Article | Gaming the Quantified Self

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Abstract

Gamification combines the playful design and feedback mechanisms from games with users' social profiles (e.g. Facebook, twitter, and LinkedIn) in non-game applications. Successful gamification practices are reliant on encouraging playful subjectivities so that users voluntarily expose their personal information, which is then used to drive behavioural change (e.g. weight loss, workplace productivity, educational advancement, consumer loyalty, etc.). The pleasures of play, the promise of a 'game', and the desire to level up and win are used to inculcate desirable skill sets and behaviours. Gamification is rooted in surveillance; providing real-time feedback about users' actions by amassing large quantities of data and then simplifying this data into modes that easily understandable, such as progress bars, graphs and charts.

This article provides an introduction to gamification for surveillance scholars. I first provide brief definitions of gamification, games and play, linking the effectiveness of gamification to the quantification of everyday life. I then explain how the quantification in gamification is different from the quantification in both analog spaces and digital non-game spaces. Next, I draw from governmentality studies to show how quantification is leveraged in terms of surveillance. I employ three examples to demonstrate the social effects and impacts of gamified behaviour. These examples range from using self-surveillance to gamify everyday life, to the participatory surveillance evoked by social networking services, to the hierarchical surveillance of the gamified call-centre. Importantly, the call-centre example becomes a limit case, emphasizing the inability to gamify all spaces, especially those framed by work and not play. This leads to my conclusion, arguing that without knowing first what games and play are, we cannot accurately respond to and critique the playful surveillant technologies leveraged by gamification.

Introduction

Every weekday morning, I sit at my computer. After checking my emails, I head to a gamification website, *750words.com*, that promises to make writing a daily habit by rewarding me with badges, positive feedback, and semantic and statistical analysis about my written text. After I complete my daily quota (summarizing field notes from the previous day), I am shunted to a page that awards me a virtual cheetah for improving my typing rate, and tells me—by noting my word choices and comparing them to other writers'—that I am feeling introverted and selfish this morning. I mentally make a note to use more 'we' and less 'I' in the following day's writing. I then check the task management application on my iPod, *Epic Win*. Framed as a questing game, every task I complete levels up my avatar and has the chance of uncovering virtual loot. I hurriedly put in a load of laundry, strike-through the task with my finger, and watch my skeleton avatar lurch forward on a crumbled treasure map. I am far ahead of my husband's Viking avatar, and I still have thirteen things on today's 'to-do' list. I close the app, noting that *Nike+* has sent me a reminder to run this morning. Literally, within an hour of waking up, I am playing at least two games that promise to help me become a more productive worker and prolific writer. The moral of this anecdote is that, while I am well-versed in Surveillance Studies, I am happily participating in this