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Playing the Real Life

The Ludification of Social Ties in Social Media

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the crowded contemporary marketplace, the merchant is more than ever required to capture and hold the attention of potential customers. Corporations deploy infinite ways of marketing concepts in order to create loyal customers. As Poster (1990) and Elmer (2003) theorize, the customer is now not disciplined to self-surveillance, as would be the case in the Foucauldian sense, but instead he is now enticed into participating in being monitored. They are effectively impelled to participatory surveillance, rather than compelled, as was the case in the disciplinary society. Contemporary customers sell their personal data in exchange for benefits and products. Familiar concepts in corporate surveillance are for example supermarket loyalty cards. Whoever uses them will provide behavioural data for the supermarket and will receive his reward often in the form of a discount. This is seemingly a mutually beneficial relationship and completely voluntary, however it is not. If customers do not wish to fill in the form, use their loyalty card or participate, they will be punished by exclusion from these rewards (Elmer, 2003). These developments of participatory surveillance lead to an entrapment of the customer. He has a choice to participate or he will be punished by paying a higher price if he refuses to. Davies (1997) calls this incentive to 'opt-in' the 'illusion of voluntariness', which effectively conceals the imposition of corporations.

Corporations are cunning in extracting data from its customers. Within this 'illusion of voluntariness', a new form is developing that digs deeper in punish- and reward-mechanisms. This method is so inherent to the system that it has become much more concealed than a loyalty card or other electronic cards that track a person's position (Deleuze, 1992). This latest trend of corporate surveillance involves the use of *game mechanics*. Game mechanics are often developed to incite addictive behavior (Zichermann, 2010). By using gaming elements corporations attempt to create a large and especially loyal customer base. Rao (2010) asks himself rhetorically what other role these game mechanics could have other than being obvious marketing tools to make the whole experience more appealing (10). According to Jesse Schell (2010), CEO of Schell Games, professor and author of *The Art of Game Design*, inserting game elements is not only an attempt to create loyal customers, it also reveals a new kind of business model. At the time of Schell's fascinating talk at DICE early 2010, the popular Facebook Game FarmVille had more players than Twitter had accounts. According to some, this astonishing number led to the first real bite of the social networking site Facebook in the pie of search engine Google, because in 2010, Facebook topped the list of most-visited websites (Bosker, 2010).

According to Arvidsson (2007), discipline transforms power. He quotes Nicolas Rose's famous statement 'ruling through freedom' to explain the ways of control deployed by corporations. He states that 'ruling through freedom' will be achieved when an artificial environment, such as a game, is constructed where freedom and passions are put to work. Within corporate culture, power can be mediated through the imposition of an everyday game. According to Deleuze (1992), a lot of immaterial workers are already playing a game: a meritocracy game at the office, in the academic world, etc. This notion of emerging ludic elements in everyday life is called *gamification*. Gamification is the use of game mechanics to boost interest in non-game applications (Zichermann, 2010). This gamification happens under a new kind of industry that Julian Dibbell dubbed *ludocapitalism*. He describes ludocapitalism as a new industrial revolution driven by play as the first was driven by steam (quoted in Shaviro, 2007: 12).

This article elaborates on these new concepts by casting light on how they function within social media. Considering the explosion of Facebook Games, Foursquare, Booyah, Gowalla, etc. who all have integrated game mechanics, it seems that social media are becoming ever more game-like and vice versa. This new kind of corporate marketing is alarming, as for the first time in history it seems that corporations have found a way to influence customer behavior by way of appreciated addiction.

2. POST-DEMOGRAPHIC: A NEW WAY OF ASSESSMENT

Doing research on social media requires one to think about several concepts such as different kinds of classes, identity management and the relation between 'real friends' and 'friended friends' (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In a study by Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe (2007) on social networking sites (SNSs), they use the distinction described by Putnam (2000) between bridging and bonding: the former describes the 'weak ties' and the latter describes ties that are tightly knit and emotionally hold together (1146). On the question of how to make sense of the tremendous amount of data retrievable from SNSs, Rogers (2008) has come up with a new way to evaluate the users, namely by considering their 'tastes' and their 'favorites'. The rise of this kind of assessment is what Rogers (2008) dubbed post-demographics. While the traditional demographic assessment is 'bio-political', focusing on governing bodies, post-demographics attempts to be more 'info-political' by focusing on getting certain information to certain people (2). As he explains:

Where of interests are not the traditional demographics of race, ethnicity, age, income, educational level or derivations thereof such as class, but rather tastes and other information supplied to make and maintain an online profile [...] from a postdemographics perspective, the profile lies at the core of research into social networking sites, as it provides information that moves beyond the demographic, organized according to 'interested' and 'favorites', with more specific sub-categories as brands, music, movies, animals, etc. (30).

