Counter-gamification
Emerging forms of resistance in social networking platforms

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Introduction

Social networking sites are ruled by numbers. Counts of friends and followers, scores of likes, views and shares play a central role in defining what is on view and what is not in a constantly evolving info stream. As every move is measured and every post awaits feedback, a particular ground of action is being formed. Images, links, videos and thoughts constantly compete with each other for attention. The number of friends a user has, the time he chooses to upload a post and the number of responses she/he gets are all decisive for his/her online presence. The social media world is a competitive world with scores dependent on networks' algorithms on one hand and on users' promptness and virtuosity on the other.

Is this a new form of a gamespace? As users constantly consider what their next 'move' should be while checking the scores of others, they very much seem to be acting like players; but what seems to be a game, it actually isn't. It rather is the ultimate convergence of the real world with the online realm where real data are being used in a new peculiar game system[1]. What happens in the web is one of the many facets of the phenomenon of gamification which allows new forms of measurement to be formed and opens the way not only to opportunities for gameful interaction but also for exploitation and control.

The emergence of gamification

Gamification can be described as a trend, a buzzword or a strategy which relates to a vast array of everyday life activities. Jogging, eating, shopping, learning, going out, using the public means of transportation, visiting places are some of the examples where game features are being added, assigning a new game-like character to people's daily rhythm.

With the application of badges, points, progress bars and leaderboards, people are challenged to continuously improve their performance and to compete for better outcomes. Described as 'the application of a game layer on top of the world'[2], as 'the use of game design elements in non game contexts'[3] or as 'the penetration of our society with methods, metaphors, values and attributes of games'[4] gamification seems to have made an appearance which can not be ignored, highlighting a new era for the role of games in culture and society. Although the idea behind gamification is not new - in certain areas, like the military or education, the use of game elements was always present- yet what happens today is something ultimately different, as it also becomes clear from the controversies and discussions about it.

At the very core of them lies the fact that gamification's origins are not to be found necessarily in games. Even though the word itself appeared back in 1980 when Richard Bartle named gamification the process of 'turning something that is not a game into a game'[5] the term only started being used in 2010 after it was reintroduced by the technology company BunchBall.com as a new form of game based marketing strategy[6]. According to the company, game mechanics and dynamics started then being introduced into a 'site, service, community, content or campaign', in order to 'drive participation', to 'teach, motivate and persuade people',[7]or else as Zichermann and Linder put it, 'to serve business purposes' [8]. For this reason, gamification was confronted with hesitation by scholars from the game studies field. Described as 'exploitationware' [9], or as 'a tactic employed by repressive, authoritarian regimes' [10], it was doubted for its aims and values while at the same time its connection to the notion of game was doubted. Ironically called 'pointsification' [11] or 'de-gamification' [12], it was claimed that points and achievements do not render an everyday life experience a game experience. At the same time, however, many game developers and games enthusiasts have been supporting that if used properly, game elements can still become an integral and positive part of life. In this context, gamification can be 'smart' creating compelling experiences[13], or 'meaningful' giving users the possibility to contribute, to define and to take decisions[14]. It might not need to follow the marketing strategy of gamification but rather one of gameful design which pays attention to positive emotions, meanigfulness and purposes which can ultimately bring changes to daily life[15].

The spectrum of the gamification discourse is wide and so are its applications and uses which might or might not be connected to the market. In any case, the whole process did not appear unexpectedly. It followed what Raessens has framed as the ludification of culture which emerged with the rapid development in the fields of computer games, mobile telecommunications and the internet[16]. The serious games, the social games, the use of games as services[17] are aspects of this continuum which formed the ground for gamification to appear along with the new possibilities offered by constant connectivity and mobile devices. It seems therefore, that society can only be gamified when the lusory attitude, that is the game-like behaviour following Bernard Suits term, is on a high level as Fuchs puts it[18]. A gameful shift is therefore needed in the behaviour and the perception of the many for gamified mechanics to function.

Gamification in the social media

The social web very much responded to what both Raessens and Fuchs discuss. Not only were the social networking platforms based on technological structures which could embrace game like elements but they also encouraged users right from the start to have a lusory attitude when interacting within them. 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.

