

# GAMIFICATION AND GOVERNMENTALITY

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by **Niklas Schrape**

## INTRODUCTION

This article suggests a research perspective that investigates the techniques of gamification as a symptom for an emerging new mode of *governmentality* (Foucault 2007 / 2004 and 2008 / 2004) that depends on the global infrastructure of digital computer-networks. Together with choice architectures (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) and big data techniques (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013; Paharia 2013), gamification belongs to a set of methods that aim to regulate individuals and society in ways, hailed as *libertarian paternalism* by its proponents (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). This mode of regulation takes Michel Foucault's concept of a liberal governmentality to the extreme. Within it, the subject is constructed as a free player in a defined rule-space. So far, the biopolitically appropriate behaviour of the players had to be ensured by negative feedback-techniques like punishment and deterrence. Now, gamification allows for effective behaviour regulation via positive feedback. Points, badges and leaderboards are more pleasant than prisons and executions. The carrot beats the stick. The only price to pay is total surveillance.

However gamification did not start out as a dystopian control technique but rather a marketing ploy. Many of its techniques were invented in order to foster brand loyalty. So let's start at the beginning.

## **BRAND LOYALTY**

Gamification originally was – and predominantly still is – a marketing buzzword. Several definitions exist but in its broadest sense scholars like Deterding et al. (2011), Fuchs<sup>1</sup> and Escribano (2012) agree: Gamification describes the permeation of non-game contexts with game elements. Several different understandings of this concept exist, but the most common one is to understand gamification as a set of techniques to regulate behaviour via game rules for strategic purposes. At least this is the dominant usage of the notion in marketing discourse. This becomes evident in the whitepaper Gamification 101 by the company Bunchball, one of the most successful proponents of gamification techniques: “At its root, gamification applies the mechanics of gaming to non-game activities to change people's behavior” (Bunchball 2010, 2).

In the marketing context, gamification techniques do not aim to change the way people think, but how they behave. The importance of this fact cannot be overstated: many traditional marketing techniques, like advertising, aim to influence the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs of the consumer. In this, they follow the paradigm of classical rhetoric. Aristotle distinguished three categories of rhetorical means in his *The Art of Rhetoric* (1991): *logos* (rational argumentation), *pathos* (emotional appeal) and *ethos* (the image and the expression of the orator). Rhetorical persuasion, therefore, cannot only be achieved by appealing to the mind, but also to emotions and to pre-existing notions about the speaker. But regardless of the means of persuasion, changing the mindset of the listener is always the objective.

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1 Mathias Fuchs in his presentation from March 8, 2013 at the Serious Games Conference in Hannover, titled “Einführung in das Phänomen Gamification” (Introduction to the Gamification Phenomenon). See also: <http://www.biu-online.de/de/presse/newsroom/newsroom-detail/datum/2013/03/13/serious-games-conference-2013-erfolgreich-es-comeback-nach-einjaehriger-pause.html> (accessed February 27, 2014).

Most modern advertising techniques share the same goal: they aim to influence the consumer's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about products. The classic four steps to describe the intended consumer reaction to an advertisement are attention, interest, desire, and action (AIDA) (cf. Kotler et al. 2011, 808). The acronym was coined as early as 1921 by C.P. Russell. While this idealised process has been reframed, condensed, and complemented several times in the history of marketing, its general characteristics have persisted. Persuasion is understood as a process in which the intended consumer behaviour (the action) is the result of a previous cognitive and affective processing: First, the consumer has to notice the advertisement. Then his or her interest in the product has to be raised by promises of advantages, features or qualities. If successful and if the consumer can connect the characteristics of the products to his or her own needs, a desire arises. This desire can be understood as a cognitive and affective complex, it encompasses a rational understanding and evaluation but also emotional components (e.g. attraction to the model on the poster). Only if there is a desire and if the consumer is capable of attaining the product, may he or she actually perform the purchase.

Even if persuasion cannot be limited to a linear process, there is no doubt about the objective of the advertisers: they want the consumers to think and feel about products just they way they planned it. They want to create and to communicate a desirable image. In advertising, the behaviour of a consumer (e.g. to regularly buy a specific brand and not another) can be interpreted as deriving from an instilled attitude towards a product.

A predictable behavioural tendency towards purchasing a specific brand is interpreted as "consumer loyalty" or "brand loyalty" in marketing literature.<sup>2</sup> Commonly, brand loyalty is understood as the commitment of a consumer to a certain brand. This concept is perfectly illustrated by the memorable dialogue between George Clooney's character Ulysses Everett

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2 Both terms are in use. The online-dictionary of the American Marketing Association (2014) defines brand loyalty as: "1. The situation in which a consumer generally buys the same manufacturer-originated product or service repeatedly over time rather than buying from multiple suppliers within the category. 2. The degree to which a consumer consistently purchases the same brand within a product class."

McGill and a salesman in the Coen Brothers' adaption of Homer's *Odyssey*, titled *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (Coen and Coen 2000).

Pomade Vendor: [...] here's your pomade [...]

