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Gamification is broken
An interview with Steven Poole

Steven Poole is the author of *Trigger Happy* (2000. New York, NY: Arcade Publish), *Unspeak* (2006. New York, NY: Grove Press), and *You Aren't What You Eat* (2012. In press). He has written extensively on books, culture, and videogames for *The Guardian* and other publications.

Q. In a recent article on *Edge*, you criticized Jane McGonigal's take on videogames as socially redemptive devices[1]. To us, her book seemed to be one of the peaks of a rising change in the social perception of gaming. Games have emerged as an unquestionably positive activity: they can be art, they are beneficial to the individual on a cognitive or psychological level, and they can serve socially relevant issues. You seem to share with GAME a more moderate position on these issues. Can you tell us more about this with regard to your article?

A. Two of my columns for *Edge* magazine last year were about "gamification", which in general means the application of videogame mechanics and reward–systems to real–life activities. The first pointed out that an uncritical newspaper report about a "gamification" of the London public–transport system made it obvious that the real interest for those making it was the opportunity to sell advertising in the virtual space overlaying the real one. When I turned to Jane McGonigal's book, *Reality Is Broken* (2011), it seemed to me strangely complacent. The author claims that "reality is too easy," which is why we need to erect game–like obstacles in it; but of course reality is not easy for many people. McGonigal also claims that large–scale social games could help solve problems such as global warming and world poverty. Though she has done some very interesting work (and made some very interesting games) herself, these claims are so hyperbolic that they are surely counterproductive, as well as tending to trivialize the very problems that "gamification" will allegedly help solve.

Q. The rising discourse about games as an absolutely positive medium seems to contradict a previous perception of gaming as a negative activity. Games used to be a health hazard, they were incapable of aesthetic achievements, or they promoted antisocial behaviour. In an article you wrote in 2000 for *The Guardian*[2], you were amongst the very few who were able to criticize such a narrative.

1. McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is Broken*. New York, NY: The Penguin Press HC.

Do you still subscribe to your previous comment in relation to that particular historical moment? Do you think much has actually changed since then?

A. *Trigger Happy*[3], the book I published in 2000, was in one sense a manifesto for treating videogames as a new artform, and so part of it (as with that article) was necessarily devoted to rebutting the prevailing negative mainstream view of them. But back then, even other thinkers who recognized the aesthetic interest of videogames were too often thinking in terms of other media, so I needed also to challenge the assumptions behind phrases like "interactive storytelling" or "interactive cinema", which thankfully one doesn't hear so often any more. (It would be nice to suppose I played some small part in destroying their popularity).

In a way a lot has changed since I published that book, in ways that I hoped it would change: videogames have attained more of a mass cultural acceptance (they are now afforded long reviews in newspaper culture sections, for example, rather than buried away in the geeky tech supplements). In another way, though, nothing has changed, in that the old "But is it art?" question keeps coming round (see the Roger Ebert kerfuffle of recent years[4]), even though the answer, or so it seems to me, is very simple. Every new artform in history is art, but not in the way that people have previously thought of art. That is why it's new. And that's why there will always be a reactionary cadre of people who say "But this is not art!", as they did of novels and cinema in their turn. Sure, it's not art as you know it. Any definition of "art" is just a post hoc account of what all the different forms might have in common. When a new form comes along, you have to revise that account.

My own view remains that videogames are, indeed, an artform, capable of tremendous things, but also capable of lazily recycling political and cultural ideologies. The interest for me, in my monthly column, is in analysing individual works, or trends across certain works. It no longer makes sense—if it ever did— to make grand claims about "videogames" in general, in the same way that you can't really say anything interesting about cinema in general or books in general.

Q. Polarized takes on games seem to have emerged in recent times from the academy, while your position, which is much more aware of the implications of the relationships between technology and culture, comes from the journalistic field. Do you believe that in the understanding of digital games there has been an overlapping of academies and specialized journalism, and that the latter is somehow more conscious of the general developments of the narratives regarding video games, to the point that this view is somehow more cautious than the academic one?

A. When it first began to become respectable to write about videogames in the academy, you could see that many people were just importing the trendy new thing (videogames) into a pre-existing media-theoretical practice and lexicon, which didn't seem to me very fruitful. But these days I think it's less than useful to think of a dichotomy between journalism and the academy, since so many of the best writers on videogames straddle both fields, and often the

2..Poole, S. (2000, November 4). Zones of pure play. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www. guardian.co.uk/technology/2000/ nov/04/games.dumb

3. Poole, S. (2000). *Trigger Happy*. New York, NY: Arcade Publish.

4. Ebert, R. (2010, April 16). Video games can never be art. *Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved from http:// blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/ video_games_can_never_be_art. html

third field of game development as well. Indeed, one of the thinkers on videogames I admire most right now, Ian Bogost, is an academic, a columnist, and a game designer himself; and Clint Hocking is a very thoughtful writer as well as a designer. If academics nonetheless still sometimes make grander claims about videogames than journalists in the specialist press (e.g. *Edge*) do, I think that has more to do with the pressures and incentives of university employment and trade publishing than with anything inherent to an "academic" as opposed to an unaffiliated critic's point of view.