The application of gamification on social media seemed easy as the two spaces actually seemed in a way to have quite a lot in common. Based on voluntary participation, encouraging sociability, allowing users to play with their identities and providing a particular context of action, social networking platforms just like

games were inviting users to bring in their disposal and skills in order to freely interact with others. And the similarities did not stop there; what most probably facilitated the application of gamification the most, was the fact that these networks, just like games, are basically systems; they are well functioning complex systems formed by 'sets of interconnected nodes' if we follow Castells' definition on the networks[19]. And what could have been more convenient for social media companies than to use existing active and vivid systems which are continuously expanding to apply a strategy like gamification? Recalling how Salen and Zimmerman define games as 'a systems in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in quantifiable outcome',[20] then we realize that all gamification needed was the construction of this artificial conflict in order to bring about quantifiable – and other desirable for its platforms-outcomes. Moreover, it is also not coincidental that gamification reached users in the era of a data driven culture and economy, when everything had started being calculated and quantified not only by governments, companies or institutions but also by users/citizens themselves.

In this context, new behavioral trends emerged which intensified Suit's lusory attitude, adapting it to the new gamified realm. Through social media buttons that allowed new forms of measurement, progress bars which encouraged users to complete their profiles and newsfeed boards fed by status updates where users could announce their actions, gamification started affecting various sides of users' online experience. Such examples are the following:

- *The online self became recordable and measurable*. With the increasing introduction of metrics in platforms like Facebook, Linkedin and Google+, the online self started more and more to be fed by data and numbers. It started resembling a Sims character or a Tamagotchi toy that needed to be taken care of in order to remain alive. The continuous flow of information made clear that constant participation was needed. Else, the online identity could be be off the stage and forgotten by the rest of the users. This process meant that more and more data connected to one's real identity were logged on the networks databases.

- *The value of the friends' networks increased*. As the number of users in social media significantly augmented, the importance of friends for an online profile changed. It was not only indicative for a user's real or fictitious sociability but it also started playing a decisive role for her/his overall score of influence. This became clear with the emergence of aggregating platforms like Klout or ProsKore which were specifically created in order to measure one's influence and to assist users in ameliorating their score. This brought about a new form of exponential growth of social capital for the networks and a new kind of alienation for the users. Numbers started becoming more important than the people behind them[21]

- *Urban interactions became traceable and quantified*. With the appearance of location based social networking sites, users' moves, preferences and social interactions within the city environment also gained gameful properties. As the platforms started counting how often a user goes out,

> how many different people she/he spends time with or how frequently someone visits her/his favorite spots, building a reward system around these data, new motivations -supposedly- emerged for citizens. People started being rewarded for being social and doing what they like the most according to McGonigal[22] but at the same time, new data was made accessible not only to the users but also to the networks.

Either discussing the gamification of the online self, the online sociability or the mediated city interaction one thing becomes clear; it is users' data that is at stake and the mechanisms of gamification have come to facilitate the access of the networks and other third parties to these data. In social networking sites as Andrejevic notes 'every image we write, every video we post, every item we buy or view, our time–space paths and patterns of social interaction all become data points in algorithms for sorting, predicting and managing our behaviour'[23]. And if our networked algorithmic culture has already entered this path, the introduction of game elements makes particular processes connected to data aggregation easier. These processes could be briefly described as it follows:

Firstly, gamification assists in narrowing identity down to *identification*. As De Lange specifically argues online social media platforms are coded spaces that define users by their personal tastes and attributes[24]. User generated data bodies are created as users on one hand are willingly filling up their profiles with personal data – such as their date of birth, their relationship status, their religious views etc – and on the other hand they constantly feed these profiles with their interests and preferences. From this perspective, one could say that game mechanics assist in the formation of what Richard Rogers calls as 'post-demographics', that is the demographics which are being shaped by online profiles based on joined groups, accepted invitations and installed apps, and not on race, ethnicity, age, income, and educational level, like the traditional ones.[25]

Secondly, gamification succeeds in applying new forms of *measurement* and *capitalisation*. The social buttons here play a central role. Gerlitz and Helmond particularly discuss how data and numbers today have gained 'performative and productive capacities', how 'they can generate user affects, enact more activities and thus multiply themselves' [26]. Different forms of affective responses are translated as 'like', they become productive while also opening the way to advertisements, merely through their placement on web pages. Additionally, Evans specifically explains how a giant resource is formed for platforms like Foursquare by the 'check-ins' of the users, who are not only checking in somewhere but they also work for the particular places, creating the entries themselves. [27]

Thirdly, taking into consideration the aforementioned points, as identities are logged and behaviors can be predicted through processes of measurement, processes of *homogenization* are also facilitated as Grosser argues. 'The more one's personal details are shared with the world, the harder it is to retrieve or change them without others noticing …'[28] Being limited to lists of shares and likes, users learn to 'cycle through trend's as Dean also puts it.[29] Online friendships are based on sameness[30], filtering the unknown. In the social media world, Dean argues, in the era of post-disciplinary societies, there are no more normative expectations or institutional norms imposed by the school, the church or the

family[31]. The new norm is now rather defined by an audience, a network of users one feels she/he presents oneself to. And this is unavoidably dependent on metrics, algorithms and social software.