It seems that the public has yet again been degraded, after the bureaucracy had already turned the individual into a number (Poster, 1991). At first, philosophers were concerned that individuals could not be fitted into the limited field of characters or in the predefined categories (Rogers, 2008a). But according to Rogers (2008a), now with SNSs, the limitations are stretched, there are more fields and the individual has greater agency 'to author oneself' (31). These developments reminds of what Lyon (2002) described as new categories of social classes. In what he calls the 'phenetic fix', corporations capture personal data that is triggered by customers and these abstractions of their personal data are then used to place these individuals in new social classes of income, attributes, habits, preferences or offences, in order to influence, manage or control them (3). The customer is not approached as an individual living in the physical world, but rather as an abstraction of pragmatics, mainly focused on what type of customer he is.

3. THE SOCIAL GRAPH: A NEW WAY OF RECOMMENDING

The previously described phenomenon has emerged in social media as well and even in industries such as the online (and offline) retailers that make use of this particular kind of social construct. Online retailers such as Amazon and offline retailers such as supermarkets are heavily dependent on profiling new kinds of individuals based on data other than that of the demographic kind. Tastes and taste relationships are of importance for recommendation systems, both online and offline. This kind of profiling, which Rogers (2008) calls 'depersonalized data analysis', focuses not only on who bought what kind of product, but rather that an individual bought it and what else this individual has bought. The marketing principle is to use the data on customer behavior and its purchase histories to employ depersonalized data analysis. Of interest is what kind of products are purchased and in which purchase-relationship the purchase occurred. In other words, which books with which cd's? Which shoes with which ties? Or in a more market-targeted meta-analysis, which brands are in which purchasing-relationship? Popular products are subsequently boosted and certain combinations may be shelved together (33).

In Web 2.0 applications the individual and therefore the recommendation is often undisclosed. The famous retail tagline ‘the person who bought that also bought this’ does not reveal who that person actually is. Google’s PageRank system, which is in fact a finely tuned recommendation system, does not reveal who boosted which websites to be on top of their search results. A YouTube video with hundreds of thumbs up does not show who voted. This ‘depersonalisation of data’ is for Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, the biggest flaw in Web 2.0 applications (Vogelstein, 2009). According to Vogelstein (2009), Zuckerberg might be attempting to overtake the search industry by creating more value out of its immense user base. The edge of Facebook is that their users do not use depersonalized data, but real names, real favorites, real friends. This highly valuable network for marketers is what could be called the ‘social graph’ of an individual:

Zuckerberg envisions a more personalized, humanized Web, where our network of friends, colleagues, peers, and family is our primary source of information, just as it is offline. In Zuckerberg's vision, users will query this ‘social graph’ to find a doctor, the best camera, or someone to hire—rather than tapping the cold mathematics [...]. It is a complete rethinking of how we navigate the online world. (Vogelstein, 2009).

In order for this kind of ambitious proposition to come true, the scale of the social media is crucial. The first step of every social media company is to build critical mass: the bigger the better. In doing so, social media encourage third-party applications. This is especially true in the case of Facebook where a high number of games and other applications are integrated in the use of their service, when compared to other social media. According to Rogers (2008), they realize that not only user content will increase their value, but also users’ applications as those will increase the value and as well as levels of participation. Quoting Shirky (2008), Rogers (2008) states that this is a “classic argument concerning the inversion of the ‘value chain’ in online games as well as in the entire Web 2.0 industry, summed up in the idea that the more use it, and contribute to it, the better and more valuable it becomes” (35). In the example of Facebook, in order to expand their domination of making everything social they introduced Facebook Connect: a tool that allows users to log in to third-party websites with their Facebook identity. Obviously this tool is, like the most of online services, a trade-off between convenience and selling personal information.

