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+10! Gamification and deGamification

This article investigates the cultural meaning of *gamification* and of its degamification power. In particular we will see what gamification is (+1), which are the levels of analysis (+2), how gamification makes explicit how culture derives from the game (+3) even if they are different things (+4), how the formation of culture in game and vice versa could delete them and how gamification cannot do that (+5), why every gamification is a *degamification* (+6), why *pointsification* cancels fiction and gameness from games (+7), why gamification of devices does not involve a playification of experiences (+8) and how the gamed player stops to play (+9).

+1 TUTORIAL

Game Studies is both an academic and an industrial discipline that has led to cyclical debates. During the last year the concept of gamification has received increased attention, in part due to an essay of Jesper Juul devoted to the analysis of market expansion and the involvement of new casual users (Juul, 2009). Actual market expansion lies in three specific factors: 1) the introduction of new interfaces, such as the Wii Remote and the use of vibratouch screens; 2) the conquest of new play areas through online socialization, increased by the spread of social networks which involve real-life identities; and 3) the application of gaming technologies to the industry of mobile phones. These trends have sparked the interest of investors in gamification leading them to organize an international conference on the topic¹.

However there is not a consensus among researchers and designers about what gamification is, because its described features do not seem to pertain to a single phenomenon. This is the typical problem of any ontological “what-is-this” question. Moreover video games are social objects, so their *map* is their territory (mapas knowledge, not as a *Pac-Man* maze). So to map this map we have to produce a metadescription with no objectivity, because the properties of the analyzed object (the game) depend on a specific point of view (that of the player). The issue becomes complicated.

In any case, some authors define gamification as A) a process of market expansion, which transforms non-players in players (or non-gamers in gamers)

1. The Gamification Summit, September 15–16, 2011, New York.

and non-games in games. According to others, gamification is B) the expansion of a ludic property, the so-called pointsification, toward non-ludic contexts. Finally, there are those who define gamification as C) a broad cultural phenomenon that can criticize consumerism by promoting it (McGonigal, 2011). To understand better these theses:

- A. The market expansion into new spaces, new times and new media is a vital goal of any economic sector. The handheld introduced during the mid-eighties allowed the second socio-economic boom of video games, as well as the recreational use of CD by *The 7th Guest* stimulated the CD-ROM market. The game market periodically expands, so if “gamification” refers just to current market expansion, the concept contains a (forgivable) etymological error.
- B. Gamification as pointsification instead refers to rewarding players with points, quantitative indicators or status icons such as the badges that track completed levels. Often an entire game is structured around pointsification, like in *Look How Many Friends I Have*, a game for the Facebook platform. Pointsification is a typical feature of video games, e.g. the counter at the top right corner of the *Space Invaders* screen. The concept of pointsification also suffers from vagueness because the score of *Pong*, which was a core mechanic, is not normally considered a good example of pointsification. So pointsification, while being nothing new and rather vague, is becoming more and more important for games and for other consumer activities, such as the refurbished badge-points of supermarkets, the credit structures of universities, the car stickers for gas control, and the symbolic hierarchies of NGO volunteers managed as a multilevel marketing company. In general, the pointsification is a boost to competition through the recognition of progress and loyalty to a product, which does not always lead to entertainment. On one hand the pointsificated activities inherit from games the intent to create engagement, interest and loyalty for uninvolved activities; on the other hand they are simply tracking methods, such as notches on the shepherd’s stick.
- C. The third, broader vision associates gamification with the dual historical process of *ludification* of serious practices and *seriousization* of ludic practices, well exemplified by the so-called *serious games* (or *educational*), the ad-wares and the ad-games.

These three phenomena (market expansion, pointsification and ludification/seriousization) constitute a sort of gamification system that combines new marketing tools and design patterns with a form of stumbling ideology, promoting a consumerist and conservative battle in favor of a bizarre concept of secularization (Huling, 2010).

