

Gamification of organisations, work, theorisation in the vigorous era of digitalisation - from fading irony and other distance towards a positive reconceptualization of “addiction”

34<sup>th</sup> EGOS Colloquium 4 – 7 July Tallinn 2018

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This article is speculative in nature. I essentially argue that a key property of effective and successful games, that is their strong addictiveness, has been significantly bypassed in the widespread enthusiasm for digitalisation-boosted gamification of organisations, work and even theoretical thinking. The point of my article is not to claim that the strong associated addictiveness is necessarily something bad, but to provoke unprejudiced reflection on possible features and consequences of the gamification in question, especially in relation to the core of academic work.

Introductory vignette: Spud from “Trainspotting”

We could start from almost anywhere, but let’s first ponder a bit on a scene from the famous film *Trainspotting* (1996) where the protagonist is Spud, a seemingly hopeless and unemployed

substance abuser. In the scene, the employment authorities have sent him to an interview about a job in the leisure industry. To keep his welfare benefits, Spud must play the role of an active jobseeker. However, Spud does not want any work, but he needs the welfare benefits. So, his task is to both convince the interview panel of his willingness to get the job, and at the same time make sure that the panellists decide certainly not to let him loose on any innocent paying customers. With a little help from his friend Renton and some amphetamine, Spud succeeds marvellously in his balancing act. This he does by drowning the three-person panel in a feverish non-stop monologue that details his fantastic qualifications and superb motivation for the job at hand expressly. “My pleasure is other people’s leisure,” he enthusiastically declares, for example.

First of all, the scene can be seen to weave motifs and themes together that are familiar from social scientific research into work and organisations. We have an ostensibly active jobseeker in a grimly asymmetrical power relationship of scrutiny. This is a jobseeker for whom job-hunting has been made the actual job itself, and is a lousily-paid, tedious job with meagre chances of “promotion” to a “real” job in the private or public sector.

On the other hand, of course, Spud already has an all-consuming and overwhelming job in the world of crime, that is, he constantly steals things to pay for his heavy drug habit. A regular nine-to-five job just does not fit into the work-life balance configuration that Spud has made for himself, and, luckily for him, he is able to lean on certain *resources of resistance* even in a highly unfavourable-looking situation. The three interviewers may naturally consider Spud just crazy or stoned, but what Spud does in the interview is to introduce himself as the most eager and best-qualified candidate for the job to the hilt. His only admitted weakness is pursuing perfection too intensively.

Can you still game the system – ironically, for example?

It is a familiar result in social scientific and organisational research that an underdog may be able to implement some resistance and gain a certain amount of freedom by trying to follow formal rules and explicit ideals of an organisation to the very letter. Such excessive literal-mindedness tends to disrupt any organisation’s smooth operation and spread uneasiness. However, the resistance practised by the underdog is distinctively *ironic* here, because obviously you cannot be criticised or sacked for carefully following the rules correctly.

Spud can be said to have succeeded in gaming the system in a certain way for his own benefit, but what might a jump from *Trainspotting* to our accelerating and intensifying era of all kinds of organisations infused and transformed by digital platforms and digitalisation then look like? If we continue with the sketched organisational irony in a broad sense, it seems plausible to me to argue that conditions of its practice are significantly changing if not disappearing from organisations and working life.

Recent social scientific research into job advertising in the “advanced” economies shows, for example, that the requirements employers demand from their potential employees have become more and more detailed and have also changed in quality over the last decades (e.g. Vallas & Cummins 2015; Kuokkanen et al. 2013). Accordingly, and especially concerning white-collar work, an employee must nowadays not only be extremely qualified in her actual job tasks, but she should also manifest highly desirable personal qualities, such as initiative, creativity, innovativeness, sociability, team-working skills, flexibility – you name it. Naturally, applicants and jobseekers have quickly learnt to play this special game, and so they fill their applications and CVs with inspired depictions of how unique, enthusiastic, adventurous and creative they are.

The demands of working life have certainly become harder and more specific in certain ways in numerous sectors in the last decades. (In other ways working life has, of course, historically turned better and “softer” – the assessment depends on the context of comparison.) A cynic would naturally be ready to point out that these super workers sought for in job ads and showcased in applications simply cannot exist in such large numbers. In spite of huge amounts of the familiar hype, mediocrity, fallibility, negligence, laziness, “functional stupidity” (Alvesson & Spicer 2016) etc. have not vanished from work places and organisations.