4. THE SOCIAL MEANING OF EXPLOITATION

The relationship between ludic elements and social media, as in the case of Facebook, is starting to unveil itself in such a manner that it is inevitable and cannot be ignored. It seems that gaming and ludic experiences are intrinsically related to online socializing. In the article 'Facebook Application and Playful Mood: The Construction of Facebook as a "Third Place"', Rao (2010) explains the emerging of gaming in everyday online socialization. He says that novel cultural practices that emerge within the context of an increasingly participatory culture are "establishing play as a central cultural value rather than an alternative to or 'escape' from everyday reality" (8). The function of escapism in games is diminishing and there is an urge to have other significant meaning in order for one to play. According to Haque (2010) who speaks from a business perspective, social media are undervalued and underestimated. If it would only be used to make friends or maintain social ties: "it would be thinking of social tools a little bit like using a positronic brain multiplier from the 25th century to tie your shoelaces faster". The capacity of social media to create significance and meaning has never been more important (Haque, 2010). Julian Dibbell (2007) is one of the first to assert the development of a ludocapitalism, an industrial revolution that is driven by play, 'just like the first was driven by steam' (quoted by Shaviro, 2007: 12). He explains:

[The pursuit of wealth] drained of the religious significance that gave it meaning, the economic system we inhabit must either bind us to its pointlessness against our wills – a costly proposition, like any prison system – or contrive new meanings for our daily grind. And what easier way is there of contriving meaningful activity than through the mechanisms of play? [...] The grind must sooner or later become a game. (Dibbell, 2007)

Although using social media like Facebook or MySpace does not seem like a working grind, its users must never forget that they are in fact creating value for the corporation. Every click, every photo and every comment or status an user gives to the website it contributes to creating value; something the user itself will never be part of when collecting. The excellent metaphor Mäkelä (2008) uses is that social networking under the license terms of the corporation is like living within a medieval city where life goes on as usual, but the premises and large parts of the citizen's livelihood are owned by and benefit the landlords (40). In the medieval city, it was protection from the landlord that enticed the citizens to live in their exploitive relationship: nowadays it is enslaving addictive gaming. In the digital medieval city, the concept of 'ruling through freedom' (Rose, quoted by Arvidsson, 2007) still exists. It happens when passions and freedom are put

together within an artificial environment such as a game. However, the game or point system of an application should never be the sole enticement. If that is the case, the corporation will lose value and tangle down (Farmer, 2010). Game goals are merely a means to an end. Rao (2010) argues that playfulness and social situations are intrinsically connected in a symbiosis: the two cannot exist without each other. Although he acknowledges that playfulness creates the best conditions for the individual to communicate in a group, he does not clarify whether playfulness arises from social situations or that social situations implicitly contain playfulness. According to Holmes (2007), the contemporary capitalist culture is to let users play in their sandbox, i.e. “to express yourself in a situation whose parameters have been deliberately designed by an organization that is looking to maximize the profitability of one or several of your behaviors”. This principle is where the complete Web 2.0 industry is based on. In capitalist culture, increasingly more wealth and value is produced by the mass collaborative intellect that is impossible to command. For creativity to rise, even the very costly prison system described by Dibbell (2007), would be deficient. It is impossible to order someone to be creative; instead, there is a digital sandbox to play in and simultaneously siphon creativity.

5. THE SOCIAL GAME

In his article ‘Money for Nothing’, Shaviro (2007) expresses an Adornoesque mood about the ludocapitalism. He sees the situation as one in which even leisure and play have become hard work, and work has been turned into play only to get its slaves to do more of it (13).

Gamification, implementing game-mechanics in non-play applications, and ludocapitalism are yet another evolutionary step from the market to let the customer engage and indulge in the service and product. Shaviro sadly remarks that the ludocapitalistic developments are just “the latest instance of the Market’s astonishing ability to subsume, denature, and profit from whatever threatens to contest it” (14). In his article he discusses the experiences and ideas of Julian Dibbell (2007), who claimed that play has become work and vice-versa. He made this claim after witnessing the huge amount of Chinese gold farmers and their million-dollar business. A Chinese gold farmer is someone who works in a Chinese factory, but instead of producing material products such as jeans or electronic apparatus, they play and grind their day into producing immaterial virtual game currencies. “They perform the digital equivalent of hard labour” (Shaviro, 2007: 9). Social networking, as discussed earlier, has similar elements to a multiplayer game. This is not only because of their intrinsic connection, but also because of their specific characteristics as a place focused on conversation and informal sociability, a place where individuals can just be together. A concept similar to what Foucault (1998) calls ‘heterotopia’s’ and Oldenburg (1999)

calls 'Great Good Places'. These places are there to host playfulness and conversation: it is the digital tavern of the modern world (Rao, 2010).

