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Farmville, Eternal Recurrence, and the *Will-to-Power*-Ups

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nww.iv, April 13, 2013

Was heißt Gamification? That is: what is called gamification? — but also, what calls upon us to gamify? What is it, in our age, that is such that gamification should emerge within it, should be called forth by it?

I hope, most centrally, to ask the last of these questions, but the way we build in our questioning cannot but pass through the other questions as well. Still, since this last concern is my focus, we will begin with Heidegger's use of Nietzsche in his attempt to understand our technological age, in which we are called upon to gamify.

1. Heidegger's View of Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence

In Lecture X of *Was Heißt Denken?*, Heidegger claims that eternal recurrence, encapsulated in *Will to Power* §617 ("That everything recurs is the closest approximation of a world of Becoming to the world of Being"[1]), remains "wrapped in thick clouds" not due to "any inability in Nietzsche's own thinking,"

1   Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 330.

but because "it is the matter itself which is named by the term 'the eternal recurrence of the same' that is wrapped in a darkness from which even Nietzsche had to shrink back in terror."[2] He goes on to caution us not to dismiss eternal recurrence as "a mystical fantasy," commenting that "the coming age, in which the essence of modern technology — the steadily rotating recurrence of the same — will come to light, might have taught man that a thinker's essential thoughts do not become in any way less true simply because we fail to think them."[3]

Eternal recurrence, then, is shrouded in darkness because it is a kind of expression or reflection of the essence of modern technology, which Heidegger would elsewhere call "Enframing."[4] To reinforce this connection, we might note the parallel between Heidegger's phrase in these passages, "the steadily rotating recurrence of the same [*die ständig rotierende Wiederkehr des Gleichen*]," and Nietzsche's phrase, "the eternal recurrence of the same [*der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen*]." This is no illusion of translation! We see also, in "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra," where Heidegger again warns us not to think of eternal recurrence as "a mystic phantasmagoria," a further comment that "a look at the present age might well teach us a different lesson — presupposing of course that thinking is called upon to bring to light the essence of modern technology," followed by the rhetorical question, "what else is the essence of the modern power-driven machine than one offshoot of the eternal recurrence of the same?"[5]

The difference, then, between eternal recurrence and the darkness of the steadily rotating recurrence, corresponds to the transformative and nihilistic responses to "the greatest weight" — that is, the gap between "[e]verything recurs, it de-

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2   Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. John Gray and Fred Weick (New York: Harper and Row, 2004), 108.

3   Ibid., 109.

4   Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

5   Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes I & II,* trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 233.

pends on each moment, everything matters — it is all alike," and "[e]verything is naught, indifferent, so that nothing is worthwhile — it is all alike."[6] Nihilism, however — exemplified by the last man, who says "we have achieved happiness" and blinks — is not easily marked by awareness of nihilism but (as in "the danger") may be accompanied by a lack of awareness that there are alternate, life-affirming forms of valuation, valuation which is true to the earth.

What could be a more perfect, complete, and literal version of this steadily rotating recurrence, this nihilism that does not know it is a nihilism, than gamification?

Consider the closed system of *Farmville* in which clicks plant fictional seeds upon which we must wait to harvest fictional crops to get coins so that we can continue to click and to buy decorations to give us something to look at while we cycle from clicking to waiting captured in a circuit of drive[7] to play out capitalist accumulation serving nothing but the exchange of real time and money for fictional time and money — and in which the "fiction" has little in the way of story, characters, or other compelling elements of fiction!

Consider the economies of *World of Warcraft,* in which we grind and level, paying for the ability to toil alongside Chinese gold farmers in offline sweatshops.

Is this not hatred of the earth in practice if not in thought?

2. Gamification: A Post-Nietzschean Definition

For further analysis, we need some discussion of definitions and examples of gamification. But this is itself fraught with difficulties! Gamification is an ill-defined process. Those things that characterize games need not be present in the gamified — for example, that games are fun, at least in principle — and even games can be gamified, as in fantasy football, or in the simple case of betting.

6   Ibid., 182.
7   Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010).

Gamification, like the term "game" itself,[8] is likely a family-resemblance term. How then shall we define it in a manner sufficient to ask what, in our age, calls gamification forth?

A merely descriptive definition may not get us to the heart of the matter, given the family-resemblance use of the term, and so we will begin from a core starting point, and then put forth a prescriptively-oriented definition. This will allow us to identify forms of gamification not commonly discussed as such, and to discard false positives as well. And where better to turn for a starting point than to business research on effective gamification?

In her article "Seven Examples: Put Gamification to Work," Debra Donston-Miller draws upon a definition from Gartner Research Inc., where gamification is characterized by:

1. Accelerated feedback cycles: Gamification increases the velocity of feedback loops to maintain engagement.
2. Clear goals and rules of play: Gamification provides clear goals and well-defined rules of play to ensure players feel empowered to achieve goals.
3. A compelling narrative: Gamification builds a narrative that engages players to participate and achieve the goals of the activity.
4. Tasks that are challenging but achievable: Gamification provides many short-term, achievable goals to maintain engagement.

