The Grammar and Rhetoric of Gamification

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Abstract

"Gamification" is widely promoted as a new organizational principle that envisions work as the end result of a game and games as a "mechanism" for improved work efficiency. This article examines the political implications of the gamification proposition; by closely reading Michael Hugos' book *Enterprise Games* using Burkean Dramatism. The analysis of rhetorical devices in this sample text unveils a problematic contradiction at the core of the gamification concept: it rests on the presumption that players' engagement or "intrinsic motivation" can be externally stimulated. Thus, the alleged free intentionality of the gamified subject is in conflict with her actual grammatical function as a means toward someone else's ends. Based on the relations of power and motive constructed by the text, I claim that Hugos is a rhetor who coaches an audience of business leaders or prospective gamifiers in transforming games and game-players into instruments of efficiency and productivity. His book *Enterprise Games* establishes an hierarchical order according to which the gamified subject, whose capacity for autonomous, engaged action is emphasised in words, is grammatically overpowered by the game as well as the gamifier.

Keywords: gamification rhetoric; Burkean Dramatism; hierarchy; power relations; motive.

Résumé

On promeut largement aujourd'hui la « ludification » comme nouveau principe organisationnel qui conçoit le travail comme le résultat final d'un jeu, et le jeu comme un « mécanisme » pour améliorer l'efficacité du travail. Cet article explore les implications politique de la mise en avant de la fluidification, par la lecture attentive du livre de Michael Hugos *Enterprise Games* au moyen du *dramatisme* de Kenneth Burke [*Dramatism*]. L'analyse des procédé rhétorique dans ce texte paradigmatique dévoile une contradiction problématique au cœur du concept de ludification : celui-ci repose sur le présupposé selon lequel l'engagement des joueurs ou « motivation intrinsèque » peut-être stimulé de manière extérieure. Ainsi, l'intentionnalité prétendument libre du sujet ludifié est en conflit avec sa fonction grammaticale réelle de moyen pour l'accomplissement des fins de quelqu'un d'autre. L'analyse des relations de pouvoir et des mobiles que le texte construit me permet d'affirmer que Hugos est un rhéteur montrant à un public de grands industriels ou de ludificateurs potentiels comment transformer les jeux et les joueurs en instruments d'efficacité et de productivité. Son livre *Enterprise Games* établit une hiérarchie, selon laquelle le sujet ludiciel dont le discours met en avant l'engagement autonome dans l'action, se trouve totalement contrôlé dans sa fonction grammaticale par le jeu et le l'unificateur.

1. Introduction

Gamification is a concept and design strategy that appears at a time when video games have provided evidence of the connection between user experience design and user involvement. Deterding and team describe it as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts"[1], while authors like Hugos, Chatfield, Penenberg, Edery and Mollick promote games as tools for engagement, which, used properly, can "induce voluntary participation" and drive desired behaviours (Hugos). This ostensible tension between volition and compulsion, spontaneity and determination, is not only the defining characteristic of the concept, but also the root of its appeal. The promise of gamification to utilize the fictional scenarios and "fun" of games for the production of real-life benefits has an attractive zing for the corporate owner and the end consumer alike. It is the proverbial Holy Grail that will harmonise personal freedom with social compliance, pleasure with efficiency, and entertainment with labour. Gamification has quickly gained traction in fields such as education, marketing, the business sector, academia, and public governance and has generated a wave of book publications, government-funded research,[2] and a following by professional and academic conferences. The gamification trend thus produces a discourse and a rhetoric that express a worldview and open space for new social practices.

Drawing on Kenneth Burke's understanding of language as motivated action, I treat gamification theory as a rhetoric and reinterpret its contradictory claims as motives. According to Kenneth Burke's philosophy, "symbolic communication is not a merely external instrument, but also intrinsic to men as agents" (*Grammar of Motives* 33). Therefore, the symbolic systems we create and inhabit are representational, but also contain attitude and intention. By focusing on the dynamics of communication and the form of messages, in addition to their content, Burke establishes a standpoint for critical analysis. The consideration of gamification theory as a rhetoric reveals the discrepancy between outwardly spoken and implicit intentions of the gamification movement.

