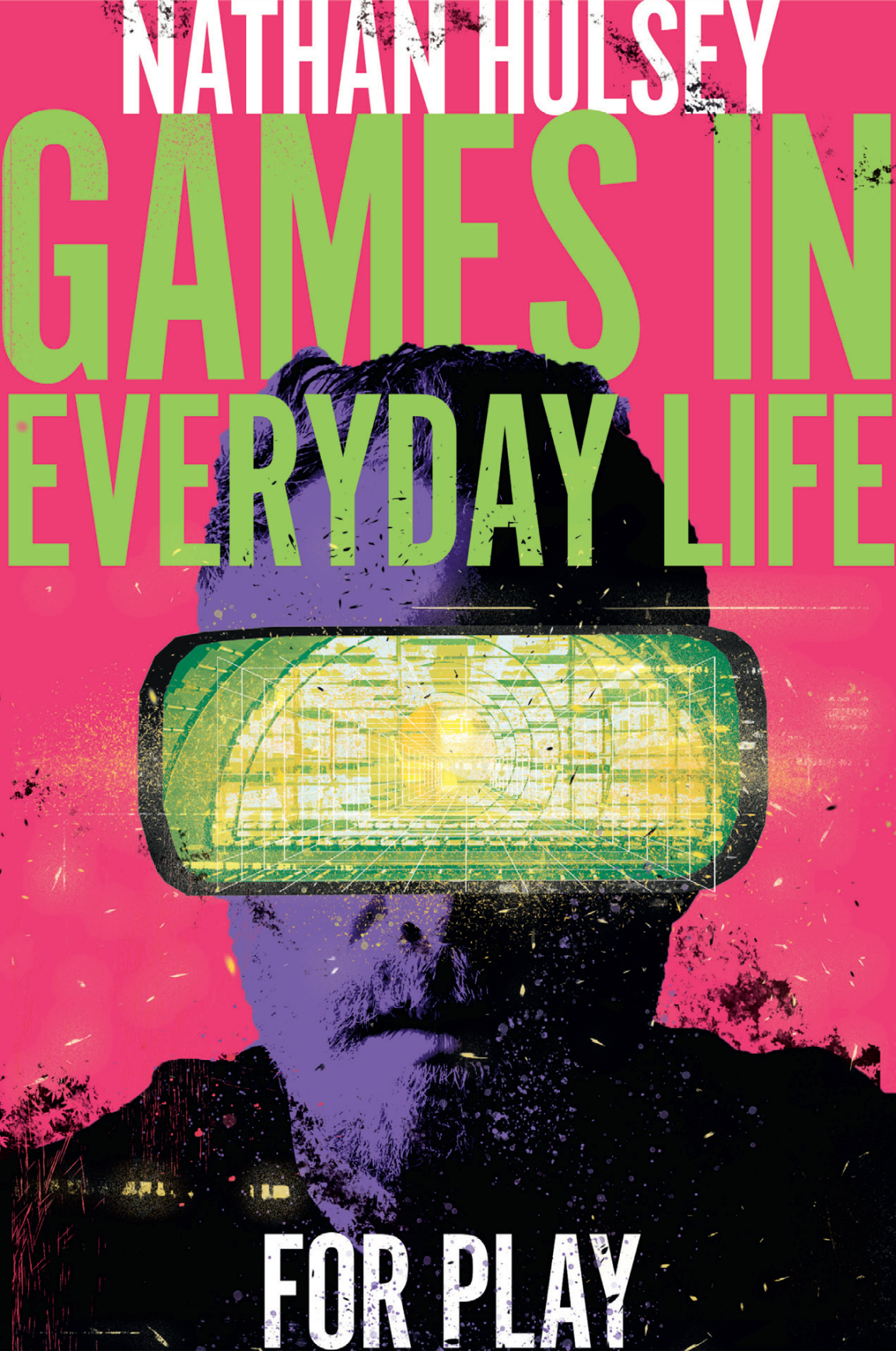
NATHAN HULSEY

GAMES IN EVERYDAY LIFE



FOR PLAY

Games in Everyday Life

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Games in Everyday Life: For Play