Gamification came in at a time when 'software is the invisible glue that ties it all together' as Manovich writes[32], when it is software that 'regulates and disciplines' as Kitchin and Dodge note. Within this context, little possibility for any counter-action seemed to be an option. After all, as the latter scholars note this can only be possible 'if an application's underlying calculative algorithms and communicative protocols are encoded to support such actions'[33]. Game mechanics therefore seemed to have appeared to assist in the formation of new contemporary apparatuses, of mechanisms that have the capacity 'to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings' to follow Agamben's definition.[34]

Defining counter-gamification

Is a gamified future then unavoidable? Danah boyd argues that gamification will seep into many aspects of life without us even acknowledging it, becoming a central part of neoliberal ideology. On the other hand Susan Crawford argues that 'if everything was a game, no one would have a reason to invent; …there have to be ways to explore, invent, create, and avoid—it can't be that we'll be adding up points for every salient element of our lives'. [35] But which are these ways? How can the processes of identification, capitalisation and normalization based on data contribution be disrupted and by whom? How could we frame the notion of counter-gamification?

The prefix *counter* denotes opposition, retaliation or rivalry. It has been used by philosophers and scholars to express different forms of resistance which basically highlight the importance of the 'power to' against the 'power over'. One for instance could recall the idea of the counter-actualisation of Gilles Deleuze that highlighted the possibility of one becoming the actor of her/his own events,[36] or the notion of counter-empire of Hardt and Negri [37] that emphasizes the potentiality of multitude for resistance. Respectively, addressing resistance within the networks, Castells framed counterpower as the possibility lying in collective action to introduce new codes or to alter the existing codes[38] while Galloway and Thacker have explored how counterprotocological practices can be found when power differentials within the system are located and exploited[39]. But interestingly, it is Agamben's definition for the counter-apparatus which might prove to be the most useful of all, when aiming to frame the emergence of what one could call as 'counter-gamification'. To oppose mechanisms of power, they need to be de-activated and this property can only be found in the element of play, Agamben argues. Apparatuses need to be profaned; they need to be played in order to not only abolish and erase the separations existing within them but also to reverse and change their use.[40]

So what if ultimately the network needs to be played, as Dmytri Kleiner impulsively also argued when discussing forms of resistance in Transmediale 13?[41] What if play is the element in-between, the invisible switch that acts to render resistance possible? Just like game elements themselves within networks

are not a form of exercising power – they rather facilitate this through the aforementioned processes-, play itself also is not a form of resistance. It rather is the mode which can assist in revealing network mechanisms, in raising awareness and in activating mechanisms of counter-gamification.

For this reason, this form of resistance being formed today is very close to hacking, innovative creativity and what has been framed as critical engineering. Behind it are artists, programmers and skilful users who purposefully apply rules in unexpected ways or ignore and surpass the ones imposed by the networks. These creators are the ones that Jan Rune Holmevick calls as electrate inventors, as contemporary bricoleurs who use ad hoc strategies while also building a discourse around them[42]. They are also the followers of a long tradition in art based on 'dismeasure' and 'disproportion'[43] and revolting 'against the rule of the number'[44], confronting commodification and capitalism.

At the part that follows, different practices are being discussed as acts of creative and playful opposition which aim to stop or confuse the processes of gamification in order to enhance users' understanding and empower resistance. An attempt for their categorization is being made following different strategies that have been developed by various scholars.

Obfuscation

Obfuscation is a term introduced by Helen Nissenbaum and Finn Brunton, used to describe a form of vernacular resistance which is based on the idea of providing misleading, false, or ambiguous data[45]. Some well-known examples the writers refer to are *Tor, TrackMeNot* and *Facecloack*. Turning to events and projects initiated by creators, however, it is worth mentioning the *Cryptoparties* that invite users to learn how to defend their right to anonymity, pseudonymity and privacy or the work conducted by the *Unlike Us* network and particularly the Unlike Art project. Playful and humorous extensions have been developed such as the John Smith extension for example which transforms any users in Facebook and Google+ to "John Smith", the most common name in these social media.

