adoption. Part (perhaps most) of the purpose of a "gamification strategy" is to satisfy a company or a division's desire to be able to claim that it has a gamification strategy. Corporations have to keep up with the Joneses too.

But Frankfurt provides us with tools for a more effective response. It's not just that bullshit is unconcerned with truth, but that it is "not germane to the enterprise of describing reality" (Frankfurt 2005, 30). Sometimes this divorce is undertaken mindlessly, its ideas concocted from nothing. But other times, the practice of describing or influencing reality is

secondary or even irrelevant. Gamification lives in the latter neighborhood. For the gamification industry, projects and their results are essentially immaterial. The main goal of the movement has nothing to do with business problems such as engagement and loyalty, but merely with the establishment and continuance of the practice itself. The real reality of gamification is just not relevant for its consultants and service providers. All that matters is making those services a required feature of an organizational strategy, such that consultants can sell the latest insights surrounding them.

In this respect, one must admit that gamifiers are not alone: innumerable trends in technology, business, and culture have no particular concern for their attachments. For example, the free software movement's values have recently been transmuted into the more abstract logic of "open source" by for-profit companies (Morozov 2013), a practice some have called "openwashing" (Finley 2011). Organizations such as Google celebrate "openness" as a value, yet they ensure that the products and services they produce return relatively little into the public sphere while still using their appearance of openness as a marketing and publicity vehicle. Of course, just because gamification is not alone in producing a rhetorical veneer atop a particleboard philosophy does not mean one should celebrate such bullshittery as acceptable because it is widespread.

Gamification without Games

I've previously suggested the term *exploitationware* (Bogost 2011c) as an alternative for *gamification* because such a term more adequately characterizes its proponents' goals. It's a term that strips "games" from the situation entirely and focuses instead on the consultant's gambit and his or her enterprise customer's desire to extract value in the form of meaningless engagement. Even its proponents have begun discussing the practice as a combination of "game design, loyalty, and behavioral economics," partly admitting that gamification has little in common with game design and development.[3] While we cannot police the adoption of one field in the service of another, we still ought not overlook the contortion of such disciplines. The best game design practices create playful experiences meant to produce gratification. The best loyalty programs offer a two-way conversation between a company or organization and its customers. The best behavioral economic techniques study and establish economic models for rationality. In gamification, all of these inspirations become contorted techniques for producing compliance. Given the brazenness of gamification's proponents, I suppose I should have expected that a derogatory alternative like *exploitationware* could be so easily re-incorporated into the gamification machinery. Like the best sociopaths, gamifiers are not even capable of being ashamed of their activities.

For now, gamification's groupies have not fully acknowledged that their strategies amount to a distorted version of behavioral economics, one dressed up as gaming in order to appear cooler and more appealing to potential sector customers. Until then, we can look for cracks in the fundamental idea that gamification draws its lessons from game design

Table 2.1

Major characteristics of games, according to a 2012 Bunchball white paper

Performance	Real-time feedback	Transparency	Goal setting
Achievement	Badges	Leveling up	On-boarding and mastery
Social interaction	Competition	Teams	

practices in the first place, rather than from more general and ordinary practices common to business operations for decades.

In 2012, Bunchball issued a white paper titled "Enterprise Gamification: The Gen Y Factor." It's a useful candidate for analysis for a few reasons. For one part, Bunchball was founded in 2005 as a social gaming company and transitioned into gamification services in 2010, at the very start of the trend's rise. For another part, the company has maintained a more modest public persona than Zichermann's various organizations, offering a contrast to the trend's typical hucksterism. Bunchball founder Rajat Paharia offers a tempered and deliberate approach to publicity and sales, not the least of which is resisting the temptation to plaster his name and likeness all over his company's website and marketing materials. And for another part, Bunchball's white paper is currently offered as one of the seven "getting started" steps in Gamification.co's online guide, so the company and its ideas offer a different resource that is nevertheless considered a part of the gamification "canon."

