HOW TO WIN FOURSQUARE: BODY AND SPACE IN A GAMIFIED WORLD

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I desired to do something truly unprecedented for our housewarming. The festivities began Saturday morning at Artichoke Pizza. We called it "The Alphabetical Tour of Alphabet City". The goal was simple: in twenty-four hours, traverse twenty-six restaurants and bars throughout the lower Manhattan neighbourhood, in alphabetical order.

I rarely sat and only spoke briefly to the ever-increasing group of guests at each locale. Instead, I was preoccupied typing out the name of each venue we entered on my smartphone. I "checked-in" to each spot using the social media application Foursquare, which utilised GPS to verify my location and allowed me to compete with friends and strangers over how many places we frequented.

Each check-in, furthermore, was linked to other social media platforms, namely Facebook and Twitter, enabling other users online to meet up with us even as we progressed at our frantic pace. I relished each check-in as the software awarded me points.

The next day, we were joined by a few celebrants for brunch at our final destination, Zum Schneider. Recovering over German sausages in the beer hall, we three stalwarts who made it to every venue bragged and congratulated each other, in awe of our achievement. Through the bounty of the social media

applications employed, our exuberant adventure and the spoils of our social competition had been recorded for all to envy. At some point, I recall thinking to myself not so much that the Alphabetical Tour was just a great party and a social success, but that I had won. I wasn't sure what I had won, but I certainly had the score to prove it.

1 GETTING INTO THE GAME

The Alphabetical Tour was not particularly unique in a city like New York where bars abound and crawls between them are commonplace. Atypical was the extravagant amount of time, money, calories and brain cells I expended for a bit of merriment, and the role the then year-old program Foursquare (2009) played in shaping our adventure. Its presence punctuated moments throughout the day and evening, and not only broadcasted where I was along the route, but also became a topic of conversation during the event itself.

Foursquare, in many ways, has become the corporate embodiment of gamification. Its use of location-based technology and mobile media makes Foursquare the perfect target for admonishments about the exploitation of users through game-like elements, the facility for surveillance and the promotion of conspicuous consumption. We realised such apprehensions during the tour. However, knowing full well its potential ramifications, why did I, like millions of others, use Foursquare? The sheer zealousness of the celebration highlights how I was willing to disregard concerns about manipulation for reasons that are at once difficult to define yet fundamentally important to that day. The desire for a glorious experience outweighed any rational judgments.

While much of the research surrounding the proliferation of gamification into non-playful settings and the design of Internet applications has centred on either the potential effects of game elements on the populace, or the growing cultural acceptance of games and play, the experience of gamification has been less explored. As the Alphabetical Tour illustrates, this phenomenon is subtle yet distinctive, involving new forms of communication, and exploits some of our most elemental urges: to compete, to win, to forge a path to glory.

This article will deal with the experience of gamification, specifically through the lens of Foursquare. After first situating the application within the

larger discourse of gamification, it will become evident that, while Foursquare has never purported itself to be a game, it remains a quintessential example of a tool that capitalises on user behaviour through the employment of explicit and implicit game-like functions.

Superficially, Foursquare appears to reduce a user's environment to a series of icons and locations that flaunt capitalism and a culture of "cool" within primarily urban and suburban settings and constituencies. This perception also intensifies claims that Foursquare is merely a waste of time.

I will argue instead that Foursquare rescripts ordinary experience into one of expenditure and glory by allowing its users to bring an ethos of competition into their existence. Through Foursquare, life becomes a conduit for fierce play, communicated less through words than through presence, a kind of "proximal communication".

Because the application maintains a constant presence within everyday life, this form of communication becomes as much part of the bodily experience as an outwardly communicated act. Through a phenomenological approach, along with personal anecdotes to support it, I will show how Foursquare engenders what I call a "state of play" in which the motivating forces of play are not only felt in the virtual space of a "magic circle", but also punctuate and pervade mundane activities, ultimately characterizing the experience of gamification more generally.