+2 LEVEL UP: THAT IS THE POINT

We have seen what gamification means, but we need to understand if it is a real phenomenon and if it is a good one. Different ontologies (organized categories) could be drawn depending on the level of granularity considered. There are various levels of granularity in the analysis of video game phenomena: level 1 is the program code (with many sublevels); level 2 is the perceptual output (sound, visual and tactile objects); level 3 is the player material interaction (interface); level 4 is the player symbolic interaction (usability); level 5 is the socialization between players; level 6 is the cultural classification of these phenomena; and level 7 is the scientific research on these phenomena. Gamification is not present in all levels:

1. More and more program routines and graphic engines originally developed for video games become used by non-ludic software, such as war training simulators. Moreover, software that still requires tutorials tends to design these as games.
2. The generation that grew up with video games (the majority of professional software users) is very sensitive to the playful patterns of representation, which form the basis of its computer literacy. So the use of certain “game styled” graphics in non-ludic software is due to the familiarity that the average user has with these graphics, rather than their inherent affordability.
3. The material interface of video games, however, does not tend to migrate to other devices: joystick, joypad and Wiimote did not find serious applications, while mouse and touchscreen passed from serious software to games.
4. By contrast, ludic usability (symbolic interface) of video games is rampant on many serious applications: avatar, splitscreen, free roaming first-person view, isometric representation and the division of the screen into separate areas such as text and images are just some professional software elements introduced early by games.
5. The socialization of games has cooperative elements (such as modding, online multiplayer, bulletin board systems and grouping of MMORPGs), which has often migrated toward other contexts, such as joint purchasing groups. Nevertheless, what is dominating the current gamification is simply the structure related to pointsification.
6. The critics’ style in video game magazines has created a model for all other technical magazines. Today any specialized magazine designs its reviews, previews, insights, readers’ mail, demos and rankings following the model of game magazines. However, the model for game review and scoring probably derived from the evaluation of wines introduced by Bob Parker in the late seventies. So there is a gamification in review styles, but its origins in a non-ludic practice.

7. Game studies is the main model for research on games, but they have not had a particular influence on other disciplines. Rather, they are modeled on semiotic, ontological or cognitive approaches.

So gamification is not related to all aspects of video games, and its expansion beyond video games does not affect all the areas of the non-gaming reality. Still, it remains to be understood from a broader point of view what the gamification of the culture implies, and what the central idea of the gamification system is.

+3 FLASHBACK TO ANOTHER WORLD

In philosophy, the relation between “what is play” and “what is not play” is scattered among the pages of a vast amount of literature, often not directly related to the subject. Concerning gamification, only a few names are relevant, starting with Lyotard (1979). According to him, our age, which has given rise to video games, is the age of postmodernism, where *grand narratives* (massive ideological systems of interpretation) disappear. Ideology, religion, politics and science no longer have normative influence: we can just play. From this perspective games become the main institutions of our society; video games in particular, because they bind information technology and media, which are the basis of economic development of post-industrial societies.

Lyotard’s thesis dates back to 1979, the time of the first video game boom. Previously, other thinkers described the culture (not just the post-industrial one) as a big multiplayer game. Anthropologists (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1982; Goffman, 1974; Bateson, 1956), philosophers (Schiller, 2000; Fink, 1960; Gadamer, 1960; Searle, 1995) and psychologists (Winnicott, 1971; Vygotskij, 1966; Piaget, 1945; Bruner, 1976) described institutions as productions of the faculty to imagine and to play “as if” X was not X, pretending instead that X is Y. Culture derives from Searle’s *imposition of status function*: the physical object X counts as a status Y in the context C. Wittgenstein says that culture is a set of linguistic “games” concatenated by family resemblances. Nonetheless, social actors do not intend language games as games, otherwise they could not constitute serious institutions upon them. So, culture is an implicit and serious fiction, deriving from the game understood as an explicit and interactive fiction.

According to many thinkers, culture is a fiction taken seriously, a representamen sign transformed into a represented object (Remotti, 1993). Then the cultural ludic status is a convention determined by the subject. Wittgenstein seems to confirm this when he states that there is not a single collective trait that could regroup all the games under a single ontological category (Wittgenstein, 1953). Indeed, the variety of game types is due to the fact that the game, being an intentional state and not a real object, depends on the subject (Mosca, 2011b). Game is a frame, not an object (Deterding, 2009).

