

David Golumbia
Virginia Commonwealth University

SLSA Annual Conference
September, 2012

Game of Drones

i. The Cyber-Libertarian Agenda

When I was growing up it was well-understood, especially by thinkers from a wide range of humanities disciplines and perspectives that the wholesale computerization of society was incompatible with core principles of human freedom. Lacking strong democratic oversight, computerization can always and will always be used by the powerful to their benefit, and the distribution of computing power will always be tilted toward actors with other forms of power, especially governments and businesses, because most forms of computational power can be purchased with capital. It was even well understood that computerization was likely to be imposed upon society not as an overtly authoritarian power grab, but rather as a seductive offer too good to pass up and too good to be true.

Despite the thorough grounding of this perspective, we are now told with more and more frequent certainty, even at times in the humanities, that computerization is the *only* means for repairing our social ills, and that this is so obviously the case that countervailing viewpoints should not even be considered. This reversal—from force to be feared to savior to be championed—strikes me as worryingly close to the scenario about which so many of those thinkers warned us: we would come to love and even solicit the systems that, were we to stand outside and look at them objectively, we know to carry too many inherent risks to be implemented without prolonged, careful, clear-eyed and rational consideration. I don't find enough evidence in favor of the salvific view to believe that it has developed out of such consideration; to the contrary, it seems to me substantially ideological, a view that happens to align neatly with the imperatives to keep spending money on information technology, and for the powerful to make themselves even more powerful.

This is the background against which I view the majority of cyber-libertarian discourse. Here I mean something broader than the deeper and more specific perspective I follow analytic philosophers in calling computationalism in my book *The Cultural Logic of Computation*. I follow Morozov, Toby Miller, Langdon Winner and others in using cyber-libertarianism as a name for any discourse that suggests that the way to create more human freedom is through ever-more ubiquitous computerization. As one is forced

now to say at such moments, I am not a Luddite and I am in no way suggesting that we should throw away our computers or go back to the stone age, or the paper age, or whatever you want to call it. What I am suggesting is that the thoroughgoing cyber-libertarianism on which our culture thrives—and which, despite being in many ways an overt and explicit form of pro-capitalist techno-utopianism, often simultaneously declares itself to be an anti-capitalist leftism—offers itself as a kind of self-regulatory moral architecture that can only be an emperor who has no clothes. It is not the case that Facebook, or Twitter, or Google on the one hand, or “hacking” as such on the other, carry within themselves a moral solvent that insures they will only do good, or only be used for good. But because we have so little discourse directed toward finding ways to keep computational power within democratic control—and worse, because our typical *laissez-faire* method for making such decisions is to hand that control over exactly to those who have either a consumptive or productive interest in such decisions, even when the decisions clearly impact those who do not either produce or consume the product in question—we magnify the problems and make it very difficult to develop or even imagine solutions to them.

When I read about “gamification” as a strategy specifically designed to address social and personal problems, I see such calls first and foremost as yet another in the ongoing and sure to be perpetual series of exhortations toward more and more computerization, and toward computerization as the solution to any number of problems including the very problems produced or exacerbated by computerization. Gamification gestures away from the rational democratic discussion of the nature of our real problems and solutions toward them; toward a merger of independent political and intellectual thought with commercial agendas that was anathema to intellectuals of all stripes until just a few years ago; and toward an ongoing disparagement of human agency and human engagement with the life-world that we might ordinarily think comprise the main part of our daily existence. Despite its apparent and overt dependence on human players, the agenda gamification pushes can be understood as, at least in some manifest ways, nonhuman, because as the Sun Microsystems cofounder, computer scientist Bill Joy (2000), famously said, the future it describes doesn’t need us, even as it’s being sold to us as one we both need and want.

ii. Gamification and the Senses of “Game”

Perhaps the most disturbing entry into the discourse of gamification so far is Jane McGonigal’s *Reality Is Broken*, a book that closely replicates the form of intellectual inquiry while persistently avoiding most of the important intellectual and political questions raised by the book’s subject, a book that masquerades as neutral intellectual study while avoiding any substantive reflection on its author’s direct commercial interest in its conclusions.