2 GAMIFICATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Gamification might have been a rhetorical inevitability with the ascension of digital and video games in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Game Studies scholars, such as Jesper Juul and Eric Zimmerman, endeavoured to carve out a distinct field for the study of games, connecting them to the realm of play, or "ludology" (Frasca 1999), a term attributed to Johan Huizinga, who attempted to track the pervasiveness of play in society in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. As a consequence, at its theoretical roots, Game Studies underscores play's potential universality and its broader application to cultural contexts.

The study of gamification has helped to disclose the discontinuities between perceptions of games and play and their impact on society. Advocates foresee games helping to mitigate adverse social conditions (McGonigal 2011; Zichermann and Cunningham 2011). For instance, current projects make

weight loss (Block 2012) and the awareness of climate change (Fox 2013) a game. Others assail the insidious and unbridled enthusiasm to capitalise on "game elements" for corporate greed.

While the potential societal effects of play and gamification deserve much attention, the experience of the player and what motivates him to engage with gamified programs remains a less travelled frontier. If the invocation of gamification opened up a Pandora's box of predictions about a gameful world, it is worth asking what it is like to live in it.

3 WHY STUDY FOURSQUARE?

Founded in 2009 by Dennis Crowley and Naveen Selvadurai, Foursquare has developed along with the proliferation of gamification, becoming the quintessential example for academics interested in both gamification and mobile media (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012; Deterding et al. 2011; Frith 2012; Frith 2013; Glas 2013; Whitson 2013). The premise of the application is simple: Users check in primarily with smartphones to various venues, ranging from their homes to bars, restaurants, stores, parks and other public settings. Venues are assigned both by the company and created by users. Users are rewarded for checking-in with points posted on a virtual "leaderboard" of friends. They may also achieve "mayorships" and badges on rarer occasions.

The foremost reason for using Foursquare as a case study is to examine the paradoxical relationship between the systems that make up the application and the experiences of the user. That the application fosters competition over leisure appears not only to be impractical in a utilitarian sense, but also blatantly exploitative due to the company's knowledge of users' locations. The by-product of Foursquare is a valuable commodity: a record of the whereabouts of users, including the timing and frequency of their every excursion, which has recently enabled Foursquare to offer businesses the ability to advertise to users when in close proximity to their establishments (Tate 2013). However, the experience of the user remains somewhat divorced from this capitalist ploy. Users willingly volunteer information, submitting to "Big Brother", while revelling within the constraints of the system. Public disclosure and control are produced from the bottom up.

Foursquare, like other gamified applications, lies provocatively on the border between being a game and social media. Games are defined by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, as

"a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 83). Although their definition is meant to be functional, it emphasises the game-like quality of the application. Foursquare encourages competition through rewards while retaining the basic components of social networking sites, which "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison 2007, 211).

Even as it sets the stage for friendly competition, the program is marketed as a singular tool to connect people throughout cities via location-based technologies, offering coupons and deals for those who frequent participating restaurants and bars. This somewhat prosaic goal neither explains Foursquare's appeal to at least 40 million users (Foursquare 2013), nor its growing ubiquity among retailers throughout cities in the United States. The essential functions of the program, the check-in and the subsequent rewards, provide a peephole into the application's appeal.

4 FUN-CTIONS OF FOURSQUARE

While comments, the uploading of photos and other social elements commensurate with social media like Facebook have been added since the end of 2010 (Van Grove 2010), the primary function of Foursquare has always been the check-in with corresponding rewards. This is the causation that drives the Foursquare experience. Upon close observation, the check-in function is tinged with both implicit and explicit means of feeling a sense of glory; the user competes and potentially wins by performing the act.

The check-in is not an inherently competitive act. In Foursquare, once recognised, the user is informed of his successful check-in and rewarded. The importance of the check-in is not only related to registering the user's presence at the venue, but also the value ascribed to the act of registering. Users only receive rewards, points and trophies when the GPS software on their phones traces them to the vicinity of the particular venue.