Following this conception, gamification is a metarepresentation: if the culture derives from the game, then to gamify the culture is just to reveal its core

structure. Almost ten years ago, Michael Montola published a series of essays on pervasive games and on the traditional boundaries of ludic activities (Montola, 2005). He identified the main trend of postmodern games: going outside the traditional ludic boundaries. This trend seems to be constantly growing, but already Montola questioned it on a specific issue: if the game is a fiction opposed to real life, what happens when the game bursts into serious life, eventually involving unsuspecting or passive “players”? There are two scenarios, Montola wrote: if a non-player character (NPC) understands she is part of a game, then she could choose to continue or to stop playing; but if she does not realize she participates in the game, then she will continue to believe she lives in a real life (like the protagonist of the film, *The Game* [Fincher, 1997]). In that case, it is difficult to argue that in fact a NPC is playing. As we have seen, the game is an activity that depends on comprehension and awareness.

The dependence of the game upon the subject involves a particular relation between game-time and real-time: to be ludic, the nonlinear game-time has to be inscribed in linear real-time. Due to this, people who remain continuously connected to the MMORPGs do not perceive they are playing, instead they perceive they are spending real time in a real second life. Conversely, exploring a new context of real life (e.g. a new CAD software) is an activity often perceived as ludic and separated from reality. This is paradoxical, but true. So, a ludic tutorial is not the gamification of serious learning, but merely the exacting of the playful property of learning.

Is gamification just an explicitation of the ludic origin of culture?

+4 AVATAR AND AVATARA

The Christian *theologia ludens* of Rahner (1965) and Moltmann (1972) revalued cultures as worldly games and James Carse distinguished “finite games” inside life from the “infinite game” of life: to feel life as a game it is sufficient to think of it as one of the opportunities and not the only one (Carse, 1986). Carse’s theories were adopted by gamification ideologists as a very effective example of their ideology. Gamification—making game what is not—seems to bring culture back to its ludic roots. Indeed we have seen that culture arises when the infantile and intransitive fiction of games becomes the adult and transitive fiction of institutions.

Many authors think that social reality derives from game, but the same number believes that there is a fundamental difference between them. According to Plato (*Leg.*, 803c–d, trans. 2000), actions can constitute a game only if they have no irreversible consequences. A real life is a game only if it is eternal and with no existential problems: therefore only gods live by playing (with human toys). Many other doctrines share this view, like the Hindu myth of Lil, the divine play that God uses to constantly create the world that he visits with his *avatara* (Watts, 1999).

According to Caillois(1958) and Huizinga(2009), the essential feature of games is the magic circle that separates them from other serious activities. The serious work is a goal-oriented activity that takes its meaning from its goal. On the contrary, games are non-pervasive and autotelic(Csíkszentmihályi, 1996) activities that have a meaning in themselves, like morals; differently from morals, in order to play you have to believe that your game cannot exist independently from you, whereas a real social actor believes exactly the contrary. According to Turner, the adult society maintains a space of play (the liminoid), where players can explore and freely create without any purpose. That ludic space is a non-lieu(Augé, 1992), a non-time, where daily places and times become meaningful, where the familiar is de-familiarized and the unfamiliar is again approached. Thus the social order comes from the extraordinary gameplay.

Gamification makes explicit this fiction as the basis of culture. But could the culture itself become a game?

+5 NEVERMORE "GAME OVER"

Herbert Marcuse argued that workers plagued by alienation should use complete automation to produce goods in order to turn work into play(Marcuse, 1964). During the 1950s (when Marcuse wrote his critical theory), some companies tried to insert game into work in order to increase production and to decrease alienation. A noble intention, but one that apparently failed: the game, both as recreational break from routine and as exploratory activity, did not yet increase production. Again, during the eighties many companies tried to gamify their working processes, this time on the basis of mathematical game theory that identifies games with problem-solving and brainstorming (Morgenstern and Von Neumann, 1944). Yet, even though such practices became a reality in many organizations around the world, it seems that workers do not consider them as play activities.

Nevertheless, closer to the political rhetoric of "all power to the imagination", the existential and psychological problems seem to share in the *bovarist* ideology of today's gamification, which do not simply turn work (the goal-oriented activity) into game (the autotelic activity), but turn game into work too.

