

RETHINKING GAMIFICATION

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FROM ENGAGEMENT TO LIFE, OR: HOW TO DO THINGS WITH GAMIFICATION?

by Paolo Ruffino

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH “ENGAGEMENT”?

Let us first outline the meaning of engagement, as it is presented in the literature on gamification. In those texts, engagement is one of the most used keywords. One of the best known texts about gamification, *Gamification by Design* (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011) starts precisely with a definition of the notion of engagement:

The term “engagement”, in a business sense, indicates the connection between a consumer and a product or service. Unsurprisingly, the term is also used to name the period in a romantic couple’s relationship during which they are preparing and planning to spend the rest of their lives together. Engagement is the period of time at which we have a great deal of connection with a person, place, thing or idea. (Ibid., xvi)

However, for Zichermann and Cunningham, this definition is problematic as it is too vague and difficult to apply in a marketing context. Therefore, they propose to create a metric to break down engagement:

We would be better off thinking of engagement as being comprised of a series of potentially interrelated metrics that combine to form a whole. These metrics are: recency, frequency, duration, virality, ratings. Collectively, they can be amalgamated as an 'E' (or engagement) score. (Ibid., xvi)

Engagement is presented here as a "score". The need to count, number and evaluate appears quite often in gamification. It is frequently brought forward in order to record data and compare results. In one of the most often mentioned examples of gamification, what comes to be quantified is "life" itself. This is in fact what NikeFuel (2012), a recent development of the (2006) series of sport applications developed by Nike, states in its advertisement:

Our minds, our bodies and our experience all tell us that movement is life and that the more we move the more we live. It's something athletes have understood from the beginning. The kind of movement it takes to improve your game is the kind of movement it takes to improve your life. But unlike sport, life doesn't come with convenient ways of measuring movement. So we developed one. NikeFuel: a single universal unit uniquely designed to measure the movement of the entire human body for the entire human race, whatever your weight, whatever your gender, whatever your activity. It's that simple and that revolutionary. So get out there, find what fuels you and get moving. (Nike Inc., 2013)

NikeFuel is a service based on a wearable technology that counts, via an accelerometer, how much the body moves during its daily activities. In so doing it provides a number, which is supposed to quantify movement – and life, which is allegedly the same thing. Again, what can be seen here is an attempt to engage sport practitioners, and potentially beginners, through a service that quantifies what would be otherwise difficult or problematic to quantify.

In this paper I will suggest that this specific idea of engagement, as it is presented in the books on gamification and its applications, has in fact a problem with the notion of life. Participation and involvement of the players should have an impact, in the theories of gamification, on their daily lives. However the ways in which this impact is performed brings about a

rather limiting concept of life, one that remains static rather than being *in movement*.

What sort of notion of life and movement is performed by gamification apps? Nike+, for instance, connects to a mobile device and records, via GPS, and an accelerometer the path and pace of a runner. Nike+ is a system that is designed to receive and record already predicted signals; it rewards precise events, which are already expected by the simulation. It works as a system for recording and reviewing runners' performances, and compares them with each other, on a local or global scale. The runner/player of Nike+ is brought to comply with a frame of rules, which works as a regulatory frame, where only specific events are expected, saved, calculated, and evaluated. Through this practice of compliance, the runner/player of Nike+ is normalised, and regulates him or herself in order to maintain and progress in a process of constant self-normalisation. As Foucault notes (1977), disciplinary practices tend to optimise the body and stimulate its submissiveness. A mobile application such as Nike+ produces docile bodies while disciplining their sport activity and punishing their eventual failure. Failure here comes to be defined not only as failure to improve the body's performance, but more subtly as failure to produce the expected data, to update the system as frequently as possible and to provide information about the body. Nike+ is not a game to play, but mostly to update.

There are many other examples of gamification apps that propose to motivate the player in sport and fitness practises. On a similar note, the game SuperBetter (2012), designed by Jane McGonigal, works in a similar fashion, while attempting to regulate physical and mental health. The goals to achieve (losing weight, running a marathon, connecting with friends and relatives and similar ones), and the tasks offered to reach such goals, prescribe a limited set of possibilities for improving one's life. Games such as Nike+ and SuperBetter tend to limit the possibilities of play, and can also be seen as conservative images of a way of living. Both games, or gaming platforms, offer a unique path to the achievement of well being, where what is defined as good for the body is catalogued and presented as necessarily positive.

