Gamification

By Ana Raquel Riedel von Teschenhausen

Although the practice of gamification is nothing new, it has for instance been applied in educational systems for decades (e.g. classroom grades or boy scouts'badges) and many have advocated that the social reality is itself a game, especially in the capitalist era (e.g. where salaries are a reward system).The term gamification was first documented in 2008, but it was just in the second half of 2010 that it was broadly adopted and became a buzzword. There are many definitions for the term, but the most generally adopted is: "gamification is the use of game design elements (such as badges, points and leaderboards) in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al.[1]) Its verb is "to gamify". Another interesting definition was given by Jane McGonigal in 2011: "Gamification is a *broad cultural phenomenon that can criticize consumerism by promoting it."*

Misconceptions of gamification

The term is often misplaced (by newcomers) in contexts of *serious games* and *game-based learning learning games*; which may become a disastrous misconception, considering that the last terms concern the use of games in its full realization (immersion, playfulness, etc.), whereas gamification tends to make use of selected elements and mechanics of game design such as *badges*, leaderboards, points (all regarding *extrinsic motivation*) and apply them into non-gaming contexts.

A better name for gamification

The fact that gamification makes use of selected elements from games, has led many game theorists and game designers to claim that "gamification" misuses the word "game" by referring to techniques that exclude the most relevant elements of game design and game thinking, suggesting "pointsification" as a better suiting definition for the practice. These professionals also aim to distance their professional fields from negative connotations concerning gamification, being mainly related to the issues related to free will (manipulation, conditioning, surveillance, persuasion).

What can actually be gamified?

According to gamification enthusiasts, everything. Besides education, the following fields have being the most influenced by gamification practices: marketing, consumption/sales, wellbeing and health monitoring, and the workplace. This list may be already way too long for some, or for others just the beginning. However, is it morally acceptable to gamify everything?

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[1]Deterding et al.*From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining "Gamification".* 9-15. p.10.

The following examples and their respective video selection concern many of the topics which will be discussed further in this article and it is highly recommend to watch them carefully, what will provide you valuable input, serving as basis for an enriching reading.

The Gamification of Marketing, -of Well Being and Health Monitoring and -of Consumption/Sales

The Nike Ads: Nike has managed to do both the gamification of marketing and wellbeing and health monitoring in the same project. (the videos are sorted by relevance)

1. [Game on, world.](#)

2. [This is your Nike+ FuelBand](#)

3. [A day with Nike+ FuelBand](#)

4. [NikePlus commercial](#)

Another example of gamification of wellbeing and health monitoring is the well-known [*"Weight Watchers"*](#), *who use game elements such as points for giving food an easier metric system and like Nike Fuel (through a sensor) for controlling how much activity the member of the program has done, in order to support his/her quest of losing weight.*

The gamification of marketing and consumption has been present in our lives for a long time now, among others, through loyalty programs such as airlines miles and supermarket member's cards.

Check this further example of gamification of marketing (launched almost two decades ago):
[AT&T Commercial (1996) True Rewards Program](#)

And one other of the gamification of consumption/sales:
[MyStarbucks Rewards](#) - customer loyalty programme

The Perrier Game: is in my opinion not an example of gamification of marketing but a real "game-based marketing strategy", since it embraces the most interesting aspects of a gaming experience, in opposition to gamification, as you will see further in this article.

Watch the trailer of Perrier`s game as a marketing strategy:

[*Perrier Secret Place - Trailer*](#)

The game is incredibly immersive and interesting. I highly recommend you to give a try and feel by yourself the power of well done game-based marketing and its implications in a future that may be all about it.

[*Perrier Secret Place - Game*](#)

Game and Addiction

"A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say" (Italo Calvino).

And I add: A book, a film or a television series... *A Reflection from Star Trek back to the 90s:*

"And what if someone is trying to use the game for something other than pleasure?" (from the episode of Star Trek: *The Game*)

[Star Trek: The Game – episode trailer](#)

[Star Trek: The Game – relevant scenes from the episode](#)

The Gamification of Everything = The Gamification of Life

Sight: this is a brilliant and disturbing sci-fi short film which simulates a future reality of a gamified life in which Google Glass-inspired apps are everywhere. It is a must.

[*Sight – the movie*](#)

Black Mirror - 15 Million Merits: Black Mirror is a British television series that focus on the dark side of life with technology in a not very far away future.

[Black Mirror: 15 Million Merits - episode trailer](#)

[Black Mirror: 15 Million Merits – full episode](#) (optional)

Negative connotations of gamification

Conditioning and manipulation

Gamification has positive and negative connotations. Gamification critics go as far as naming it 'exploitationware' (you may want to check the intriguing article "[Gamification is Bullshit](#)" by Ian Bogost). These critics infer that in order to achieve goals (mainly financial), companies have been using gamification to make people do what they do not want to (be it performing a boring task at work or buying things they do not need), driving them to believe that they do want, so by taking advantage of the human innate inclination for playing and competition. For a better understanding of this inclination watch this video: [*Why do we play games?*](#)

This innate inclination may often lead to addiction what would make the "player" vulnerable enough to be conditioned or manipulated (see: [*behaviourism*](#)) by his/her employer or by the company aiming to increase its profits. This thematic is the core of many articles written on "gamification and persuasion".

When the game is no longer "played"

This spectrum of conditioning goes further when gaming becomes an enforced practice, it is when the individual no longer has the choice on whether or not to take part in the game, he/she is obliged to do so. As Jennifer Whitson mentions in her insightful article[2] *"Freedom of choice is an essential element of games and play. As succinctly put by Mark Twain: 'Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and… Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do'. Once this freedom of choice is removed, any game falls to pieces. It is no longer play."[3]*

A booster of competition

As you saw in the video above, humans are naturally inclined to be competitive, but boosting this characteristic [beyond natural parameters] could be harmful. In this case, creativity could be compromised (once the latter is also stimulated by collaboration) and the social life quality of the individual could decrease as mental conditions such as anxiety and depression due to the pressure of a competitive environment (e.g., judgements from colleagues, who produces better and faster, etc.) increase.