A useful index of McGonigal's method, including her lack of respect for both her sources and her audience, is her reliance on the work of Mihály Csíkszentihályi, well-known around the world for his theory of "flow," which she quotes him in calling "the satisfying, exhilarating feeling of creative accomplishment and higher functioning" (Csíkszentihályi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, xiii; quoted at RIB 35) McGonigal writes that Csíkszentihályi "found a depressing lack of flow in everyday life, but an overwhelming abundance of it in games and gamelike activities" (RIB 35). McGonigal's repeated reliance on this research and the concept of flow throughout her book might lead one to think there is a natural connection between computer gaming and Csíkszentihályi's theory of optimal experience; he "was right," she says, "about the need to reinvent reality to work more like a game. He was just too early" (RIB 37). What McGonigal fails to mention is that Csíkszentihályi is still an active writer and thinker—like her, he has even given a well-regarded TED talk—but is an outspoken critic of what he calls and she repeatedly dismisses as "screen addiction," specifically noting in a recent *Scientific American* article that games "offer the psychic pleasure" of flow, but that "prolonged exposure of the orienting response can wear players out" (Kubey and Csíkszentihályi 2002), that screen time in general tends to take us away from the intimate physical contact human beings need to thrive, and that the flow of video games *simulates* the kinds of flow he is most interested in, and thereby threatens to remove us from the engagement with the human world that we most need.

Among the most telling examples of McGonigal's willful topsy-turvy style of argumentation is captured in a trope she frequently uses in her talks: "if I'm lying on my deathbed, will I wish I had spent more time playing computer games?" The question arises most directly, I think, from the tremendous timesuck constituted by computer games and the ease with which they distract us from other forms of personal interaction.

The top five regrets people have on their deathbed are:

- I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
- I wish I stayed in touch with family and friends.
- I wish I let myself be happier.
- I wish I'd had the courage to be my true self.
- I wish I had been true to my dreams and not what others expected of me.

It's plain to anyone with even a passing interest in taking games seriously, that rather than being something you regret, games can help prevent the major regrets that people suffer from. Ms. McGonigal then went about detailing some explicit ways in which they fight those regrets. It was a very moving talk and I

highly recommend everyone to check out the website in which she details her research. (Jane McGonigal, “Games for Change Festival” talk, quoted in Proto, “Games for Change Festival – Day 2 Recap”)

What I can only describe as the bald disingenuousness of McGonigal’s approach is visible in her deployment of this trope, because it would be easy enough to ask this question directly in well-constructed psychological surveys of just the kind she is relying upon: “do people on their deathbeds wish they’d spent more times playing video games?” While there are presumably some who would, and more power to them, I think I am right in my intuition that they are the minority. But the desiderata that McGonigal uses to advocate for gamification are ones that can only be thought to inhere in games from a blinkered position, since they name qualities that seem on the surface not to be enhanced but rather *diminished* by games, or at least by too much game play. Unlike the blog commentator reporting on McGonigal’s talk, I don’t think that “*anyone* who takes games seriously” thinks that games are an important means to prevent any of these regrets; to the contrary, at least many of us do think games, or at least too much time spent at video game screens, likely intensify rather than ameliorate these regrets.