Nevertheless, the advertising game played between employers and applicants does not seem *ironic* most of the time, and so at least one interesting question arises. That is to say, to what extent are the high requirements manifested in job ads and applications actually translated into rules and norms for employees to follow? The familiar and well-developed auditing and control systems of modern organisations obviously imply that super workers are not typically left to their own devices. Though, a good amount of research also shows, of course, that creativity, job crafting and other related activities implying some measure of freedom are possible for employees in modern organisations (e.g. Hakanen et al. 2017).

## Some disquieting news for potential friends of organisational irony

In August 2017 a large international conference on the future of work, WORK 2017, was organised in Turku, Finland. Several papers were presented in the conference introducing all kinds of new research results and were related to the themes of this article, and I next quote some of the papers for the purpose of elucidation.

“The globalized electronic economy has contributed to creating a culture, where individuals struggle to adjust to new experiences of the self as long-term focus has been replaced by short-termism, and where individual flexibility and adaptability are crucial in order to survive the ever-tougher corporate climate and workplace conditions.” (Biese 2017)

“Changing economic circumstances have fundamentally altered how people are supposed to feel about their paid employment. Increasing economic pressure and the not so subtle expectations that one should be committed to and even love one’s work, encourages people to give more of themselves to their employer.” (Siegert et al. 2017)

Biese and Siegert et al. analyse familiar themes from critical social scientific research into contemporary work. The buying and selling of super workers in job ads and applications that I earlier discussed makes obvious sense in relation to the phenomena that Biese and Siegert describe. Clearly it looks reasonable for employers to try to hire the kinds of individuals who will not struggle with new experiences but rather will thrive on them and happily dedicate their flexible and creative selves to their work and employers. And with no doubt, such “elite” employees certainly do exist who are able to fulfil the high expectations referred to – at least in some circumstances and for some periods.

Furthermore, in theory at least, it would be irrational to shackle creative, flexible and devoted workers to minute instructions of how they are expected to perform their tasks. For these reasons, a worker’s potential ironic resistance by following her organisation’s explicit instructions and rules to the last letter may become difficult if not impossible. Often there will just not be any such rules you could fabricate your irony from.

However, it would obviously be too straightforward to claim that worker resistance, irony included, is just becoming impossible in the new ecology of organisations built around digital

platforms and other digital tools. People are often creative in many unexpected ways. Yet I will introduce my next quotes from the WORK2017 conference presenters, in this case Teixeira and Pärnänen, who shed light on certain important characteristics of digitalized work.

“Compared with non-digital work practices, it is much easier to retrospectively analyse digital work practices [...] in the world of digital work, it is unchallengeable to audit who worked on what, when and with whom. Digitalization paves the way to work that can always be retrospectively analysed.” (Teixeira 2017)

“Digitalization makes the control of the worker easier. It also increases possibilities to collect data about the worker including such rather new and surprising issues as abilities to learn, mistakes made at work or even blood pressure. In the light of the work life surveys the question is how to measure these kinds of aspects within the survey questionnaire.” (Pärnänen 2017)

Both Teixeira and Pärnänen thus draw our attention to some magnificently precise tools for supervising, controlling, rewarding and punishing workers. The relevance of these digital tools to opportunities and potential forms of worker resistance, irony included, should be rather obvious. For example, there exists plenty of research on the sophisticated ways of how digital algorithms are made to supervise, cajole, criticise and exert pressure on Uber’s drivers (e.g. Rosenblatt & Stark 2016; Peticca-Harris et al. 2018).

Towards gamification with positively reconceptualised “addiction” to follow?

Now we can go back to the protagonist of the satirical and ironic movie *Trainspotting*, that is we can see Spud from a slightly different angle. Spud is, of course, an addict, and an abuser of hard drugs. In an obvious sense, Spud’s overwhelming addiction gives him a strong motive for trying to “game the system” successfully, and in the described scene he manages to do this. Generally, and especially concerning “real life”, I presume that most people are not likely to see much irony or anything positive in addicted states or lives themselves, because those kinds of lives are often considered some of the worst miseries of our times. An addict himself may naturally appear to show an ironic stance towards his life, for example, but his relatives and treatment professionals will probably claim that such an attitude just implies his state of denial about his serious problems.

Addictions themselves, whether they are substance-related like alcoholism, heroin use or chocoholism, or activity-related like too much sex, shopping or gambling, have existed in the grey zone between moral vices and medical conditions for a long time. It is arguable, though, that the medical model, that is classifying addictions purely as medical problems with no moral stigma attached, has triumphed in our civilized times. This may well be the case to some extent, but it is quite remarkable that such key practices of handling addictions as Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous etc. basically consist of *morally rebuilding* an addict's character. Leaning on the Big Book and with help from support persons, an addict must try – very seriously and with no obvious irony - to stick to sober ways of thinking and doing things. In other words, he must learn a new kind of *ethics in taking care of himself*, as Michel Foucault would have put it (e.g. Foucault 1986). Pretty understandably, the objective success rates of AA and its derivatives are hard to measure and have been seriously questioned (e.g. Dodes & Dodes 2014), but significant numbers of people clearly get some help from them.

