Playmentalities. Sony Playstation

(Article begins on next page)

26 April 2024

PLAYMENTALITIES. SONY PLAYSTATION

Alberto Vanolo

Notes from a gamified future

Peter was looking at his WhatsApp status. He was definitely tempted to upload a picture of his new virtual trophy, which testified that he had crossed 5,000 streets with the green traffic light, but he also thought it was stupid to exhibit such a banal award. It'd be cooler to exhibit a trophy showing that he had crossed 5,000 streets on a red light, but no such award existed.

Peter's '5,000 green lights' trophy adds to his vast collection of civic achievements gained during his first 14 years of life. Last week he gained a virtual medal as he reached 1,000 kg of recycled paper placed in recycling bins. Once he had reached a score of 900 kg he had started collecting paper everywhere, but what had really made the difference was finding a stock of abandoned books in his grandpa's cellar. Those horrible, smelly, useless books, promptly moved to the closest smart bin, allowed him to reach the trophy, which has been automatically displayed on his Facebook page. Now he is somewhat less motivated about paper-awards, as the next milestone is 1.5 metric tons of paper, which seems a distant goal. 1.5 also feels like a banal number, not as cool as '1' or '10.' Right now, he occupies position #3 in his class paper recycling ranking (although he is only #121 in the school and #732,221 in the city).

These trophies have been developed by PlayStation to nudge citizens like Peter to behave in more virtuous ways. PlayStation is not the only provider of civic games, but it is the most popular, mostly because of the quality of the games and the real-time integration between videogame stats and civic trophies. PlayStation had entered the field of civic gamification by developing free apps and online leaderboards aiming at educating citizens in the sphere of environmental sustainability. In the beginning, it was all about recycling and saving energy. Then, with the rise in popularity of civic games, the company started to develop city-specific apps in order to tackle a number of local problems, such as traffic in Mexico City or car theft in San Francisco. In each city, PlayStation invented a competition to measure, compare and rank citizens, and even to convince them it was fun. The supposedly 'best' citizens were not just awarded with symbolic trophies, but also with bonuses. For example, if you locate 30 stolen cars by reporting them on San Francisco police department's online map, you receive not only

a 'grand theft auto report' trophy, but also a 20% discount on car theft insurance fares, which can raise to a 40% discount if you report 60 stolen cars. If you live in Mexico City and do not move beyond five kilometres of your home and do not use a car you will receive 4 free bus tickets.

Some of Peter's trophies are not as socially cool. Last month he went 16 days without taking a shower in order to save a huge volume of fresh water. This allowed him to reach #1 in his school's 'water saving chart.' That victory did not come without costs: especially the backchannel jokes that were created about him by his schoolmates once they realised that he also had very low levels of consumption of toilet paper.

Some trophies are just inherently more pleasant. Peter caressed over different 1,000 cats, allowing him to get a 'cat lover' award. With each feline interaction, he took a photo that was then uploaded to be analysed by the Playstation's 'loving pets' algorithm. Peter then received a metal pin from Catter, a popular cat-food company, that he put on his schoolbag. He still has to caress 424 dogs before reaching an analogous result in the canine sphere, but he isn't as fond of dogs. Apart from Muffin, which is Mike's border terrier. Mike is Peter's best friend, and his dog is adorable. Mike got the 'meta-animal-lover' award because he turned Muffin into a fully vegan dog by feeding it only with VegPuppy, a brand of non-flesh-based dog food. Mike was the first kid at school to get the award and it made him quite popular for a while. The notoriety wore off quickly though, even though he still exhibits his trophy.

Peter tried hard to get the trophy '50 days without saying the word fuck', but he failed. He failed on day 43, and when his mobile phone switched itself off as he was composing a long thoughtful message. He couldn't help himself: 'fuck, fuck, fuuuuckkkk!!' The incident cost him a 10% deduction on all language milestones for six months, but did learn a lesson. Since then, the word 'fock' seems just as cathartic when he needs to express his displeasure. This might not work for long though, as there are rumours that the software update will start getting smarter about recognising these linguistic hacks.

Peter knows that these games all matter especially after he leaves school and becomes an adult. His access to work, public services, and much else in everyday life all depends on the scores that he builds up. His Dad is always telling him to work on his scores: that they will improve him and the city. All he needs to do is play the game as it is designed to be played, and avoid associating with any dissidents, especially those that argue that the gamification of civic life leads to a loss of autonomy, privacy, freedom and politics. The games are fun and they make the city a fairer place for everyone to live in, his father insists, how could there be any real harm in that?

