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EMERGENT FRAMEWORKS

THE NEW GAMIFIED SOCIAL

Athanasia Daphne Dragona

Introduction

How many friends do you have? How many followers? How many people have liked your recent post or video? How many shares or how many re-tweets did that post have? And then ultimately what is the total score? How influential are you?

These are questions that might not be openly asked but are always on social media users' minds. Constantly looking after their 'scores' and checking on the popularity of others', users today clearly show that in the social networking world numbers matter. Numbers reveal how sociable users are, how popular their sayings are, how interesting their everyday life appears to be. High scores depend on the content, or rather the virtuosity of the user behind the content; on the way moments, actions and thoughts are captured, expressed and uploaded, in proper timing with a readiness for timely interaction.

In the era of the attention economy, the social media world looks more and more like a game-space prompting players for their next decisions and moves. Following scores, newsfeed boards and status announcements, users compete for their online presence and peer recognition. Daily mediated interaction is charged by a degree of performativity, a degree of repetitiveness and addiction; a need to keep coming back to provide new feedback. But what drives these new modes of interaction? What is the broader context they can be studied in? Which are the forms of power and counter-power being developed?

In his *Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno notes that there is something childish in today's multitude, which at the same time is utterly serious (2004). He argues that repetitiveness persists today, just like it happens in the games of childhood, as a response to the need to protect one's self against the unexpected. Do social networking sites take advantage of such features of human behavior when they embrace game-like elements? This paper will aim to discuss these questions in an attempt to examine the emerging phenomenon of gamification, analysing its origin, consequences and counter-forces.

The emergence of gamification

Social networking sites were competitive right from the start. One can recall the early years of YouTube when people could rate videos using stars, or the period that MySpace and Facebook had a top friends rank. Although friends' or channels' numbers were hitting much lower scores than today, the first signs for the intensification and gamification of sociability were already there. The social web had appeared as a space where one could belong but also stand out, where one could collaborate but also compete, where one could express oneself but could act only within constraints. The new vivid and antagonistic participatory spaces were based on rules set by the social networking sites and on the progressive integration of dynamics and mechanics coming from another field, the field of games.

Gamification, as a term, appeared in 2010, some years after the social web boom, in order to specifically describe this process of integrating game elements into non game environments and drive participation. Not surprisingly, the term was 'invented' by a technology company BunchBall.com that wished to promote marketing as a game strategy (Ionifides 2011). However, gamification was not limited to cyberspace; its application expanded to different areas such as those of health, education, labour and advertising, aiming to affect human behaviour in ways desirable for the market. Using game mechanics and dynamics, such as points, levels and leaderboards on the one hand and awards, affirmations and achievements on the other, a broad spectrum of game like experiences appeared that succeeded in motivating and engaging the targeted audience.

Gamification at first seems fascinating. As game designer Jane McGonigal suggests, even society itself can be restructured better through such processes. Paying special attention to the emotional activation that only games can bring, she sees a future in which games will build stronger social bonds and lead to more active social networks. 'The more time we spend interacting within our social networks, the more likely we are to generate a subset of positive emotions…' she argues (2011). Thus, according to McGonigal, a new gamified social condition seems to arise driven through games and collective, pleasurable activities. While such optimism is yet to be confirmed, this paper will aim to examine the emergence of gamification following three basic axes related to a. the self, b. social relationships and c. urban space.

The gamified social condition

The gamified self

The avatar is a constructed identity that appears in the form of uploaded pictures, comments, and other forms of sharing, and every update to the site mediates and reforms this identity in view of others (Butera 2010).

The online self is formed by data. It is fed by posts, likes, shares, tags and status updates, and it is measured and quantified by sums of numbers. Like an avatar, it needs to be actively cared for, in order to be kept 'alive'. Similar to Sims characters or Tamagotchi toys, it relies on its owner's responsibility to survive but, at the same time, it is not really an avatar. The online self is a data body which has been gamified, as most information related to it is real, reflecting a real person in their everyday life.

