It's Not Just Whether You Win or Lose: Thoughts on Gamification and Culture

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Abstract

As it is popularly understood, gamification risks becoming synonymous with achievement. Yet achievement is only one potential aspect of games that gamification could focus on, and one that is not necessarily well suited as a motivation for many cultures around the world. In this paper, we argue for a need to draw on cultural motivations in the design of gamification systems and examine some of the issues involved in adopting such an approach.

Introduction

In Danish and other Scandinavian cultures, there is an important concept known as Janteloven [8]. In Janteloven, one should never try to stick out from the crowd. Those who do try to stick out do so because they think that they are better than other people. But no one is any better than anyone else, which is why one should not try. Janteloven is essentially a set of rules for encouraging social equality, social stability, and uniformity. Some locals question whether Janteloven still serves as an apt description of Scandinavian society. But as many a foreigner who moves to Scandinavia soon discovers, Janteloven is still an important cultural creed and one of the first aspects of Scandinavian culture communicated to newcomers.

Gamification can be characterized as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts [3]. In a culture in which it is undesirable to stand out and to strive to

achieve more than one's neighbour, does it make sense for us to design gamification systems that focus on competitive differentiation, achievement points and leaderboards? How do we make sense of gamification in cultural contexts that seem inherently at odds with gamification's current trademark design elements? If we choose to introduce more culturally sensitive game elements, how might we go about this process?

Achievement, games, and gamification

Popular perceptions of gamification are intrinsically linked to the systems currently labeled with the gamification "brand". That many of these systems rely on markers of achievement as guiding feedback suggests that gamification has become almost synonymous with achievement. Yet achievement is only one aspect of games that could be harnessed by gamification and there are many others that have not yet been explored and exploited by designers.

The achievement-oriented approach to gamification relates to deeper issues surrounding general perceptions of games and the values they codify and promote [1]. While it is possible to find examples of games that promote diverse values, achievement remains fundamental to most understandings of games. For example, in Caillois's classification of games, the core game category of agon describes competitive games, which are hard to separate from the concept of achievement [2]. The very concept of "winning", whether stemming from explicit competition or not, is also at base a recognition of achievement.

From the game system to the world

The assumptions of characteristic game values, and accordingly, gamification values can be challenged when we consider them in terms of the broader cultural and social contexts in which they exist. For example, for any given game, it is worth considering whether the values it embodies and promotes are deemed acceptable in its surrounding cultural context. But does it matter whether games map to our cultural values, or does the somewhat separate nature of the game context exempt games from complying with cultural rules, expectations, and patterns?

The same question can be asked about gamification. But whereas for games, there are compelling arguments for both sides, for gamification there are strong pragmatic reasons for considering mappings to cultural and social contexts. Gamification takes place in non-game contexts, i.e. it concerns moving game elements outside of game systems and into the world. The context of operation for the game elements in gamification *is the world*. Any separation between game and culture becomes even blurrier. If we had reasons before to bring socio-cultural factors into the frame, those reasons are further intensified by gamification's context.

Culture and games

In the words of Hofstede, "culture is the software of the mind" [4]. It impacts on our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour, and it shapes how we relate to others and our environment. Importantly, it is shared and learned. Following on from early connections drawn between culture and games by Huizinga [6] and Caillois [2], more contemporary game studies thinkers have also explored the relationship between games and culture. This exploration has tended to revolve around three areas: representations of culture and different cultural groups in video game worlds, appropriations of video

games amongst cultural groups, and the development of subcultures within or around particular games and genres. For example, game studies scholars have explored representations of minorities in terms of race (e.g. [4,9]) and the place of games within non-Western cultures (e.g. [7,12]).

The structural similarities between games and cultures have yet to be explored deeply. Both have rules, implicit and explicit, which serve to guide us in terms of how to act with regards to others and our environment. Both suggest goals that are worthy of pursuit, and noble and ignoble ways to achieve them. By agreeing to abide by the rules we become insiders. Those who do not abide by the rules are frowned on – either by other people, or by system mechanisms.

In fact, a game system is not just contained within hardware or software, but also contains players as people. Game systems rely on players interpreting and acting not just in response to hardware or software signals, but also by drawing on their prior knowledge, beliefs, and systems of ethics.

Culture and gamification

As we pointed out earlier, the context of operation for gamification is in the world. Within the world, people rely on cultural rules and patterns to guide beliefs and interactions. Our previous research on persuasive games suggests that even while playing closed-system games, people do not leave their cultural backgrounds and assumptions behind [8]. We found that people were more welcoming of persuasive games that were consistent with their cultural beliefs, and demonstrated greater shifts in attitude change in culturally matched conditions. If anything, it seems more important for

gamification designers as opposed to persuasive game designers to draw on cultural patterns for inspiring design directions, as the cultural and gamification systems operate within the same space.

Cultural motivations as design inspiration

In our previous work on culture and persuasion, we looked to insights from the cross-cultural psychology literature to inspire design concepts. One etic framework of culture that seems promising from a gamification design perspective is Schwartz's theory of cultural orientations [11]. In this model, universally understood cultural value types are spatially co-located in a circle in terms of similarities and differences. Adjacent value types such as *egalitarianism* and *harmony* have more in common with one another, whereas distant value types, such as *egalitarianism* and *hierarchy* are considered opposing values. Part of Schwartz's research objective was to position different cultures within this model to facilitate our understanding of which values are most important to different cultures. America is positioned closest to *mastery* (which encompass the notion of achievement), *hierarchy*, and *affective autonomy* values, indicating that amongst Americans, cultural importance is given to these concepts. America is positioned far away from *intellectual autonomy*, *harmony*, and *egalitarianism* values, indicating a cultural de-emphasis of these concepts. In contrast, Denmark is positioned close to *intellectual autonomy*, *egalitarianism*, and somewhat close to *harmony*, and is far away from *hierarchy*, *embeddedness*, and, to a lesser extent, *mastery*.

Frameworks like this do not propose design solutions. They do, however, help designers to understand the cultural context of their users. More than this, they are

highly suggestive of design possibilities. For example, Schwartz's framework would suggest that gamification systems for Danish users that were premised on achievement and differentiation by rank would make little sense culturally, whereas systems promoting notions of equality, creativity, and freedom would make more sense.

We point out, however, that gamification as a concept is curiously subordinated to games. The game elements that designers make use of in gamification systems are generally those that are somewhat familiar to users. In fact, the most prolifically used gamification mechanics are those that we have seen used time and time again in games. These elements serve as a kind of shorthand for previously experienced and well-established game dynamics and mechanics. If we design gamification systems by using elements of games that few people have experienced before, however, or if we sidestep games altogether and focusing just on cultural values, these systems will embody something other than gamification, and move more towards becoming novel design mechanics.

Satisfying two literacies

Drawing on people's familiarity with games while satisfying their cultural expectations suggests that we need to intertwine people's cultural and game literacies. For the particular interactions and attitudes our gamification systems are designed to encourage and support, we need to (a) understand how those interactions and attitudes are contextualized culturally and socially, i.e. in relation to relevant motivations, special cases, taboos, etc., and (b) explore how we can map familiar and compelling game mechanics to support culturally contextualized interactions and

attitudes. This is a knowledge that we must build through design experimentation and reflection, and one that will ultimately help gamification to mature.

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