RE-CONQUERING THE GAMIFIED CITY: AN OLD BATTLE ON A NEW URBAN GROUND

ATHANASIA DAPHNE DRAGONA

What does the notion of gamification imply for the urban environment? In the last few years, images of new adventurous cities have appeared which offer excitement, fun and socializing to citizens who are full of energy and desire for challenges, rewards and status recognition. Is this an expanded gaming territory or an unfortunate ludic decadence? This paper addresses gamification by looking into an old battle, situated between 'game' and 'play.'

In the last few years, a new challenge appeared for the inhabitants of cities around the world. Gamification, the strategy of applying game dynamics and mechanics into non-game contexts, reached the contemporary metropolises and created a new ludic layer over them. Challenges, points and levels have been integrated into the urban environment inviting citizens to act as players and compete for achievements, awards and status recognition. Designed by location-based social networking sites, the new motivations for urban exploration are based on two fundamental human characteristics: our sociality and disposal for play. Being rewarded "for doing new things and for making a better effort to be social," the players engage successfully not only with different everyday activities, but also with life itself writes Jane McGonigal, arguing that the application of pleasurable game elements can actually assist in restructuring society in better ways. [1] While, according to this line of thought, a great game-based future might be opening ahead of us, one cannot help being reserved when confronted with such positivism. On which grounds does gamification really stand? This short paper will aim to discuss gamification by locating the contradictions and misrepresentations connected to it on one hand, and by situating the potentialities for its surpass on the other.

Gamification is a term describing a process applied not only to the urban environment but to a wider range of sectors, such as those of health, education, labor and the Internet, with a common aim: to affect and manipulate human behavior for the favor of the market. Although McGonigal chooses not refer to the market but to praise the process as a decisive solution for the impasse of today's reality, most of the gamification supporters directly discuss the possibilities game-like processes may offer to generate more customers, more advertisements, more revenue. For this reason, since its beginning, gamification has been met with hesitation by scholars from the field of game studies. Described as "exploitationware," [2] or as "a tactic employed by repressive, authoritarian regimes," [3] gamification has been doubted for its aims and values. The world might have always resembled a game, but never before did this resemblance manage to make profit per se.

Complementary to this first argument, a number of logical points can follow regarding the sense and impact of applying game dynamics and game mechanics to urban life. Do we really need extrinsic awards, for instance, in order to wander around in the city and decide where to stop? Do we need extrinsic motivation to meet our friends? Is having our movements and interactions tracked, controlled and used by third parties worth it, for the fun of the game? Gamification has therefore received a lot of critique not only for the profit that it generates but also for the devaluation of human activities that it encourages.

In addition to the above, scholars doubt the influence of the integration of points and awards into a non-game activity and the characterization of it as a game; these elements are actually the less important aspect of a game they argue. However, either the game resemblance is accurate enough or not: the features and techniques used are sufficient to trace the revival of an old battle between two fundamental notions, those of 'play' and 'game.' By setting rules and constraints, by enclosing certain locations in the map while ignoring others and by limiting the citizen's openness and freedom of choice, gamification's preference towards the 'game' becomes clear. Or, to remember Roger Caillois, 'paidia' seems to be defeated by 'ludus,' as the "arbitrary, imperative and purposely tedious conventions" of the latter take over the gamespace and push away the "frolic and impulsive exuberance"; the "anarchic and capricious nature" of the former. [4] The formation of the new controlled city, seems therefore to be in complete antithesis with what the Situationists once envisioned as the playful city, or more particularly with what Constant framed as the 'New Babylon.'

What a sad reversal and a disappointing cancellation of the revolutionary ludic thoughts of the past, one could note while reflecting on the 'New Babylon.' What a swap in the use of technology: from a means of liberation to a means of control, from the city planned for 'Homo Ludens' to a city planned for playful work. The 'New Babylon,' a city for play, leisure and adventure, a city where work would be automated and man would be free as in a utopian city. However, no one expected such a realistic misrepresentation of it where 'Homo Ludens' would become again 'Homo Faber,' seduced by game gimmicks and fouled by the impression that the game like interfaces of technology could empower him over the city. Although Constant wisely predicted the exciting ludic behavior the advance of technology and telecommunications would bring, little could he foresee the expropriation that would also follow. A city of movement, based on dynamic relationships between citizens and the urban environment was realized, but based on the inhabitants' disposal, sociality and potentiality.

In reality, the new gamified cities perfectly fit into the context of the post-fordist metropolises, of the new city factories where the multitude lives. The contemporary cities based on our knowledge, information, codes and social affects are being gamified; inviting us to produce more, while collaborating and/or competing with our friends. Gamification is in perfect alignment with the new modes of immaterial and affective production. We produce as we play. We work as we interact. The new realistic perception of ludic cities is based on our capacities and potentialities. However, for this same reason, no dead end has been reached yet: gamification can be opposed and this is possible only by again embracing play itself.

While a gamified image of the city is being created by interfaces, a different documentation of the contemporary metropolis manifests playfulness as an immanent element of today's multitude. The fragmented, anarchical, diverse and incoherent multitude in times of crisis and transition uses play to express and highlight its opposition and resistance. Masks, movements, actions appear spontaneously within gatherings and demonstrations. "The anger of the protesters coexists with their joy in the carnival," as Hardt and Negri note. "The protests are carnivalesque, not only in their atmosphere but also in their organization," which shows an enormous capacity for innovation; innovation to transform reality itself . [5] To see this image one needs to turn from the mobile interface to the image of the square, from the controlled gamespace of the market to the reclaimed public space of the city. The anarchical, impulsive elements of paidia are apparent; one only needs to set his eyes on the practices of the urban players around us. At stake today, therefore, are the potentialities of today's players/citizens, which can easily be used for the profit of the market through game like interfaces, or for the benefit of the common through tactics of playfulness. For the latter direction, players/citizens need to realize not only the set of possibilities offered in today's city gamespaces but also the ways value can be generated and exploited with their involvement.

In other words, we need to keep going back to understanding the rules and constraints of the 'game' and to being critical and playful at the same time. Else, the gamified corporate reality will slowly abolish common play. At that point, we might even be driven to a manifestation of a call to "Never Play" following the "Never Work" of the Situationists as a form of resistance, as McKenzie Wark writes in his latest book . [6] Could we prevent the ultimate ludic downfall of our times?

References and Notes:

1. *Jane McGonigal, Reality is Broken (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011).*
2. *Ian Bogost, "Gamification is Bullshit," Ian Bogost, Videogame Theory, Criticism, Design, August 8 2011, http://www.bogost.com/blog/gamification_is_bullshit.shtml (accessed Septermber 2, 2011).*
3. *Heather Chaplin, "I Don't Want To Be a Superhero," Slate, March 29, 2011,http://www.slate. com/articles/technology/gaming/2011/03/i_dont_want_to_be_a_superhero.html (accessed November 12, 2011).*
4. *Roger Caillois, Man, Play and Games (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 13.*
5. *Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Multitude (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 208-211.*
6. *McKenzie Wark, The Beach Beneath the Street (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 157.*