Ulysses Everett McGill: Hold on, I don't want this pomade. I want Dapper Dan.

P.V.: I don't carry Dapper Dan, I carry Fop.

U.E.M.: Well, I don't want Fop, goddamn it! I'm a Dapper Dan man!

The attitude that Ulysses Everett McGill shows towards his favourite brand of pomade can be considered the epitome of brand loyalty – he connects his very identity as a man and human being to the brand of pomade. Thus, loyalty becomes a matter of the heart, a question of defining oneself via the use of specific products. The loyal consumer of a branded product partakes of its image.

## **GAMIFIED LOYALTY**

Gamification processes, however, promise a far more direct way to getting at the behaviour and therefore the loyalty of the consumer. Simple examples are the frequent-flyer programs, described in Bunchball's whitepaper (2010) as a primal form of gamification.

The most successful of these is the Miles & More programme by Lufthansa and other airlines of the so-called Star Alliance.<sup>3</sup> Here, aircraft passengers can gather points through their flights, appropriately labelled as miles. There exist two kinds of miles: "award miles", which can be invested in various upgrades and benefits, and "status miles" that can be collected in order to climb up in a hierarchy of levels: 35,000 miles are rewarded with the "frequent-flyer status" (level 1), represented by a silver card, giving access to the business lounges as well as several smaller benefits. 100,000 miles lead to a golden card, the so-called "senator status" (level 2), and access to the senator lounges as well as an exclusive telephone service hotline for instance. Finally, after collecting the unlikely amount of 600,000 miles in two years, the passenger is allowed to call him or herself a member of the elected

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3 More information under: <http://www.miles-and-more.com> (accessed May 8, 2014).

HON-circle (level 3), and is granted a card in pure black, a personal assistant and limousine service in selected airports (and access to an even more exclusive telephone service hotline). The tangible benefits of the levels are quite small, but the promise of status and exclusiveness itself seems to work as a driving force of motivation.

Recently, Lufthansa and Star Alliance even added a kind of badge system in the form of so-called “status stars” on the frequent-flyer, senator, and HON-circle cards. Like military emblems, these stars are printed directly on the card for all to see.<sup>4</sup> This public visibility of status and loyalty rewards is one of the decisive characteristics of gamification as Zichermann and Cunningham emphasise:

In the old days (pre-2008) if a person preferred Cuisinart over KitchenAid, for example, how was that bias expressed? How did she get her friends to understand this loyalty choice? First, her friends needed to be standing in the kitchen near the product itself. Then, a conversation would have to introduce the subject. This process was called word-of-mouth marketing [ . . . ] Loyalty is no longer private. It is no longer a matter of standing in a kitchen next to your favorite mixer. It is public, and millions are viewing it. (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011, 9)

The traditional way to publicly demonstrate loyalty to a certain brand was to repeatedly use a product or service for all the world to see (e.g. sitting with an Apple MacBook in a coffee shop). The brand preferences are visible in the very act of use. But gamification techniques allow it to monitor product usage, to memorise this information, and to compress it into publicly visible signs (like badges, levels or status stars). Thus, brand loyalty and preferences become apparent, independent from the actual use of the product or service. Consequently, every partaker in gamification programmes attains a visible history of product usage. In the case of the frequent-flyer programmes, the status cards are the carriers and visual displays of this personal history with the brand. The individual status of every passenger, measured in miles and

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4 See: <http://www.miles-and-more-promotion.com/statusstars/en/index.html> (accessed May 7, 2014).

materialised in cards and stars, derives from his or her memorised history with the brand. Suddenly, consumption transforms from a momentary action to a process that carries its own history and displays it publicly.

According to Bunchball, the promise of status makes all the difference: Brand loyalty does not depend on a company's image anymore. Gamification techniques like the frequent-flyer programmes can be understood as strategic instruments to manipulate the behaviour of people towards products and services while circumventing their very attitudes towards them. The personal history with a brand creates a commitment that is independent from its image or the consumer's satisfaction: "And they'll [the passengers] go out of their way to stick with the vendor where they have the most points and status – even when disappointed with the actual service" (Bunchball 2010, 3).

Another film with George Clooney illustrates the power of such a gamified loyalty: *Up in the Air* (Reitman and Turner 2009) by director Jason Reitman. In this movie, Clooney plays Ryan Bingham, a travelling "downsizer" who is basically hired by companies to fire their employees. Ryan Bingham is a frequent flyer and a participant in the frequent-flyer programme of American Airlines (AAAdvantage).<sup>5</sup> He dearly loves his status and feels a deep sense of loyalty towards the airline, and also to the Hilton hotel chain, which participates in the programme. In fact, his main life goal consists in gathering miles, as this dialogue with his young assistant Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick) attests:

Ryan Bingham: I don't spend a nickel, if I can help it, unless it somehow profits my mileage account.

Natalie Keener: So, what are you saving up for? Hawaii? South of France?

R.B.: It's not like that. The miles are the goal.

N.K.: That's it? You're saving just to save?

R.B.: Let's just say that I have a number in mind and I haven't hit it yet.

