

From *Bad Ideas About Writing* (2017), full text available at <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/794>

GAMIFICATION MAKES WRITING FUN

Joshua Daniel-Wariya

Recently, I received an email titled “Gamification: The Next Frontier in Student Achievement.” It asked, “When is a game more than just a game?” The answer followed: “When it takes a classroom from completing 30% of their assignments to completing 100%.” This, I suppose, should sound great—if not too good to be true—to any teacher having difficulty getting students to complete assignments. When I clicked the link for more information, I was taken to a newsletter about a teacher named Beth who was struggling with student engagement. By using a particular platform to gamify her classroom, I read, Beth was able to “turn learning into an adventure” and “spread her enthusiasm” to her students. Within one year of this gamification experiment, Beth achieved 100% student completion rates. The newsletter went on to state that Beth “even led her district’s professional development because, well, you can’t ignore that 30% to 100% jump.”

I have no clue if Beth is real, though I do suspect she is the embodiment of the urban legend of gamification’s many promises. The email allows interested instructors to join Beth’s online course to see for themselves how she achieved her astonishing results. Instead of units, assignments, and activities, we have *quests*, *levels*, and *Easter eggs*. Instead of grades, we have experience points and the ability to level up. Students can even *power level* by collaborating with classmates who have already completed major quest lines. One area of course content provides the following instruction to students for “Training for Epic Essays”: “Many of your most epic battles on this journey and in the rest of your life will require you to communicate well. Good communication earns large amounts of XP and unlocks many achievements. Refer to this folder any time you need help writing the most epic essay possible.”

This course rehearses the notion that students view school in general, and writing in particular, as not being much fun. But by covering the monotony of writing with the excitement of games, Beth achieves undeniable results. As philosopher and game designer Ian Bogost says, “Everyone seems to agree that games are powerful. And that power is mysterious and wild, like black magic.” Beth’s course quantifies that power in the 70% increase towards perfect student engagement. The underlying theory is that by making her course look like a game, Beth made it fun.

But what is actually required to make something fun? What gives any activity the quality of fun? And why are games universally recognized as being so good at creating it? Is it because games use the descriptive terminology of quests and levels, of epic battles, or because they award experience points and trophies instead of grades and diplomas? Following Bogost, here I take the position that gamification rehearses a common, yet misleading, conception of fun as something like easy pleasure. To have fun means people feel as though they are not working hard, or even not working at all, simply because they are escaping the monotony of hard work to the adventure of a whimsical game. This process is sometimes described metaphorically as chocolate-covered broccoli. Gamification covers the bitterness of something that is important, yet undesirable, with the sweetness of something that is not important, yet desirable.

This metaphor occludes something deeper about what makes games fun and how writing might be made so. According to Bogost, games are fun because they are “experiences we encounter through play.” Here, I want to suggest that a better way forward in making writing fun is not to make it more like a game, but instead to consider the specific conditions in which writing allows for and invites *play*. While the terms game and play often seem synonymous, they are not the same. While games can be described as a *context* of rules, space, people, materials, and valorized outcomes, play is an *activity* or way of moving about that context. Game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman describe play as “free movement within a more rigid structure.” This means that any material, medium, or environment has the capacity for play. People play when they move their avatars through virtual spaces. People also play when they move words and phrases around with respect to genre conventions. Games, then, are not unique from writing because they *have* play, but because they are conceived as experiences of play and recognized as such. Writing has the same potential.

My position is that writing can, and will, be fun when it is conceived as an experience encountered through play. So what would it mean to conceive writing as such an experience? First, play is contextual. This means that play takes place within a rule-bound network of people, objects, and space. The relationship between play and rule structures can seem counterintuitive because common sense tends to associate play with unconstrained freedom, such as children playing freely in a yard with no apparent rules or purpose. Pressed further, however, it becomes clear that play is meaningful due to its situated-ness within specific rule-bound contexts. For example, take the act of swinging a bat at a ball. While people may play in this way nearly anywhere, any particular swing only becomes meaningful when situated within a particular context, such as a little league baseball game or a cricket exhibition. Play—and even fun—does not equate to making writing *easy*. In order to truly engage with the play of writing we have to embrace its difficulty, not gloss over it or cover it up with a gamified lexicon. Gamification masks difficulty, when writers need to engage it directly.