Since the majority of places where the user checks in are retail establishments and public venues (Bawa-Cavia 2010), Foursquare is frequently associated with consumption, underscoring its business / marketing model.

Check-in restrictions can be circumnavigated by users with few consequences. They can check in from a mobile internet browser version of the application, or emulate a GPS signal on a computer.[1] These practices invoke a kind of "cheating" that is somewhat unusual within the context of social interaction.[2] Rather than being innocuous, the check-in is actually a playful and competitive act, the standard by which rewards are given fairly or illicitly.

Foursquare's rewards adhere to Salen and Zimmerman's game definition, providing a quantifiable outcome for particular actions. Each prize is appropriated toward competitive ends, bestowing bragging rights and promoting a kind of glory. Jordan Frith describes users cultivating their activities around cities in order to obtain particular badges and mayorships (Frith 2013, 251), which are prominently displayed on the profile page of each user. Badges, which are given for specific sets of check-ins such as registering in the same place three times in one week, or checking-in to five different Mexican restaurants, define the achievements of a user and the breadth of his activity, or the type of player he is. Foursquare's reward system expanded in 2011 with the addition of levels to specific badges (Parr 2011). The repetitive completion of the same task now garners even more benefits.

A mayorship is granted to a user for frequenting and achieving an abundance of check-ins at a particular venue, more than any other user within a 60-day period. The glory that comes from a mayorship is highly localised. Particularly in cases where friends frequent the same venue, they become cognisant of each other's mayorships and can vie over them. Mayorships garner other tangible and intangible awards. Both mayors and friends of mayors receive extra points for their check-ins at establishments for which they are mayor, as well as occasional mayoral perks from venues. In the case of restaurants, often a free drink or appetizer is the mayor's reward for each check-in, a fair honorarium for a loyal patron who, at any time, is in danger of losing his position.

1 It should be noted that if a user checks in with the browser version of the application, they are able to receive points and badges, but not mayorships.

2 The most notorious case of cheating in Foursquare can be found in the case of Indonesian "Jumpers" who gained notoriety by checking-in to venues in the United States, en masse, from Indonesia (Glas 2013).

The most constant form of competition and reward is the leaderboard, which appoints a numerical score, seen only among friends, for the user's check-ins over the prior week. Users receive points for a variety of prescribed reasons, ranging from bonus points for checking in to new venues, to attaining a mayorship, to checking in over multiple days or weeks at a particular type of establishment. Other points are awarded completely arbitrarily, such as extra points for the inauguration of the Year of the Dragon on the lunar calendar, or on a user's anniversary of joining Foursquare. Accumulation of points does not lead to achieving any specific reward; points are only significant because the leaderboard is built into the overall structure of the program. Like the high scores in an arcade game, the leaderboard tally records and perpetuates the overall glory of the user. Furthermore, because the score reflects only the past week's activity, it constantly resets, establishing perpetual competition among users. Since the scores on the leaderboard are only shared among friends, the entire reason for its existence is localised glory and competition. The leaderboard seems to be Foursquare's most "game-like" feature with obvious allusions to scoreboards and video game scoring systems.

As can be seen from this brief synopsis of Foursquare, the possibility for competition and play is explicitly fostered, in the case of the leaderboard and mayorships, or potentially, in the case of badges and the check-in itself. More than anything, like other gamified systems, these rewards are meant to motivate users, to induce them to play. However, both the consequences and experiences of these functions for the user are lacking in this analysis.

5 CONCEPTIONS, CONSUMPTION AND CONTESTS

Foursquare activity appears to stem more from the act of checking-in than the rewards received. Publicizing a particular space at a particular time, especially in an urban setting, automatically carries socio-economic connotations. The software promotes a certain kind of conspicuous consumption, allowing users, as hackneyed as it may sound, to appear cool.