By

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

In 1960 the German philosopher Eugen Fink wrote *Spiel als Weltsymbol*, or "Play as a Symbol of the World." The work portrayed play as a wellspring of creation, a sort of cosmic power source that generated "the world": the process by which all phenomena make themselves known to human beings (Loht, 2016). Fink also claimed that play revealed the fundamental purposelessness of the world, a vast tumbling whirlpool of causalities. For Fink, the human need for play is rooted in the desire to be co-constituted, embodied, in the world (Fink, 1974). We wish to exercise freedom reflexively, to live and create without consequence. The work went relatively unnoticed in the English-speaking academic world. Play (for the pragmatic-minded) has primarily been treated as a theoretical dead end by "serious" thinkers. Perhaps its absence in most critical scholarship is because, as Fink noted, nothing comes of it – play roots itself in irreality, or what might be rather than what is.

Despite play's often slippery ontological status, both play and games have begun to creep once again into the modern conscience. Video games have become one of the largest media forms in the world, spawning a global "gamer culture." Films such as Black Mirror's *Bandersnatch* and Spielberg's *Ready Player One* muse on the world as gameplay, a series of choices and consequences directed and designed by an enigmatic gamemaster. These narrative universes place the modern individual in a maze of choices and rewards. The concern with the vast matrix of technology that precedes every collective thought and action is a common theme in both games and gaming culture. Thus, gaming culture and play have become seemingly ubiquitous topics in the study of technology and media.

Outside of deep subcultures and media narratives, our everyday, quotidian existence also seems increasingly gamelike. Ever: multiplying categories of gamelike applications such as *Facebook*, the social media giant that contains game elements like points and rewards, or *Trello*, productivity software that provides level-like tracking for tasks and "power-ups" that give a playful façade to labor, inundate consumers. Also, the mobile applications market is suffused with free-to-play, free-to-buy, and "freemium" products that draw on the gaming boom. They promise to enhance daily life, to give it new meaning by drawing on the wellspring of play while also providing direction with the rules and rewards of a game. In the digital age, play becomes a wellspring of possibilities and also a wellspring of profitable data.

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Collectively, humanity is entering into the age of *surveillance capitalism*, where data-hungry corporations and governments increasingly influence everyday life (Zuboff, 2019). All of our "free" applications are not for charity. They expand the base of users via a nonexistent entry price and then profit on the data users' produce, mining it for themselves and third parties. All these data have produced a cottage industry of data brokers, selling to the highest bidders (Steel & Dembosky, 2013). Every action becomes quantified, monitored, and fed into advanced predictive algorithms and machine learning systems, which are driven by dispersed human labor (Lanier, 2013). Culture, capital, labor, and consumption are increasingly driven by "playful" applications that borrow from games but never fulfill the category of a game. As Fink suggests, play is a type of energy source, but in surveillance capitalism, the consequences and the stakes of play are genuine.

This book is meant to address these liminal applications, which are commonly referred to as *gamified applications* by industry professionals. In 2018, the market share of gamification was expected to hit around $11 billion by 2022 (Gamification Market, 2017). These statistics are only drawn from companies that brand themselves as selling gamified services; many more companies rely on gamified design, such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and many other social media sites. The rate of gamified applications has increased significantly in recent years, but they remain relatively unaddressed in critical scholarship. Gamification is a unique practice: while gamified applications draw on games, they do not purport to be games. Gamification draws from a vast array of practices and pursuits associated with game design and play in order to produce social and behavioral change.

In recent years, scholars have examined how games and play have evolved within the context of our digitally oriented societies. While this project, in many ways, is the focus of many collaborative efforts across disciplines, my small contribution focuses on how games and play are tools in maintaining large-scale social and economic simulations that seep out into our lives, guiding our actions and beliefs for profit. To do this, I explore how game design, in concert with surveillance, produces a method of *seductive control*. This phrase will be unpacked over the course of the book, but the simple definition is *pleasure-oriented, playful control without an end-state*. Unlike control that utilizes punishment and discipline, seduction works as a motivator based in games and play.