N.K.: That's a little abstract. What's the target? [ . . . ]

R.B.: It's ten million miles.

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5 See: <https://www.aa.com/AAAdvantage/aadvantageHomeAccess.do?anchorLocation=DirectURL&title=aadvantage> (accessed May 1, 2014.)

N.K.: Okay. Isn't ten million just a number?

R.B.: Pi's just a number [...] I'd be the seventh person to do it. More people have walked on the moon.

N.K.: Do they throw you a parade?

R.B.: You get lifetime executive status.

If frequent-flyer programmes can be considered prototypical gamification techniques then the character of Ryan Bingham exemplifies how gamification can foster a new kind of loyalty. Such gamified loyalty might motivate a certain sense of identity, but its immediate object is not the brand as such, but rather the point system attached to its consumption. Ryan Bingham's life-goal is to gather miles. The primary object of his desire therefore is the frequent-flyer programme itself and the status it promises. But because of that he develops a behaviour pattern that he retrospectively interprets as loyalty. This becomes apparent in a romantic conversation with his future casual relationship Alex Goran about his new status card:

Alex Goran: Oh, my God. I wasn't sure this actually existed. This is the American Airlines...

Ryan Bingham: It's a Concierge Key, yeah.

A.G.: What is that, carbon fibre?

R.B.: Graphite.

A.G.: Oh, I love the weight.

R.B.: I was pretty excited the day that bad boy came in [...]

A.G.: This is pretty fucking sexy.

R.B.: Hope it doesn't cheapen our relationship.

A.G.: We're two people who get turned on by elite status. I think cheap is our starting point.

R.B.: There's nothing cheap about loyalty.

Ryan Bingham feels rewarded for his loyalty and draws his self-esteem from this recognition. His one life-goal is to gather more than 10 Million miles as one of just seven persons in the world. In fact, his sense of identity stems to a certain degree from his understanding himself to be being loyal. Ryan Bingham believes in gamified loyalty.

Ryan Bingham's concept of loyalty is a product of the gamified marketing programmes of airlines and hotel chains. For him, loyalty can be measured in points. It is a variable in a game, something that can be calculated and fed into computational models. His attitudes towards brands seem to be the result of a behaviour pattern, motivated by a formal system of game rules – because of gamification, the very concept of loyalty transformed for keeps.

## **AIRPORT POLITICS**

But gamification does not only transform crucial concepts of our society like loyalty. It holds the potential to transform the very social space itself. The frequent-flyer programmes might be symptomatic in this regard.

The structure of status signs (different cards, status stars), exclusive areas (the various lounges), and privileges (special service-hotline and limousine service) creates an artificial hierarchy within the social space of the airport. This hierarchy is the precondition for the experience of status: the access to the exclusive lounges and the privileges has to be restricted – otherwise it would be worthless. In reverse the hierarchy has to be protected through means of surveillance and discipline: Star Alliance's economy class passengers without Miles & More cards may not enter the senator lounges. They have to be excluded, in order to protect the exclusiveness for the privileged. Therefore, the lounges are separated from the rest of the airport through borders, guarded by friendly personnel in uniform. Like in a border control of a nation-state, the crosser has to present the correct ID-card in order to attain access.

But the status cards differ in one crucial aspect from the ID-cards of the nation-states: an ID-card does not memorise data beside what is printed on it. In contrast, the frequent-flyer card functions as an externalised memory of a person's past as passenger – condensed into a number of miles, an attained level (type of card), and visible badges (status stars). While the customs officers at a nation-state border-control cannot attain much knowledge about a traveller's past by looking at his or her ID-card, the employee of the airline has immediate insight into the passenger's past.

This reliance on history and the past marks the crucial difference between the hierarchies imposed by the frequent-flyer programmes and the traditional class system of the airport (the distinction of first class, business class, and economy class). While the class system is actualised in the mo-



ment of the purchase, the frequent-flyer hierarchies persist over time. Any passenger can decide to spend all of his or her money at once to experience first-class comfort for one single time. Thus, the affiliation to a class is realised in the moment of transaction. It is ahistorical, not depending on the former decisions of the passenger but only on his or her willingness to invest. In contrast, it is impossible to buy oneself into the senators lounge. One has to earn the right to climb up one step in the frequent-flyer hierarchy. This hierarchical belonging is completely dependent on an individual's past-decisions and personal history with the airline.

The existence of memorised and publicly visible individual histories marks a tremendous transformation of the very nature of the social space of the airport. In 1992 Marc Augé published the original French version of *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), in which he presented the airport as prime example for his thesis. According to him, our contemporary society is more and more saturated with non-places, places devoid of social relations and history from which a sense of identity could stem.<sup>6</sup> Airports, motorways, train stations, chain hotels and many other such non-places are somewhat artificial, anonymous, and governed by rules that dictate behaviour (e.g. "wait in line"). They are no places to stroll around but simply to pass through – logistically organised as effective as possible.

