

Politics is more than a game
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Politics is a game and like all games there are winners and there are losers in every campaign and political fight. Although the existence of the victor and the defeated has been a part of politics since since the earliest contest, the rise of games, and a larger culture surrounding games has lead to the gamification of politics. The language of politics, words like “veepstakes” and online primaries allow anybody to participate in the game and play politics.

GAMIFICATION

Gamification is still an emerging field and a single definition remains elusive. One attempt to define the term was developed by Sebastian Deterding et al. In *Gamification: Toward a Definition* they propose expanding gamification beyond the awarding of badges and leaderboards to non-games. They describe gamification as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts.”¹ Games, for the purposes of their definition requires rules and a competition towards a goal by “human participants” to qualify as a game.²

As there is no singularly accepted definition of “gamification”, therefore, for the purposes of examining gamification in politics I propose a hybrid model. Gamification is the application of game principles or mechanics to a non-game, real world situation; or using game principles or mechanics to engage users outside the traditional entertainment purposes of games.

The functional part of their definition is taking gamification to activities that are not just classic games. If game elements were only used for purposes of structured

¹ Deterding, Sebastian, Rilla Khaled, Lennart E. Nacke, and Dan Dixon. 2011. “Gamification : Toward a Definition.” *Design*: 12–15. 1.

² Deterding, Sebastian et al. 2.

traditional or online games there would be no gamification. Deterding et al. write that gamification is the use of games outside “their normal expected use for entertainment.”³ One of these uses is the electing of leaders through an improved process with added “joy” or “improving the user experience” through game elements.⁴

Another definition offered by Alan Chorney in *Taking The Game Out Of Gamification* proposes that without a sufficient and “structured content” gamification or the use of “game mechanics” take advantage of users and in doing so the use of game structures outside of the traditional game form does not change participant behavior.⁵ Getting users to participate in the gamified environment for a real world problem is difficult as they will not play if they are not predisposed to being a willing participant in the goal.⁶

In an opinion piece for *The Atlantic*, game designer and professor Ian Bogost offers a critical view of gamification writing that “gamification is bullshit.”⁷ He argues that gamification gives a comforting idea for those who need to sell a product or a vision, and political campaigns need to do both. Bogost writes, “Gamification is easy. It offers simple, repeatable approaches in which benefit, honor, and aesthetics are less important than facility.”⁸ In the context of politics, the idea is to mobilize rather than benefit, as the

³ Deterding, Sebastian et al. 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chorney, Alan Ivan. 2012. “Taking The Game Out Of Gamification.” *Dalhousie Journal of Interdisciplinary Management* 8 (1).2.

⁶ Ibid. 12.

⁷ Bogost, Ian. 2011. “‘Gamification Is Bullshit’.” *The Atlantic*, August 9, Online edition. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/08/gamification-is-bullshit/243338/>.

⁸ Ibid.

user does not gain much from playing the game but the candidate gains greatly by finding and keeping an engaged, likely voter.⁹

Gamification, which he finds is the use of repeatable techniques of game design to achieve a given result can better be described as “exploitationware” for taking advantage of the players. He writes that use of game mechanics in this way “capitalize on a cultural moment, through services about which they have questionable expertise, to bring about results meant to last only long enough to pad their bank accounts” or in the case of politics win a campaign.¹⁰

Using games to solve real world problems, including high stakes problems, is not unique to politics. In his paper *Virtual Sustainability* William Sims Bainbridge speculates about the hybrid online-real world games called LARPs (*live-action role-playing*) games where players “accomplish political missions.” In his vision, players take pictures of fuel inefficient SUVs and post them online to publically shame the owner.¹¹ There are obvious flaws in Bainbridge’s game including publicly shaming the owner of a vehicle that they already openly drive. His goal to “transform the enemies of the earth into enemies of the players” appears to be dangerous since he intends real-world consequences for the game and forging enmity amongst strangers, some of whom do not know they are participants. This could lead to actual harm resulting from the game significantly diminishing its “play” aspect.¹² Despite these technical flaws that hurt his

⁹ Likely voter is a common political survey term used to highlight who was polled. It differentiates from registered voters by sampling only those considered most plausible to impact the election by voting.