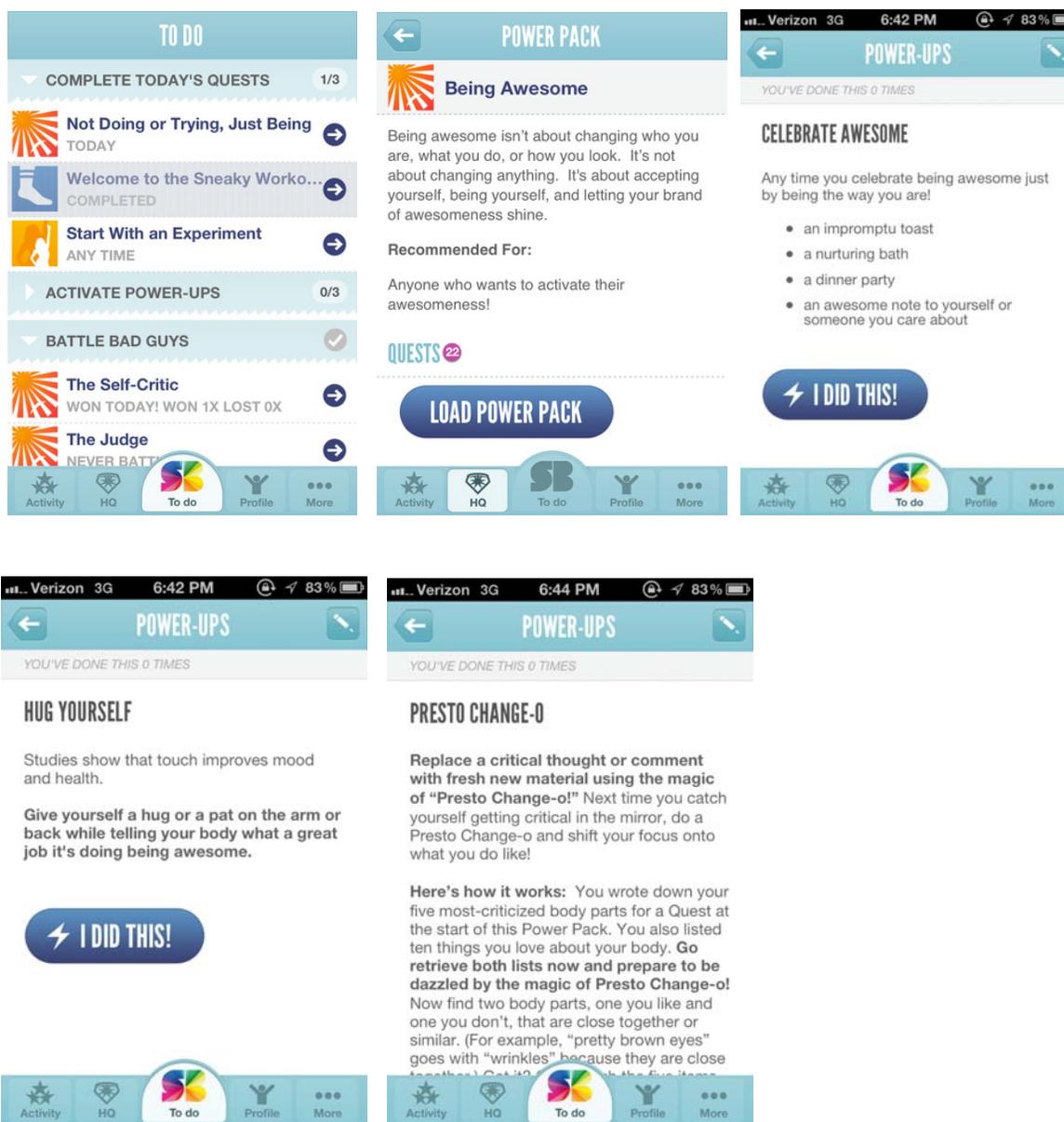
Here and throughout *Reality Is Broken* there is one quality more than any other that McGonigal identifies as critical to human happiness, one she is right to identify from work in the only academic field in which she shows any interest (despite her Berkeley PhD in Performance Studies). That field is the slim subsection of psychological research called “happiness studies” or “positive psychology,” among the more relentlessly depoliticized and tunnel-visioned versions of academic research in operation today, especially if one divorces it, as McGonigal does, from the rest of the research programs in which it is typically embedded. One of the five deathbed wishes she identifies is to “stay in touch with family and friends,” a locution which makes it sound as if all forms of being “in touch” are roughly equivalent. In *Reality Is Broken* McGonigal writes that “we crave social connection. Humans are extremely social creatures, and even the most introverted among us derive a large percentage of our happiness from spending time with the people we care about. We want to share experiences and build bonds, and we most often accomplish that by doing things that matter together” (49).

I could not agree more strongly with this sentiment, and it is rightly repeated throughout *Reality Is Broken*. Not repeated are two fairly clear theses from fields of research other than happiness studies: first, that the kind of social connection offered via the computer is no replacement for the in-person connection which “spending time with the people we care about” tends to suggest to all but the most computer-centric among us; second, that the addictive qualities of the computer itself are currently in part responsible for a widespread sense of isolation and disconnection among at least a significant minority of

contemporary people, as Sherry Turkle reports so ably in *Alone Together*. Since McGonigal, by focusing exclusively on happiness studies, never pauses to consider what might be the causes for the “broken” nature of what she calls “reality,” she never even considers the possibility that games, or more specifically video games and other screen-based activities that encourage us to spend even more of our time sutured to our chairs and the video monitor, rather than being the solution to the problems at which she gestures, are part of the problem, and that finding ways to put even more of them into our environment is very likely to make matters worse rather than better.