The positive, Frankfurter consequence of a broad gamification would be the critical *deconstruction* of social reality, whereas the negative, Californian consequence would be the *destruction* of social reality as reality (the ontological res that resists to the subjective epistemology). Even in the view of Carse, the infinite game of life is such only if opposed to a background; so a game, to be such, must have a characteristic of playfulness that distinguishes it from a serious reality. But if social reality becomes a game, then its reality is deleted. In addition, if game becomes social reality, then its playfulness is also lost. Therefore, the risk of gamification is not only to destroy the real culture, but also to destroy the game as a parallel, fictitious and separated space. Disaster!

But have no fear: the transformation of the entire life into a game is not so simple. If a game feature becomes pervasive on a total scale, then it loses its playfulness. The points collection was a game only for the housewives of the sixties. Those who play always (e.g. monomaniacal gamblers, video game-addicted, gametesters) gradually stop to feel that they are playing, even as they continue to carry out actions that their culture considers to be playing. But above all, a game exists if and only if players do not believe that it exists outside their mind. If all social objects were games, then they could be changed continuously. The motor of change is the liminoid space and change is a good thing for societies, but a totally dynamic society is not a society because basic structures of societies (such as promises, laws, and moral values) are founded on continuity. This continuity is designated as serious, in opposition to games and thoughts. So, a society made by games would have no games, but solely serious institutions. This is a daunting prospect, but improbable due to the social need of continuity of serious and real social objects that stop social conflicts and the capriciousness of future actions.

+6 VIDEO DEGAMIFICATION

When old works become new games, old games become new works. We have seen that gamification is a transformation of serious activities into ludic ones, but we have seen too that this constantly activates the transformation of ludic activities into serious ones. I call it a degamification.

The first electronic gamification was the OXO use of computer in 1952. For a long time, that gamification was restricted to a few people: the engineers that worked with computers. On the contrary, the majority of people came into direct contact with computer technologies through video games. When ordinary people started to use computers for work, there was a degamification.

A non-technological example is the degamification of public spaces that has occurred over the last decennia: children no longer play in the streets, squares and courtyards, but in private rooms (Farné, 2010). Beyond the specific reasons related to urban development, the degamification of public spaces is the opposite of the gamification of work and organized shopping. But why gamify shopping? Today, the majority of free time is spent in malls, where shopping is no longer a playful activity (as for *Parisian-passages* ladies of Flaubert, Balzac, Simmel and Benjamin). Pointsification, lotteries, assignments of roles, and fictional statuses are simply means to make new the very old phenomenon of consumerism, so essential to our capitalist society.

What is important is that every gamification is a degamification. Some years ago, public and private institutions such as banks and governments opened avatar branches in *Second Life*. Did it involve a gamified access to institutions or a degamification of *Second Life*?

The question is similar to the nineties issue of “real vs. virtual”: did websites of institutions “virtualize” the institutions or did they “realize” the Web? This

could be seen as the classic unsolvable problem of the glass as half full (sense) or as half empty (nonsense). But someone, like Lehdonvirta (2010), would suggest that virtual worlds do not exist as worlds. Informatics platforms share the very same world of children playing and of war massacres. I agree because, as Heidegger (1996) and Axelos (1974) wrote (and that Heim [1993] did not understand), the concept of “world” implies a totality. There is just one totality, full of different contexts, as well as there only being one space, full of places. So there is one cyberspace with a plurality of cyberplaces (Mosca, 2011a). Similarly, every gamification of an X always goes with a degamification of a Y, even if gamification is just pointsification.

+7 POINT TO POINTS: THIS IS THE LEVEL

The purpose of pointsification is to increase user engagement, loyalty, rhetoric awe, and time spent by using software. The secret intention is not to entertain but to gain money from players, or alternatively to educate them. Education and income are two very different areas, even antithetical, but they share the same property: the new goal orientation of an old autotelic activity. The most shared external goal of games is victory. So pointsification is based on the gratification received by a competitive environment, which provides identity and social status through rewards.

Cognitive science experiments show that activities presented as autotelic receive more attention than goal-oriented ones, even if the goal is a desired reward. Reward diminishes attention. According to gamificators (I do not use “designer” because “the gamification process rarely involves any of the current game designers” [Robertson, 2010]), this decline in attention is compensated by the intensity of the autotelic play. I believe this cannot happen.