Surveillance capitalism revolves around a profound asymmetry in "knowledge and the power that accrues knowledge" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 11). The institutions that collect and model out data know everything about us, but we seem to be unaware of their slow incursion into our everyday lives. I argue that play and seduction are two critical aspects of what Shoshanna Zuboff calls a "psychic numbing" to the effects of wide-scale dataveillance. She states that gamification presents a significant technique in the collection of data, serving to motivate use while obscuring surveillance and manipulation (Zuboff, 2019, p. 314). As such, games and game design have become an instrumentalized so-called "big data" revolution. However, the use of game design in building large-scale data mining and surveillance enclosures has yet to be explored in full. Oversights occur

because of two significant issues. First, a critical history of digital games as "serious" computational media has yet to emerge (Lowood, 2009a). Second, due to this lack of history, scholars have not developed a critical vocabulary to examine games beyond the current focus on "gaming" as a type of leisure culture. By this, I refer to the primary aim of critical scholarship on games, which contextually examines *digital games*, *game industries*, and *game cultures*: the material, social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of playing games.

This project intervenes in Game Studies by framing a game design as an innate extension of computation and simulation. Games and game design played a large role in determining the current stage of computing: networked surveillance, big data, simulation, and predictive modeling all utilize elements of games and game design. I hope to provide a set of terms that can aid in expanding the ways that games are studied, expanding scholarship beyond the immediate concerns with gaming culture and looking at how game design is affecting people's everyday life.

In short, this book is dedicated to establishing gamification as a *theoretical process*, an assemblage of techniques with histories rooted in simulation, computation, and social control. As such, studying gamification goes beyond market predictions, business applications, and social effects: gamification is part of a wider push to assimilate, monitor, and manage human populations through a unique brand of seductive design that focuses on power without force and control without discipline. As such, I argue that gamification contributes to an emerging form of governmentality rooted in an increasingly technocratic society. It is a design philosophy mired within the global deluge of surveillance capitalism.

Seduction and the Stack

To some degree, the growth of gamified applications is related to the increasing complexity, and digitalization, of play. Digital gaming is a combination of technology, play, and sociability that relies on the technological embodiment of players. These attributes identify digital games as a particularly conspicuous aspect of "new media" (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). Gaming relies on the convergence of play, consumption, simulation, media technologies, human feedback to manipulate and to create pleasurably seductive human (or nonhuman) bonds with machinic systems and computational protocol (Giddings, 2007a). The intensive bond between human and computer, cemented by seductive design, is leading to new approaches in social and economic organization. Even more important, though, it is leading to new forms of governance and control.

Scholars have long looked for some type of teleology in media history and its eventual "remediations" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Kittler, 1986). However, the most substantial changes in our sociotechnical lives tie into a computer-based "architecture of governance," or what Benjamin H. Bratton (2015) calls *The Stack*. The Stack is oriented around planetary-scale computation, a "metainfrastructure" that collects and parses increasingly large amounts of information. This large-scale technical infrastructure provides the backbone for new ways of control backed by the multilayered technocracy of large-scale networked "layers" that "arrange technologies vertically within a modular, interdependent order"

(Bratton, 2015). The Stack comprises large-scale technological agencies (which shape political and economic geographies) and also vast layers of data archives (which shape the ways we interpret concepts like politics, economics, or geographies).

The Stack may seem like a hyper-object; too large to properly wield in any meaningful theoretical way. However, Bratton makes sure to note that the Stack is made up of heterogeneous layers, a messy (slightly) accidental assemblage whose architecture grows more real and more embedded every year. It operates on six distinct layers: Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface, and User. Bratton (2015, p. 11) states, "each layer is understood as a unique technology capable of generating is own kinds of integral accidents…These layers are not just computational…The Stack is also composed of social, human and concrete forces." Each layer, from bottom to top, can insert modes of control at almost any point in the chain. The scenario Bratton puts forward consists of human and nonhuman "Users" bound together by "Interfaces." The interfacial layers parse user data into a series of tagged geographical "Addresses" which form a simulative map of "Cities" and "Earth," which are stored and accessed by the "Cloud" layer (Bratton, 2015). In short, the Stack produces multiple totalities of control all cobbled together via vast, networked architectures.