From people not invested in promoting games, including, sometimes to my surprise, many of my game-loving undergraduates, I hear a story that differs markedly from the one McGonigal tells. We all love texting and messaging and Facebook, they say, in part not just because they offer a kind of enhanced social connection but, just as much and somewhat paradoxically, because they let us and even encourage us to hide from each other. For many of us, at least, there is some part of our brains and our bodies that will tend to choose the least embodied, least “risky” contact with other people, even those about whom we care deeply, even when we know logically and from the perspective of our own experience that we will be happier risking more embodied contact. No matter how clearly we know these facts, if you put a relatively disembodied tool in front of us, many of us will choose it, against our better judgment and against a large part of our brains that tells us to choose better.

One of the easiest places to see the disjunction between the world of human connection gamification says it is promoting, and the nonhuman gaming world it often does promote, in the game with which McGonigal is primarily associated today, SuperBetter. SuperBetter combines game mechanics applied to everyday experiences and tasks, to-do list, and self-help manual, and is largely played on mobile devices. While there are some interesting ideas in this game, and it may have some social benefits which I would not want to deny, it is notable how in its current implementation what the user is told over and over again is that he or she is “super-awesome” just for being him or herself; that nothing need be done to improve things other than changing one’s mind—via “Presto Change-O” “magic” as one of the tasks says.



The disingenuous nature of this work is nowhere more clearly exposed than in the game's "Power Up" that rightly notes that "studies show that touch improves mood and health," and then tells the user to "Hug Yourself," without noting that, at least as far as I know, it is the touch of *other* people—or even other animals—that is understood to improve our mood and health (see, eg., Weze, Leathard, Grange, Tiplady, and Stevens, "Evaluation of Healing by Gentle Touch"). Just as McGonigal repeatedly makes the paradoxical argument that more time in front of the screen will bring us more physical closeness with our loved ones, her game here advertises the absence of the human as the solution for what she rightly acknowledges is our deep need for its presence.

iii. Drones as Gamification

One of McGonigal’s most disturbing, paradoxical, and tunnel-visioned claims is her prediction that a game designer, working on some unspecified project to solve an unspecified political problem, will be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by 2023. As I’ve already remarked, *Reality Is Broken* suggests we spend much more time inside video games, while offering no recommendations at all for how we increase political thought or analysis that would allow us to understand the world’s political problems well enough to create workable solutions to anything the Nobel Committee cares about. While the contributions of video games to world peace have yet to be demonstrated, as far as I know, their contributions to militarization and war are well-known and well-established. Recent scholars like Crogan, Dyer-Whitford and de Peuter, and Der Derian, as well as my fellow panelists, have noted the development of a “military-entertainment complex,” or what Peter Singer (“Meet the Sims”) calls “militainment,” one of whose effects is to serve as a primary tool for recruitment, especially of young people; estimates place the current US budget for video games of all sorts, including its own *America’s Army* recruitment tool, internal training software, and work with commercial game developers, at over \$6 billion (Singer, “Meet the Sims”).

Achievements: Unlocked

In achievement: unlocked on December 23, 2010 at 9:14 pm

My #1 goal in life is to see a game designer nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. I’ve forecast that this will happen by the year 2023. Of course, it’s not enough to just forecast the future — I’m also actively working to make it a reality. (And you can too — join **Gameful**, the Secret HQ for Worldchanging Game Developers.)