What drives the construction of this new self? Scholars discussing the formation of online identities tend to agree on the desire to control the impression of the image of one's self in the presence of others. They turn to Erving Goffman's theory about the performance of the self (1956) and to Judith Butler's perception of a self in a permanent process of becoming (1990). Rob Cover for example, who mostly bases his research on Butler's work, argues that profile management is actually a form of identity performance (2012) while Pearson, referring to Goffman, examines how the controllable and mediated spaces of social networking sites allow users not only to create their online selves but also to create their own staging and the setting in which they will perform themselves. 'The online performative space is a deliberately playful space' she says but she also adds that in these new spaces there is not much risk involved. There is always a safe distance (2009). Pearson's thought can be connected to Zizek's notion of interpassivity; the state where one postpones being affected and being active (1999). Instead of the user, it is his/her profile that 'enjoys, laughs, believes in the right political causes and suffers…, thus relieving [one's] own real bodily self of all these sometimes unbearable duties and injunctions of being a decent human being.' (Muhr & Pedersten 2010).

So rather than living in a phantasy, in which we are building active selves that can change the world, as McGonigal argues, we need to face our lack of real action, the fetishism of our online ourselves. As Jodi Dean notes we have now reached a mindset where success is measured by numbers of friends and page hits rather than duration and depth of commitment (2009). This seems to be confirmed by social media platforms such as the Klout that count how influential we are based on our overall appearance and action in social media, or the Quantified Self community, supported by a collaboration of users and tool makers around the world who believe in self knowledge through data-acquisition and self-tracking.

The gamification of friendship

The number of contacts shown in one's profile on a social networking site is important. It supposedly indicates the popularity of the user and her/his level of activity in the network. In the first years of the social media, this number was taken seriously into consideration, with high 'scores' sometimes even leading to negative impressions. In 2004 for example, users making superficial connections in Friendster were characterised as 'Friendster whores', as Donath and Boyd write (2004). Nowadays, however, it is difficult to generalise as most users' number of friends has increased after a longer period of time in the social network. High scores now indicate how open or flexible a user is to the continuous friend requests received. But this change does not mean that numbers don't matter. On the contrary, in today's highly populated networks one has to fight for her/his online presence through her/his activity. And the larger the network is, the bigger the challenge to stand out and to be heard. The continuous flow of information demands constant participation.

Danah Boyd, in her research regarding friendship within social networks, argues that 'while Friending is a social act, the actual collection of Friends… provides space for people to engage in identity performance' (2010). Friends are needed to perform one's identity, allowing communities to be formed in egocentric ways, as Boyd observes (2006). But, is this real sociality? Sherry Turkle, in her latest book, explains how users have ended up being 'alone together'. Based on interviews she conducted, she describes how the mediation of technology has affected users to a point that friends are now processed, paused or nexted (2011). When friending, liking or tagging is possible, unliking, untagging and unfriending is also an option. When people are processed, relationships are processed too. And as friends are continuously filtered, one can come to the conclusion that we are not so much talking about a friends' network but rather of an ephemeral crowd, a different and distinct type of community based on mechanisms of suppression and censorship applied by users themselves (Butera 2010).

The mechanisms of the new ephemeral communities are important to study as they are also related to new hierarchies and structures empowering the new gamified social condition. A closer look to a friends' network in a social networking site like Facebook offers a clear idea. Users decide to connect to their real friends, the friends of friends and unknown 'friends' that are people of special interest. These are characters, that just like in a game environment, they can assist in leveling up. They are the ones users connect to, not only to upgrade their social status – a classic societal *cliché* – but also, for example, to enhance chances of job opportunities. In a period when companies start to check the social media profiles of their potential employees, it is expected that the ones with expanded networks of 'high quality' friends might be preferred (Adrejevic 2011). This category of 'high quality' friends, therefore, plays an interesting role in the capitalisation of friendship. The quality and quantity of friends form the metrics of power for a new social capital gene-rated by the users, aggregated by the social networking sites and exploited by third parties.

The gamification of the urban space

The gamification of social networking sites is not a solely web-based phenomenon. The last few years, thanks to the development of location based social networking sites such as Foursquare or Gowalla, gamification expanded to the streets of the city. Integrating challenges, points and levels, these sites invite inhabitants to use their mobile phones and compete with their friends for achievements, awards and status. What a great playful way to experience the city, supporters of gamification would argue. As McGonigal notes, platforms like Foursquare reward users for novel activities and for making an effort to be social (2011). But is this so?