The desire to be seen at particular places is popular in urban settings, where knowing the trendiest spot is often competitive. Historically, the data about Foursquare showed that the primary locales checked-into were commercial establishments, such as restaurants, bars and art galleries

(Bawa-Cavia 2010).[3] This evinces a natural inclination that the average Foursquare user wants to be seen and "in-the-know" more generally. In a July 2010 Urbagram study, check-ins were concentrated in areas where restaurant culture and high retail consumption thrived, such as downtown areas of Manhattan, Williamsburg, and Park Slope. In other cities, such as London and Paris, this same study found similarly that "Nightlife" and "Food" venues were the primary places where users were checking in, with Paris also having slightly more frequent check-ins at both art galleries and parks (ibid.).

However, Carnegie Mellon's "Livehoods" project, started in 2012, both updated and complicated the findings of the Urbagram study (Livehoods 2013). The project visualised the activity of Foursquare users in different US and Canadian cities with fascinating results. In different neighborhoods, distinctly diverse activity occurred. For instance, while a number of groceries made up the most checked-in sites of New York's predominantly residential Upper West Side, Brooklyn's hipster enclave Williamsburg featured two bars in its most popular check-ins. In other words, the check-ins mirrored the particular demographics of each neighbourhood, rather than being homogenous throughout New York City (ibid.).

Livehoods contradicted the preconceived notions of conspicuous consumption associated with the check-in, describing different ends based on the users' locales. Users may choose to forego some check-ins in favour of being seen at others. For instance, I rarely see users check in at home. This is supported by Frith's determination that players predominantly check in "to score points, earn badges, present themselves to others, and remember where they have been" (Frith 2012, 189).

Foursquare's activity, consequently, is prompted by personal use, for personal reasons. Furthermore, this personal choice drives Foursquare's economic model. After all, Foursquare generates its revenue through advertising; its software is free. Foursquare's existence is sustained by the continued use of its players, whom it must stimulate in order to maintain an audience for advertisements and from which to collect information. Users must ex-

3 As of 2013, the most popular check-in spot within the United States was airports (Shankman 2013).

pend on behalf of the program. Such exertion has led PJ Rey to describe the activity as "playbor". The term, which he derived from Julian Kücklich's 2005 study of the modding of video games, means making "productive activity an end in-itself (namely, fun) . . . The object of production is no longer to create value; instead value becomes a mere by-product of play" (Rey 2012).

Certainly, the activity in Foursquare encompasses this definition. The play of the check-in belies the effort people expend on behalf of the program. Rey partially invokes playbor to dissolve the traditional notions of economy in capitalist systems, in which work and play are separate. Rather than simply a device to promote frivolous conspicuous consumption, within the context of playbor, Foursquare becomes an outlet for work, causing play to lose "its innocence" (ibid.). However, Rey acknowledges that the experience of play has its own value, including the symbolic capital of intangible rewards. What motivates "playborers" (ibid.) then does not derive from traditional capital models, but instead from intrinsic incentives that come from play itself, namely personal choice and competition. If not driven by capitalism, an ontological investigation of exchange within society may explain the motivation for such competition: glory.

6 COMPETITION AND GLORY

Becoming mayor in Foursquare can be associated with a certain amount of boasting. Mayorships allow users to compete over their favourite haunts. So strong was my desire to obtain mayorships, that I sought them from any number of places. I became mayor of my grandmother's condo, as well as the "gym" in my mother's basement (actually just a stationary bicycle). Many friends were similarly mayors of their local delicatessens, bagel shops and apartment buildings, rather than the hippest restaurant or nightclub. These trumped up mayorships still had value, with a friend complaining if another had pre-empted the mayorship of their apartment. In fact, when I was nearing the assumption of the mayorship at the completely fictitious "Arsenal HQ" (the Foursquare title given to the bar where Arsenal FC fans met to watch soccer games), the head of the supporters' group half-seriously threatened me if I overtook his mayorship. His sincerity was enough for me to abandon my quest for that position.

Playbor certainly characterises my pursuit for mayorships. Mayorships require persistent checking-in to venues, and as described in the above

account, the additional labour of making up both factual and fictional places in which to check in. The reasons for the effort are related to competition.