From <http://janemcgonigal.com>

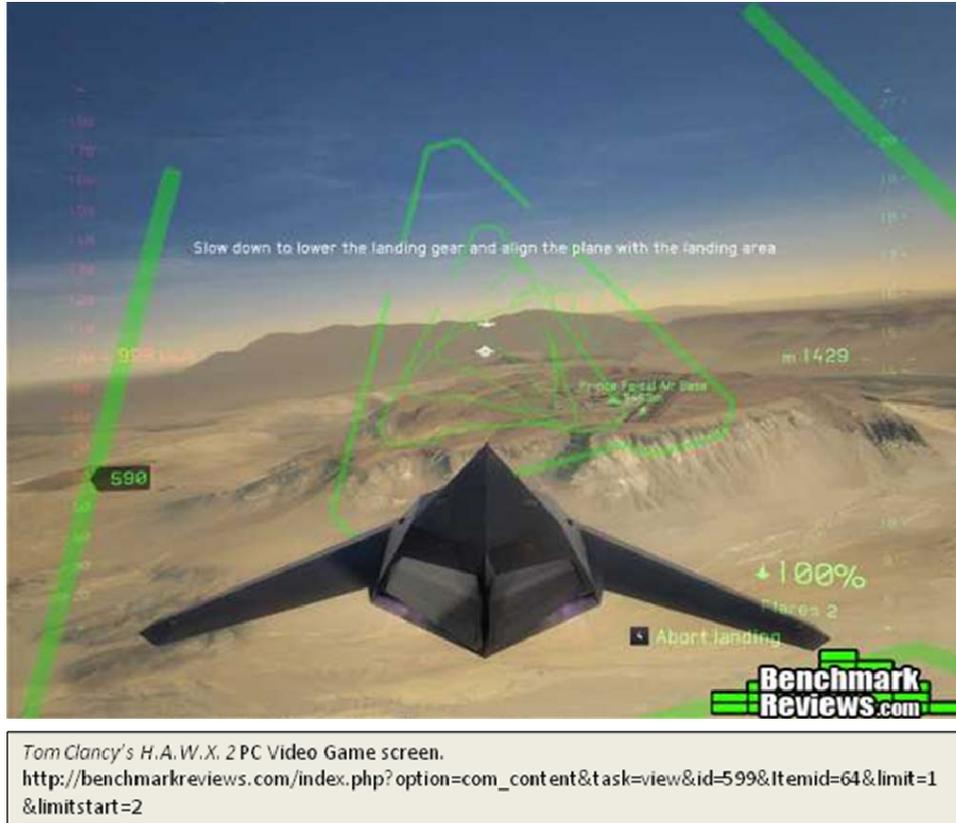
One effect of the wide spread of games, many of them built directly on military models, is to prime and identify those members of our society most likely to be ready, even to volunteer, for military service; one of the most robust canards of game defenders is that since violent games do not desensitize to violence everyone who plays them, that therefore they cannot be said to promote violence. Of course, the

deployers of the military version of gamification know that they do not need, and probably do not even want, the games to prime everyone for service; rather they want the games to target and prime that particular subsection of citizens who will take to the activity with particular skill and fervor. If one wants to call that free choice, semantics may require it, but it is a particular perversion of “free choice” through a kind of statistical manipulation that, seen from the top down, looks like it is anything but free.

The recent widespread deployment by the US in particular of Unmanned Combat Vehicles (UCVs), especially Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), collectively and colloquially known as *drones*, poses significant ethical and legal problems for not just the military but civil and democratic society as a whole. As one recent legal commentator puts it, “the concern is not the introduction of robots into the battlefield, but the gradual removal of humans” (Kanwar 2011, 3; see Singer 2009 for a complete overview). What strikes me as especially appropriate to the gamification discourse is not so much the physical drones themselves, but the software by which the drones are operated, which resembles video games very strongly, and this removal of human actors from the field of battle.



User interface for Ballista, DreamHammer's "multi-drone operating system." Spencer Ackerman, "War With Friends: Pentagon Eyes a Drone App Store," *Wired Danger Room* (Jun 18, 2012). <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/06/drone-app-store/>. Image provided by DreamHammer



What is disturbing about the removal of humans in this way is the fundamental lack of equivalence it introduces into what is understood the profoundly equalizing nature of war. In its ideal state, at least, war is understood as a kind of game in which the stakes are precisely the most valuable thing we have to offer: human life. Because its stakes are just that high, we enter into war only when it is unavoidable, only when we have no other alternative. At that moment we put our own lives at risk as we put the lives of our opponents at risk as well.

To some extent these are old issues; many forms of military and technological superiority allow one side or the other to put its troops more or less out of harm's way. But the canonical examples of such intervention—using jet planes to bomb when the other side has no air power, using land mines, or launching missiles from ships or remote ground sites, along with currently illegal and (apparently) unused tactics such as biological, chemical, and nuclear warfare—are already among the means that raise persistent claims of unfairness and that may violate laws of war. Further, many of those tactics that are currently legal involve, at least arguably, the physical presence of the bodies of the opposing forces somewhere near, if not in, the theater of combat, so that it is conceptually possible for the other side to attack the aircraft carrier or jet plane, even if by unconventional or asymmetric means.