Hierarchical Surveillance

In her article, Whitson discusses different types of surveillance in gamification: participatory surveillance and hierarchical surveillance, being the latter concerned with free will issues, and which in addition to the de-characterization of play, high competition levels and conditioning bears the factor of surveillance which grasps them all.

Hierarchical surveillance regards the gathering and storage of the player behavior's data and its use to manipulate his/her future behavior towards the product (e.g. in the case of a company using gamification to boost sales) or towards a more "productive work". In this case, Whitson says that the gamified workplace attempts to mask *"the reality of work, the hierarchical and unbalanced power relations that characterize these spaces, the social expectations therein, and the fact that covert surveillance is used to judge, rank, and punish employee."[4]*

Whitson goes further by stating that*"the gamified workplace also identifies their (the employees) place in the corporate hierarchy, exposing apparent competencies and talents as well as weak spots and failings. Employees ideally would monitor themselves, hastening their pace if they felt they were short of meeting their goals."[5]*

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[2]Whitson, J. R. 2013. Gaming the Quantified Self. *Surveillance & Society* 11(1/2): 163-176. (Hyperlink: Pdf)

[3]Whitson, J. R., p. 165, op. cit.

[4]Whitson, J. R., p. 174, op. cit.

[5]Whitson, J. R., p. 174, op. cit.

Lateral Surveillance

Whitson also draws the lines for what she calls lateral surveillance, which concerns the "peer-to-peer control", or the vigilance among colleagues of one-another's performance. This practice is in its turn also responsible for the competitiveness boost.

> *"(..) as clicking on the avatars of coworkers immediately indicates who is productive versus who is dragging the team down.While employees may not care about meeting their own productivity goals, Reeves and Read argue that they would perform in order to avoid the censure of their co-workers. Friendly competition to be the best in the office may further incite productivity."[6]*

Replacement and Over-justification

> *"The over-justification effect occurs when an expected external incentive (reward)such as money or prizes decreases a person's [intrinsic motivation] to perform a task. According to self-perception theory, people pay more attention to the external reward (see [extrinsic motivation]) for an activity than to the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction received from the activity itself. The overall effect of offering a reward for a previously unrewarded activity is a shift to extrinsic motivation and the undermining of pre-existing intrinsic motivation. Once rewards are no longer offered, interest in the activity is lost; prior intrinsic motivation does not return, and extrinsic rewards must be continuously offered as motivation to sustain the activity."[7]*

See in this article where Gabe Zichermann`s (the most prominent pro-gamification guru) responds to this line of criticism.

Positive connotations of gamification

The positive connotations of gamification are promoted mainly by professionals who provide the 'gamification services' for the business industry or by the business industry itself; be it in marketing a product (e.g. through loyalty programs), gamifying a websiteor inside the work-place in order to increase productivity. They talk about a 'ludic age' (see the manifesto in *web resources*) and the 'generation G', and alsoadvocate that gamification is a way of turning a boring task at work or the purchase of products, as well as actions for good health (e.g. Nike Fuel and Weight Watchers) into more fun and engaging activities, helping people to accomplish what they want or need to do. The trick is that as mentioned in previous paragraphs the person may believe that he/she wants to do something, although it is not true, since he/she was conditioned to think so.

Gabe Zichermann is seen as a guru for being the main "pro-gamification" speaker, and of course for offering his outstanding skills of 'gamifying everything' (including *[gamification of*

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[6]Whitson, J. R., p. 174, op. cit.

[7]Carlson, R.Neil and Heth, C. Donald (2007).*Psychology of the Science of Behaviour.* Pearson Education: New Jersey.

learning processes]) as a service.Mr. Zichermann is an extremely persuasive speaker and for a better understanding of which positive aspects of gamification he highlights (which in his talk completely overshadow all the negative connotations we have discussed until now in this article) I recommend you to watch the following video (you don't need to watch the whole talk, which is quite long, but with some minutes of it you will get the point): *Fun is the Future - Gabe Zichermann in Google TechTalks*.

The world-known game designer, Jane McGonigal has been often mentioned in the web and academic literature as a gamification activist. However, she has never adopted the term "gamification", but "gaming for change" (be yourself or the world),even because what she stands for is not gamification in itself, but it goes more in the direction of *serious games* or even *game-based learning* (*learning-games).* Of course you will find points and leaderboards in her games, but remember that gamification has taken these elements from real games.

Jane McGonigal has mentioned one crucial point regarding the moral aspects of gamification. She says: "If you use the power of games to give people an opportunity to do something they want to do, then you're doing good. If you're using the power of games to get people to do something you want them to do, then you're doing evil."

Based on this statement we may conclude that in a case where gamification is enforced (either in the workplace or in other cases when it is not explicit), or/and in the case when the person does not know or does not realize that he/she is part of a game, it becomes morally unacceptable.

Participatory Surveillance – the shared self

For a better understanding of participatory surveillance[8], it is important to consider that surveillance is pleasurable, once there is pleasure associated with mastery and control (of the self and of the other).

So the choice of sharing one's private life with others while "playing" with them, both for the sake of pleasurable surveillance and/or to achieve any desirable result (e.g. the case of gamification of wellbeing and health monitoring) shall be considered genuine and positive, a morally acceptable mode of gamification, but with the condition that the player chooses to take part on the game voluntarily and has the choice to quit the game whenever he/she wants.

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[8]Whitson, J. R., p. 171, op. cit.