In the white paper, Bunchball (2012, 2) rehearses a familiar argument about Generation Y (otherwise known as the Millennial Generation): they are "digital natives"; they "live and breathe online," they have been playing video games from childhood, and that "a game-like metaphor applies to almost every aspect of their lives." Bunchball singles out three characteristics of games that are particularly gratifying to Gen Y employees: performance, achievement, and social interaction. Within each of these categories, the company identifies a few purported features of games that realize such gratification (table 2.1).

Whether or not these particular features of games or work really motivate Gen Y employees is irrelevant for our discussion. As we've already seen, gamification need not concern itself with truth in order to advance its project. So, rather than asking if activities like real-time feedback, transparency, and leveling up really motivate young workers, let's instead ask: do properties like these have any special relationship with games?

Among the performance-related features of games Bunchball highlights, one is real-time feedback, which the company defines as follows: "In a game, anytime you take an action, you receive instant feedback. Positive feedback reinforces good behavior, strategy and tactics, while negative feedback enables you to learn quickly and adjust" (Bunchball 2012, 3).

Do games really offer instant feedback for actions? It depends on what sort of feedback we have in mind. Certainly, many games offer visual and auditory responses thanks to the fact that they are real-time multimedia artifacts. For example, moving a block in Tetris or directing a unit in Warcraft creates feedback in the form of changes to the display and

alterations in the sounds that emanate from the computer. But nothing about this virtue seems limited to games.

After all, as I write this sentence in Microsoft Word, every tap on my keyboard produces an audible click, signaling to me that the key was depressed successfully. On screen, a character corresponding to the key I pressed appears in the document. The same is true of other standard office software that long predate the Millennial Generation, tools like spreadsheets, calendars, e-mail clients, and databases. Should such actions be considered "positive" and "negative" feedback, akin to that of games? I suppose that when I inadvertently depress an incorrect key, I immediately see the wrong character appear in the body of my text, allowing me to identify and correct it by means of the backspace key. Is this the sort of feedback Bunchball has in mind? Perhaps a more sophisticated sort is necessary. How about this then: as I typed the present sentence, I thought I had typed "present" correctly, but in fact my fingers had become bound up with one another, resulting in the erroneous nonword "presnt" instead. Word dutifully underscored the error in its characteristic red squiggle, alerting me to the misspelling, which I was able to correct. Is this the sort of feedback Bunchball has in mind? If not, a more complete description would be required. But if so, then wouldn't "word-processorification" be a sufficient explanation of the purported "game characteristic" in question?

Perhaps I'm being ungenerous, and Bunchball really means to suggest that games provide more synthesized representations of player choices and their possible outcomes. For example, Tetris displays a shadow on the tiles at screen bottom, showing the player where the current piece will fall when it is placed and thereby helping him or her visualize an outcome. But such feedback can be found outside of games as much as within them. In fact, one of the common examples of real-time feedback among gamification proponents is the Toyota Prius dashboard statistics system, which displays both quantitative and qualitative information about the driver's style and how it might affect overall fuel economy. Says one critic, "Whenever I start my Toyota Prius, . . . my eyes go straight to the car's average miles per gallon since last fill-up. Driving has become a game" (Pegoraro 2012).

It sure sounds good. But, is it really reasonable to conclude that driving has become a game because one can attempt to optimize fuel economy given calculated feedback? Why choose games over the design of automotive computer data displays as the design inspiration? The Toyota Prius and Nissan Leaf are common examples thanks to their eco-trendiness, but gasoline-only cars have allowed drivers to view average fuel economy information in-dash for years. As such, why not highlight Gen Y's need for "dashification" or some such instead? There's even a history of such efforts, the "business dashboard" trend of the 1980s and 1990s, much of which would seem to prefigure gamification's focus on real-time feedback as a key feature. Bunchball doesn't consider such questions, presumably because it's already decided that games are the answer before posing them.