It is from these considerations about the conservative visions of life that come to be performed by gamification apps that I propose to rethink our own possibilities for critical participation. I will suggest that reconsidering

life and movement can be crucial in rethinking engagement, gamification, and more generally the performativity of video games. I will do so through the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who has been closely inspired by Bergson's notions of intuition, creativity, and vitalism. Bergson's idea of life as movement, strikingly similar to Nike's slogan, will be presented in its radical difference to what Nike and the gamification gurus have been proposing so far. Before going through the theories of Ingold and Bergson, I will look at how different perspectives on what gamification supposedly is and does have been expressed in the academic field. I will conclude the final section by pointing out how a certain idea of the performativity of video games, of their agency and effects, could be seen as replicated in ways that are not too greatly dissimilar from what gamification gurus have been promoting.

CRITIQUES OF GAMIFICATION

As a response to the emergence of gamification, one of the reactions in the academic world interested in digital gaming has been to propose a more moderate understanding of this newly emerging phenomenon, possibly eliminating the marketing aspects involved. It is from this context that Sebastian Deterding and colleagues have proposed a relatively simple definition of gamification: "gamification is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al. 2011, 2). The above quote has been accepted in the academic discourse over the last couple of years as a good description of the term gamification.

As reported by Deterding and colleagues, gamification is not the only term used to label the practice of adopting game design techniques in a non-game experience:

Parallel terms continue being used and new ones are still being introduced, such as "productivity games", "surveillance entertainment", "funware", "playful design", "behavioral games", "game layer" or "applied gaming". Yet "gamification" has arguably managed to institutionalize itself as the common household term. (Ibid., 1)

The paper by Deterding and colleagues helps to define gamification beyond the enthusiastic talk that usually transpires in the uses of the term since Jane McGonigal made it popular through a series of TED talks and her book

Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World (2011). However, gamification has received a relatively large number of more or less consistent definitions and studies of the origin of the term and its political implications (Nelson 2012; Fuchs 2012; Jacobs 2012; Mosca 2012). This is partly due to the concept's background. Gamification is in fact mostly a marketing concept, developed and promoted by designers and business consultants. In this context a clear and simple definition soon became a necessity in order to sell gamification to existing businesses (and sometimes also to public institutions). It is for this reason, probably, that most texts on gamification take the form of guidelines and instructions on *how to gamify* a certain experience. The term has been further defined in the academic context as well, simply replicating the how-to approach of many publications (e.g. "Gamification" module at Pennsylvania University, held by prof. Kevin Werbach, also seen in Werbach and Hunter 2012) or, occasionally, articulating what else could be involved in the phenomenon ("Rethinking Gamification" workshop at Centre for Digital Cultures, Leuphana University, May 2013).

Deterding and colleagues attempt to define gamification, but say little of what gamification does and what it could do, which I believe are much more relevant questions. These are in fact questions more directly challenging the discourse on the potential effects of digital games, which is what the promoters of gamification insist on. The attempts to further elaborate what could be at stake with gamification are not many, and the present paper aims precisely at addressing this point. New definitions of gamification, in fact, would not yet tell us why we should be interested in it, and what we could make of it.

Ian Bogost has attempted to address a more nuanced question about gamification, firstly by saying that, from what we have seen so far, the technique should be renamed "exploitationware" (2011a) – or elsewhere, and more explicitly, "bullshit" (2011b) – and secondly by exploring the potential uses of video games in his text *How to do Things with Videogames* (2011c). His first argument can be summarised as follows. Gamification has little to do with the design of games, as it tends to reduce them to a predictable series of mechanisms to attract players / customers. Such mechanisms include the use of leaderboards, rankings, and badges to award the best players, as well as quick and unchallenging tasks to encourage players and make them feel gratified. However, Bogost argues game design (or at least "good"

game design) has been trying to complicate such techniques by introducing more varied tasks, demanding a variety of skills from the players and possibly questioning the experience of playing through complex narratives. Gamification does not attempt to achieve any of these goals, as it is uniquely interested in maximising the activity of the users, and potentially turning them into “better” customers, or unpaid contributors to their business. Therefore, according to Bogost, it should not be embellished by the word “game”, and should be more correctly called “exploitationware”.