¹⁰ Bogost, Ian. 2011.

¹¹ Bainbridge, William Sims. 2010. “Virtual Sustainability.” *Sustainability* 2 (1).

<http://virtual.colophon.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/sustainability-932-layout.pdf>. 9.

¹² Ibid.

argument there are elements that can be applied to politics, with a more collegial approach.

Bainbridge advances the idea of LARPs to solve real world problems, and those are the kinds of games being used in politics, the tackling of real world problems such as campaigning for office, through the use of game elements. Where Bainbridge asks users to take pictures of SUVs, campaigns ask participants to donate, get others to donate, get out the vote, and the most important live-action element of the game, to vote for the candidate and propel them into office.

POLITICAL GAMES

“Anything can be fun...we can make government fun” Gabe Zichermann said during a Google Tech Talk on the eve of the 2010 midterm elections.¹³ Less than two years later nearing the 2012 Presidential election there are political factions looking to engage potential voters to participate in the political process, or for some actors persuade voters in a certain direction. If, as Zichermann said, anything can become engaging through the use of game elements politics with its winners and losers paradigm is a natural fit.

Political campaigns for individuals, issues and parties need to sell a product and their product is more than just what appears on the ballot. The product in politics might be t-shirts or dinners with the candidate as much winning the election and seeing your opponent lose. Selling this product is the same as any other commercial good or service and involves marketing. In the same Google Tech Talk, Zichermann said that “consumers

¹³ Zichermann, Gabe. 2010. “Fun Is the Future: Mastering Gamification” October 26. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6O1gNVeaE4g>.

are looking for more...engagement” and one way for political consumers to become engaged is through a political structure that mimics the type of play that consumers are comfortable with through their regular life activity.¹⁴

The “play” that the political class is relying on in their gamification efforts is twofold; first there are the obvious games that people play.¹⁵ These games are the classic “casual games” familiar to many people and they range from simple games to the more complex.¹⁶ The simple games include the single-player block game Tetris and Words with Friends where players compete against each other over separate connections in different places through a mobile application in a classic Scrabble contest. The other type of games are the more complex virtual worlds and MMORPGs (*massive multiplayer online roleplaying games*) such as World of Warcraft where players from across the globe can play together to defeat an opposing armed force fall into this first category. The second type of game the political class employ is the already gamified elements of society. In an article about casual gaming and gamification in *The New York Times* magazine, Sam Anderson wrote, “gamification seeks to turn the world into one giant chore chart covered with achievement stickers.”¹⁷

The system of rewards that people have come to expect from the achievement stickers given out on a daily basis can benefit those seeking to influence votes and political contributions. Once a feedback system of performing an action and a reward for

¹⁴ Zichermann, Gabe. 2010.

¹⁵ Political class is used to refer to establishment reporters or well known independent journalists and bloggers, pundits, elected officials and their staffs. Many of these individuals are also known as “Beltway players” or “inside the Beltway.”

¹⁶ Anderson, Sam. 2012. “Angry Birds, Farmville and Other Hyperaddictive ‘Stupid Games’.” *The New York Times*, April 4, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/angry-birds-farmville-and-other-hyperaddictive-stupid-games.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁷ Anderson, Sam. 2012.

that action is put into place all a campaign must do to capitalize on it is implement the system into their campaign. One visible political media outlet has already taken this approach. C-SPAN, the Cable, Satellite Public Affairs Network best known for full coverage of the House of Representatives and the Senate has implemented a reward system through the location based service Foursquare for C-SPAN's most dedicated users.