Nevertheless, let's consider how the company suggests incorporating real-time feedback in the workplace. Given the real-time feedback mechanism that is purportedly a characteristic of games, Bunchball recommends the following lesson: "The current state of painful once-a-year performance reviews isn't going to cut it. Businesses need systems and processes that enable fast and meaningful feedback, accelerating employees' growth and learning." I'm

no expert in management theory, but would any reasonable organization really consider annual performance reviews to be a sufficient feedback mechanism for employees of any age? Isn't the marketplace littered with management and leadership texts encouraging different methods of developing employees and businesses through more frequent and more data-driven methods?

As for Bunchball's suggestion of "systems and processes that enable fast and meaningful feedback," this too is hardly a new challenge facing Gen Y workers and their supervisors. The need to evaluate company, division, or employee performance on a more frequent basis using better data almost seems like an obvious point in today's information economy. In fact, one can trace it back to the 1950s, when IBM researcher Hans Peter Luhn first proposed the concept of "business intelligence" as a way to automate statistical procedures to produce data that, when communicated effectively via "input-output equipment," might be "assembled to accommodate all information problems of an organization" (Luhn 1958, 314). Apart from his old-fashioned diction and prolix delivery, Luhn's summary of the problem in 1958 could easily have made the cut as one of Zichermann's introductory documents for getting started with gamification.

In fact, Luhn's original paper on business intelligence already contains most of the lessons suggested by another of the "game characteristics" Bunchball identifies in its white paper: transparency. "Games," the company suggests, "are statistical nirvana—players can always see exactly where they stand and where everyone else stands. Progress can be tracked and communicated in real-time; both in the moment and over longer time periods" (Bunchball 2012, 3). Businesses, Bunchball concludes, "need the ability to

capture [performance] data and make it available to employees in an easily digestible format." This sentiment bears striking similarity to Luhn's motivations for establishing a business intelligence system in the context of IBM and its corporate customers:

> The growth of organizations and increased specialization and divisionalization have created new barriers to the flow of information. There is also a growing need for more prompt decisions at levels of responsibility far below those customary in the past. Undoubtedly the most formidable communications problem is the sheer bulk of information that has to be dealt with. In view of the present growth trends, automation appears to offer the most efficient methods for retrieval and dissemination of this information. (Luhn 1958, 314)

Luhn wrote these words at the start of the industrialization of computing, in the year Intel founder Robert Noyce codesigned the semiconductor. Clearly, Luhn didn't have access to the kind of powerful and widely available inter-networked personal computers we now enjoy. But he was also writing for the Greatest Generation and Silent Generation workers who would later become Gen Y's grandparents—if not their great-grandparents. As for Luhn himself, progenitor of these ideas so similar to the latest trend, he was born in 1896.

The field of business intelligence grew substantially with the expansion of both industrialism and computing in the mid-twentieth century. The availability of client-server terminals in the 1970s and then networked business computers in the 1980s bolstered the growth of data warehousing, data mining, executive information systems (EISs), decision support systems (DSSs), online analytical processing (OLAP), and countless other boring-sounding business back-office practices.

Given the long tradition of business intelligence in the enterprise, why might gamification proponents not connect their efforts to such historical examples in order to make their products and services more palatable and appealing? Partly because nobody wants to talk about OLAP and data mining, partly because selling IT solutions is far more complex than selling marketing, sales, and human resources solutions, and perhaps even partly because the gamification community just doesn't know about that part of industrial history. But most of all: The uncertainty and opportunity presented by a flood of young (and therefore inexpensive) millennials coming of age and looking for work combined with the weird and incomprehensible appeal of games among that population (particularly in the minds of older managers and executives) makes a game-based solution seem both sexier and more relevant to today's business goals. Among those goals: corporate middle and upper managers who have to make themselves and their divisions appear creative and winsome while also keeping up with competitors by ticking the latest trend boxes without giving in to the ennui of meaningless corporatism. No executive wants to attend a conference on "new approaches to business intelligence through smart dashboards." By comparison, a conference on gamification sounds like a trip to Disneyland.