Just one year later, in 1993, Lufthansa started the Miles & More programme and changed the nature of the non-place for good. The programme became a tremendous success: in 2011, it counted more than twenty million participants worldwide (Lufthansa 2011). In a certain way, the programme can be interpreted as answer to the lack of history and identity that Augé described. For the enthusiastic participants of the Miles & More programme, the airport is no longer an ahistorical place devoid of social relations. Quite the contrary, it is a deeply hierarchical field for social contests about status and privilege. The airport is the very source of identity. But these identities

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6 "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places [. . .]" (Augé 1995 / 1992, 77–78).

and histories are products of strategic designs. Moreover, they are automatically generated through tracking and monitoring techniques, put into numbers, and stored and processed by computers. They are pure data. And the citizens of the airport are living within these data structures.

Airlines are not the only ones who collect and store data about their subjects. States do it too – a well-known fact since the Roman census in the times of Jesus. But this kind of data is concerned with statistical social demographics and does not involve evaluations of individuals. States do keep track of the deeds of their subjects, however this should only encompass information about the transgression of legal boundaries – at least in democratic ones: it should be about what a subject did wrong, not about what it did right. Not all state officials need to know how much tax money an individual generated, how many children he or she conceived, or to what extent he or she has been otherwise a particularly good citizen. What they do need to know, however, is if the person in front of them is a danger to society and its laws. This information is stored in the crime record, a record about former punishments.

Punishment can be considered to be a *negative feedback technique*. Through punishments, states try to discourage their subjects from committing crimes – the logic of deterrence. Punishment diminishes unwanted behaviour. In contrast, gamification techniques, like those implemented in the frequent-flyer programmes, exploit *positive feedback*. They aim to enforce actions that are considered to be favourable. They amplify desired behaviour.

## **GAMIFICATION AND BIG DATA**

What becomes obvious at this point is that the frequent-flyer programmes are not only amongst the earliest examples of successful gamification but that they also are symptomatic for a novel mode of behaviour regulation. This regulative technique is dependent on constant monitoring and data-collection. Only the existence and accessibility of this data allow for the implementation of positive-feedback mechanisms. The frequent-flyer programmes and gamification techniques in general are therefore intrinsically linked to another common buzzword of today: big data.

The term big data emerged in the early 2000s in the context of sciences like astronomy and genomics that collected unprecedented amounts of data about their subject and were forced to develop new computerised methods

to process it (cf. Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013, 6–7). Since the late 2010s the term dissipated as a buzzword into marketing and economics. There exists no consensual definition but most practitioners agree on the following characteristics:

Big data refers to things one can do at a large scale that cannot be done at a smaller one, to extract new insights or create new forms of value, in ways that change markets, organizations, the relationship between citizens and governments and more. But this is just the start. The era of big data challenges the way we live and interact with the world. Most strikingly, society will need to shed some of its obsession for causality in exchange for simple correlations: not knowing *why* but only *what*. This overturns centuries of established practices and challenges our most basic understanding of how to make decisions and comprehend reality. (Ibid.)

According to these authors, big data revolutionises society in the most fundamental way. This may be typical Silicon Valley hype but the concept nevertheless highlights some important shifts: the computer technology permits us to store and process information in a way that was simply not possible before, allowing for novel ways to analyse it. Most importantly, today's computing power makes it a lot easier to base decisions on stochastically stable correlations between factors without knowing the underlying causal relations and principles. To some degree, the manager of an airline does not need to know what the customers expect and why they choose the one airline and not the other. What he or she does need to know, however, is whether a certain bonus or badge in the frequent-flyer programme correlates with a higher use of their airline.

Gamification is a symptom of our contemporary society in which every aspect is being captured and processed by computers and digital networks. It relies on a specific techno-historical situation, characterised by global pervasions of nearly every fibre of the society's body with networked computer technology. This development has recently been described by several theoreticians as cybernatisation (cf. Tiqqun 2001, Mersch 2013). According to the German media philosopher Erich Hörl (2011) it even led to a new kind of "environmentality": The omnipresent digital technology merged into the background of society. We are embedded within it. It became our environment.

The new state of nature is a cybernetic one. The existence of such a seemingly self-evident, unquestioned and apparently natural cybernetic environment is the precondition for gamification and big data techniques. The opportunities to gather huge amounts of data, to track movements and behaviour patterns, to award points for deeds and tasks, and to compare them in social networks, they all are only made possible by the pervasiveness of digital networks and computational processes.

Only because of the omnipresent information technology, companies like Bunchball can sell universal gamification engines to be implemented in various businesses. In his book *Loyalty 3.0. How to Revolutionize Customer and Employee Engagement With Big Data and Gamification* (2013), Rajat Paharia, the CEO of Bunchball, describes the new condition of ubiquitous mediation and data generation as great opportunity:

[. . .] we're now living our lives online – community, entertainment, work, finances – everything we do is being mediated by technology and, as a result, is throwing off reams of data (big data) about our activity. Smart companies, forward-thinking companies, are feeding this user-activity data into gamification systems, which use data-driven motivational techniques [. . .] to drive engagement, high-value activity, and loyalty. (Ibid., 5)

Paharia advises using data mining techniques, including predictive modeling, in order to forecast the behaviour of groups, and sentiment analysis to extract and to filter out information from natural language communication. The picture he is painting might seem dystopian for many readers, but for him as a professional marketer, the new world of permanent and ubiquitous data-generation is a dream come true: “With big data, a business can learn a lot about what you do, where you do it, when you do it, and what you like” (ibid., 40–41).