The gamification of the urban environment presents a special interest because of the theory it contradicts. Discussing the urban environment as a game-space, one's mind unavoidably returns to the writings of Constant and the Situationists, that have been quoted so often by contemporary scholars studying pervasive games and locative media. One can particularly recall Constant's 'city of movement', the *New Babylon*, where citizens, liberated from work thanks to the advancement of technology, could have dynamic relationships with their surroundings; or to reflect on Situationist notions of psychogeography and drifting, where people were invited to a playful wandering where they could follow their own desires.

But to what extent are these elements revived? How do the rules and constraints imposed by gamification relate to the ideas of the thinkers of the 60s? Although Constant wisely predicted the exciting ludic behaviour technology would bring, little could he foresee the expropriation that would follow. Today's city of movement is based on the new playful worker who, following homo faber and homo ludens, is seduced by technology and fooled by the impression that it can empower him. Today's location based social networking sites do not leave much of a choice. By setting rules and constraints, by enclosing certain locations in the map and excluding others, and by connecting challenges and awards to consumption and advertising, no space is left for drifting and freedom of action.

The formation of the new controlled city seems, therefore, to be the complete antithesis of what the Situationists once envisioned as the playful city.

Some points about gamification's function

By taking into consideration users' aptitude for competition and triggering them with challenges, which might be direct – like a badge in Foursquare – or indirect – like peers' recognition on Facebook – users' participation and interaction is significantly augmented. As an outcome of this socialisation, a new form of wealth is created based on the accumulation of social capital and its openness for further processes of exploitation. Advertising companies, employment networks or government services are only some of the receivers of data aggregation. Observing the new social condition, for the self, the social relationships and the urban space, several common elements become clear and can be identified.

First of all, gamification's connection to the market is undoubted, its aim being to engage people in certain behaviours that connect to services or products. For this reason, gamification, since the beginning, was confronted with hesitation by scholars from the game studies field. Described as 'exploitationware', by Ian Bogost, or as 'a tactic employed by repressive, authoritarian regimes', by Heather Chaplin, gamification was questioned in its aims and values. Complementary to this first argument, a number of logical points follow regarding the sense and impact of the use of game dynamics and game mechanics. Do we really need extrinsic awards, points and numbers to present who we are to the others, to make friends and wander around in the city? Does having our interactions and movements tracked, controlled and used worth it?

In reality, gamification is in perfect accordance with the post-Fordist condition in which we live, with forms of production based on the knowledge, information, codes and affects users/friends/citizens produce and exchange. Gamification invites us to produce more while we are being performative and while competing with our friends. We produce as we play. We work as we interact. We play as we work. A second point that can be made is that gamification intensifies immaterial and affective labour. While, one can not be forced to be creative, or to participate and contribute in today's social networking sites, the integration of game elements succeeds in re-introducing motivation and affection in order to facilitate work. As Arvidsson has noted, 'ruling through freedom' can be achieved in an artificial environment, such as a game, which is constructed so that freedom and passions are put to work (2007).

Thirdly, gamification generates a new form of alienation; an alienation from the users' own data. The number of likes or comments introduce new forms of measurement but weaken the importance of the individuals behind them (Man 2011). When data is depersonalised, the user is detached from it; she/he stops paying attention to the specific information provided as she/he gets limitless opportunities for association, exchanging and belonging. The networks keep reminding users how many friends, photos or videos they have in common, encouraging them to keep looking for more. As Richard Rogers writes in his introduction for the notion of post-demographics

> of interest [today], are not the traditional demographics of race, ethnicity, age, income, and educational level – or derivations thereof such as class – but rather the demographics of taste, interests, favorites, groups, accepted invitations, installed apps and other information that comprises an online profile and its accompanying baggage. (Rogers 2009).

This is what feeds the market and keeps it alive. The circle is vicious. The more posts and likes a user makes, the more suggestions the market will have for her/him through the friends network.