Bogost also adds that “serious games” is instead a much fairer nomenclature than gamification. Bogost has supported on several occasions those games that show a political or activist agenda (for instance, in his work on “persuasive” games, 2007). Serious games, in fact, combine two apparently contradictory words to describe a challenge to the design of games through which players are supposed to question their own knowledge and beliefs. The serious aspect serves to distinguish these emerging kinds of video games from more facetious forms of entertainment (Bogost 2011a, 2011b). Bogost expands his view on serious games in the text *How to do Things with Videogames* (2011c). Here the reference to Austin’s *How to do Things with Words* (1962) is explicit, and so is the attempt to introduce a debate on the potential of video games from a perspective that is possibly more nuanced than the one seen in the context of gamification. This means, according to Bogost, that a better understanding of the potential of digital games entails an expansion of the number of things attainable from them: not only to be used as entertainment tools, or as part of marketing campaigns and self-help applications, as proposed in gamification, but also as objects with an artistic value, or as elements of social and political campaigns, and much more.

In *How to do Things with Videogames*, Bogost lists and analyses some of the possible uses for digital games that have recently emerged, including games with political content, promotional games displaying in-game advertisements, games used for propaganda or activism and those with artistic purposes. He also discusses, through several short chapters, how games could provoke “empathy”, “reverence”, “relaxation”, “disinterest” and “drill”, among many other effects. Bogost argues that we can understand the relevance of a medium by looking at the variety of things it does: “we can think of a medium’s explored uses as a spectrum, a possibility space that extends

from purely artistic uses at one end [. . .] to purely instrumental uses at the other [. . .]” (2011c, 3).

Bogost’s answer to the debates on the potential of the medium of the video game is to avoid binaries and oppositions between serious and superficial technologies. He proposes instead what he calls an ecological understanding of the medium, inspired by McLuhan and Postman’s theory of media. In this view, according to Bogost, media affect the environment where they are introduced at a variety of levels, not necessarily to be evaluated in positive or negative terms. Bogost’s response to gamification, and more broadly to the idea that video games can be used for achieving specific effects, contests the institutionalisation and appropriation from the side of the marketing context of the alleged transformations of the medium currently happening through the emergence of gamification. However, it does not yet tell us how the binaries he evokes could be further complicated and possibly surpassed, and therefore does not propose a way of thinking about video games that could be seen as radically different from what McGonigal, Zichermann and colleagues evangelise about.

The question of what we can do with video games receives a more varied response from Bogost, when compared with any of the gamification gurus. However, what persists is the idea that the medium of the video game has a certain impact on its users – an impact which could be more or less predicted and channelled through design.

While this and similar approaches to the study and design of video games can work well for specific purposes,¹ I would like to propose different questions, and not just for the sake of proposing something different, or because different is “good for its own sake”. I think instead that a process of rethinking gamification, while maybe not urgently needed in the marketing sector, is quite indispensable for the debates about the medium of the video game, where the performativity of games (and the theories about them) has yet to be investigated properly.

1 See for example how the theories by Ian Bogost have been discussed in the debates on what is known as procedurality; seen as a method for both the critic and the design of video games that want to “communicate messages to players” through “rhetorical strategies” and arguments, each allegedly deriving from a specific component of a video game (Treanor et al., 2011).

In the following section, I will consider the question of gamification as proposed by both its gurus and detractors, and as rephrased by Bogost, with reference to Austin: as “how to do things with video games?” I will discuss how the anthropological perspective proposed by Tim Ingold (2010, 2011) can suggest how to rethink gamification, and not necessarily against the current proposals originating from the non-academic contexts. The reason why Ingold’s perspectives could prove useful in this context is that they directly address how objects and things (the distinction soon to be debated) come to be constituted, and with what implications. I will argue, via Ingold, that the discourses on gamification tend to produce objects (gamified apps) allegedly composed of identifiable parts that can each potentially affect players. The theories against gamification contribute to this process of objectification by expanding it to the entire medium of the video game. I will now discuss how we could think differently about gamification in particular and video games in general.

GAMIFICATION AND THE LIFE OF THINGS

I will be addressing this issue through the contribution provided by Tim Ingold, whose work, although not explicitly related to games or video games, questions the concept of performativity from an anthropological perspective. In the discourses about gamification the focus is on the agency of games: games can “do something” to their players, they have a certain power to affect players in a more or less predictable way. As Ingold would put it, agency is a term often brought into a debate in order to resuscitate the concept of materiality. In this view, objects have a certain material presence that does something to us; they have a certain agency with regard to the surrounding environment. However, Ingold suggests, while thinking in this way we tend to be suffocated by “the dead hand of materiality” (Ingold 2011, 28). Ingold here means that agency and materiality are not only forms of abstraction that overshadow the nuanced relations between human beings and the surrounding environment, but, as concepts, they also actively produce this distinction. The distinction remains even when agency and materiality are nuanced and complicated and this is why they (metaphorically!) strangle our thinking. Through Ingold, I will question how this distinction is also replicated in the discourses on gamification, and I will attempt to articulate

a different reading of gamification by re-imagining the relation between human beings (players or game scholars) and video games.