In the modern tavern, the meritocracy game (Deleuze, 1992) has found its digital playground. Within social media, the social graph is a vehicle used to become more prominent. The more social activities an individual conducts, the more he will be present in his social network. According to Weber (1930) who talks about the spirit of capitalism and as elaborated by Dibbell (2007): the pursuit of wealth, or in this case the pursuit of prominence, "tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport". In the digital tavern, to boost one's prominence is simply done by being social: to tweet, to post on walls, to comment, to like, etc. These running entries are competing for presence on the pages of your friends. The modern landlord continually encourages its citizens to consume more, i.e. to make more comments, to view more photos and to make more friends (Rogers, 2008). It is the social game of prominence. Just like having cool stuff in a multiplayer game gives you in-game social prestige (Shaviro, 2007: 5), it also accommodates narcissistic traits: an individual feels satisfied to see its presence on a friend's page. Dibbell (2007) compares it with an open-source project where contributing and competing with peers is the most enjoyable part. The reward is to be better and more prominent than your peers and not so much any material benefits. He quotes Linus Thorvalds, the creator of open-source OS Linux, who says, "the computer itself is entertainment". Is this true for social media as well? Is making friends, giving and receiving comments, posting photos, becoming a sport? Some may even argue that the goals of Facebook are to win friends and influence people (Krotoski, 2007).

5.1 Game Mechanics

Gamification is a very new and hot topic within game design, game-based marketing and social games. The implementation of game mechanics into social media is an intertwined process. Social media, due to the network of friends, boosts and drives the motivation to play. On the other hand, game mechanics motivate individuals to make use of that particular social medium. Although I am neither a game designer nor a psychologist, a few game mechanics that are typical for social games will be briefly explained.

5.2 Constraints

The first basic rule of game design is rarity or scarcity. According to Castronova (2001), who researched the economics of virtual worlds, many people consider the best world to be the one with both scarcity and perfectly equal opportunities. The world of a game is one that can offer equal opportunities: everyone starts at level 1 and is subjected to the same rules. Scarcity is not a bug, but it is a feature of the game (Shaviro, 2007: 9). Having to overcome and deal with those rules is what makes a game worthwhile and meaningful to play. Shaviro (2007) quotes Dibbell's assertion that if all else being equal, "people will choose the world that constrains them over the one that sets them free" (12).

5.3 Appointment Dynamics

There are many factors that have made FarmVille the popular game it is. One of them is what game designers call *appointment dynamics*. Appointment dynamics (AD) implies that the player is required to log in the game at a predetermined time. AD makes clever use of the reward- and punish-structure as an incentive. If a player does not log in at the predetermined time, or if he is late, he will be punished. In the case of FarmVille, its crops will be withered and of no value anymore. If a player is on time, he will be rewarded for his hard work and his punctuality by harvesting the crops. CEO and founder of Zynga Mark Pincus (2010), creator of FarmVille, calls this the Golden Mechanism or even Wither Mechanism. AD seems to be such an obvious way of nothing else than enslaving its players, but so cleverly integrated into the game that it may even make the game more enjoyable. It reminds me of Spinoza's (1998) remark that people "will fight for their servitude as if for salvation" (3).

5.4 Progression Dynamics

Another often seen gamification practice is *progression dynamics*. In its fully manifested form this can be no more than a bar that shows the completion percentage. Think about the profiles of social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook. A bar with the progression percentage is shown to new users, thereby motivating them to achieve the 100% and complete the task. A similar practice happens after the completion of the profile but in a much more refined manner. The continuous quest and encouragement of Facebook to make new friends seems to go on forever. Therefore, an individual's profile is in constant progression and never complete. In a gaming perspective, it is a game with only advancements but no goal. Facebook encourages its users to always find new friends by browsing through the recommended friends and importing contacts from email-accounts. What goes even further is the advocacy of Facebook to suggest friendships

between one's own friends. If those friends have indeed 'friended' each other, the individual who suggested the friendship will receive a notice with a rewarding message. Facebook is making it satisfying and rewarding to act as friend-matchmaker.