In the end, what the user is left with is her/his new gamified data body; that is a body created based on her/his potentiality, skills and interests but on which she/he has no power over. But have we really reached such an impasse?

Opposing gamification

While gamification seems to be introducing new forms of dehumanisation, measurement and alienation for the new social condition, at the same time the potential of the social can never be totally captured as it will always be in excess, like life itself is nowadays. As every mechanism feeds its anti-mechanism and every power its counter-power, gamification has also given birth to forms of resistance developed within its system, aiming to impede its functioning, to confuse it or to subvert it. At this last section, an attempt will be made to name some examples of tactics and practices developed by users, creators, programmers and scholars.

Faking identities
One of the older examples of resistance comes from the old network Friendster. Danah Boyd, who has studied Friendster, explains how users created fake profiles to cheat the platform when needed (2006). This happened when Friendster decided to impede its users from browsing profiles that exceeded four degrees of separation (friends of friends of friends). Fakesters came as a response. They were profiles invented by the users for actors, pop stars, ideas, songs to which a lot of people could connect and use as hubs to get more access. Although the accounts were at some point terminated by Friendster, a form of *exploit*, a hole in the system, was found and collective action succeeded in temporarily subverting its rules and constraints.

Over-presence/Hypertrophy
In Facebook, users, from the start, have been playing with tagging and linking, creating small acts of sabotage that were confusing the system. Irrational, humorous and weird ideas and actions are created such as irrational fun pages which succeed in breaking the productivity chain, impeding capital to be generated for the market. Sean Dockray, in his 'Suicide Facebook (Bomb) Manifesto' writes that if we really want to fight the system we should drown it in data, we should 'catch as many viruses as possible; click on as many 'Like' buttons as possible; join as many groups as possible; request as many friends as possible. Wherever there is the possibility for action, take it, and take it without any thought whatsoever. Become a machine for platforms and engines.' (2011).

Exodus from the game-space
Another radical tactic that has been proposed, in a humorous way, is based on the reclaiming of a right to exit from social networks. As Spehr writes, while discussing networks, there must be a freedom to refuse to collaborate, an exit strategy. It should be possible for rules to be rejected, questioned and negotiated. (Spehr 2003). 'web 2.0 Suicide Machine' by the Moddr team and the 'Sepukoo' of Les Liens Invisibles are examples of projects developed by artists in this direction. Developed in 2009, they enabled users to commit suicide, to delete their account permanently, something not allowed in most social networks. Using the mechanism of the game, they created a parody of social networking sites, presenting elements such as top lists of suicides and a network of happy users liberated from the constraints of the platform.

Obfuscation/ Nonexistence

This is a counter logic that can protect one's data or provide false data, discussed by Brunton and Nissenbaum (2011). Some examples are the 'FaceCloak', that provides the initial steps towards an elegant and selective obfuscation-based solution to the problem of Facebook profiles (Luo, et al., 2009), and 'TrackMeNot', which was designed to foil the profiling of users through their searches. Interesting examples also come from the network of the Unlike Art network, with projects investigating social media produced by Networked Media students at the Piet Zwart Institute of Rotterdam.


Hacks of appropriation

Creators have often used tactics of appropriation to oppose the system of social networking sites in a playful and ironic way. A great example is the work of the artist Tobias Leingruber. As part of his 'Facebook resistance' workshops he has designed several counter-tools and hacks, in collaboration with participants, that aim to impede the proper functioning of the system and its rules. In 2012 he also proceeded in setting up a Social ID bureau producing Facebook identity cards, playing with the idea of the new online identity and data body offered by the medium itself.