Since competition is so prominent within Foursquare, its importance and nature warrant further exploration. This analysis will begin to position Foursquare within the realm of game play and to substantiate user participation. It explains, not only how people play Foursquare, be it as playbor or otherwise, but also why they put so much effort into the program.

Salen and Zimmerman refer to the importance of conflict as both "intrinsic" to the game and the means by which players achieve their goals within the confines of the game (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 265). Johan Huizinga indicates in *Homo Ludens*, "[t]hus competitions and exhibitions as amusement do not proceed from culture, they rather precede it" (Huizinga 1971, 47). Huizinga sees the contest as a prescribed event, not dissimilar from play: "Like all other forms of play, the contest is largely devoid of purpose. That is to say, the action begins and ends in itself, and the outcome does not contribute to the necessary life-processes of the group" (Ibid., 49).

The desire for glory, to win at the contest, remains a part of the economy of play, motivating play, as well as proffering a result when play occurs. It is a means of rethinking the "value" of Foursquare. Users will check in to more places for renown as opposed to receiving some tangible economic boon. The users' check in is rewarded with glory, for bragging rights, the "exalted phenomena that we can never fully understand but can only experience" (Leibovitz 2013, 75).

The goal of the Foursquare user therefore diverges from capitalist economic purposes in the competition for glory. Expenditure, the dispensing of time and energy into the Foursquare experience, with no economic value in return, galvanises the Foursquare user and is implicit within Rey's playbor model. Participation in Foursquare, in regard to traditional economic models, is to some degree a bona fide waste of time. As in any game, its economy is dictated by the rules of and desire to play, rather than any rational capitalist motivation.

This expenditure echoes Georges Bataille's analysis in "The Notion of Expenditure" that:

> A certain excitation, whose sum total is maintained at a noticeably constant level animates collectivities and individuals. In their intensified

> form, the states of excitation, which are comparable to toxic states, can be defined as the illogical and irresistible impulse to reject material or moral goods that it would have been possible to utilise rationally (in conformity with the balancing of accounts). (Bataille 1985, 128)

Excitement is then caused when the user expends. Interaction with the software, for the sake of glory and competition, exposes the user to more activities. The user does not react to the software as a promotional tool. Foursquare has created a mode of consumption that marries advertising and traditional marketing with anti-productive activity, namely competition and glory.

Bataille's expenditure also explains the reasons why users play, a kind of economy of competition, independent of capitalist models. As he puts it:

> [T]he creation of unproductive values; the most absurd of these values, and the one that makes people the most rapacious, is *glory*. Made complete through degradation, glory, appearing in a sometimes sinister and sometimes brilliant form, has never ceased to dominate social existence; it is impossible to attempt to do anything without it when it is dependent on the blind practice of personal or social loss. (Ibid.)

Glory, according to Bataille, is inherently a part of human interaction and culture.

6.1 The Potlatch

Bataille, Huizinga and foundational anthropologist Marcel Mauss all mention glory in their dissection of the potlatch ceremony. The potlatch was one of the first tribal systems of exchange studied by anthropologists. While based partially on economics, the practice permeated all aspects of society including "initiations, marriages, [and] funerals" (Bataille 1985, 121).

The potlatch was a ceremony of competition and expenditure, with the goal of "humiliating, defying, and *obligating* a rival" (ibid.) through the giving of gifts and the sacrificing of wealth. The goal of the potlatch was to give away one's excesses with the expectation that some day a gift of greater value would be returned, and by receiving that gift, another of even greater value was obligated.

Bataille states that the potlatch "is linked to the possession of a fortune, but only on the condition that the fortune be partially sacrificed in unproductive social expenditures such as festivals, spectacles, and games" (ibid., 123). This sacrifice of excesses and expenditures relates to Foursquare in that users are ranked by how much they give in excess to the game. In this way, Foursquare mimics the potlatch gift culture when friends turn their daily activities into spectacles of expense.