By checking in at five of many pre-designated Washington, D.C. -- locations where C-SPAN typically has or sends cameras to cover events, or otherwise are closely connected to national politics -- foursquare Foursquare users will unlock the C-SPAN badge. Checking in at key political sites across the country -- such as in Iowa and New Hampshire, locations with early presidential campaign activities which C-SPAN covers-- also will count toward earning the C-SPAN badge.¹⁸

C-SPAN took one step towards the gamification of politics and the 2012 Presidential campaign with the creation of a badge to reward their most devoted and interested participants. This same method can be applied to the presidential campaigns themselves. Dinners with candidates are usually reserved for top donors but they can also be raffled off to anyone who meets a certain criteria, such as anybody who donates five dollars within a certain date range which is itself a gamified element of campaigning. But that principle can be applied to layer campaign games, a location based game with a campaign game. The same raffle in September 2012 could be: anybody who checks in at 5 campaign events within any fourteen day span will be awarded the OFA (Obama For America) badge on Foursquare and then be entered into a drawing to win dinner with the President.

¹⁸ Anon. 2011. "Foursquare Users Now Can Earn a Political Badge, the C-SPAN Badge". C-SPAN. http://www.c-span.org/uploadedfiles/Content/About/Press_Releases/PR-20110513-foursquare.htm.

This approach costs the Obama team nothing but dinner and maybe transportation, but it can serve to energize a base of voters who might not have the financial means available to donate but are part of an active base that can be leveraged later in the campaign which needs to be kept engaged throughout the process. Attending five events in two weeks is not easy, it might require travel or organizing events, or otherwise a large amount of volunteer work for the campaign, but in his New York Times piece, Anderson suggests that using games as a means to encourage “players” to become “workers” might be the ultimate penetration of games and the highest form of gamification. Games which people feel compelled to play are “the logical end of gamification: gamified games. They have the appearance of games, they inspire the compulsion of games, but for many people they are not fun like games.”¹⁹

President Obama and his campaign joined Foursquare in August, 2011 to share the President’s location and information about what he is doing. By layering two games (Foursquare and the campaign) Obama and his political operation are conceding, “that the challenges facing the nation have become so complex that conveying information via traditional means no longer suffices.” Their answer according to an article in *The Washington Post* is to turn it into (more of) a game.²⁰

Political campaigns are in many ways the ultimate and original game in their basic structure of defined rules resulting in a winner and loser. The citizenry’s comfort with games has reinvigorated the game element that then reaches every element of the race.

¹⁹ Anderson, Sam. 2012.

²⁰ Basulto, Dominic. 2011. “The Gamification of the Presidential Election.” *The Washington Post*, August 18, Online edition, sec. Ideas@Innovations. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/post/the-gamification-of-the-presidential-election/2010/12/20/gIQAcfftNJ_blog.html.

THE 'VEEPSTAKES'

One of the most important decisions for a presidential campaign is picking a running mate, someone to occupy the office once referred to by an occupant as “not worth a bucket of warm spit,” the Vice Presidency.²¹ The complex set of rules surrounding the game serve to govern the players who choose to accept them. The first of these rules is that if you are playing the game, do not acknowledge the game.²² Potential nominees do not campaign to be a vice presidential candidate and when asked if they would be Governor Mitt Romney’s running mate on the 2012 Republican ticket they must deny interest, dance around the questions or give non-answer answers. Florida Senator Marco Rubio responded to questions about the vice presidency by saying "There are multiple ways that someone can help our nominee, and I look forward to doing that." One way of rejecting the game is to deny interest in playing as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush employed in his rejection of the office: “I'm not going to be vice president.”²³

At first answers like this might seem to reflect a respect for the presidential candidate and his process in choosing a running mate as well as a desire not to interfere with that process. However the very act of denying an interest is an act of being interested. Political comedian, commentator and blogger Will Durst calls the desire to

²¹ Cox, Patrick. “John Nance Garner on the Vice Presidency - In Search of the Proverbial Bucket”. University. *Dolph Briscoe Center for American History*.
http://www.cah.utexas.edu/news/press_release.php?press=press_bucket.