The use of big data in gamification reveals itself as deeply linked to the issue of surveillance. This becomes obvious in Paharia's description of outlier detection, meaning statistical deviators from norms, that would help to “expose bad behaviour” (2013, 48). He hails big data as opportunity to monitor one's own personnel in order to attain a “360-degree view” of every individual and to “use this data to predict such things as which employees are

at risk for leaving, who are going to be top and bottom performers, who is likely to get injured and file for workers' compensation [ . . . ]" (ibid., 59–61).

But Paharia does not want to regulate the employees' behaviour through negative feedback techniques like punishment. He strives for an effective regulation through motivation by the means of points, badges, and leaderboards – the positive-feedback mechanisms of gamification. For him, the existence of big data is the precondition for an effective use of gamification mechanics:

[ . . . ] *gamification*, is *motivating people through data* [ . . . ] Streams of big data on user activity are sent to the business, and in real time, the business feeds that data to a *gamification engine* that processes the data, feeds it through a set of rules, updates all the necessary statistics, and then responds to users with real-time feedback and other data-driven motivational techniques. (Ibid., 68)<sup>7</sup>

Paharia's concept of gamification is far removed from romantic idealisations of playfulness. This gamification is a technique for behaviour regulation. It is not achieved through disciplinary means (e.g. loan-reductions for employees who cannot reach target productivity) but via codified positive-feedback mechanisms. The feedback is conceptualised to be anonymous: Paharia does not imagine a manager who personally praises the work of an employee, he envisions an automated feedback-system based on the computer evaluation of measured performance. Such a feedback-system can easily be up-scaled to fit the needs of large workforces or to address huge target groups.

Paharia extends the logic of the frequent-flyer programmes to all market sectors. In his view, the behaviour of the customers and employees of any given company should be monitored in the same way that passengers' are. The 360-degree profile of consumers and staff takes the place of the status card in the airport. All decisions shall be tracked in order to identify patterns of behaviour and in order to influence it with motivational techniques. These techniques derive from a specific understanding of management. He clearly envisions the manager as a panoptic governor of workforces and

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7 Paharia's emphasis.

consumers. While the big data techniques are the governor's tools to watch over the subjects, the gamification mechanisms are the means to regulate their behaviour.

### **GAMIFICATION AND LIBERTARIAN PATERNALISM**

Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013, 7) make the claim that big data demands we think in correlations not causalities. This mirrors the observation that gamification techniques aim to influence the behaviour and not the attitudes of their target group. In the age of big data and gamification, analysts do not have to ponder why something is the case, and no one cares what the consumers think about brands and products. Reasons are not as important anymore. Questions of "why?" and "how?" are sealed in black boxes. The new primary focus is on the quantifiable outcomes of a process: the correlation between factors and the behaviour of consumers.

With its black-boxing and its focus on outcomes and behaviour, gamification appears to be a resurrection of the psychological school of behaviourism. Its techniques do not stand in the tradition of advertising as they do not aim to change consumers' attitudes. Instead they can be considered as advancements of behavioural marketing and management techniques. A simple example of such a technique is the placement of a product in a super market: high-price products are placed at eyelevel in the shelves, low-priced products at the bottom. The reason being that it is more convenient for buyers to see and to grasp what is right in front of their nose than to bend down. For a similar reason, milk and butter are always put at the very opposite ends of the multideck cabinet: thus buyers have to pass by a lot of tempting products in order to get to the essentials. In both cases, products are strategically positioned in space in order to influence the behaviour of consumers.

Such behavioural marketing techniques have recently been described as "choice architectures" by the behavioural scientists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in *Nudge. Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (2008). They even invent a job description for persons who design such choice architectures: "A choice architect has the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions" (ibid., 3). For them architectures of choices are inevitable: "[. . .] there is no such thing as a 'neutral' design" (ibid.), they claim, and therefore the design should be made consciously with an eye on the intended effect. Their prime example is a school canteen.

see also  
Raczkowski  
p. 147, 155

Here, the healthy food should be put in eye-high and right next to the cash point – not the sweets. They admit that the children would basically be tricked into buying the intended food. But for Thaler and Sunstein every other organisation of the shelves would also be a choice architecture – so why should the owner of the canteen not consciously make “the right” decision that improves the wellbeing of the children?<sup>8</sup>

**“Fitter, healthier and more productive, A pig in a cage on antibiotics.”**

- Radiohead (*Fitter Happier*)

Gamification systems often involve the conscious creation of choice architectures: frequent-flyer programmes e.g. comprise options for participants to invest their award miles in services and products of partner companies. Award miles work much like a currency. But they differ from money in at least two fundamental regards: on the one hand, they cannot be spent anonymously and each investment will create new data that marketers can monitor. On the other, they cannot be spent for everything but only for the products and services that have been selected. The award miles can only be invested in a strategically designed micro-economy of business partners. The participants can only choose between the options given to them. And these options are embedded within a carefully built choice architecture. Gamification and choice architectures are concerned with the same task: to influence people’s behaviour in intended ways. Both techniques aim not to change mindsets but only visible and measurable performance and conduct.