The reasons for the potlatch were entwined in a society of self-perpetuated loss and destruction, endemic to the human condition, what Bataille believes to be the "reckless, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life . . ." (ibid., 128). Glory came from the much more intrinsic need to humiliate, to win and ultimately expend excesses. Bataille further expounds that all forms of "order" and "reserve" in society are merely temporary states to facilitate glorious expenditure (ibid.).

Foursquare's software, by Bataille's estimations, serves a natural need: when seeking glory wherever he can, the user needs order and meaning to freely expend. Foursquare supplies an ordered pattern to everyday life, so that the user may find the means to compete and potentially feel the sense of liberty afforded by his expense. This begins to rationalise Bataille's "states of excitation" in the excessive "play" of Foursquare.

Competition can be incorporated into just about anything, and potlatch interaction enveloped numerous aspects of daily life. Bataille and Mauss state that the potlatch was woven into all forms of exchange. It was "reserved for forms which, for archaic societies, are not distinguishable from exchange" (ibid., 123). For Mauss, all of these systems of giving, of glory and sacrifice are integrated. They are part of what makes up these early anthropological societies (Mauss 2000/1950). For Bataille, expenditure extends to the entire biosphere, which he characterises in terms of "a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of *living matter in general*, involved in the movement of light of which it is the result. On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess" (Bataille 1991/1949, 21).

Foursquare taps into something quite fundamental if it is indeed making use of excess and expenditure. The expenditure on behalf of Foursquare is not explicit, however – and the rewards bestowed are intangible. The competition between players acts as a kind of public sacrifice between users.

Mauss also broadens the scope of the potlatch to a wider gift culture, which he argues persisted in a subdued manner into nineteenth century Europe, long before the current interest in the "gamification" of everyday life. Citing an exchange among the Maori people, Mauss states that the gifts given are "a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul, is of the soul" (Mauss 2000 / 1950, 12). In relation to Foursquare, such an atmosphere pervades and capitalises on the structures of the program. The application's architecture allows the competition to expose users' lived experience, where they went and what they did, thereby making their expenditure on the game's behalf, at least rhetorically, of the soul. The everyday becomes the gift that the users sacrifice and exchange. The giving, rewarding and playing for the sake of Foursquare is based upon everyday existence. The result of these exchanges, in Mauss' perspective, was a frenzy of excitement.

Bataille, clearly acquainted with Mauss, refers to the state of excitement in his own models and Huizinga, also aware of such a state, pronounces "the potlatch spirit is akin to the thoughts and feelings of the adolescent" (Huizinga 1971, 60). In the same text, Huizinga considers the study of the potlatch as both a social and religious experience, similar to Mauss, and, as such, places the potlatch within the realm of what he calls the "magic circle".

6.2 The Real Shape of the Magic Circle

The magic circle acts as a bridge in explaining the spiritual and societal worlds in which competition and the gift economy exist. The theoretical basis of the magic circle lies within the work of Huizinga, who manufactured the term when studying the play element in culture. For Huizinga, the circle represents the place of comfort, which one enters to play. Huizinga enumerates several important points in describing this circle: first, the circle provides a sense of freedom. Second, Huizinga identifies play (the state of entering the magic circle) as "distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration" (Huizinga 1971, 9). While this view has been faulted for too narrowly defining the act of play (Zimmerman 2012) and has been amended and redrawn by game studies scholars (Juul 2008; Zimmerman 2012), the potency of the hypothesis lies in the fact that the magic circle "creates order, is order" (Huizinga 1971, 10). Huizinga explains further: "For archaic man, doing and daring are power, but knowing is magical power. For him all

particular knowledge is sacred knowledge—esoteric and wonder-working wisdom, because any knowing is directly related to the cosmic order itself" (ibid., 105).

The magic then partly derives from what is known. Huizinga connects this to the feast and competition, glory and, implicitly, the potlatch (ibid.). The magic circle becomes, within this context, the landscape of what is known, a moment in space where things can be predictable.