I read Michael Hugos' book *Enterprise Games* as a representative sample of gamification rhetoric, whose purpose is the promotion of a specific attitude and practice. As a way of speaking, the promotional rhetoric of gamification constitutes a rhetorical act whose purpose and motivation are better expressed by its grammatical 'mannerisms' than by the content of its claims. The resources of Burke's dramatistic and rhetorical analysis establish the locus of this rhetorical act, the participants involved, and their roles, goals and relationships. Based on the relations of power and motive constructed by the text, I claim that

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[1] Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L.. "From game design elements to gamefulness: defining gamification." In *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments* (September, 2011), pp. 9-15. ACM.

[2] *Advanced digital gaming/gamification technologies* was one of the topics included in the call for research ICT 2014 - Information and Communications Technologies made by the European Commission in 2013, with a total call budget of EU 658,500,000, http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/90-ict-21-2014.html#tab2.

Hugos is a rhetor who coaches an audience of business leaders or prospective gamifiers in turning games and game-players into instruments of efficiency and productivity. His book *Enterprise Games* establishes a hierarchical order according to which the gamified subject, whose capacity for autonomous, engaged action is emphasised in words, is grammatically overpowered by the game as well as the gamifier.

2. The Utility of Games

By its very structure, the word 'gamification' suggests the presence of at least two distinct entities: a game and something that is not a game. Based on the meaning of its suffixes, 'gamification' is a noun that has been derived from the verb 'gamify' (to make something game-like); hence it implies an action led by an intention.

Michael Hugos is representative of a group of authors for whom that which is not a game is the 'real' world of work and business and the intention of the gamifying action is the utilization of games for business enterprise. Like the rest in the genre, Hugos' book is formatted as a textbook on current labour practices and is openly addressed to a corporate or entrepreneurial audience. *Enterprise Games* is about "*Using Game Mechanics to Build a Better Business*" or incorporating game elements into the work process. The suggestion that game mechanics can be identified and extracted from the context of games in order to be applied in a business context is a provocation that renegotiates existing conventions. In the following pages, I will examine closely the rhetorical devices employed by Michael Hugos who, in *Enterprise Games*, teaches entrepreneurs to "gamify" work, or rather,"businify" games. But, first, it will be necessary to review the Burkean terms that support the forthcoming analysis of texts on gamification.

3. The Dramatistic Method

Burke's dramatism describes the construction of motive through a sequence of related terms. The elements of the dramatistic pentad (act, scene, agent, agency and purpose) designate the participantsin any given statement, while the ratios describe the relationships between these participants. As the Burkean scholar Glenn Stillar explains, the pentadic elements and their ratios can be understood as "means for giving reasons" (72). Thus, while the organization of the statement forms its attitude or program of action, its implicit definitions, which Burke calls "substantives", provide its deeper meaning. A statement that constructs an attitude by means of pentadic distribution and is substantiated by taken-for-granted beliefs is a statement of motive that is also addressed. In other words, statements of motive constitute rhetorical acts that Burke has nicknamed "stratagems with 'you' and 'me' quality about them" (*Grammar of Motives* xvii). The present analysis of gamification discourse draws on Burkean terminology and follows a three-stage procedure that involves a) determining the elements of the pentad and ratios as means for giving reasons; b) establishing the substantives that shape the conventional meaning or underlining bias of the statement; and c) describing the rhetorical act.

a) Pentadic elements and ratios

The first step towards a dramatistic analysis of a text is to determine the distribution of the dramatistic pentad. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke observes that the "basic forms of thought", or patterns of expression that characterise drama, are common to all statements or attributions of motive. These Burke systematises in a "pentad of key terms" which signify the

core relationships in any statement: *act*, *scene, agent, agency* and *purpose*. Drawing on Burke's understanding of speech as action, I read sample texts to determine "what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how they did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (*Grammar of Motives* xv).