Notes from a gamified present

Peter's gamified life is an over-the-top speculation of some future society, but it is not without foundation. Life in cities is already being gamified, with the use of virtual rewards and playful elements (such as rankings, scores, badges, levels, rewards, leaderboards, virtual currencies) to stimulate public engagement and encourage virtuous social behaviours. There are now apps, developed by both public and private institutions, designed to reshape environmental behaviour (sustainable living), promote educational goals (lifelong learning), create healthy

behaviours (walking, eating properly), and produce political participation (community development initiatives). The use of games is growing in civic planning in order to support collaboration, participation and deliberation in design and decision making. Many urban government innovation labs, such as Mexico City's Laboratorio Para La Ciudad, Dublin's The Studio, Boston and Philadelphia's Offices of New Urban Mechanics, San Francisco's Office of Civic Innovation and Singapore's Human Experience Lab, have introduced civic gaming elements. The European Union, through its Smart Cities and Communities programmes, are funding many initiatives that use gamification to progressively change human behaviour with respect to energy, transport, and consumption of resources.

Gamification does not involve 'playing games'; rather, it concerns embedding game thinking or game mechanics in daily activity such as shopping, exercising, or working in order to make that experience more attractive or efficient. Gamification therefore aims at reaching goals which go beyond the game context; to nudge behaviours in order to induce desired conducts. Nudges do not aim at changing value systems or at providing information; rather, they encourage behaviours and decisions which are supposed to be beneficial for society and for the individual, for example acting in sustainable and healthy ways. Gamification uses specific forms ofnudging based on ludic elements, with the motivational power of games mobilised in order to promote participation, persistence and achievements. Two types of rewards are utilised to shift behaviour: extrinsic rewards built into the game design (badges, trophies, etc.); and intrinsic rewards implicit in playing, such as self-worth through beating one's own best record and mastering aspects of the game, and social rewards through helping others.

Nudging is the key aspect of the governmentality produced through gamification. Indeed, gamification is all about the governance of subjects. It is specifically designed to reshape behaviour; to produce the 'good citizen.' Indeed, gamification involves the subjectification of 'good' and 'bad' citizens/users by the distinction and rewarding/penalisation of appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. The computational technology of measurements, points and leaderboards assigns a position to each user, transforming them into assessable and enumerable units, which as a result enact a form of neoliberal biopolitics (underpinned by the logics of competition, individualism, rewards and responsibilisation of the self). Citizens are asked to measure their own productivity, civility and well-being, with the implicit imperative to perform and to govern themselves in relation to these. In exchange for the provision of personal data and quantified performances, the user is rewarded with a sense of achievement and participation. Those that do not 'play the game' are penalised, through disenfranchisement, higher premiums, and exclusion. Inherent in this neoliberal ethos is the idea that actors have to be moulded and controlled in order to adapt to new market and public/private logics (and not vice-versa).

There are number of troubling issues here, such as surveillance, privacy and biopolitics. The means by which nudging occurs is also a grid of measurement and monitoring. Citizens are being enrolled into a system of social manipulation that is also a system of pervasive surveillance. Gamification simply sweetens the shift in governmentality, providing the illusion that the citizen is in charge of their own destiny through game-play rather than playing to the designs of others. Moreover, gamification reproduces the ideology of 'technological solutionism', that the right app, with the right system of feedbacks and rewards, will nudge behaviours and fix problems.

This raises a whole series of issues. Who gets to decide the aims and the rules of the game? What are the effects of such competitive subjectification on social relations? What happens to those who reject this form of governmentality? What effects do they have on those that lack the means to play? What are the social and legal responsibilities of companies designing these gamified social systems and gathering vast swathes of personal data? What are the interlinkages between gamified social life and the transformation of capitalism through the mobilisation, commodification, accumulation and exploitation of various forms of cognitive activities? To what extent does gamification lure or coerce workers into exploitative conditions by mobilising interest instead of economic coercion? How does gamification reconfigure work, consumption, cognitive production, participation and engagement, and spaces and times of cities? Can nudging fix deep rooted, complex structural issues and wicked problems afflicting cities?

While Peter thinks the gamified city might be fun, he is already exploring ways to game and subvert the system. And with good reason. There will be little fun when society is reduced to the games of states and corporations.