Thaler and Sunstein deduce a political style of governance from their behaviouristic reasoning: *libertarian paternalism*. While the concept might seem paradoxical at first glance it follows neatly from their observation that it is impossible not to design choices in any given social situation. Libertarian paternalism implies that, for example, the state grants its subjects the freedom of choice, but designs all possible options in such a way that they will decide in an intended way. The subjects should feel free but their behaviour is regulated. This principle is familiar to all players of computer games: the choices at hand are quite limited in most games but some do a good

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8 Of course, the question arises what qualifies as “the right” architecture of choices. What are the criterias behind our judgments about right and wrong? Surprisingly, Thaler and Sunstein don’t ask these questions.

job of hiding the limitations, thus giving the player the illusion of freedom. In a similar way, the children in the canteen are free to choose whatever food they want, but they can decide between the given options, and the proclaimed healthy one is positioned in the most convenient way. For Thaler and Sunstein there exists no contradiction between freedom and regulation:

The libertarian aspect of our strategies lies in the straightforward insistence that, in general, people should be free to do what they like – and opt out of undesirable arrangements if they want to do so [ . . . ] We strive to design policies that maintain or increase freedom of choice [ . . . ] The paternalistic aspect lies in the claim that it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people’s behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier and better. In other words, we argue for self-conscious efforts, by institutions in the private sector and also by government, to steer people’s choices in directions that will improve their lives. (Ibid., 5)

Thaler and Sunstein’s political ambitions are much more than mere boasting: In 2010, the British Prime Minister David Cameron set up a Behavioural Insight Team<sup>9</sup>, commonly called the “nudge unit”, in order to explore the potentials of Thaler and Sunstein’s concepts for governance. According to an article in *The New York Times*, the Whitehouse is currently considering to set up a similar programme in the United States (cf. Bennhold 2013).

Like choice architectures, gamification is envisioned by its proponents as universal remedy to make the world a better place, as made especially obvious in the talks and writings of Jane McGonigal: “What if we decided to use everything we know about game design to fix what’s wrong with reality?” (2011, 7) For McGonigal, gamification holds the potential to motivate every individual to behave more responsibly, to cope better with problems, to feed on better nutrition, to be less messy etc. But most of the gamification techniques entail surveillance. Evgeny Morozov mentions a particularly striking example in *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2013, 2): BinCam, the gamified trash can that takes pictures of dumped waste, posts them online,

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9 For more information see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/behavioural-insights-team> (accessed May 1, 2014).



and awards points for correct separation while exposing unwanted behaviour. For Morozov (*ibid*, 1–6), this and other gamification techniques are examples of what he calls “solutionism” – the belief that technological innovations would not only solve all possible problems but more importantly the tendency to identify all possible situations and states as problems in the need of solving.

In the eyes of Morozov, David Cameron and his nudge unit must appear as wonderful examples of solutionism. But the European Commission jumped on the same bandwagon in their current Horizon2020 programme, when they decided to set up a call for research and innovation called “Advanced Digital Gaming/Gamification Technologies”. Here, consortia of academic institutions and commercial enterprises are invited to hand in proposals for joined innovation programmes regarding “digital games and gamification mechanics in non-leisure contexts” (European Commission 2014). The text explains that “digital games can [ . . . ] make a real change in the life of a large number of excluded groups, enhancing their better integration in society” (*ibid.*) thus praising games and gamification mechanics as tools for political means. The call draws heavily from an issue of the European Commission’s in-house science-service Joint Research Centre’s “JRC Scientific and Policy Reports”. It describes the political values of “digital game-based approaches” encompassing gamification and concludes that these techniques “show potential in addressing issues of policy concern including wellness and aging, education and employability of poor learners, improved quality of training and skill development in industry, and civic participation” (Centeno 2013, 11).

As honourable as these goals might be, it becomes obvious that in the eyes of the European Commission, gamification is a tool for Foucauldian biopolitics: a way to reduce the statistical average of people dying from diseases related to obesity, to increase the percent of citizens with appropriate skills in reading, writing, arithmetic, or IT that suffice the needs of the market, etc (Foucault 2008/2004). The enthusiasm of nation-states and supra-national organisations to make use of techniques like choice architectures and gamification might indicate that there is more in play than mere solutionism. These techniques could indeed be harbingers of a novel style of governance.

## **GAMIFICATION AND GOVERNMENTALITY**

Behind the EU's interest in gamification lies the same reasoning as in Thaler and Sunstein's book (2008). Gamification and choice architectures both are examples of governance techniques that are actually quite accurately described by liberal paternalism. Drawing on Foucault, both emergent techniques can be analysed as signs of a shift in the dominant mode of governmentality.