According to Stillar, "a pentadic analysis would be a mere cataloguing of the ideational structure (process, participants, and circumstances) of a text if it did not recognize the structuring capability of ratios" (64). Burke describes the ratios, the particular combinations of elements in a given text, as "principles of selectivity rather than as thoroughly causal relationships" (*Grammar of Motives* 18). Being a matter of an authorial decision, ratios help direct attention and construct motives, attitudes, and orientations. For example, a scene:act ratio may describe the act as a reaction to circumstances, while an agent:act ratio suggests that the motive originates in the agent. The review of ratios and their transformations in Hugos' text reveals the locus of the act (its place of origin or initiating agent) and the structure of hierarchical relationships that supports it.

b) Substantives

The pentadic ratios (responsible for directing attention and creating attitudes) are supported by underlying definitions that Burke calls "substantives". These are the in-text iterations of conventional beliefs that appear as references to the essences of things or reliable facts of life. To unravel the absolute claims of "apparent truths", Burke examines the concept of "substance". Looking at its etymology, he notes that the term we use to refer to what a thing "intrinsically is" points to something outside of it—"something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing" (*Grammar of Motives* 21-2). In other words, "the word 'substance', used to designate what a thing is, derives from a word designating something that the thing is not" (*Grammar of Motives* 23). Burke extends the paradox of 'substance' into a general principle of definition. He identifies several types of definition that are responsible for the kinds of "substantives" one can encounter, namely geometric, familial and directional. Each type of definition expresses a different aspect of the "paradox of substance" or creates an ambiguity that initiates a transformation of meaning. The substantives in Hugos' text comprise the mesh of taken-for-granted truths that justify the book's foregrounded attitude and proposed course of action. They formulate the reality according to which we act.

c) Rhetoric

Burkean rhetorical devices are synthesized in the following terms: *addressivity, identification, transformation*, and *order*. The 'you' and 'me' quality of rhetoric stratagems places *addressivity* in the centre of their definition. However, this is not to say that only rhetorical speech is addressed, but rather, that any speech is rhetorical, because it draws various participants into a common ground of understanding and action. Moreover, the presence of language, according to Burke, both gives away and constitutes the alienation of human beings from each other, and from experience. Humans as "symbol-using" animals who are "separated from their natural condition by instruments of their own making" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 16), are also necessarily divided by different abilities, interests, beliefs, social status, and class. Difference requires *order*[3], and order is created

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[3] According to Burke, a rhetorical act is produced within a particular social order that is itself the result of symbolic action and can be renegotiated through further symbolic action. As Burke explains: "[I]n any order, there will be mysteries of hierarchy, since such a principle is grounded in the very nature of language, and reinforced by the

through "the mysteries of hierarchy", which permeate the fabric of "symbolic action". Hence, Stillar explains, "the function of rhetoric is to overcome division through identification and consubstantiality" (73). By overcoming division, even momentarily, *identification*[4] initiates a *transformation* in the hierarchy. In other words, the purpose of the rhetorical act is the re-negotiation of the social order that produces it. The rhetorical devices applied in gamification theory texts establish a common ground for participants, but also a framework of interaction with its specific rules and requirements that present themselves as absolutely necessary.

4. *Enterprise Games*: Pentadic Ratios

The organization of actors, actions, and motives in Hugos' book is multilayered and does not easily conform to the categories of dramatistic analysis. The difficulty arises from Hugos' ambition to address a divided audience (employers and employees/ gamifiers and players) with the same message and appeal to both. His double purpose is reflected in the complexity of constructed motives. For this reason, I have isolated two different planes of action, which I consider separately and in relation to one another. The first plane of action is defined by the relationship of writer and reader to the contemporary condition as their common scene of existence. The second plane of action is constituted by the introduction of games, which relate differently to gamifiers and players. The ratio transformations that follow, ultimately, coordinate all participants in a single act: gamifiers (agent) use games (agency) and players (agency) as a means towards better profits. The tracing of the transformations in pentadic ratios provides the foundation for the analysis of rhetorical means and ends of the author.

a) **scene (**economic reality**):agent (**writer, gamifiers, players**)**

As a statement of motive, the preface to *Enterprise Games* readily identifies the relevant context, the speaker, the audience, and the intent of the message. Here the grammar of interaction is already set in place and the elements of the pentad and the ratios they form reveal the prevailing attitude and dramatistic structure of the book. *Enterprise Games* begins by establishing the need for a new approach to business. Hugos writes as an expert, who addresses an audience comprised of "change-minded business executives", "people who advise them", "people who design games", and those whose "work is already taking on a game-like quality" (viii). This varied crowd of prospective readers is all united under the pronoun "we" as the residents of the contemporary condition:

> We are living in a time of big changes. We face changes driven by powerful forces like world population growth; rising prices for food, fuel, and raw materials; depletion of natural resources . . ..