In Ingold's perspective a crucial role is played by the distinction between objects and things, which he draws on Martin Heidegger's essay "The Thing" (1971). The distinction is useful in the context of my work because it helps to move from understanding *engagement* as the result of a cause-and-effect relation (one in which video games do something to us or us to them). While drawing on Heidegger's essay he comments:

The object stands before us as a *fait accompli*, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection. It is defined by its very "overagainstness" in relation to the setting in which it is placed (Heidegger 1971, 167). The thing, by contrast, is a "going on", or better, a place where several goings on become entwined. To observe a thing is not to be locked out but to be invited in to the gathering. (Ingold 2010, 4)

Ingold follows from this that things are constantly in contact with each other through their surfaces. This contact is what makes it possible for "things" to "gather" and participate in each other's presence. Imagining the environment to be populated by objects suggests the image of an excavated world, similar to a piece of Swiss cheese (Ingold 2011, 24). Objects are seen here to be separated and abstracted from the environment. In this view, objects need to be "resuscitated" by what is commonly called "agency". Instead, Ingold argues, things fill the environment and are entangled with one another, in "a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement" (Ingold 2010, 4). Things are alive, as much as we are. The perspective offered by Ingold is more than an attempt to avoid a sort of horror *vacui* of an environment where objects are "cut" and surrounded by an empty space. There is still, for Ingold, the need to make sense of our own participations, as "things" ourselves, participating in the world. He sums up his point saying, "[i]n effect, to render the life of things as the agency of objects is to effect a double reduction, of things to objects and of life to agency" (ibid., 7).

It is not my purpose to consider what Ingold names a "double reduction" to be necessarily negative, strangling, or a "dead hand". It can in fact be said to be working fine in those contexts where engagement is intended as an effect, something that video games can do to their players. However, I

find Ingold's theory interesting for the ways in which it thinks about participation as "living" with and "within", as a sort of co-existence, which I see as radically different from thinking in terms of engagement as "doing something to someone". Through Ingold, we no longer pose the question of what video games (and gamified apps) can do to us, but of what it means to participate and live in a world populated by video games.²

Life is here a crucial concept for Ingold, and he explicitly mentions Bergson and his *Creative Evolution* as one of the major influences for his work (ibid., 13). From Bergson, Ingold develops the notion of life as movement and duration. Bergson argues that we, as humans, tend to capture the things around us intellectually, interrupting the flow of life to freeze, control, and transform things into forms. However, this process loses sight of movement. The intellectual faculty of our mind is accompanied by the intuitive faculty, which we rarely exercise but which persists and occasionally comes through. Intuition, for Bergson, originates from the "vital impulse" shared by all living species. While intelligence is analytical, in that it divides and recomposes things in order to give us the knowledge we need to satisfy our needs, intuition instead gives us the knowledge of how things are in constant movement and always in the process of becoming other (Bergson 1914/1907).

Creativity is that which accounts for the continuity of life, the movement of things, and at the same time for the discontinuity of such things, the

2 Which is not the same question that Bogost proposes in *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's like to Be a Thing* (2012). Bogost proposes an analysis of how objects, or things, experience the world surrounding them. In his attempt to reflect on what experience could be like outside of an anthropocentric view, and how this could lead to different morals and ethics, Bogost does not eliminate the essential alien quality of the objects/things he uses as examples. To interrogate ourselves on the "ethics of the spark plug, the piston, the fuel injector, or the gasoline" (Bogost 2012, 75) when looking at the engine of a car, can indeed be a different question from seeing how a car engine is entangled with human activities. However, it is not yet telling us much about how the plug, piston, injector and gasoline "happen to us", how come they have been divided as such, as separate and abstracted objects, and how such process of "cutting" the environment makes sense to us, what is at stake in it, and how it could be otherwise: In other words, we do not yet know from such an analysis of "aliens" how we are participating in the analysis itself, how we are in contact – physically, intellectually, or intuitively – with the engine of a car, or any other system.

diversity of matter that we tend to intellectually fixate in time and space. Our task, for Bergson, is to reconnect with the intuitive faculty and participate in the life of things, in order to reach absolute knowledge. What does it mean, then, for us, to creatively participate in such a “flow of life”? It means, first of all, that the very idea of the agency of objects of any sort (words, technologies, human beings, etc.) has to be rethought as being less a transitive action (doing something to someone else) and more a dynamic state of being, a property that allows things “to be alive” in the world.