A prescriptive definition departing from this might then be that gamification is a kind of exploit[9] of fundamental intra- and interpersonal drives, to achieve effects external and accidentally related to the natural outcomes of their means,[10] thereby con-

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8   Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. Gertrude Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 32, §67.
9   Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
10 Rather than true ends, which are consummatory fulfillments of their means (John Dewey, *Experience & Nature* [New York: Dover Publications, 1958], 366).

stituting, rather than a "magic circle,"[11] a simulacral realm[12] of false needs[13] which may or may not coincide with the realization of true needs. Accelerated feedback cycles hack into circuits of drive established originally with relation to actual life goals within personal narratives, displacing our will to power from the world into a safer, more empowering, more predictable, more structured false world — compelling, clear, challenging, rewarding, and tidy.

This definition should be sufficient to apply to a variety of clear cases of gamification, and to identify the structure of gamification in systems not normally described as "gamified." The MMORPG presents us with a clear case, as do social games, such as *Farmville* — with social games presenting a more unalloyed form of the gamified game, since, unlike MMORPGs, they do not contain structures that lead easily to actual robust interaction between players and friends.

As Bogost demonstrated in his *Cow Clicker reductio,*[14] the fundamental structure at work in many social games is one in which each action is valorized by its enabling of further actions within the closed system, and the sheer fact of delay, coupled with arbitrary and isolated, in-world valorized reward structures, is sufficient to generate the exploit of our psychological reward structures. This simulacral growth and progress is often enough accompanied by a simulacral sociality, as Losh demonstrated in her analysis of the antisociality of "social games,"[15] whether friends appear as assets as in *Mafia Wars,* in leaderboards as in the iOS *Game Center,* or as nominal interactants as in *Farmville*. In social games, just as play is reduced to the

11 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
12 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans. Mark Poster (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
13 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man,* trans. Douglas Kellner (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
14 Ian Bogost, "Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession," July 21, 2010, http://www.bogost.com/blog/cow_clicker_1.shtml.
15 Elizabeth Losh, "With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies?," in *Facebook and Philosophy,* ed. Dylan Wittkower (Chicago: Open Court, 2010).

mere disconnected simulacral image of the ludic, sociality is reduced to its mere disconnected simulacral image of sociality as well — we "play" in the mode of machine operators, as we "interact" with "friends" in the mode of network administrators. In this kind of "whatever" gaming,[16] content, story, gameworld, and fellow players are reduced to mere moving parts to be manipulated; intensity, degree, and function rather than content, meaning, or enjoyment. We play *Candy Crush Saga* in a mode of disguised self-hatred even as we continue to play it, a "regressive gaming" parallel to the "regressive listening […] always ready to degenerate into rage" that Adorno described in relation to fashionable jazzed-up music[17] — we know it to be false and empty even as we cannot but be captured in its orbit.

But of course it is not only games which are gamified. Consider badging, barnstars, and Employees of the Month. Consider the similar drives in the schoolchild's fundraiser sales of chocolate bars, in which points are earned and trinkets given. Consider the elevation of couponing into a robust life practice in which "savings" — the shadow-world capital accumulation of merely counterfactual exchange values — are accumulated, producing as a secondary effect the piling-up of less-than-freely chosen consumer goods, which then need to be consumed in order to valorize the counterfactual shadow-wealth accumulated in their purchase. Consider No Child Left Behind, under which we have codified the movement in educational practice wherein learning and understanding are pursued in schools only in so far as they can be adequately captured within empirical and standardized assessments in regular feedback cycles — the crudest form of logical positivism, but applied not to metaphysics but instead to human growth and the enlightenment ideal.

In the broadest sense: Consider "saving time" and the cult of busness. We have exported the corporate and capitalist con-

16 After Jodi Dean's "whatever blogging" (*Blog Theory*).
17 Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Culture Industry,* ed. Jay Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991).

cerns with cost-saving measures into our existential engagement — just as businesses seek to minimize capital outlay in the conduct of business, so too do we seek constantly to reduce time spent on both necessary and voluntary tasks. In business, the capital accumulated in this manner can be used to expand the business or can be treated as simple profits made. In our lives, however, time "saved" cannot be accumulated, and we cannot expand into additional lives or acquire other persons through hostile take-overs. Instead, time "saved" will automatically dissipate — will be "wasted," as it seems we cannot avoid thinking — unless it is "spent." Just as the machines must be kept running in order to maximize the profitability of constant capital — as Marx said, the factory left idle at night could be just as easily used during that time to gain further surplus value from variable capital[18] — we must keep ourselves running at full tilt, lest the sacrifices we have made to quality of life in order to accumulate the counterfactual time we have "saved" should go to "waste."