I believe that one cause for the current acceptance of drone warfare among the American public is its own asymmetric nature: that it is designed to protect our troops while endangering theirs. Were this tactic available to all sides—for example if Pakistani troops could send drones into Colorado and target US drone pilots—it would first of all lose one of its main advantages, an advantage I am arguing is illicit and, on the thought of at least some military observers, illegal. Were the truly asymmetric product we now use to be available in reverse—were the Pakistanis able to target US citizens on our own soil while we had no defenses against them, and could not ourselves target the troops, it is not hard to imagine Americans rising up in vocal protest of the asymmetric nature of the tactic. Indeed, the line between what we call “terrorism” in virtue of not its political goals but its asymmetric nature, and drone strikes precisely against populations who themselves do not have access to the same tools of war, is remarkably thin. As recent reports have made very clear (Kaufman, “NYU-Stanford Report”), the violence perpetrated by drones, due both to their panoptical surveillance capabilities and to the lack of human operators directly accessible to enemy combatants, is experienced by our opponents, including its civilian noncombatants, as a new and especially terrifying form of psychological as well as physical warfare.

Today we read with increasing frequency, mostly in the political press, that drone operators themselves experience a peculiar kind of mental distress associated exactly with their disengagement from the field of battle: from, essentially, not having their lives at stake. In a 2010 interview with *Der Spiegel*, when asked “does your own physical safety make a difference for you?,” US drone pilot Major Bryan Callahan answers:

It sounds strange but being far away and safe is kind of a bummer. The other guys are exposing themselves, and that to me is still quite an honorable thing to do. So I feel like I'm cheating them. I'm relatively safe. If I screw up or miss something, if I screw up a shot, I wish it was me down there, not them. Sometimes I feel like I left them behind. (Pitzke, “It Is Not a Video Game”)

Interestingly, the interview is titled with a quotation from Callahan that despite its resemblance to one, drone software “is not a video game.” What he means is that the consequences of using the software are real, human ones, but “it’s easy to think that [it is a video game], to fall into that trap.” This parallels exactly an insight into what it means to be human that I see stretching back at least to Kant, in which part of what makes our world meaningful is precisely our own embodied investment in it and in each other; it seems to me plausible that the distress felt by drone operators is of a similar kind to the “alone together” feeling Turkle describes, and that both result precisely from gamifying parts of the world from which there are many reasons to worry about the subtraction of the human.

While its advocates suggest, then, that what our society needs to free itself is to become more gamified, the widespread adoption of games constitutes part of a thoroughgoing, deliberate, well-planned effort to control the actions, wishes, and beliefs of the population to a degree unthinkable even a generation ago. Anyone who looks at contemporary political campaigns in the US and does not see how thoroughly the voting public is being gamed in this regard needs to look more closely. Anyone who thinks that software of incredible sophistication, utilizing exactly the data we provide via any number of fun tools like Facebook and Farmville, is not being used to manipulate us with extreme care, sophistication, and secrecy, is living in a dream, a dream produced in part by games. Much of what is done by political parties, especially on the right, exists in a kind of confident dream of faux-openness, in which the venality and dishonesty of their operations can be repeatedly brought to light, while losing almost none of its efficacy, and in fact perhaps gaining efficacy, in no small part via gaming operations of a level of sophistication so great that most of us choose not to believe they are even possible—a fact the game masters know very well.

McGonigal and the gamifiers tell us that games will make our world more fun, without reflecting seriously on why it is that games are more fun than our everyday experience, or on what the effects could be on our everyday experience if we find more and more that there is another “reality,” a simulated world, that is tremendously more fun than the world in which we live. It is no accident that the software that controls drones removes human beings from the field of combat; despite the rhetoric, a principle goal of most regimes of computerization is to eliminate human interaction and human participation from whatever domain is being computerized. One need only look at the floor of any manufacturing business, or of securities trading, or of customer service, and so many other industries, to see that what we call “efficiency” translates directly into a vast reduction in the number of workers required and the general ability of machines to do more and more of what we used to need humans for. Make no mistake: there is no more nonhuman actor, and no more effective game master, than capital itself; and while one might imagine that capital requires human actors as some version of its lifeblood, to consume if nothing else, we have plenty of historical evidence that clearly shows that capital will find any avenue to continue its rapacious acceleration, up to and including the limit of destroying its own productive base. The close imbrication of capital with computerization augurs poorly for discourses of liberation that tie themselves closely to computerized salvation. What we need is not more games that tell us “we are super great just for being ourselves,” and that the solution to the breakages in our experience is to lose ourselves in more screens. We need to learn how to take control back from the game masters.