My primary argument is that the gamified design performs an increasingly necessary task: gluing the user to the interface and encouraging prolonged cooperation with technological conditions. Bratton (2015, p. 220) states that "the interface layer consists of any technical-informational machine, compressed into graphical or objective formats, that links or delinks Users and the Addressed entities up and down columns within the Stack. Its role is to telescope, compress, and expand layers of the Stack, routing User actions both up and down as they go." Interfaces are not only the graphic user interfaces we toy with on our screens; they comprise a "generic structuring of links and boundaries" forming "any point of contact between two complex systems" that "govern conditions of exchange" between systems and users (Bratton, 2015, p. 220). In short, interfaces provide logics of control and exchange between ourselves and our technicized daily lives.

As we will see in later chapters, the history of computation and simulation has been a long, complicated dance with games and game design. Game theory, contingencies, probabilities, and possibilities have driven social, genetic, and evolutionary simulations to new heights (Erickson, 2015). At each turn, however, game theoretical systems only produce outcomes oriented to rational or nonrational actors; the results of such simulations are only sometimes useful (Erickson, 2015). Social and economic modeling is best achieved through dataveillance, a combination of programmatic surveillance and algorithmic control (Clarke, 1988; Eposti, 2014). Algorithmic protocol increasingly impacts everyday life, and we live in a society that encourages and justifies dataveillance (Clarke, 1988; Eposti, 2014; Smith, 2018). Algorithmic control involves "sprawling assemblages involving many forms of human labor, material resources, and ideological choices" (Finn, 2017). Because data drive capital in the Stack, I often see a critical focus on data rather than the user–interface networks that produce it. To me, this

appears to why we have overlooked (game) design as a key aspect of our collective experience with interface.

As Bratton (2015) notes, the Stack runs in real time. It needs, among other things, constant input. That input also has to be "real" in the sense that models must be actionable within a short frame of time. We have real-time climate models, the product of thousands of sensor and satellite inputs observing the atmosphere at fraction-of-a-second intervals. Why not have real-time social and cultural models, as well?

In terms of the Stack, most of my arguments place gamification at the levels of User and Interface. Games are, after all, modalities of design and Users are a creation of design (Bratton, 2015). However, if we begin to peel apart the history of computing and simulation, we can see that gamified design plays a significant part in the Stack's "new architecture" because it focuses on control through *seduction rather than force*. According to Baudrillard (1979), seduction is a form of play or playfulness. Seduction is a false weakness – it is not sovereignty or outright force, but instead acts through the inception and channeling of desire. Seduction, then, is the interplay of desire and potentiality. By channeling desire, seduction focuses on potentiality, not outcomes; it works through the possibility of a desire's fulfillment. As such, it is the primary origin of simulation – the ideation of possibility and the desire to pursue, consume, and possess its materialization (Baudrillard, 1981a, 2005). It is nondisciplinary power – it only exists through continued processes, meaning that any sort of finality is arbitrary for seduction: it acts only to continue itself. Baudrillard (1979) points out that seduction ends once a desire is fulfilled. Using sex as a metaphor, he states that once sex begins, seduction – or the process of sexual play – terminates and must be restarted. In short, seduction is the willing extension of desire, not the fulfillment of it. It is a design philosophy that produces an "infinite game" whose rules only seek to extend play without naming an end-state or a winner (Carse, 1987). Game design often uses the word "engagement," which is the attentional resources of the player. Seductive design promises complete and willing engagement – a never-ending parade of contingency and desire (Anderson, 2011). Seduction begins with users and interfaces, but the result is what fuels the other layers of the stack: data and capital.

The best outcome of application design is user data. With enough data, application designers can model *and* influence possible outcomes. Gamified design provides the seductive choice architectures that drive engagement. Gamified applications aim to produce the *right* data about users, data that can be put to use in making more efficient designs. Gamification is a vector for the gradual acceptance of real-time, digital governance. As such, I think that games, and play, provide a window into how and why we continue to create and sustain the Stack.