²² Anon. 2012. “The First Rule of Veepstakes - Video on Msnbc.com.” *Msnbc*, May 8, Online edition.
<http://video.msnbc.msn.com/newsnation/47326338/#47326338>.

²³ Moody, Chris. 2012. “Romney VP Speculation Fills the Weekend with Jeb Bush, Rubio, Ayotte and Gingrich Weighing In.” *Yahoo News*, May 7, Online edition, sec. The Ticket.
<http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/veepstake-speculation-fills-weekend-jeb-bush-rubio-ayotte-153011716.html>.

divine the vice presidential candidate “that quadrennial game sensation sweeping the nation.”²⁴

Alone the Veepstakes does not gamify politics, it is an example of how game mechanics can be taken outside the game environment and into a political one to change the nature of the political process and alter engagement. The word “veepstakes”, a combination of “veep” (short for Vice President) and “sweepstakes”, makes it seem like a game, and then allows for more game elements to follow. The Washington D.C. newspaper *Politico* declared, “the veepstakes tryouts have begun” and the only games that require tryouts are competitions, which lead to eliminations and ultimately a winner.²⁵

The language chosen to describe an action is equally as important as the action itself. Choosing to define the selection of a vice presidential candidate as a game turns it into one. In a 2010 TED Talk, Jesse Schell describes the process by which users become drawn into games as a self fulfilling prophecy: people pay for games because they are spending a lot of time with them and they then spend a lot of time with them to justify their payment.²⁶ The same logic can be applied to the language of politics: selecting a vice presidential candidate is turned into a game because of the natural game structure of politics, and the structural elements of politics resemble those of a game therefore selecting a vice presidential candidate is turned into one.

²⁴ Durst, Will. 2012. “2012 Veepstakes.” *The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/will-durst/2012-veepstakes_b_1481180.html.

²⁵ Schultheis, Emily. 2012. “The Very Public Race for Veep.” *Politico*, May 4, Online edition. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0512/75906.html>.

²⁶ Schell, Jesse. 2010. “When Games Invade Real Life” February, DICE Summit 2010. http://www.ted.com/talks/jesse_schell_when_games_invade_real_life.html.

AMERICANS ELECT

One of the more novel and controversial elements of the 2012 election season is the rise of a new way of nominating a candidate. Americans Elect offers an online primary to choose a pair of Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates who will appear on the ballot in all fifty states.²⁷ Their goal of stepping outside the two-party system is achieved through a pairing of a Democrat with a Republican or an Independent so the Presidential and Vice Presidential nominees are not from the same traditional party. Some candidates have declared their intention to run while others are part of a popular movement to draft them onto a ticket.²⁸

What are the game elements of Americans Elect? First a user registers and defines their priorities, then they are matched with candidates who share their views; users then get to “shape the debate” followed by choosing candidates. The more than 2.5 million participants in this process work with game elements to advance their cause and their standing within the organization.²⁹ A video announcement from the organization details the use of badges, a traditional element of gamification, in the Americans Elect process. “From the ‘Rockefeller’ to the ‘Uncle Sam’ you’ll earn them [badges] for things like answering questions, making a donation, sharing with friends and family and of course bringing in new delegates [participants/players].”³⁰

What role does Americans Elect play in the game? Some have gone as far as to call the resulting ticket a spoiler, winning enough votes in a key state to give the election

²⁷ Americans Elect is a non-partisan, non-profit organization working for ballot access in all fifty states for the agreed upon candidate and does not support any individual candidate or position.

²⁸ Anon. “About.” *Americans Elect 2012*. <http://www.americanelect.org/about>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Anon. 2012. *Americans Elect How To: Badges*. Americans Elect How To: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=_01yzBLF3j8.

to the candidate who would have lost the electoral college vote without that state.³¹ The idea is similar to the one advanced that Ralph Nader won enough votes in Florida in 2000 that, when combined with the butterfly ballot gave enough votes to George W. Bush for him to win the election without winning the popular vote.