With "governmentality" Foucault described specific, historically situated rationalities of governing (2007 / 2004 and 2008 / 2004). He invented the concept independently and probably unaware of the one of governance in the political sciences, as defined here by Mark Bevir:

[G]overnance refers [. . .] to all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, a market, or network, whether over a family, tribe, formal or informal organization, or territory, and whether through laws, norms, power, or language. Governance differs from government in that it focuses less on the state and its institutions and more on social practices and activities. (Bevir 2012, 1)

Broadly speaking, governmentalities could be described as paradigms of governance in the sense of Kuhn (1962). A historically specific governmentality does not only encompass particular governance techniques but also the underlying principle, idea, or model behind them.

Foucault originally coined the term to characterise a specific type of governance aimed at the statistical regulation of a state's population through biopolitics, specifically:

the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, race [. . .]. (Foucault 2008 / 2004, 317)

Later, he used the concept in a much broader way, which allowed him to distinguish different historical modes of governmentality. He discerns today's governmentality from the Christian and medieval concept of "pastoral power" (cf. Foucault 2007 / 2004, 161–185). In those cases, the ruler was

considered analogous to a shepherd and conversely the subjects as members of a flock that had to be taken care of by worldly and religious means (e.g. by confession, penance, and indulgence). This differs vastly from the political rationality of the “reason of state”, which developed in early modernity. In this Machiavellian doctrine, ruling was conceptualised as rational calculation of advantages against competing European powers. Every state’s goal was to maximise its economic and military power at the cost of the others, while preserving internal security through disciplinary means. In reverse, every subject’s duty was to maximise the wellbeing of the state. And in order to guarantee this appropriate behaviour, the subjects had to be under the control of the police.

With the rise of modern economics and liberal thought, a different rationality of what it meant to rule emerged: the idea that economic power stems from a growing, healthy, and educated population with a strong work ethic. The wellbeing of the state suddenly depended much more than before on the size of its population and the conditions they live in. In consequence, the management and administration of population became a fundamental part of governance – the birth of biopolitics. In stark contrast to the medieval feudal lords in the time of pastoral power, the individual citizen is now unknown to the rulers: not the single subject is the object of regulation but the statistically determined collectives of citizens.

Moreover, the “discovery” of seemingly natural market laws in economic theory led to the conviction that the optimisation of state power via economic prosperity could paradoxically be realised through a limitation of regulatory activities. The logic of liberalism demanded that the state guarantees the free play of the market to maximise its gains. But in order to let the market dynamic unfold, the state’s subjects had to be granted freedoms. Thus, the state re-defined its function. It became, in fact, the *game master* and *rule keeper* of the free play of the market and its citizens. Fittingly, Foucault describes this concept of a natural and beneficiary economy as an “economic game”:

This is the idea that the economy is basically a game, that it develops as a game between partners, that the whole of society must be permeated by this economic game, and that the essential role of the state is to define the economic rules of the game and to make sure that they are in fact applied.

What are these rules? They must be such that the economic game is as active as possible and consequently to the advantage of the greatest possible number of people [. . .] (Foucault 2008 / 2004, 201–202)

For Foucault, this mode of liberal governmentality is still dominant. It is not restricted to actual political institutions like legislative, executive, and judiciary organs. It encompasses all institutions and discourses that regulate the behaviour of the subjects. The order and prosperity of a state is obviously not only dependent on some laws and their enforcement by the police, courts, and prisons. It is equally dependent on schools, universities, hospitals, and much more. The state does not control all of these institutions directly but it creates the conditions and the legal boundaries for them, in which they are free to act. All its regulatory techniques can be described as the definition of game rules. Thus liberal governmentality gives rise to a very specific kind of society:

[. . .] a society in which there is an optimization of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated, in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals. (Ibid., 259–260)

It is the paradox of liberal governmentality that it has to enforce disciplinary means in order to not only guarantee but to produce the very freedom that is its necessary precondition of existence. Freedom might be the precondition for prosperity but an excess of freedom can endanger it. For instance, the freedom to grow as a company can become dangerous for the free play of the market if a monopoly is established. Thus freedom is bound to surveillance and discipline.

As in his study *Discipline and Punish* (1977 / 1975) about disciplinary techniques, Foucault refers in his work on governmentality to the liberal philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and his “panopticon” as epitome of disciplinary means – a visionary architecture that allows for perfect surveillance of inmates in prisons. But Bentham did not want to restrict the use of this panopticon to the penal system. As the subtitle of his book *Panopticon*;

or the *Inspection-House* shows, the panopticon should be implemented in various institutions of the state, from mental institutions and factories to schools:

[. . .] a New Principle of Construction Applicable to Any Sort of Establishment, in Which Persons of Any Description Are to Be Kept Under Inspection; and in Particular to Penitentiary-Houses, Prisons, Houses of Industry, Work-Houses, Poor-Houses, Lazarettos, Manufactories, Hospitals, Mad-Houses, and Schools [. . .]. (Bentham 1995/1787)

Omnipresent surveillance might appear contradictory to the idea of liberalism for many contemporaries. But not for Bentham, one of the fathers of liberal thought, and one of the earliest proponents of universal human rights and gender equality. For him, ultimate transparency of everyone to everyone is the precondition for the prevention of crimes, the guarantee for civilized behaviour, security and thus for freedom. In the Benthamian philosophy, surveillance and freedom are inextricably linked.