Q. Do you think thus that we could speak of an actual change in the social perception of gaming in a wider sense? Do the clashing perceptions of games as either redemptive or noxious run as parallel or at the expense of each other? Do you think that the reasons for such discursive changes might really have to do with revolutions in the medium of the video game? Or rather, do they reflect social and generational shifts?

A. I seem to perceive the grand "redemptive" narrative of videogames as coming mainly in books—such as *Reality Is Broken and Fun, Inc.*[5], and the contrary "noxious" narrative as perpetuated still by the gutter press. I don't think there is much interaction between the two, and I think most people who take a close critical interest in videogames are sceptical of both. But there is a generational difference to the extent that the very idea of taking a close critical interest in videogames, which would have seemed like a juvenile waste of time twenty years ago, is now considered perfectly respectable by people who have grown up with them, and observed their evolution into a greater variety of complex and interesting forms.

Q. In the recent past, claims have been made by new disciplines for the study of videogames, such as "ludology". Do you think this could be explained mostly by the urges and necessities of academics and their professional context, and that this replicates in the academic field a larger tendency of the gaming community to niche into its own culture? Instead of claiming a radical specificity for games, should we not consider them in their relations with other arts and as a specific facet of a broader and far-reaching landscape of leisure and entertainment? This would imply thinking that some of the already established approaches (e. g. the "humanistic tradition") could still prove more fruitful, historically savvy, and mature reserve of intellectual tools than the ones which have tried to break apart to claim recognition—especially in times in which Roger Ebert has not retreated from his claims.

A. I think we need to keep both views in a productive tension. On the one hand, games draw from and are influenced by other art forms, such as cinema, painting, comics, architecture and literature, and certain aspects of the critical tradition in those media can certainly be applied interestingly to games. On the other hand, it would be wrong to assume that those critical tools can exhaust the possibilities of games, because games are something radically new in art: not because they are "interactive" (a word whose use can be confusing, since

5. Chatfield, T. (2010). *Fun Inc.* London, UK: Virgin Books..

all art is interactive), but because they change depending on what the user does. That's what the ludologists (or latterly, say, the procedural rhetoricians) rightly recognize and insist upon.

Q. Regardless of those who consider games from a critical perspective (and of prejudicial opinions), it would seem as though the response of the mainstream media was largely adjusting to an unconditioned bias. However, this could hardly be seen as a necessarily more critical or mature approach. The mainstream journalist, or even the one from the specialized press, often buys into an absolute praise for games that boast big production values or intercept gamers' need for social legitimization. It is our opinion that games like *L.A, Noire* [6] have been unconditionally hailed as a turning point for the history of gaming despite their being far from perfect and not bringing any actual revolution. In fact, claims of "modern games" as being capable of art are based very often on the disdain of the "old" and therefore inept ones, with no historical consciousness of what constitutes a good game in its own right.

A. I agree. To me it's obvious that *Defender* [7] is a better game than *Red Dead Redemption* [8]; but also that *Shadow of the Colossus* [9] is a better game than *Joust* [10]. There is still too much of what I have called "cinema envy" even among the self-appointed defenders of videogames today: an assumption that the closer a game imitates some version of the "cinematic"—e.g. *L.A. Noire*, *Heavy Rain*[11]—the better it is, and the better it will serve as a kind of ambassador for videogames in general to a non-specialist audience. But the danger here is that, if you show someone what is essentially a very badly scripted CGI movie with a few menus or button-prompts thrown in, the person can justly respond: "Well, if this is the best that videogames can do, they are juvenile rubbish, just as I thought all along!" (I think this is basically what happened with Ebert.)

Q. Much has been said about the so-called "gamification" and worldwide popularization of video games. Has gaming become a pervasive activity that extends far beyond a particular subculture? Can you tell us something about this while keeping in mind what we have so far discussed?

A. It's obviously not a "subculture" when you take into account the millions of people who play games on Facebook and smartphones. You could say we're living in an age of ambient play.

6. *L.A. Noire*, Rockstar Games, Australia, 2011.
7. *Defender*, Williams Electronics, USA, 1980.
8. *Red Dead Redemption*, Rockstar Games, USA, 2010.
9. *Shadow of the Colossus*, SCE, Japan 2005.
10. *Joust*, Williams Electronics, USA, 1982.
11. *Heavy Rain*, SCEEE, France, 2010.