Bratton (2015) does an excellent job laying out a "big picture" of the Stack. In his scenario, the user is at the bottom of the totem pole, the base ingredient of our modern global technocracy. Are *we* forcibly arranged at the behest the Stack, or are we expected to arrange ourselves into the needed configurations? Tracing gamification back to its technical and philosophical roots, I believe, reveals that

the latter is most important – we must arrange ourselves. For the foundation of a vertical structure to hold, it must be stable – and all the better if that stability is self-imposed. Gamification, in a nutshell, merely heeds us to follow our ludic desires, getting rewarded for doing the right things at the right time. For the most privileged among users, we should enjoy holding the layers above us stable.

Gamification at a Glance

Practitioners typically define gamification as a business or marketing strategy that began to emerge after marketers and public relations professionals noticed the success of traditional video game platforms in driving behavioral practices among players (Campbell, 2011; Davenport, 2010; Delo, 2012; Zicherman & Linder, 2010). A key focus of gamified applications is promoting, regulating, and tracking engagement with products, services, spaces, institutions, and ideas through motivational tactics embedded within seemingly simple aspects of game design. For example, Google and Niantic's game *Ingress* uses competitive territory defense that players access and take hold via location-aware devices – resource nodes, via modified GIS systems, are embedded into physical spaces such as monuments, museums, and dog parks. *Ingress* was mobilized to drive research into navigational issues affecting pedestrian traffic and location-based advertising by studying the routes players take to reach individual nodes and their motivation in regards to rewards for traveling longer distances. Each incidence of gamified design is linked to surveillance and data gathering. However, it is unique because users seek out this mode of surveillance for its rewards.

Gamification represents a wide array of applications used for a variety of purposes. In a nutshell, it represents a new take on life, one that embraces playful-but-serious surveillance and introduces new techniques that attempt to redefine the categorical position of "player." Gamification achieves this by introducing game mechanics into nonludic environments via design (Zicherman & Cunningham, 2011). In addition to design-oriented aspects, gamification embraces behaviorism by promoting playful behaviors, such as seeking and parsing information, arranging patterns, route finding, leveling, progression, self-archiving, socially exchanging information, and seeking positive feedback through intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

In short, gamification as a set of design practices takes a contradictory, but strangely unifying, approach to labor and leisure (Fuchs, 2014a; Raczkowski, 2014; Raessens, 2014; Schrape, 2014). It toys with boundaries between leisure and labor by circumventing the common definitions of both (Hamari, Huotari, & Tolvanen, 2014). Gamified applications profit from exploiting the idea that labor can be converted into a playful activity to increase productivity and engagement – that leisure can *become* labor.

However, play is often associated with free-wheeling, nonproductive, redundant, and chaotic actions that do not directly interfere with quotidian processes of law, capital, or culture (Huizinga, 1950). Gamification seems to utilize play in a manner that promotes control, order, and capital. The outcomes of this experiment in design are thus far unknown. This contradictory set of purposes and

outcomes is the primary focus of this project: a key question concerning gamification is "why *play*?" Deploying play for the purposes of control seems counterintuitive; if play is truly nonproductive from the standpoint of capital why attempt to use it for purposes of production? If it eschews disciplinary tactics then why use it to promote processes of behavioral categorization? This question lies at the heart of gamification: how can a mode of control harness a force that, by some interpretations, inherently resists uniformity?

The answer lies, primarily, in what can be considered play. Gamification uses play, but only in a particular context. Play is ambiguous and contains a variety of actions, outcomes, and practices (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Some aspects of play, such as free play (Derrida, 1966), resist centralized constraints. There are also aspects of play that favor regulated, centralized, and rule-based competition (Baudrillard, 1979, 2001; Caillois, 1961). Gamification primarily leans toward these by using the compulsory nature of progression to promote behavioral modifications in players, specifically to increase efficiency in everyday actions by rewarding players for desired behavioral outcomes. On this level, play can be used as a definite set of potentialities aimed at individual or collective control.