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resultant diversity of occupational classes. That claim is the important thing, as regards the ultimate reaches of rhetoric. The intensities, morbidities, or particularities of mystery come from institutional sources, but the aptitude comes from the nature of man, generically, as a symbol-using animal." (*Rhetoric of Motives* 279).

[4] In *A Rhetoric of Motives* Burke also explains how identification presupposes and compensates division: "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man's very essence. It would not be an ideal as it now is, partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions; rather it would be as natural, spontaneous, and total as with those ideal prototypes of communication, the theologian's angels, or "messengers" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 22).

> . . . [C]onflict between wage payers and wage earners is returning. . . .
> Companies hire and fire as needed to respond to market volatility and . . . fit
> the realities of our real-time, global economy. (vii-viii)

With this description, Hugos establishes the 'scene' as the counterpart of game–the 'real' or the not-game that has to be gamified. By limiting the scope of the discussion to the exclusive perspective of business enterprise, Hugos cuts out a piece of 'reality' and uses it to signify the whole. Thus, the definition of 'the real' is reduced to the economic reality we inhabit. The use of this type of reduction or metonymic definition Burke calls "narrowing of the circumference" of terminology. As Burke proposes, while every terminology is a selection of reality which to function properly needs scope, a selection becomes a "deflection when the given terminology, or calculus, is not suited to the subject matter which it is designed to calculate" (*Grammar of Motives* 59). In that sense, Hugos' reduction of reality to its economic aspect constitutes a deflection. This narrow definition of the world, however, furnishes the scene:agent ratio that dominates the passage. The implication is that 'we',the readers and author alike, are conditioned by our common circumstance.

 b) agency (games):agent (writer, gamifiers)

The remedy Hugos proposes against the challenges of this economically troubled world are games. Hugos recommends the adoption of video game technologies that are immensely popular and present a promising model for structuring complex multi-participant interactions. His treatment of games in the following passage throws light on the relationship between games and gamifiers.

> Games and associated technology we currently refer to as video games offer
> us more than just diversion and escape from difficult times. They offer us field-
> tested models to use for organizing companies and performing complex and
> creative tasks. They offer clear and compelling examples for how people can
> work together, build their careers, and earn a living in rapidly changing and
> unpredictable environments. (viii)

It is interesting to notice the ambiguous pentadic function of games, which are treated both as an agent and an agency. By saying that games "offer us field-tested models to use for organizing companies", the author assigns them a human-like capacity to act (games offer models). At the same time, 'games' are the agency or tool employed by "us" for the organisation of companies. Thus, in this sequence of related actions, games lead the first action forming an agent:act ratio, but are then demoted to a means towards the end of "organizing" in the second. If this second action is properly paraphrased in an active voice, it will again be expressed by the agent:act ratio; however the agent will be "we" (formerly 'us'), and the act will be "use games as models for organising companies". However, this active form of the statement can be seen as the chosen destination of the author's message. It is what the audience of business leaders can be convinced of, but only after following the transformations of the pentadic ratios, which advance from scene:agent to agency:agent and finally arrive to agent:act. In other words, the agent who is initially conditioned by one's environment proceeds to adopting a new strategy (applying games in business) that now

brings him/her into the category of an expert entrepreneur. As such, the agent is capable of determining the action.

c) agent (gamifiers):act (gamification) vs. agent (games):co-agent (players)

Hugos guides his readership towards the empowered position of the expert gamifier. Here, however, the composite agent "we" falls apart into segments with various pentadic roles.