Overidentification

Overidentification is a form of resistance based on the appropriation of the sovereign ideology in order to criticize it. It is an aesthetic strategy that was initiated first back in the late '80s by the band Laibach and the art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst in Ljubljana[46]. In social networking platforms, one could note that creators have often used similar tactics of appropriation to oppose the system in an ironic way. Such an 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.

Desertion – exodus

Desertion, connected to exodus and nomadism, stands for the evacuation of

places of power[47]. Today, as control is distributed, desertion or non-existence as Galloway and Thacker put it, can have a major significance. 'The nonexistent is that which can not be cast into any available data types. It is that which can not be parsed by any available algorithms'[48]. In times that everything can be aggregated and measured, an act of desertion signifies leaving a space of control. Two famous applications related to this act were *Seppukkoo* by Les Liens Invisibles and *Web 2.0 Suicide Machine* by Moddr, which coincidentally developed a similar software at the same time in 2009 enabling users to delete their accounts from social networking sites. Gathering testimonials from the suiciders, creating antagonism and a top rank among them, the creators of both platforms in a rather amusing way played with the idea of online suicide as a social experience which could ultimately free users and their data.

Hypertrophy

Galloway and Thacker argue that nowadays the notion of resistance should be replaced with hypertrophy. The goal here is to push technology into a hypertrophic state, further that it is meant to go. In Facebook, users have been playing with tagging and linking from the start in order to confuse the system and its numbers and to break the productivity chain for the profit of the market. Sean Dockray, in his *Suicide Facebook (Bomb) Manifesto* specifically 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'.

Exposure of game mechanics

Other projects created by artists have appropriated the game mechanics applied on social media in order to expose their utilization and develop a critique. Such a case was the *Folded In* game by Personal Cinema & the Erasers, created already in 2008. Based on YouTube video wars, *Folded In* highlighted the rating system of the videos and the antagonism built within the popular video platform engaging users. Or a more recent practice is proposed by the works of Benjamin Grosser such as the *Facebook Demetricator*, an application which purposefully removes all countings from a Facebook page addressing the questions for their real significance and value.

Devaluation

Devaluation could be described as the practice embraced by creators who wish to cut the expropriation of data by disrupting the process and reclaiming the wealth of information for users themselves. Such examples are the projects *Commodify.us* and *Data Dealer*. *Commodify.us* allows users to export their data from social media, to view them and inspect their contents and create a new account where their data is verified and anonymised. They are invited to explore and understand how their information looks to 'potential licensors' of data and social media companies while also deciding how to license their data and leverage their monetary and creative potential. A similar approach is followed by the

creators of the *Data Dealer* game which invites users to become data vendors and 'build up their assets by trading in personal information' capturing the entire population in a database.

Closing thoughts

'Gamification is the latest and most sophisticated strategy of the vectoral class, its aim being on one hand to manage networks and extracting data on the other' McKenzie Wark writes in a single phrase summarizing the main arguments behind gamification critique[49]. Locating and quantifying relationships, tastes and desires, gamification does indeed seem to be market's current weapon as it greatly facilitates processes of identification, capitalization and normalization. Thanks to the structures social networking platforms offer, game-like engaging interactions are easily being developed which however as it has become clear leave important elements aside. What about the intentions, the effects, values, virtues and aspirations lying behind them? When discussing the impact of phenomena such as gamification we should also consider those, as Sebastian Deterding argues[50]. If game mechanics are only brought in to serve the market, what is left for the users? And how understandable is this profound asymmetry to them?

Aiming to highlight the urge for critical awareness and understanding, the paper presented different practices and tactics developed today by creators and skillful users who wish to render control impossible, to re-appropriate content and disrupt the strategy of gamification. Empowering cryptography, embracing anonymity or pseudonymity, exposing networks structures while also impeding metrics and causing purposefully confusion, the aforementioned examples can be considered as playful yet radical modes of counter-gamification. Perhaps they are allusions - a notion political philosopher Paolo Virno uses to refer to contemporary forms of disobedience - in relation to what real resistance could be[51]; but still, they do highlight the potentiality users have to provoke changes and they do bring back to the surface the dynamic of elements which are playful – rather than gameful – in order to disrupt predicted expectations and to reinforce free movement within networks.

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