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# Gamification and location-sharing: some emerging social conflicts

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**Abstract**

Location-sharing services such as foursquare are a prominent example of commercial apps that use gamification to increase user engagement. These gamification elements however have to coexist with a plethora of usage motivations. We here present selected observations on emerging conflicts between gamification elements and other usage motivations for location-sharing. We argue gamification needs to take into account the social context in which services operate and that conflicts within this context can be detrimental, but can also add to playfulness.

**Keywords**

Gamification, foursquare, location-sharing

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation: Misc.

**Introduction**

Current location-sharing services like foursquare are a prominent example of near-mainstream gamification. Foursquare employs gamification elements like points, badges and mayorships to motivate people to engage more with the service and 'check in' more frequently. While the service isn't a game as such, it arguably features pervasive game [9] elements using real places. Most popular location-sharing services differ from earlier research efforts in important ways: not

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only do they employ game-based incentives, they use manual 'check-ins' to pair user location with semantically-named, user-generated venues visible to all users and location is shared with a potentially very large audience. We here describe some recent observations on gamification in location-sharing services from two wider research programs at Mobile Life: one focusing on location-based services and the other on pervasive games. We here describe a selection of our findings that show that gamification can have both positive and negative effects on engagement with the service and we show emergent - sometimes conflicting- norms (not) to check-in resulting from for example clashes between 'play'-based motivations and more coordination-oriented uses. Our goal is to identify how gamification motivations can be successfully employed, and co-exist with other uses within wider, complex social contexts, such as in location-sharing.

### **Location-Sharing**

Sharing one's location and knowing the whereabouts of others is not only a practical tool for coordination and communication [1,7]; rather than practicality and accurately sharing location or activities, location sharing is a social, emotional and moral affair [2]. It is used not only to express whereabouts, but also moods, lifestyle and events [1]. People share information that is interesting, enhances self-presentation and/or leads to serendipitous interactions [7]. Sharing is a social negotiation and can support connectedness, social repartee and enjoyment within social groups [1] and reassurance [2]. Which locations are shared can depend on with whom the information is shared, for what it is used [3], and 'right' and 'wrong' places to be [2]. Gamification elements have now been added to

this complex landscape of motivations and concerns presented by location-sharing.

### **Some observations on gamification conflicts**

Our group currently uses interviews, surveys and ongoing analysis of real-time 'check-in data' to analyze usage of location-sharing service foursquare. One of our studies, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 active foursquare users from Sweden, The Netherlands and the US focused on the motivations different people have for using the service (paper submission under preparation). Beyond the wide variety of motivations for checking-in, including a broader use of coordination and social-affective uses previously identified, we also identified motivations not previously described, particularly 'check-ins for me' with location-sharing as a side effect, rather than main motivation. These include check-ins for rewards (incl. discounts), life-logging, diversion and voyeuristic uses. In our studies a selection of participants reported checking-in and sharing their location primarily for the game with mayorships and badges being most compelling. One interviewee specifically set out to try and figure out how to get badges and even manipulated venue information and his check-ins to this end. However, a number of conflicts appeared to arise as well, a selection of which we discuss below:

#### *Playing for points vs. 'nonsense' venues*

A way to gain additional points and mayorships is creating new venues to check-into. However, venues that just have been created for 'the game', can also be a non-informational annoyance, making finding 'real venues' users may be looking to check into harder:

"Like... you go to a sandwich shop and there's an order line and a pickup line, and someone checks in at the order line, they check in at pickup line, I think that's kind of stupid [...]"

*Mayors & badges vs. privacy & identity management*  
Users automatically become the mayor of a venue by checking-in the most at that specific venue during the last two months. Mayorships are publically visible on users' profile, and are also shown to any user checking-in to that venue. This means that mayorships can threaten privacy – especially when considering the example of being the mayor of one's home. A selection of participants did use check-ins to 'show off' they 'went places' and 'mayorship battles' for cool places were reported. The badges and mayorships involved in Foursquare however would both facilitate and complicate such motivations. Some participants worried about getting mayorships or badges that would threaten their identity. Would one want to become the mayor of the cheapest eatery in town? Would it be professionally appropriate to have a 'crunked' badge featuring a drunk cartoon on a public profile? At the same time, 'naughty' badges and offbeat mayorships were considered fun and spurred conversations.

