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WHAT IS SOCIAL GAMIFICATION?

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Gamification is increasingly used for a variety of educational and training purposes, serving as a new and fresh motivator for many different people such as young people, managers and professionals in private and public organisations.

In most cases gamification is used in relatively controlled settings with clear activities, timing and goals.
In those cases gamification consists in one or more gameplay activities, well-structured and with clear rules, activities and success (reward) criteria.

Typically such activities are set up to work on people's mentality or to develop new competences within training scenarios.

Most gamification activities take place in such closed, controlled and highly structured settings (whether physical or virtual), not in the vibrant and unpredictable world outside the training locations.

We are, however, increasingly interested in challenging gamification to deal with social reality.

Obviously, such initiatives will need to work with gamification in a different way, introducing a new "gamification genre" perhaps, as such activity will be far less controllable and structured.

One might object to this use of gamification and argue that basic gamification principles will be lost when applied to the un-controllable and unpredictable field of social life.
We would respond that such use of gamification might not satisfy the traditional gamification criteria, and that gamification of social reality might call for a different definition and understanding of gamification.

Basically gamification means applying gameplay rules from all sorts of games, including digital games and serious games, in non-game situations – such as education and training.
Obviously such activity requires more or less controlled and structured settings.

When we talk about social gamification in this context we do not intend to carry the full gameplay infrastructures into social reality scenarios.
What we intend to do is to exploit important digital game and serious game features to help *drive, motivate and organize social action*.

To this end we are allowing us rather free interpretations of what gamification is and could be.
Frankly, the idea is not to satisfy gamification criteria, but to encourage social action! A certain undogmatic approach is needed…

What is social gamification, or what is it on the way to become?

Unlike traditional gamification that basically aims to change mentality or develop additional competences, *social gamification* aims to help people take action in social reality and to bring about social change.

In this context we use "social" in a very broad way, to designate a complex field of economic, labour market and life quality structures, basically defining the field to approach as different from for example digital or educational fields, characterized by being simulations and simulated scenarios.

"Social" could also be called "reality", but for example digital and educational fields are, in fact, part of what we call our "reality".
Therefore we prefer the term "social".

Social gamification helps people take real action in the surrounding world to change situations that do not work well for these people or for the community.
Social gamification is therefore linked to, and includes elements from, social innovation, social entrepreneuring or social enterprising, however not at the more systemic level of social innovation and not exclusively defined by the economic goals of social enterprising.

Social gamification is not an objective, it's a method; and in particular a method to help individuals and teams in need of social change to take proper action, to bring about social change.
Social gamification must be dynamic and experimentative, and should be assessed towards what it helps people accomplish and not towards how rigorously it can be defined.

Typical groups of citizens in need of social change are for example long-term unemployed, NEET youth, seniors and elderly, and in some countries less educated women.

What characterized these groups?

These groups are marginal in society as to influence, power and capacity to change their situation.
They do not have the experience, networks or drive to take change action. Furthermore these groups often suffer from (well-justified) depressive and giving-up mentality.

We are offering them short-term labour market insertion with less perspective, short-term skills training and mental empowerment to increase their self-confidence.
We are not offering them to build capacity to change their situation in a long term and lifewide perspective, and it is not easy to do so.

This is where gamification comes in, as one possible way to build capacity for social change.

We are experimenting with gamification approaches to change the depressive and giving-up mentality of those people, adding gamification activities to the traditional mental empowerment aiming to build up increasing self-confidence.
We are convinced that gamification can contribute in new ways to such mental empowerment, but we are also increasingly aware that mental empowerment does not in itself change the social situations of these people.

In short, gamification of mental empowerment is not enough!

What we need is to experiment with approaches and methodologies to help these groups take *social action* – to bring change for themselves and at the same time, to the extent possible, addressing social problems or needs in the community.

What does *take social action* mean?

It means teaming up with peers to work the real world, to work the community, to work the reality.
It means creating something than can help change one's life direction, bring economy and create new social perspectives.
Typical example of such social life change are creating not applying for a job, getting a job in new ways, creating an association, establishing a business (including online), joining an organisation, offering new forms of services for kids, young people or elderly, etc.

The short definition of taking social action is: building capacity to engage in real-life activities that brings you social and/or economic benefit, or at least takes you in a positive direction and with further perspectives.
To the extent possible, such social action might as well bring value to the community, but it does not need to.

So, gamification of mental empowerment is not enough!