My goal has been by no means to suggest the elimination of video games. Games are fun, fun is good, I am all for fun—indeed I am very serious when I say that a world without games, actual games for play, is entirely anathema to me. My goal has been to argue against the discourse that in order to fix social problems we should first of all look to games, that we should consider games a wrongly-critiqued minority, and especially that we should take literally the inherent claim of the gamifiers that computerization in general or gamification in particular is being done primarily to make things better. As Ian Bogost has rightly pointed out, that claim is bullshit. Gamification is primarily being promoted to make things better for those who benefit from increased computerization, and at bottom that will always benefit the powerful even more than it benefits those with relatively less power, even when the mechanism for that is making successful gamifiers *into* the powerful. My goal has been to challenge us to figure out ways to develop constraints other than “do what feels good until you get sick of it” and “whatever the tech companies manage to sell to the most number of people is fine” for activities that may have a general negative impact on vital parts of the social fabric. What I hope especially to have suggested, and what I hope to insist on, is that humanities scholars of digital media are today one of the only groups in any kind of position to raise critical questions about both the discourse of gamification and the effects of generalized computerization; that we are the nearly unique heirs to any number of extremely deep discourses about what computerization is for and what its effects are, and that it is our responsibility to keep alive the questions raised in those discourses; and that if society cannot look to us to be the guardians of what is vital to the human, it is not at all clear to whom it will be able to look.

Works Cited

- Bogost, Ian. 2011. “Gamification Is Bullshit.” (Aug 8). Blog posting.
http://www.bogost.com/blog/gamification_is_bullshit.shtml. Accessed Sep 25, 2012.
- Csikszentihályi, Mihály. 1975. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Crogan, Patrick. 2011. *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoscience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Der Derian, James. 2001. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dyer-Whitford, Nick, and Greig de Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- “Gamification.” No date. Gamification wiki entry. <http://gamification.org/wiki/Gamification>. Accessed Sep 16, 2012.
- Golumbia, David. 2009. *The Cultural Logic of Computation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Columbia, David. 2009. "Games Without Play: Deconstructing *World of Warcraft*." *New Literary History* 40:1 (Winter).
- Groeger, Lena, and Cora Currier. 2012. "Stacking Up the Administration's Drone Claims." *ProPublica* (Sep 13). <http://projects.propublica.org/graphics/cia-drones-strikes>. Accessed Sep 16, 2012.
- Joy, Bill. 2000. "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us." *Wired* 8:04 (April).
<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html>. Accessed Sep 18, 2012.
- Kanwar, Viv. 2011. "Post-Human Humanitarian Law: The Law of War in the Age of Robotic Weapons." *Harvard National Security Journal* 2:2. <http://harvardnsj.org/>.
- Kaufman, Brett. 2012. "NYU-Stanford Report Documents U.S. Government's False Narrative on Drone Strikes." ACLU Blog of Rights (Sep 25). <http://www.aclu.org/blog/national-security/nyu-stanford-report-documents-us-governments-false-narrative-drone-strikes>. Accessed Sep 20, 2012.
- Kubey, Robert, and Mihály Csíkszentihályi. 2002. "Television Addiction Is No Mere Metaphor." *Scientific American* (Feb 2002). 74-80.
- McGonigal, Jane. 2011. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin.
- Pitzke, Marc. 2010. "It Is Not a Video Game." *Spiegel Online* (Mar 12).
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-a-drone-pilot-it-is-not-a-video-game-a-682842.html>. Accessed Sep 17, 2012.
- Proto, Andrew. 2012. "Games for Change Festival – Day 2 Recap." The Gamification Corporation blog posting. <http://www.gamification.co/2012/07/03/games-for-change-festival-day-2-recap/>. Accessed Sep 20, 2012.
- Singer, Peter W. 2010. "Meet the Sims... And Shoot Them." *Foreign Policy* (March/April).
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/meet_the_sims_and_shoot_them.
- Singer, Peter W. 2009. *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.
- Weze, C., H. L. Leathard, J. Grange, P. Tiplady, and G. Stevens. 2005. "Evaluation of Healing by Gentle Touch." *Public Health* 119: 1 (January). 3-10.