In this way, we see a logic of gamification at work in our most basic Enframing: we valorize our life through its ordering as standing-reserve, which ordering has value through its expenditure — but this expenditure must itself be productive, and we have little notion left of productivity other than the generation of further standing-reserve. When we fall under the sway of the cult of busyness, we live in the constant sacrifice of the quality of the present in the service of maximizing the quantity of the future. The system holds together only through the ideological projection of another form of valuation: "quality time" — as if other time is to be without quality!; is it then merely quantity time? Surely this would fit well enough with Heidegger's notion of "calculative thought,"[19] and this is the mode in which we think

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18 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One,* trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf.

19 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking,* trans. Hans Freund and John Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

of ourselves as a set of time-resources to be responsibly allocated.

What could be a clearer nihilism than the reduction of our own self-regard to merely quantitative valuation? What could be a greater form of hatred of the earth? Here, we devalue life not in order to sacrifice it to another life to follow, and we treat this world as false not by comparison to some true noumenal or post-mortem world, but instead treat it as a false version of nothing more than itself. The True World? Perhaps we have abolished it, but the world in which we live remains to us mostly an illusion; a series of mere passings-through *en route* to catch the will-o'-the-wisp of the True World: Quality Time, Hobbies, and Retirement.

Thankfully, we are not so foolish as to actually live by our rhetoric. Although we have difficulty avoiding viewing ourselves as standing-reserve and falling into a gamification of life, we often enough cannot but take pleasure in the world. We may speak of going to the gym in mechanistic terms of creating health, and our minds may disappear into televisions while on the machines so that the time can be "spent" in the body's self-manufacturing without our having to be present for the whole tedious affair, but we still take pleasure both in the strengthening of our bodies and in the ache of overworked muscles. We keep at our tasks and seek efficiency as if an intrinsic good, but we still enjoy our distractions and find we have somehow "made" time (out of what?) for hallway conversations and extra afternoon cups of coffee.

3. Towards a Gamification That Is True to the Earth

But through the danger, the saving power also grows. If the danger is that Enframing should crowd out all other modes of the revealing of Being, and if gamification is a sort of Enframing, then what, in the spread of gamification, can we identify as a new Clearing? In what ways can gamification stay true to the earth, reveal to us forms of value which lead us away from the nihilism of closed systems of in-game reward structures back to

true needs and a real world? Let's look at some cases that may indicate a pathway.

Consider the Toyota Prius dashboard display. It gives us a fast cycle of change and reward, training us to think effectively about MPG rates as we drive. This structure hooks up directly to a set of concerns that motivate us to engage in this gamification, and the reward structures correspond to actual effects realized through the gamified set of actions. The skills and habits generated through this practice are, furthermore, transferable — those value-motivated practices trained through gamification can be utilized with other vehicles, and can become part of our habits such that we can continue to realize those goals through our activity when we are not paying attention to the display, but are instead listening to music, speaking with passengers, or simply engaged in driving itself.

Consider *Zombies, Run!* — an iPhone ARG (alternate reality game), *Zombies, Run!* creates an audio environmental overlay in which the long-term reward structures of running are replaced by a fast cycle of danger and achievement, through simulating a pack of zombies whose moans and shuffling come ever closer. We choose to enter its gamified environment in order to provide a proxy set of motivations for an activity towards which we have a second-order desire:[20] we do not wish to run, but we wish that we did wish to do so, and through this second-order desire choose to supplant our first-order desires with those brought upon us within the game world. The effects achieved are not isolated to the game world, but also produce desired real-world effects, and do so in a way which generates independence from the game-world: as we run more, and as we run more more often, we train and reconstitute our bodies into those which are more well-fitted to the first-order desires we wished we had initially. A non-runner who acquires something closer to a runner's body and a runner's habits is more likely to become a runner.

20 Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and The Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20.

Consider *Superbetter*. Through the use of rapid cycling rewards corresponding to real world behaviors, activities of health and recovery can be given proxy motivations, as in the previous case, and can result in new and transferable habits and behavior, as in the first case. By folding in social networks in a robust and interactive way, the gamified sociality of social games is also brought in, but is brought in in a way which generates real bonds and support networks, by asking users to actually correspond with and create meaningful connections with friends designated as supporters in their processes of health and recovery.

Through these examples, we can begin to generate a principle of gamification that remains true to the earth. Gamification creates a system of false needs and rewards short-circuiting the will to power, capturing it in the will to power-up. This can be life-affirming when 1) actions result in outcomes that escape recapture, that extend beyond the game system; when 2) those actions are adopted by players as a reason for play; and when 3) due to the game-exterior connection, a natural end is reached, allowing intrinsic reward structures to properly motivated desired game-exterior activity. Or — perhaps — when the game is, in fact, fun.