Since games are rule-based systems designed to structure play into ordered contingencies, game design and the resulting gameplay serve as a critical aspect of gamification's relationship with control. Games indeed exhibit control on an individual level, but they only instantiate it in terms of *gameplay* – the cybernetic loop between player and game that comprises a negotiation of agency rather than a system of outright control. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) state that gameplay is the site of power and control in gaming, and it is a constructive power that comprises "the site where the game and player contest each other's capacity to structure and give meaning to their ongoing interfacing" constructed through an "economy of desire."

Gameplay is actively constructed between the player's agency, the game's mechanics (its contingencies and rules) and its logics, or the intended outcomes and progressions (Lorant & Lieury, 2014; Sicart, 2008). Gameplay, as an ongoing negotiation of desire, cannot survive as a domineering mode of control. Instead, (game)play is *seductive* (Baudrillard, 1979; O'Donnell, 2014), meaning that it exhibits weak or soft control through challenges and promises made to the player – the player willingly engages in constructing his or her desires through the contingencies set forth by gameplay.

Seductive Design

Baudrillard (1979) states that seduction, like play, is "entangled" with production and power, but must not be confused with either. Seduction is an inception of desire and possibility – it serves as an alternative route to coercion that can either serve the ends of disciplinary power and production or reverse them. One aspect of seduction is its *reversibility* – it can go in a variety of ways, and it can reverse course just as quickly. Seduction presents a challenge but does not present a contract – it does not invite any conclusion or conclusive state of affairs (Baudrillard, 1979). If a conclusion is reached, seduction ends. Seduction is the key to

gamification's relationship with power, productivity, and control. Gamified applications instantiate a gameplay loop by focusing on what is possible, rather than any final or actual outcomes.

For example, gamified applications rarely offer an endpoint. Users of applications like *Ingress* can never "beat" the application. They engage in an endless stream of potential challenges and rewards. When they are rewarded for one challenge, another is generated. Thus, through gameplay, gamification achieves a state of equilibrium between leisure and labor by never conclusively being either one – it serves as an alternative to both.

Gamified applications hint at the possibility of productivity, but never fully arrive at that point. Users are productive in terms of providing behavioral data, but they are subjectively working toward progression as it is interpreted via game dynamics – their productive behavior ties to the design of the gamified application: the continuance of play. Seductive power, as an alternative to coercive or disciplinary power, is at the heart of gaming *and* gamification. Understanding how this modulation of power acts on the everyday lives of people whose lives are increasingly gamified is largely the purpose of this study.

Gamified applications often extend seductive gameplay into extensive networks while concealing the aspects of "games" or "play" embedded within the application – people become engaged in the loop of gameplay without fully being aware of their status as "player." Rather, they are viewed as users, those who employ applications for quotidian social or technical outcomes. Gamified applications are rarely marketed as games, thus downplaying the idea that they are either leisure *or* labor. However, while players are productive, the applications also actively remove any sort of finality to the actions performed – gamified applications never end. Gamified applications create continuance by introducing a sense of choice and variance. Thus, what users do through gamified applications does not entirely feel like labor, either. Their point of engagement is removed from a definitive endpoint and replaced with the intrinsic reasoning of gameplay – they do it because they can progress. At the same time, gamification drives the user-efficient production of useful (and profitable) data. Users maintain a consistent, live connection with the gamified interface, introducing a constant protocol aimed at control.

It is crucial to address gamification as a mode of control because it brings new modes of surveillance, governance, and monetization to everyday life. It also creates different categories of players; when engaging in gamified activities, players are no longer engaging in purely self-referential gameplay – gameplay where actions taken in-game correspond only to the game itself. They are participating in a more comprehensive network of consumerism, education, and surveillance that has direct connections to power, capital, and modes of production. Addressing how *everyday life* is enhanced or disrupted through gamified applications because important evidence suggests that they are diffuse methods of control enacted through game design (Dragona, 2014; Raczkowski, 2014; Ruffino, 2014; Schrape, 2014). de Certeau (1988) states that "everyday life" involves distinct modes of collective and individual power: "strategic" and "tactical" practices. These strategic practices designed by large organizations such as