My intent is to arm and inspire those who are in a position to influence or change the way businesses and organizations operate. I draw on my own experience as well as on the writings and the experiences of others in business and game design in order to present real-world examples of the merging of games and business. These examples outline salient features of an operating model for companies and economies that can deliver broad-based and sustainable prosperity. (ix)

This statement reveals that Hugos invites a specific group of people to identify with the idea that games can become work. These are the people "who are in a position to influence or change" business processes. The so far unifying "we" and "us" is suddenly narrowed to the exclusion of people "whose work is already taking a game-like quality". Thus the union between the business leaders that Hugos properly addresses and the employees or players whom he excludes is now made to depend on "the merging of games and business" that will "deliver sustainable prosperity". More importantly, the division of the reading audience into an addressed and implicated one correlates with the ambiguous pentadic function of games (as both agent and agency) noted in the previous passage. Both of these grammatical gestures construct the hierarchical order of participants in the interaction. By now, these participants constitute at least three different types of actors where business owners, individual employees, and games can be considered the respective representatives of each group. The dramatistic functions of these actors vary from one context to the next in correspondence with the specific relationship the author seeks to emphasise at any given moment. Hence, the ambiguous pentadic function of games may suggest that from the perspective of business owners, games function as means to an end, i.e. agency. From the perspective of the end user, player, or employee, games appear as another agent, or scene.

d) **agent** (games):**co**-**agent** (players) or **scene** (games):**agent** (players)

The relationship between games and employees or players is described in Chapter 1. Here is a passage that elaborates on the special quality of games that allows them to alternate between agent and agency:

A game is an engagement engine - it attracts and engages players. You can measure the success of a game by the number of players it attracts and the level of engagement it gets from its players. Games are specifically designed to attract and engage people through the application of the four traits introduced in Chapter I: goals, rules, feedback systems, and voluntary

participation. Looking at these four traits you could say that the combination of the first three traits is what creates the fourth trait. (12)

Hugos' treatment of games as actors is emphatic and consistent. It is games that "attract", "engage", "induce", "offer", and in every way act upon rather than bear the action of players. The condition to exhibit the "right combination" of goals, rules, and feedback systems that reliably "induce voluntary participation" is a qualifying one. If it is not met, a game cannot be qualified as a game. Here, games are defined in terms of what Burke terms directional substance, or inherent potential. The player, on the other hand, who has to be "attracted and engaged" and is expected to exhibit "voluntary participation", appears entirely passive. Thus, his or her intrinsic motivation is effected by the external force of the game.

As the locus of action, games can assume the function of either 'agent' or 'scene'. If games are understood as a 'scene' that constrains the player in a scene:agent ratio, they constitute an environment of impersonal forces driven by "physical causes rather than spiritual ones" (Burke, *Grammar of Motives* 131). This delineates a materialistic, pragmatist casuistry, from the perspective of which empirical facts are the result of material processes. By extension, humans too are little more than the mechanical outcome of matter in motion. However, a scenic interpretation does not eliminate completely the possibility for action. A "scenically" derived agent, as Burke explains, is an individual entity, a "finite or determinate mode of Substance" whose primary tendency is to "forever persist in its nature" (*Grammar of Motives* 144). Thus, by ascribing the role of agent to games, Hugos inadvertently claims that in addition to being a straightforward, mechanical process, a game is also a self-originating force, whose "being or essence is intrinsic to it" (Burke, *Grammar* 144). Therefore, its mysterious power or impact on the players as co-agents cannot be easily influenced from without or reproduced, the presumption being that once an interaction or a process turns into a game, it acquires a "will of its own" and becomes an agent.

5. *Enterprise Games:* Rhetorical Devices

Hugos' intention is to indoctrinate the reader into a belief system and a program of action. He achieves this goal by directing the reader's attention through a series of pentadic transformations that furnish the rhetorical act. Hugos establishes common ground with his prospective readers through the process of identification. He addresses them from the position of an expert who is willing to share his expertise with perhaps less informed, but equally forward-thinking and "change-minded business executives" who are faced with the same challenging economic environment and share the same passion for success (viii). The reader is thus called upon to identify with a specific social position, value system, and circumstance. On this basis, the initial distinction between the expert and the layperson can be overcome by following the prescriptions of the guidebook and adopting the recommended strategies. This is what the changing pentadic ratios in the introduction teach. Before being familiar with gamification (agency) the agent is determined by her environment (scene). After adopting gamification as means, she can initiate the act and manage the environment (agent:act).