Some real, competitive and hierarchic elements are part of many games, but there is still a space of fiction in any of them. Therefore, to transform a ludic competition into a non-ludic one it is sufficient to cancel the fictional property that gives a limitation to the desire to win and to achieve a hierarchical status. This property is the *fair play*. The fair use of the magic circle dissolves all hierarchies installed by the victory, resetting them at the start of every new match. When in wargames and role-playing games the single matches are connected in campaigns and the campaigns in pointsificated rankings, players often lose the playful aspect of the competition: the exploration of fictional identities (“I am the king of goblins”) becomes the construction of a single real identity (“I am the best player”), which has marked psychological commitments.

The mask is a good example of how games and institutions treat some elements in different ways; this leads me to consider the game as a way of understanding objects (a frame) and not a specific object. Masks can be used to liberate one from roles or alternatively to provide just one role: if the given role is immutable and the mask cannot be taken off, then it is a serious social role. A mask like the one worn by Facebook users cannot be taken off, therefore the exploration of

a social network can be felt as a game only at the moment when users start to use it; afterwards, in order to play you need an application such as *Farmville*.

To ensure the play, a good gamificator should not simply replicate some game structures, instead she should know what people feel when they play. But sadly the game is not important for a good gamificator because her purpose is simply to induce a lucrative addiction. Addiction is enhanced by basic perceptual stimuli related to pleasure (or to pain *eustress*, the “good stress”, as gamificators call it), such as light sources in motion, vibrations of the touch, repetitions of coordinated movements, successes on simple tasks, and frustrations of tasks too complex for the learning curve followed until that point.

If the danger of gamification is to transform everything into game, the danger of pointsification is to transform everything into addiction.

+8 GAMIFICATION OF DEVICES IS NOT PLAYIFICATION OF EXPERIENCES

As Consalvo shows, pointsification builds identities through competition and hierarchy but also through care giving (Consalvo, 2011). On the model of *Nintendogs* and *Tamagotchi*, many Facebook games are addressed to a female audience through non-immersive avatars that need care. Saving them from extinction or trying to make them more beautiful are activities that do not involve identification.

Hierarchy and caregiving are then different models of pointsification. Hierarchic players search their identity through identification with an avatar, while caregiver players build the identity of an avatar. These categories mirror the patterns of childhood play as those divided by gender: dolls and guns. But each gender entails projection and introjection: the dolls category is divided into neonate and adult puppets (like Barbie), while males use guns as well as constructions (like LEGO).

Devices built for gamification purposes are similar to normal game devices, but this does not mean a playification of the experience connected with the device, which only relatively depends on objective properties. Entertainment (in the form of game) is merely the attractive property of those devices, not their function. For example, gamificators build a socialization based on competition, not a socialization granted by competition. In a gamified activity there is never a free exchange of resources among players, except in order to encourage the frustration of “Ouch! I do not have what you have” potlatch effect. Competition for status is a boost for purchase, and that is the encrypted goal of such “games”.

A case closely related to that of gamification is the use of explicit sexuality through advertising, the “sexification” that exploits the theme to the extent that today sex is autotelic or entertaining only if goal-oriented.

In 1955 Marcuse was right to say that any activity structured as a *performance* (instrumental and goal-oriented) encourages the alienation of the social actor. The sexual performance of reproduction, he said, could be eliminated in favor of a playful and autotelic sexuality. Forty years after the sexual revolution (incited by the introduction of chemical contraception), the current prevalent

sexual anxiety related to performance is not associated with reproduction, but rather to a sexuality completely ruled by play and pleasure, which Marcuse believed with no alienation. But competition and identification are central problems of the contemporary sexuality: a sexual paradigm evolved from the duty of reproduction to the duty of pleasure. Today, mass media represent sex as a means for social competition, power, prestige and canonized roles. Yesterday, the sexual pleasure was a freedom; today it is a duty.

Similarly, the game today is a space to experiment a free recoding of social roles, but tomorrow the gamification could turn it into an expression of anxieties, responsibilities, and duties. Already, those who today live totally immersed in activities that are normally considered as games, such as professionals in sports, croupiers, and otakus, feel anxiety and duty as if they were not playing.