Exposing the game mechanics

Other projects created by artists have appropriated the game mechanics the social media use to expose their use and develop a critique. Such a case is the 'Folded In' game by Personal Cinema & the Erasers. Based on YouTube video wars, 'Folded In' highlighted the game elements used in the popular video platform and the way users are engaged by them. Or, a more recent example, is Ian Bogost's 'Cow Clicker', an application developed for Facebook, inviting people to click on a Farmville-like cow every six hours, commenting on the phenomenon of clicktivism. Other works worth mentioning are the 'Add to friends' by Nicolas Frespech, where the user clicks to add to an already excessive number of friends of the artist; or the 'Elfriendo' service, by Govcom.org, that generates MySpace user profiles along with compatibility tests and taste construction.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine the emerging phenomenon of gamification and discuss what its application means for the new social condition. As a strategy invented, encouraged and applied by the market, gamification intensifies relationships and interactions, aiming to generate value. For this reason, it marginalises opportunities for substantial social interaction but also underestimates the possibilities for critical resistance against its game-like structure.
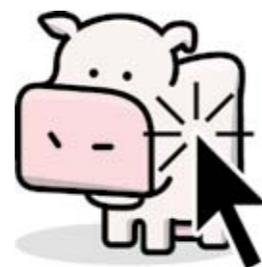
At the same time, no matter how asymmetrical power seems to be, counter-power tactics are being developed by users, programmers or artists who seek to render control impossible, to re-appropriate content and to play with the strategy of gamification. These tactics remind users of the right of disobedience and the necessity of liberation from modes of surveillance, control and exploitation.

Instead of following the measurements of gamification, they highlight an urge for critical awareness and understanding, exposing the functioning and the purposes of a strategy that in reality has little to do with games.

Going back to Virno's positioning on the multitude's childish character, perhaps we need to re-consider: what is the 'unexpected' we are socially afraid of today? Have we left any room for it? Or have we let all social experience be captured, measured, controlled and planned by networks themselves?

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DERIVATIVE WRITING: E-LITERATURE IN THE WORLD OF NEW SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PARADIGMS

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This paper seeks to broaden the conceptual field of e-literary studies by exploring the social and economic context that shapes e-literature as an emerging field of textual practice in new media. It is also an attempt to analyse the current positioning of e-literature in the broader field of algorithmic culture and to explore its interactions with new media art. Our research is driven by the idea that e-literature and its institutions might also be explained by applying some key concepts taken from the social sciences (including economics). E-literary text is viewed as a social event: it needs the presence of the audience, and the process of its creation is embedded in its social context.

In the first section of this essay we draw on e-literature in terms of algorithmic culture, which is essential in bridging the gap between the culture of literary intellectuals and that of scientists (Snow 1959). Algorithmic culture presupposes the change from pure linguistic codes, as crucial for traditional print-based literary text and its theory, to extra-linguistic codes, among them the social. The second section addresses the e-literary world as a field comprised of various institutions that make up an institutional framework for e-literary production. The third section relates to the present state of global financial markets, demonstrating some properties that are shared with e-literature.

Nothing that is happening in new media art and e-literature is excluded from the social text and context, as determined by the findings of contemporary science, new media and technologies, as well as the new network-supported economy and post-political politics (Virno 2004). In an age of globalisation and its scenarios, that lead to one-dimensional globally established modes of participation and behaviour, we are the contemporaries of several cultural trends that are impacted by the novel role of technology in an individual's life as well as with paradigm shifts relating to the modes of production, reproduction and organisation of communities, networking and the economy. In the field of culture, these movements are dictated by McDonaldisation, CNNisation, Microsoftisation, Benettonisation, Googlisation and other trends imposed by transnational corporations and their brands, which interfere in the individual's *lebenswelt* and seek to profile her. Today's individual lives in a techno-culture, meaning that the human as a being-in-the-world has mutated into a *being-in-the-technology*. Such a paradigm shift implies a theoretical turn, in terms that the technological concepts deployed in analysing today's individual, and her activity, could be explained as philosophical and literary. The issues of bandwidth, plug-ins, social algorithms and protocols do not remain outside techno-cultural studies; *generation Flash* (Manovich 2002), in the field of art-making, goes hand in hand with Flash poetry and poetry generators.

This connection of the individual and technology is covered not only by the concept of techno-culture; it is also described by expressions such as interface culture, cyberculture, software culture, digital culture, new media culture and algorithmic culture. These terms do not indicate a culture based on the techniques and technologies of industrial society but rather culture and cultures that are shaped by the applications of smart devices and software as key factors in an information society. Techno-culture applies the techno principle (in terms of challenging the extreme edges of perception – such as techno music). Interface culture (Johnson 1997) focuses on the role of interfaces in an