The ratio transformations in the definition of games are also significant. As Burke points out, it is a familiar "resource of Rhetoric" to ""eflect attention" by stressing one ratio versus another (*Grammar of Motives* 17). The emphasis on the active role of games in determining the behaviour of players, distracts from the fact that the true locus of motive is in the leading agent - the business leader, for whom both games and players are simply means

to an end, i.e. agency. Thus, Hugos coaches corporate leaders how to encourage "desirable behavior", not by straightforward argument, but by designing a scene which feels open and unpredictable enough for participants to be convinced in the spontaneity of their actions. Thus, the relationship between gamifiers and the gamified subject that Hugos promotes is one of unequal power distribution due to deliberately asymmetrical access to information. Insofar as the employee or game-player is only partially aware of the intended consequences of the gamified act, she is not its originator. According to Burkean Dramatism, "the basic unit of action would be defined as the human body in conscious or purposive motion" (Burke, *Grammar* 14). Based on this definition, the voluntary participation of the gamified subject is an action that has been reduced to motion. Similar to the reader of the book who can advance to a higher position in the established hierarchy by following its advice, the gamified subject finds her capacity for action preconditioned by her participation in the game. Hence, the text creates a double bind according to which the transformation of the proposed hierarchy is possible only by accepting and conforming to its demands.

6. Conclusion: Hugos' Act of Persuasion

The dramatistic reading of Hugos' text brings into view the grammatical patterns that lay the ground for its interpretation. Strictly speaking, the participants in the gamification interaction are the gamifier, the game, and the gamified. As observed, subjects or entities placed in the category of the gamifier (experts, game designers, business owners, corporations, or government) are consistently ascribed the pentadic function of agent. They initiate the act and invest it with purpose. Games have an ambiguous status, which fluctuates between agency and agent/scene. In other words, in relation to the gamifier, games function as a means to an end, i.e. agency. In relation to the gamified subject, games appear as another agent, or scene. Finally, entities in the category of the gamified subject (end user, employee, or consumer) function as agency. Thus, according to the hierarchical order imposed by the text, the gamifier conditions the game and the game conditions the player.

The attribution of grammatical roles goes hand in hand with the reaffirmation of a set of foundational definitions. The close circumference of the chosen vocabulary reduces 'reality' and 'nature' to economic principles of production and exchange, where "higher dividends" naturally substitute for "absolute purpose". Human beings, and their mental and psychological processes, are governed by material forces, which can be isolated, studied and therefore reproduced by design. Games are a mysterious force in terms of potential impact (directional substance) and a reliable mechanism when defined in relation to feedback systems and technologies (familial definition). The paradoxes of substance that surface in these definitions expose the rhetorical intentions of the authors to re-negotiate established conventions. Thus, the technologically enabled design of experience is justified by laws of nature: action is reduced to motion or passion; freedom, to necessity.

In its effort to communicate and persuade, Hugo's text presumes the participation of different kinds of entities, or classes between which an agreement is sought. On the surface, distinctions in status are overcome by inviting the reader, a layperson, to identify with the expert gamifier. However, the very process of identification presupposes the acceptance of an established order - an hierarchical structure of difference put in place by the text. This hierarchy, which divides and harmonises in the same gesture, is sustained and justified by a mysterious necessity. As Burke explains, communication happens between "estranged entities, and strangeness is a condition of mystery" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 177). Thus, the

hierarchy that is established in *Enterprise Games* consistently displays an order according to which the gamifier initiates the game and the game constrains the player. In other words, gamification produces the promised benefits on the condition of unequal power distribution among participants. While the business entrepreneur takes charge of the act, the employee, a paradoxical mixture of voluntary action and automated motion, is being transformed into means by means of games.

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