Gamification tries to capture, through competition, frustration, gratification, fear, socialization, and collection fever, the user's attention, in order to addict them. According to Consalvo, the gamified socialization is profitable for the gamificator only if it is organized in such a way as not to let the user exit from the game. So, very often, the socialization model of gamification is an exploitation scheme where players, like those on Facebook, contact "friends" just to gain an advantage from them.

+9. GAMER OR GAMED?

According to certain game scholars, "games are about the perception of control, choices, goals, rewards, achievements—while art is fundamentally, about contemplation, awareness and surrender" (Anon, 2011). In opposition to such theses influenced by Kant (trans. 2000), I think that contemplative activity is incompatible with passivity or disinterested pleasure. I do not understand how one could be disinterested in relation to pleasure. The participated pleasure is essential to every contemplative activity, from art to tourism. I disagree with Lucretius ("Beautiful [is only] looking the far shipwreck from the coast" [trans. 2005, p. 109, author translation]) and I agree with Leopardi ("the shipwreck is sweet for me, in this sea" [trans. 2010, p. 420, author translation]). As I wrote elsewhere, video games are very good representations of our contemporary society because of their combination of materialism and image worship. With a video game you interact not only with symbols, but you also materially interact with images. This interaction, so important for games, does not eliminate contemplative experiences related to aesthetic objects.

Current gamification does not export contemplation toward instrumental media; rather it exports exploitation toward contemplative media. In a gamified activity any action is goal-oriented, like the whole activity as such. This is no longer gaming but a gamed activity.

According to Piaget (1945) and Schiller (2000), games are the autotelic activities necessary to develop ethics. Turning games into instrumental activities could lead to a transformation of ethics into instrumental activities. Using

games to make advertising (ad-games) or to educate (serious games) indicates the transformation of an autotelic activity into a goal-oriented one, formally the same move of the rhetorical uses of morals.

That apocalyptic view, shared by certain critics, has the merit of showing the necessity of analyzing in a non-naïve way the non-naïve phenomenon of gamification. Nevertheless, I know that gamified activities cannot be judged, like rhetoric, by an ethic point of view, but I claim that they can be judged by an aesthetic point of view: the loss of autotelic games implies the loss of freedom and beauty.

For decades free gaming has been the paradigm of Scandinavian kindergartens and therefore a globally pedagogical model. But today, because of the model of gamification, the educative goal-oriented game is overwhelming. The difference, fundamentally, is that free play focuses on the acquisition of generic skills (frames for action) while goal-oriented game focuses on a specific content (objects). If game is a frame for action, then the goal-oriented activity is not a game. The gamified world structure is a set of functional boxes in which every space and every place, including ludic ones, has a specific purpose. It is clear that a social reality with game (the most important of secular liminoid activities) as functional activity is far more repressive than a social reality in which the game is a free space.

But a continued and long-termed gamification enterprise owns an intrinsic impossibility: after a first period and beyond a certain level of pervasiveness, users realize they are being used, rebelling and migrating to other forms of entertainment.

+10. FINAL BOSS

In conclusion, gamification means the use of some game mechanisms (mainly those related to pointsification, competition and caregiving) applied to non-ludic activities, in order to better engage the user. Does it work?

I agree with Adrian Chan when he says: “I personally have doubts that ‘fun’ adds value” to a product from the user’s point of view (Chan, 2010). For marketing, ad-games are not a windfall like sex images were. Perhaps a user continues to play an ad-game, but she is then driven by a compulsion to repeat, not by pleasure (Gramazio, 2010). Many authors pointed out that games communicate meaning (Frasca, 2001; Sicart, 2011; Consalvo, 2005; Bogost, 2007): what is important now is to understand that even gamification has a meaning. Gamification, like pointsification, does not simply increase the use and intensity of an activity; instead it transmits precise values related to competition, hierarchy, and *predation* (to use a term introduced by Bertozzi [2011]).

To sum up:

1. Every gamification of X is a degamification of Y
2. Current gamification is a pointsification and not a radical gamification of culture, which is itself founded on game.

3. Radical gamification is not a good deal, because it deletes liminoid spaces.
4. Pointsification is not necessarily related to games; student honors are points, but not games.
5. Pointsification is not a good deal, either for the video game industry or for values of our society.

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