IMPACT

Gamification of campaigns leads to gamification of governing, contends game designer Andrea Phillips in a blog post following Election Day, 2010.

The problem with the gamification of politics, though, is that it necessarily results in the gamification of *government*, too. And government isn't just a game, in the sense of an entertainment with no meaningful externalities. Government is the stuff of lives saved or broken, economies buoyed or sunk, wars fought or peace brokered. The stakes are high.

The sentiment is correct, but Phillips appears to be implying only that the lawmakers and the political class participant in the game. She implies that by following the latest opinion poll (standings) and by tweeting who won the “Byrd Badge” for most intricate use of parliamentary procedure the game is only accessible to those professionally qualified to play.³²

Although she is unspecific, these are the types of actions, which appear to be at the core of Phillips’s argument, and while there is the gamification of the political class there is also the gamification of the rest of the population, often times at the urging of the established media and elected officials.

³¹ Meyerson, Harold. 2012. “Don’t Let Americans Elect Muddy the 2012 Race.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, Online edition, sec. Op-ed. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/20/opinion/la-oe-meyerson-americans-elect-20120320>.

³² The “Byrd Badge” is a fictional reward invented for the purposes of this paper to highlight that no such reward truly exists. The badge is named for former Senator Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) who was a master of parliamentary procedure during his time in both houses of Congress.

The New York Times published an interactive feature in November, 2010 entitled “You fix the budget” asking readers to choose which government expenses should be cut and by how much. The graphic which showed savings in 2015 (five year budgeting) and 2030 (20 year budgeting) filled in boxes as the reader progressed through the budget items ultimately ending in “you solved the deficit!” and offering readers the opportunity to share their solutions on their social networks.³³

Solving the deficit is no small task, Congress has not accomplished it and the recommendations numerous commissions empowered to identify cuts and savings have been ignored. For an individual reader to achieve 1.3 trillion dollars in savings in twenty years is fulfilling, both in that they solved the deficit and having accomplished the task set out by the game. Gratification is a commonly used game element employed to keep players returning so as to continue being gratified. In this game, *The New York Times* employed the tactic with the “you solved the deficit” along with the opportunity to share how you accomplished the task by posting the equivalent of a badge on social media for connections to see.

CONCLUSIONS

At its core, politics is a game with incredible real-world implications and when politics comes to be seen either as a casual game or a more sophisticated virtual world the real-world outcomes change because the nature of relationships online do not translate fluidly offline.

³³ Anon. 2010. “Budget Puzzle: You Fix the Budget.” *The New York Times*, November 13. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/13/weekinreview/deficits-graphic.html>.

Many casual games are played alone for personal enjoyment such as Angry Birds but games that involve multiple players cannot be mapped over real life. A MMORPG such as World of Warcraft involves people playing on servers who may or may not know each other in real life and attacking other players who they may or may not know. The arrangement of the game of Alliance versus Horde ensures that one team will always be attacking another, and the cloaking of real identities allows a player to maintain characters on more than one server or multiple characters on a single server without ever revealing their true selves. Politics does not allow for such a luxury. Candidates campaign under their real name and govern under the same real name, attacking your opponent on Tuesday by posting pictures of their SUV online might not serve your interests on Wednesday when you need their vote.

Games, like the one developed by *The New York Times* although part of a series on reducing the deficit hide much of the complexity of the budget process and for an ill-informed participant drawn into the game for the game elements. The ability to win creates the illusion that the problem is an easy one to solve as a user might bypass the informative articles and debate included with the interactive.

Gamification is not inherently bad, C-SPAN's Foursquare badge allows an easy way to participate and share with friends a love for both politics and C-SPAN by checking in at the locations. Alone, this is harmless. It is in the aggregate that the totality of the gamifying language of politics, the adoption and layering of existing gamified apps, and the creation of new gamified elements that can create a dangerous situation of gamified governing that could result in undesired outcomes stemming from an incomplete understanding of a process the outcomes of which are not a game.

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