We need to experiment with forms of gamification that help these groups of citizens to go from mental empowerment to capacity to take real-life action.
Or, more radically: we need to experiment with new forms of gamification that create mental empowerment and self-confidence *through* taking real-life action.
Mental empowerment does not have to come before taking social action empowerment, as this model is linked to the old academic principle of *knowing before doing*.
In fact, too much mental empowerment activity can end up blocking the ability to take social action…

What gamification principles and resources can help these group take action and change their social situation?

Obviously, taking social action must happen over long and unpredictable time periods, such as months or even years, as this is the nature of social change.

This makes it quite impossible to apply traditional, controlled and structured gameplay.

This also means that the idea of social gamification is to exploit other resources and principles in not only gamification, but in digital games and serious gaming.

Which are those principles and resources?

First of all, social gamification can provide people in need of social change with a framework of comprehension, as is offers to create an overall and coherent narration of the change process, including endowing each step and activity along the change process with meaning and direction. At the same time it can help changing the action-taker perspective from being a victim or object of society towards becoming the subject of a change process: from watching the movie (the game) to acting in the movie (the game).

More specifically, social gamification can help people and teams take social change action through applying the following examples of important and key taking action methods, deeply inspired by gamification, digital games and serious gaming:

LIFE AS A GAME

You build capacity to counter depressive mentality through leaning to see and approach social life as a game that you need to play well to win.

This general approach could also be described as creating a life narrative or taking your life to an epic level.

CREATING AND PURSUING MISSIONS

You build capacity through creating strong and valuable missions for yourself and your team, including achievable sub-missions.

The mission creation helps you structure and organize your engagement in a manageable way and to assess important stepwise achievements.

BUILDING ALLIANCES AND RESOURCES

You build capacity through learning to build alliances along your mission and sub-missions, as you know that you and your team is not able to accomplish social change alone.

You learn to create the most useful and realistic alliances in the stepwise progression towards your goals, including building new alliances on successfully established alliances.

PROGRESSING IN STEPS AND LEVELS

You build capacity through working your social change mission stepwise: you learn that you must take and accomplish certain steps to be able to meet the challenges at higher levels.

Thus you learn to "design" your mission steps in useful and effective ways, avoiding taking steps you are not ready or not yet qualified to take.

LEARNING WHEN NEEDED

You build capacity through inserting small and relevant learning time-outs exactly when you need them to accomplish a sub-mission.

You learn to avoid abstract and un-contextualized learning ("noise") and to be highly motivated for learning helping you to overcome obstacles and allowing you to progress.

TRYING OUT AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

You build capacity through testing actions and strategies in real-life and in real-time, thus learning to find the best ways to overcome obstacles.

In some cases, especially at higher levels in the "game", you will need to fail several times to find the right way. In this optic, failing is a capacity building resource, not simply a failure.

TAKING PRIDE IN ACHIEVEMENTS

You build capacity through taking pride in your stepwise successes and through sharing them with your team, peers or family.

Real-life achievements demanding considerable effort and sometimes risks are the most efficient way to build self-confidence.

CELEBRATING SUB-MISSIONS AND MISSIONS COMPLETED

You build capacity through openly celebrating and making visible key achievements along and at the end of the mission, involving key players, stakeholders, alliances and possible future supporters in the celebration.

THE GAME MUST GO ON

You build capacity through recognizing and experiencing that an accomplished mission simply leads to another.

The game is never over, it must be continued, and along the process what was at first a mission now becomes a sub-mission in the social game.

Basically all those principles and work methods build on the overall principle: the mission IS the game. The change is your reward.
One might engage in various forms of specific and contextualized gameplay along the mission, but the overall approach is precisely that the mission IS the game.
You create your own social game, your own life game and you need to learn to play it as well as possible.

As can be seen, social gamification is strongly linked to methodologies applied in such engagements as entrepreneurship, social innovation and community based learning and capacity building; however social gamification adds very strong principles, work methods and mechanics to these well-known engagements and can make a significant different in the capacity building, if well managed.

Adult education, youth provisions and similar interventions need to make room for such experimentation, taking the empowermental processes out of the classrooms and into real-life action.

European Commission policy is increasingly calling for such direct change action in realisation of the limited impact of classroom based mental empowerment, and in favor of citizens' direct involvement in change processes.
Importantly, such policy and realisation should be backed up by substantial funding of such experimentation, at the moment very difficult to integrate in programs like Erasmus+, EaSI and the Social Fund.

Photo from the EU Directing Life Change project – Jan Gejel