Contrary to his older interpretations, Foucault (2008/2004, 67–68) therefore interprets the panopticon in his work on governmentality not only as a disciplinary technology but also as one to produce freedom. For Bentham, only omnipresent surveillance of all subjects guarantees security, and only security guarantees freedom. The responsibility of the state would be to intervene wherever the freedom (as free play within defined rules) is endangered. Thus Bentham dreamed of a spy system in order to monitor all the citizens, to prevent them from crimes, and to encourage them to exhibit righteous behaviour (cf. Bentham 1843).

In Bentham's time, perfect surveillance of all the state's subjects was utterly impossible. But today, the situation has changed. His vision of the panopticon is obviously similar to Paharia's praise of the potential of combined big data and gamification techniques. Both are advocating a technology that allows monitoring and tracking individuals in order to regulate their behaviours. Moreover, most of the information about every individual would be made public in the form of high scores in social networks, badges, leaderboards or frequent-flyer status cards – with the public transparency for every individual thus achieved competition is then fostered. Bentham and Paharia

both aim to create a surveillance infrastructure to secure the free play of market mechanics and the efficiency of the workforce.

There is, however, a crucial difference between Bentham's and Paharia's visions: the means of regulation. Bentham and also Foucault concentrate on direct or indirect disciplinary means, but Paharia dreams of establishing a motivational system. Disciplinary techniques like punishment or deterrence can be considered to be negative feedback: Behaviour that is out of line is punished, a given collective is normalised within a defined range of allowed differences. Gamification techniques, in contrast, are positive-feedback techniques – they encourage desired behaviour via points, badges, and leaderboards.

The fundamental difference can be exemplified with the frequent-flyer programme discussed above: In airports like in liberal societies, the space is structured by borders, separating public from non-public areas, including or excluding individuals. But the separated areas in the liberal society exist mostly to confine the excluded and the punished, thereby posing deterrence to everyone else. They are materialisations of negative feedback. But the exclusive areas in the airport exist to privilege the elite, motivating the excluded to strive for access. The passengers in the senator lounges are not dangerous individuals to be jailed or unwilling workers that have to be locked-up in the factory, they are privileged customers who are granted status and exclusiveness for being loyal to their airline. They are not disciplined to behave correctly or punished because they did not behave so, they are rewarded for their past behaviour – thus motivated to continue. The senators lounge is a materialisation of positive feedback.

## **A NEW GOVERNMENTALITY**

Gamification and choice architectures are hailed as universal remedies by their proponents. This surely is hype. The use of points, badges and leaderboards has always been common in the military, schools, and to some degree even at the workplace (cf. Nelson 2012). Tasks have been transformed into games for centuries, as Mathias Fuchs demonstrates. Point systems and token economies as control methods were already tested in mental institutions in the 1960s. What is new, however, is the degree to which such techniques can be put to use today. Until recently, the dominant technique of behaviour regulation was negative feedback. Now, big data and gamification allow the

*see also*  
*Fuchs*  
*p. 119–140*  
*and*  
*Raczkowski*  
*p. 150–153*

broad implementation of positive-feedback techniques in various sectors of society. This could foreshadow a new mode of governmentality, characterised by the constant monitoring of every individual's behaviour and its regulation through designed options and positive-feedback mechanisms. It could be the fulfilment of liberalism.

The possibility to monitor nearly every move, action, and decision of any given subject is not only a blessing for companies who want to manage their customer relations, secure their brand loyalty, and maximise the effectiveness of their workforce – it also allows for seemingly humane techniques of governance. Gamification makes it possible to effectively motivate intended behaviour in a pleasant way, without the need to appeal to the mind or reason. It aims at the regulation of behaviour while circumventing attitudes. A passenger does not have to appreciate the image or reliability of an airline in order to be loyal, as long as status cards and senator lounges are promised. But if that is the case in marketing, it is also true for governance techniques: If someone is motivated to choose carrots over bacon by badges and leaderboards, he or she does not need to know why carrots are healthier but only that they give more points. It might no longer be necessary to teach children the value of eating healthy food in order to attain the biopolitical goal of a healthy population. Insight is no longer relevant, if all that is tracked and regulated is behaviour. The age of reason finally comes to an end.

This, however, could deeply transform our understanding of a democratic and free society. The Habermasian notion of a deliberate democracy might always have been illusionary. But this ideal has been powerful and performative over centuries. From Jesus to the proponents of Enlightenment to Marxist activists, the education of people was always considered to be a venerable goal. Individual insight promised a change in behaviour and thus the potential for change in society. Now it seems that people do not have to be illuminated but simply regulated by points and badges in order to make them fitter, happier, and more productive. In fact, the world could be transformed into an airport.

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