One interesting thing to realise now is that if the conceptualisation and understanding of addiction indeed depends on some moral or ethical standpoints, then there must exist space to question those standpoints with moral or ethical arguments. With appropriate arguments, one should even be able to suggest that to have an addiction might be something good and useful, at least in some contexts. To first give some preliminary idea of the conditions where positive or even praiseworthy addiction could indeed be the case I introduce my final quotations from presenters of the WORK2017 conference:

“[...] we try to explain whether gamification works. Based on the existing literature, there are several explanations why it could work. For example, one of the major reasons could be the fact that in a gamified job the worker gets reasonable goals and continuous feedback on how she is progressing towards the goal, just like in a game. In addition, the goal is something that the worker can set herself.” (Multisilta et al. 2017)

“Taking into account the concept of ‘entrepreneurial personality’, it can be assumed that gamification can have a positive impact on the performance of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial teams. Previous meta-analyses show that entrepreneurs, for example, score higher on [...] Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience, but score lower on Neuroticism and Agreeableness compared to non-entrepreneurs. As entrepreneurs tend to perceive risky or

new experiences more positively than non-entrepreneurs, it can be speculated that they are highly motivated by new methods, e.g. gamification.” (Trusova 2017)

According to the broadly standard definition, “gamification” means “the use of game elements, mechanics and game-thinking in a non-game context to motivate people and change behavior” (Kapp, 2012). Kapp (2012) and Andrade, Isotani and Mizogushi (2016) further elaborate that gamification is a “motivational tool that improves the commitment to the tasks, increases the enjoyment with the system, and increases the sympathy for the domain”.

Different digitalised applications of gamification, as well as multidisciplinary development and research of them, are increasing fast worldwide. Gamification accordingly is an important trend of development concerning work in the organisations of the digitalized platform economy, among other things. Furthermore everyone who feels that they have played games such as Tetris, Angry Birds, Clash of the Clans – you name it – a bit too much now and then, already knows something about the potentially addictive features involved, independently of whether their own work already includes gamified elements.

It must be observed that not all of the gamification research literature is naïve about the potential hazards of gamification. Not surprisingly, “addiction” is typically seen as one such central danger (e.g. Jeong and Lee, 2015; Sun et al., 2015; Kim and Werbach 2016), whereupon it is predominantly conceptualised according to the “medical model”, that is addiction is seen as an objective medical syndrome, whose healing requires science-based means. Andrade, Isotani and Mizogushi (2016) summarise the “addiction” in question to mean “the interest above the expected in gamification features”. A lot thus depends on what “the interest above the expected” can be justifiably made to mean in this summary.

In the long list of medically acknowledged addictions there is, of course, “workaholism”, whose relationship to “laudable industry” looks analogous to gamification’s relationship to potential “gamifiholism”. While “workaholism” broadly means compulsive busying through long hours at the office with its injurious consequences, the possible addictive features of gamification have also drawn specific interest from some, though not that many, researchers (see Hyrynsalmi et al. 2017 for a useful meta-analysis). Andrade, Isotani and Mizogushi (2016) point out that “addiction to video-games and internet games is highly associated with disruption of academic performance or house chores; preoccupation with gaming; overstrain to obtain rewards; mood

modification”. It appears logical thus to draw the preliminary conclusion that bringing game elements and game-thinking into non-game contexts may create not only benefits but also problems those contexts did not previously have.

### Gamification of academic thinking and theorisation

I am a bit embarrassed to admit this, but when I first learnt of the promoted enthusiasm for gamifying management and organisation theory – or academic and theoretical thinking in general – it immediately brought J. G. Ballard’s advice concerning the ailments and problems of modern life to mind. Numerous essential things seem to be going terribly wrong in the current world but what can an individual do? Ballard simply encourages us to embrace our deep alienation and look for inspiring and creative possibilities in the alienation itself. You do not need to like Ballard’s chilly fiction to admit that he certainly succeeded in his own preferred project.

However, please note what my original gut feeling actually implies: gamification *as a whole* arouses my suspicions, but I also feel that gamification should primarily be adapted to academic/theoretical thinking in its totality, if something good is to be made of it. In other words, I consider general efforts at separating “good” gamification from “bad” gamification (or gamifiholism, if you like) useless. This is because ostensibly objective medical criteria put into the task of separation are unavoidably meshed with such ethical and other values that people often strongly disagree on and whose reconciliation (if it is possible at all) may depend on taking very particular and context-sensitive facts of the matter into account. Accordingly, in my view there may well appear cases, which can reasonably be judged to be good addiction to gamification – as well as bad cases of such addiction too, of course.