5.5 *Virality*

This encouragement of expanding the network for reward is called *virality*. Virality implies that game goals are easier to achieve with multiple players, or players are rewarded if they manage to invite other friends to play the game (FarmVille). In the social medium Foursquare, virality is the very foundation upon which this social game is based (although the founder denies that Foursquare is a game). Foursquare is a social location based service to check-in at venues and share locations. This implies that Foursquare has no value if one does not use it in a competitive manner or invite friends to share locations with. The tendency of today's gaming is linking the virtual game elements, whether achievements, goals or battlegrounds, to the real world. In Foursquare, badges for various achievements can be earned (e.g. check-in to 50 different venues, check-in 10 times in 12 hours, check-in 4 nights in a row, etc.), although these can be satisfying in itself, it also gives in-game social prestige to show off which badges you have obtained. The compelling competitive element in Foursquare is that whoever checks in a certain venue the most will be named the 'mayor' of that venue. Besides that being the 'mayor' gives in-game social prestige, it is also often linked to a reward in the real world, such as a free drink in a bar. This is the psychology behind a lot of successful social games: it uses your real friends in the real world (Schell, 2010). The players are creating value for the landlord while they are competing who can check-in most at a certain venue, not immaterial value, but actual customers.

6. GOING REAL AND EVERYWHERE

In his fascinating talk at DICE 2010 about future gamification, professor and game designer Jesse Schell (2010), shows us a glimpse of what he thinks is happening and will happen. What most contemporary successful games have in common is that they bust through reality. As described earlier, the contemporary game is not about escaping reality; instead it is being relevant in the real world. It used to be all about fantasy, but every successful platform seems to be breaking through fantasy into the new curious realism. Successful games like Fantasy Football, Geo Caching, Simpsons Scavenger Hunt, the Wii, Guitar Hero, are all games that bust through the glass screen into reality. Individuals nowadays urge for authenticity, a development that is not only visible in the gaming industry. The television becomes reality TV. In the grocery store it is all about organic groceries. In contemporary society, the more genuine is the more real (Schell, 2010).

At the end of the talk he describes a typical day in the nearby future where gamification has permeated every aspect of life. Earning points is done throughout the whole day: for brushing your teeth correctly, to buying a branded drink, to watching television (and ads) and even walk to your work. Who is benefiting besides the player? He guarantees in an Adornoesque manner that the biggest benefits go to the toothbrush company, the toothpaste company, the drink vendor, the advertisement agency, the shoes company, the health insurance company, etc. Society seems to be headed to the digital medieval city where value is created for the corporations while its citizens are playing games and kept happy. Schell assures that this is going to happen, the question is only when and who will lead us there.

7. END WORD

Within the contemporary capitalist culture the emerging revolution is ludocapitalistic. The ludocapitalistic revolution is intrinsically connected to gamification of not only the marketplace, but as shown in this article, also the online social media. However, the social media can arguably be categorized in the marketplace on account of the post-demographic placement of individuals in new social classes: social ties are assessed and expressed in ‘favorites’ and ‘brands’. This layering and categorizing of friends in the social graph works both ways: to accommodate the sale of personal data by the corporation and to make social ties more useful, as is shown in the Facebook example for the ‘more humanized way’ of search. The gamification of everything seems to be, again using the outstanding quote by Shaviro (2007), “the Market’s astonishing ability to subsume, denature, and profit from whatever threatens to contest it” (14). Gamification is the latest enticement of the modern landlord to profit from its citizen’s livelihood. Game mechanics are implemented, supplying an enslaving substitute for the demise of meaning. Social media companies host the modern tavern, the sandbox, the walled garden, where its users play and produce value.

We are in the middle of this vast and fleeting development. According to Schell (2010), this will happen sooner or later. The outcomes are radical when gamification has permeated daily lives to such an extent that it is not longer exceptional and taken for granted. Similar to what Google has done to online search and what Facebook is becoming to making everything social. According to Mäkelä (2008), there is a need to develop different kinds of walled garden “where the gardeners co-own the premises and can determine how porous or strong the walls are” (40).

William Gibson (2010) compares the contemporary social media as one big marketplace, which makes Zynga the arcade hall, the attractor of the mall. He says that it's acceptable to shop there occasionally, but now we have become a "full fledged mallrat". Gibson hopes that one day, the collective will wake up and grow up and realize that interesting things mostly happen elsewhere. In the future the individual will be playing the real life, its own life. It will be so indulged and addicted that it fails to remember that sometimes it is better to stop playing in the garden and try to look and see what is beyond the wall.

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