Play is also creative and personal. When people play, it often feels like it is purely for the sake of play. This does not mean that play has no purpose, but that its purpose in any given moment might be unpredictable, its context and duration indeterminate, and its motivation idiosyncratic. I might, for example, for no other reason I can articulate than because *I feel like it*, grab a tennis ball and play with my dog in the backyard until she and I arbitrarily decide we are finished. While such play might be highly personal and done for the sake of itself, the paradox of play is that it is simultaneously creative.

This means that, even as I play with my dog for reasons I cannot articulate, I'm connected with the world through the technology of the ball, the familiar form of the game *catch*, and how poorly my dog plays it. Through catch, I am confronted with the paradox of play as both autotelic—individual and creative—that is inevitable and inescapable. To conceive writing as an experience encountered through play, writers must likewise embrace this unresolvable paradox. Even when our motivations for writing feel mysterious and isolating, we must remember that even the tools of our trade—a pen and notebook, a tablet and blank screen—call attention to our *never aloneness*. We simply cannot write without the world around us, and yet as we write, we create our own little world. To embrace the paradox buried in that interplay is to make writing fun.

So here we have it. Writing can and will be fun when it invites and makes possible opportunities for play. Because writing situations provide writers with familiar rules and conventions, writers have the opportunity to move within and through those forms to create and strategize. And even though, like play, writing feels to us so very personal, people paradoxically cannot go about the act of writing or playing, without being deeply enfolded in the world around them through their interactions with symbols, technologies, and objects.

Certainly, gamification does have its potential upsides. The act of turning a complex task like writing into something game-like by breaking it down into simpler parts, organizing it into small missions and quests, and providing clear pathways for teamwork might help writers set and maintain achievable goals. But on a deeper level, it misses the opportunity to explore and exploit the always already fun-making possibilities inherent in writing. In terms of actual practice, what this realization suggests is that teachers, students, and writers in general should not expect writing to come easily, for it to not feel frustrating at times, or for it to not require hard work. Perhaps ironically, to truly conceive writing as an experience encountered through play means to take it seriously enough to realize how hard it can be. When we use gamification to “add something sweet” to the surface of writing, we miss all the playful opportunities present just below the surface that are simply waiting for us to take them seriously enough that they might unravel and reveal their many possibilities.

Further Reading

For further information on the variety of ways gamification is being used today, see Brian Burke’s *Gamification: How Gamification Motivates People to Do Extraordinary Things* (Bibliomotion), as well as Kevin Wervach and Dan Hunter’s *For the Win* (Wharton Digital Press). Both provide current examples of the use of gamification in professional and educational contexts.

Game designers and scholars of rhetoric and writing have published several notable works that critique gamification and offer other ways of using play and games for educational purposes. See, for instance, Jane McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken* (Penguin), which discusses the use of games to solve the problems of today’s world, such as hunger and climate change. Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games* (MIT Press) illustrates the ways games mount arguments through

computer processes. And Miguel Sicart's *Play Matters* (MIT Press) is an excellent discussion of what play is and why it is important.

Finally, scholars in writing studies have written a number of books on the potential of games to help shape the future of writing studies. See Albert Rouzie's *Serio-Ludic Rhetoric* (Hampton Press), an early look at the ways digital writing technologies emphasize and enable play. Additionally, Richard Colby, Matthew S.S. Johnson, and Rebekah Shultz-Colby's collection, *Rhetoric/Composition/Play Through Video Games* (Palgrave MacMillan) offers essays from a wide variety of writing studies scholars and gives examples of gamified classrooms, as well as more theoretical discussions about teaching with and through videogames.

Keywords

avatar, design, gamification, gaming, ludic, play, procedural rhetoric

Author Bio

Joshua Daniel-Wariya is an assistant professor of rhetoric and professional writing at Oklahoma State University, where he also serves as associate director of First-Year Composition. His research interests involve the intersections of new media, computer games, and play, especially as they relate to the teaching of writing. He has published research about the ways people interpret and express both themselves and the world through the act of playing. He can be reached—and welcomes questions about his work—through his Twitter handle @jdanielwariya.