*Mayorships vs. ownership*  
A mayorship appeared to communicate not only identity, but also public 'ownership' over a place, which was not always desired. Some participants for example reported annoyance with others for claiming places in an undeserved manner. Interestingly, some check-ins, while technically not 'fake' (aka not physically being there), would be perceived as cheating or as not respecting 'ownership' and social boundaries:

"[...] I've been to his [my best friend's] office like 50 million more times than this other guy has, but he escalated that, he made that

part of the game, and it wasn't part of the game before. I thought that was kind of unfair. [...] it felt like it was more my place and like, in a social sense, than it was his place. But then he claimed it"

Potential consequences were feared in some cases. One participant for example wondered whether it was ok 'from a business perspective' to become the mayor of the office of one of his clients.

*Anti-cheating aka 'you're using it wrong'*

When introducing game-elements, a need for rules may emerge. Foursquare for example implemented 'anti-cheating' rules, where users are warned they will not receive points for a 4<sup>th</sup> check-in within 15 mins. An interviewed bus driver however for example did not use the service to share or 'play', instead he used the app on his mobile phone to check in when driving his bus and waiting at stops. He found this a welcome diversion, and could now also revisit his routes in his check-in history. While these check-ins had no audience of other users, the service itself could sometimes serve as a disapproving audience. The bus driver for instance recalled that when checking in on the stops of one of his routes, the app would start telling him he was checking in too much to get points. He decided then that he apparently 'must be using it wrong' – services employing gamification need to consider which messages their 'game-rules' send to users who might have very well appropriated the service in other ways.

*Inappropriate can be more fun*

The conflicts above however should not be seen as a disqualification of gamification elements. This especially becomes apparent when considering the 'physical act' checking-in requires. Multiple participants described 'getting caught' and 'doing it under the table'. Exactly this social unacceptable aspect of using the service also

invoked playful behaviors - making usage of the service a bonding experience within the social group users were using (or in this case, playing) the service with. This was especially apparent for users that saw check-ins not as a tool for coordination only, but also as a playful goal in itself:

"...it's maybe not professionally appropriate to do it, right.[...] but if we're in a situation where it's probably not the best to exhibit such adolescent, teenage behaviour, we won't. What happens then it becomes a way of.. like I was saying, the social part... who can do it most subtle. and like, revel in the victory of doing that, without being in your face about it [...]we'll do like a head nod or some sort of visual cue and the other one will be like, you...you got it...this time"

We now see both non-users and fellow users becoming part of the experience as partial spectators as in [5]. The act of checking-in is either hidden to for example avoid their disdain, or first hidden and then expressively revealed to spectators who are fellow 'players' to amplify the shared experience. We cannot limit our analysis of effects of gamification elements to the virtual game and in this case the audience of the check-in via the service; the physical act of checking-in in itself also becomes a playful activity or performance.

### Up for Discussion

The examples above show that gamification can both engage 'players' and restrict 'use'. Conflicts between gamification elements and 'utilitarian' uses might not always be avoidable, and conflicts are not always a negative feature. The challenge might rather be to take advantage of these conflicts to make services more engaging. Separating 'play' and 'utilitarian use' is not always possible, as multiple motivations may be at play and users switch roles (as exemplified by interviewees'

using both the terms 'play' and 'use'). Gamification discussions need to go beyond whether gamification elements motivate individual users to use a service. We need to consider the complex social contexts in which services that employ game elements operate. For example, in the case of location sharing we need to consider motivations of the user him-/herself, the social group(s) they are 'playing' or 'communicating' with, the wider context of other users of the system, non-users who might stumble upon public profiles of 'players', and audiences of the physical act of checking-in and many more factors. For understanding the role of gamification elements in such a context, we argue that using multiple lenses and considering both the perspectives of, in this case, location-sharing and game & gamification research is crucial.

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