From a related general perspective, significant developments in academia seem to somewhat justify the claims that, first of all, digitalisation-boosted auditing culture has gradually brought academics’ work under the same kind of minute supervision and control that generally characterize organisations in the private and public sector. Furthermore, familiar though arguably superficial game-like elements already penetrate academia, for example, in the form of numerous rankings and leader boards of the best universities in the world, and various numerical reward systems for academics that bring super traveller programmes of airlines to



mind. For the sake of all-important “visibility” and “effectiveness”, you are practically obliged to participate in these reward systems.

To the well-known game theorist Ian Bogost, points, levels, badges and leader boards are, however, non-essentials, because, according to him, “key game mechanics are the operational parts of games that produce an experience of interest, enlightenment, terror, fascination, hope, or any number of other sensations” (Bogost 2011). I find it interesting that Bogost shies away from articulating a rather obvious matter: the intensity and often fast and unexpected fluctuation of the sensations he lists exactly meet the addictiveness criteria that effective games have.

The conventionally understood, both medically and ethically loaded but now questionable, malignancy of addiction thus settles into the core of digitalisation-boosted ambitions of gamifying organisations, work, or academic research. Namely, if Bogost’s view and my interpretation of it is correct, then successful gamification of any previously non-game context must ultimately turn the new game players into some kind of addicts. Correspondingly, in unsuccessful or superficial cases of gamification you might become addicted to just collecting points, badges etc., but an addiction of this kind does not seem an optimal means to achieve the essential goals of an organisation or theorisation, for example.

In any case, as the conceptualisation and understanding of addiction rather clearly depends on ethical and other value standpoints, there is room to argue that some addiction born in intensive, playful and creative gamified theorisation in management and organisation research could be a splendid case of good and beneficial addiction. I will not try to construct the required and detailed value arguments in this article but leave the task for another occasion. Instead, I end my article with two general topics for discussion which touch upon the relationship between gamification and academic theoretical thinking. I present these topics as questions i) can gamified theorisation achieve other goals or conclusions than those already installed into the theory game design in the beginning? and ii) can such traditional virtues of good theoretical thinking as reflection, scepticism, self-doubt or even irony co-exist beneficially with intensive addiction to effectively gamified theorisation?

Concerning the first topic, I can quite easily see gamification as a potentially useful tool in *teaching* theoretical thinking to students of many academic subjects. Various multi-dimensional, interactive and addictively attractive tree-models, for example, could possibly be

designed to lead a student from everyday-thinking towards understanding and commanding the nature of logical abstraction, explanation, deduction, induction, causality etc. What I find a puzzling and fascinating question however is the following: Keeping the learning targets, which probably should be relatively explicit and set by the teacher, in mind, would it be possible to give a gamified theorisation course such a design that at some point a student can start actual theorisation or theoretical thinking herself?

I presume that real theorisation always includes some element of creativity, but is this achievable without moving outside the predetermined game design? Probably the answers to these questions at least partly depend on what we understand by “theorisation”. For example, is it understood as a tool for tinkering with empirical hypotheses in natural science or is it a form of wild concept creation in some avant-garde philosophy? On the other hand, AI can already independently formulate new and creative scientific hypotheses in certain contexts, which puts the question of human theoretical creativity newly in focus (e.g. McAfee & Brynjolfsson 2017).

My second topic derives from the presupposition that effective and creative gamified theorisation is really possible, but the question then becomes whether theoretical thinking in this mode might carry some intrinsic hazards. It namely looks obvious to me that no addictive and intensive absorption in a game-like activity can simultaneously co-exist with keeping a distance – whether analytically, reflectively, sceptically, ironically – from the same activity. The moment you start to reflect on it you lose the flow.

Systematic critical and reflective thinking in some mode is usually considered an inseparable part of an academic’s task and identity, but what meaning and content would such distance-taking take on if/when gamification triumphantly marches into the very heart of academic work? Bearing the intensifying conquest of academia by NPM, “entrepreneurialism” and a digitalisation-boosted auditing culture in mind, I doubt that there can only be a simple and easy task of frame-switching to do, that is jumping effortlessly outside your addictive research and theorisation game to look critically at its processes, results and effects. Forthcoming actual developments in this sort of gamification will undoubtedly offer many intriguing research questions to the sociology of science and other related studies.

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