The power of knowing, and in the case of Foursquare, knowing about particular venues, knowing where friends are, knowing where one is in relation to friends, is predicated by the compulsion to enter the magic circle. Control of that order, to some degree, through contest and competition might be seen as the desired goal of the game. But it remains dissonant with the experience of the user, who must learn how to play through their proper experience of the game. This notion aligns with phenomenologist Hubert Dreyfus' theory of "maximal grip" (Dreyfus 2002, 367), in which the body naturally acquires proficiency at skills and tasks to the point where players are no longer cognisant of the necessary skills to perform / play. In explaining the phenomenon of games, Dreyfus explains that expertise, or knowledge of a game, is achieved when a player reaches maximal grip. Thus, the delight of games comes from the developing level of knowledge, which a player experiences each time he engages with the game.

The "magic" of the magic circle can then be defined by the experience of the players, who engage with a game, not rationally comprehending what has occurred, but "knowing" the experience through their bodies, their lived experience, which is not static, but ever-changing. As Foursquare now reveals itself to be part of the magic circle, providing an order to life congruent with gift economies and expenditure, a study of this inexplicable bodily engagement, this magic, brings to light a theory behind the user experience within this particular social network.

7 PROXIMAL COMMUNICATION

As my workload steadily increased during my Master's career and with my free time limited, I felt obligated to decline friends' invitations to spend time with them. I soon developed a new ritual to steal moments of relaxation. After a full day immersed in academia, I would inevitably reach a burnout point in the

evening and use the opportunity to sneak out for a quick, low-key dinner with my girlfriend, now wife.

Meanwhile, each time my girlfriend and I would surreptitiously visit a restaurant or bar, I instantly wondered how I could check in to Foursquare. Since many of my friends use the social network, I feared my log of check-ins would offend their social sensibilities. With the flick of a virtual switch on my smartphone, I would check in "off the grid", a private check-in option that allowed me to acquire the same points as if I checked-in publicly.

I kept at it, noting my standing on the leaderboard within the top 10 of my friends. However, my score dropped precipitously after Foursquare revised its policy to one point per off-the-grid check-in, as opposed to the 5 to 10 points per public check-in, with the claim that this change would encourage "friendly competition" (Foursquare 2012). My leaderboard score slipped, inciting surprise from my friends and incurring a blow to my ego. Suddenly, the choice to check in off the grid became a decision I had difficulty making, and indeed my off-the-grid check-ins were reduced to nearly zero after the policy change. I felt a mixture of guilt and resentment each time I checked-in off the grid, stemming not only from hiding my whereabouts from friends, but also for not getting credit for my illicit excursions.

While the "magic" of playing Foursquare is linked to competition and glory, it also embraces its antithesis, defeat. The experience of Foursquare is felt rather than contemplated, coupled to the competition of play and the personal and social components of everyday life. The check-in becomes absorbed into daily experience, becoming part of one act: registering one's presence in a particular location, and along with it the frenetic competition and glory of the magic circle.

This begins to explain the individual experience of Foursquare: the user gets lost in play throughout his daily activity. That this activity is perpetual also makes the experience different from that of ordinary gameplay. The player of a video game or board game has a rarefied experience, while the user of Foursquare has an experience ultimately integrated into ordinary life.

Expenditure and reward through Foursquare allow the experiences of the user to be of service to him, by bringing these aspects of play into his daily routines. This interpretation implies that Foursquare has the potential to change our most mundane actions from meaningless to meaningful by furnishing the tools to understand them within a larger set of involvements.

This playfulness extends beyond personal achievement to interaction with others through Foursquare's social network. Socialising through Foursquare is not based primarily on comments or even text-based conversation of any kind, which would be the norm within a social network. Although friends in Foursquare do not usually "chat" back and forth through text, nonverbal interaction regularly occurs. This communication is based on presence and gathering in relation to users' proximity. This form of "proximal communication" should be defined as communicating through a user's presence within a particular space and time.