Bullshit Carefully Wrought

Game designers and developers have resisted gamification largely because they perceive it to mistake incidental properties of their medium—points and leaderboards and the like—for the more complex and fundamental activity of designing and playing real-time simulations of complex systems. But such an objection assumes that gamification proponents have any concern whatsoever for the state of games as an art, craft, or business. Overall, gamification's relationship to games isn't just one of exploitation, but also one of total and complete indifference and unconcern. For gamification, games are not a medium capable of producing sophisticated experiences in the service of diverse functions and goals, but merely a convenient rhetorical hook into a state of anxiety in contemporary business.

In that respect, gamification represents an opportunity in the way that any business consulting trend is an opportunity: a way to sell products and services that organizations probably don't need, but which might make them feel better about some part of their operations, present the appearance of innovation and progress to their shareholders, and perhaps occasionally even create actual improvements. As Matthew Stewart (2009, 67) puts it, "Consultants, like their pagan forebears, understand that it is important for their task to envelop their work with an aura of sacred mystery. … Princes and popes always dress up for the job; so should we." But just as wearing a dark suit and cuff links doesn't make yesterday's consultant more the sage even as it improves his style, so hawking "game features" doesn't make today's consultant any wiser even as it improves his or her cool.

The bullshitter need not lie to talk bullshit; instead, it's sufficient to act in accordance with a desired outcome without any concern for its validity or even its connection to actual factors in the material

world—such as the tenuous relationship between gamification and games, or the similarities between gamification's purported novelty and age-old techniques in business intelligence. But most of all, the bullshitter must not be ashamed. And that unshakeable righteousness is gamification's most effective and most terrifying property. Bullshit may seem like a thing done without thinking, nonsense spouted when caught in a lie or backed into a corner. Some bullshit is like that, to be sure. But other bullshit is "carefully wrought," to use Harry Frankfurt's colorful phrase, fashioned with such rigor and detail over so long a period as to strike us as something credible (Franfurt 2005, 22). But as Frankfurt points out, advertising, public relations, and politics are in fact committed to bullshit in just this way.

The bullshitter, we must remember, is never earnest on the surface. Bullshit always hopes to get away with something (Frankfurt 2005, 23). Gamification proponents don't need to lie about what games are, what uses they might be good for, or how they might be best used in the contexts of business or organizational practice, because the answers to such questions are irrelevant to their projects. Rather, it is sufficient and even more desirable for gamifiers to "bullshit their way through," to establish an entire regime and industry around them and their wares rather than to determine how to accomplish either the goals of businesses or to exploit the capacities of games, "to whatever extent the circumstances require" (Frankfurt 2005, 51). The bullshitter's deception hides his entire enterprise. Gamification is not bullshit because it misinterprets games, nor even because it fails in its purpose. No, gamification is bullshit because that very interpretation and purpose are irrelevant. The only purpose it serves is to advance the current—and likely temporary—reputation and advantage of those who would advance it as a solution.

In that respect, there are two comforts we can take in gamification: first, that anyone who presents it as a solution is likely signaling either their own ignorance about the subject in question or their own complicity in the industry of bullshit surrounding them. It's a bit like learning that someone works in advertising or politics or consulting. And second, that soon enough gamification will be stained the same brown hue as those fields, such that even uttering the word will produce the kind of cautious skepticism and sanctioned revulsion we've come to associate with marketers, business consultants, and politicians.

Notes

1. See http://www.deloitte.la/welcome/.

2. See http://www.gamification.co/getting-started.

3. See, for example, the Gamification.co "getting started" guide previously mentioned, http://www.gamification.co/getting-started/.

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