My first awareness of proximal communication occurred a number of years ago, when I noticed my growing jealousy over my friends' check-in routines. I would watch their activity as I worked at home. As groups of my friends successively checked-in to the same place, I would take note of it. They would not necessarily advertise their goings-on through other social media outlets, such as commenting on Twitter or Facebook. Rather, they would merely check in as each of them arrived. No verbal or written communication was necessary. The opposite of my decision to check in off the grid, the act conveyed a specific meaning of friends congregating and interacting at a given moment, of which I was not a part.

Foursquare transforms play from a moment in life to an ever-present state.

Proximal communication, however, is not confined to social sniping or jealousy. Its spirit is much more basic. A perfect example was a habit of my former roommate, who would often stop by unannounced to say hello when I was out on a date with my girlfriend. In these casual visits, a complex series of proximal communications were articulated. By checking-in, I was stating that I was available, present and wanting to socialise, without saying any of those things specifically.

Proximal communication is not merely communication over a virtual network with text, but a communication of time and space. Communication and interaction are physical and active, based on the check-in. This communication is also contingent upon a number of factors, including gathering, relationship to space and the meaning that space may have to other users and friends. Proximal communication embodies these relationships and relays them silently. Most significantly, proximal communication points to the importance of real-world location within the context of Foursquare. Space

and gathering here shapes the platform. The experience of proximal communication is further sustained by notions of glory and competition, which provide an easy means of "knowing" within this non-verbal communication.

To understand Foursquare is to comprehend the experience of using it and the mediating role of engaging with the platform, which teeters provocatively along the edges of games and play. As a consequence, the experience often pervades everyday life in unexpected ways that deviate from both the paradigms of fun and games, as competition encounters everyday life.

Users remain in a state of anticipation for punctuated moments of glory, which both can be premeditated and arrive when least expected. The frenetic excitement conjured within the magic circle, when extended beyond a singular bounded moment in time and place, when it appears unexpectedly at any moment and time, becomes a potent force. As such, the presence of proximal communication lies at the very foundation of the Foursquare experience, transforming life from a moment of play to an ever-present state of play.

8 STATE OF PLAY

Foursquare is not strictly a game. It neither provides the boundaries of a game, nor does it correspond with the feelings of safety or order, the rarefied experience, that might be perceived in a game. Paradoxically, Foursquare does impart a sense of magic by creating a state of play within mundane activities. I use the term state due to the nature of the program itself. Its use of proximal, as opposed to written or verbal communication, renders an experience that is felt within the real world. The term play is purposely selected to counter the critiques of gamification, which rightfully argue that providing rewards and badges to anything is merely a superficial exercise in the utilisation of game elements.

The key to Foursquare's success is more elemental. The use of the software for the sake of expenditure (for the sake of play) causes a state of play that has less to do with engendering productive activity and more with transforming mundane activity and chaos into play. The experience within this platform furnishes structure and meaning in our lives through the same means as the magic circle.

Foursquare then not only enacts a state of play, but also a "state of magic", not a circumscribed or rarefied magic circle, but the experience of

the "knowing" found inside it, within the script of our everyday life. Furthermore, unlike the magic circle, there is no skill set required to understand the rules of the state of magic or the need to experience it with the expertise of maximal grip. It can be entered into and almost immediately understood.

Foursquare operates, unabashedly, as a promotional tool through which it creates a state of play for the sake of advertising and consumption. By designing the program around a very ordinary and unproductive activity, simply where we go, Foursquare has found a perfect arena in which a state of play can be enacted. The user is aware of the intentions of the company, but uses the application because of the state of play it creates, not because of its overt manipulation. This state of play is not exclusive to Foursquare. While other gamified platforms comprise other types of interaction, covering a wide spectrum of daily activity, the state of play and proximal communication discussed here are often present as well. While such states might not be as obvious, they are drawn out of us by the software itself. As a consequence, when exploring the pervasive effects of gamification on the populace, and even play more generally, as this article and personal accounts highlight, there is the need to unearth what is deep within us when we play and fathom the power of play on our daily experiences.

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