BRINGING LIFE INTO GAMIFICATION (AND GAME STUDIES)

But what does it mean *to be alive*? More importantly, how can this be helpful for a study of gamification, or the study of video games more generally? In this section I will further articulate these questions through the work of Tim Ingold, Patrick Crogan and Henry Bergson. First I will discuss how Ingold sees the “world” or environment as composed of “materials”, and how this aspect recuperates a narrative side of theory as that which makes sense (and in fact constitutes) the properties of the things around us. With Crogan I will connect this way of looking at our engagement and presence in the world with a study of video games (and of what we can do with them). I will then investigate, through Bergson (in fact, a main reference in Ingold’s work), how this ultimately brings to the notions of movement and freedom as necessarily connected to the ways in which we engage with the world.

What I have addressed thus far as a problem of rethinking our engagement with games is formulated by Ingold in different terms, as a problem of understanding life. The meanings of being alive, and ways of bringing things to life, are the main concerns of Ingold’s anthropological endeavour. He argues that the question of “life” is inherently connected to the physical presence of things in the environment, and that this question is hindered by the theories of materiality. Ingold argues that materiality is a concept derived from a sort of “academic perversion” (2011, 20). Ingold draws on Gibson’s theory of perception to suggest that it is in the problem of the boundary that materiality demonstrates its inconsistency. If we consider objects to be in contact, physically, with the external environment, to be immersed in different “materials”, then the boundary appears to be artificial. However, the problem, for Ingold, is not really in the artificiality of the boundary, but rather in what it offers in the understanding of our presence in the world,

and what it eliminates: “[M]aterials do not present themselves as tokens of some common essence – materiality – that endows every worldly entity with its inherent ‘objectness’ rather they partake in the very processes of the world’s ongoing generation and regeneration [. . .]” (ibid., 26).

Shifting the focus to materials, rather than materiality, is what allows Ingold to re-evaluate the human presence in the environment, an aspect he finds to be articulated, in the theories of agency, in a distinction human versus matter. He takes the example of a stone, which can become wet by being dropped in water. After a certain amount of time, water will evaporate and the stone will be dry. The appearance of the stone has indeed changed, and so have its properties. The wet stone will feel and sound different from the dry one. What can we say then of the “materiality” of the stone? Has the dry stone more “stoniness” than the wet stone? Ingold argues:

There is no way in which its stoniness can be understood apart from the ways it is caught up in the interchanges across its surface, between medium and substance [. . . T]he stone has actually changed as it dried out. Stoniness, then, is not the stone’s “nature”, in its materiality, nor is it merely in the mind of the observer or practitioner. Rather, it merges through the stone’s involvement in its total surroundings – including you, the observer – and from the manifold ways in which it is engaged in the currents of the lifeworld. (Ingold 2011, 32)

If the observer is also considered to be part of that same “lifeworld” of the things around him or her, then the distinction in quality and hierarchy between subject and object comes into dispute. Ingold ultimately proposes a different narrative of engagement, one that does not have much to share with the narrative that has been emerging in contemporary video game culture thus far, but that could tell us something about how we engage, also, with digital games. What he offers is indeed a different way of thinking about our own immersion in the world, as thinkers, doers, scholars, producers, and consumers. These practices, however, are thought less as transitive actions and more as what results from a co-presence of live materials.

The crucial aspect in Ingold’s theory that I would like to bring into the debate on gamification is that what ultimately comes to re-evaluation is the narrative aspect of theory. Rather than looking for the essential properties

of objects and their supposed effects, Ingold encourages the creation of narratives of those same properties in which different forms of participation are presented. However, those same narratives are immediately revealed as necessarily strategic and partial. They in fact actively constitute, each time they are performed, the properties of which they talk about, by cutting a series of lines (as Ingold, 2007, puts it) to form new things. In this way Ingold recuperates the performative potential of theory, as that which is capable of bringing things to life through a narrative of our participation with them.

How can this perspective prove useful when rethinking gamification, and how can it contribute to the study of digital games in general? Drawing on Ingold's approach to theory can prove useful when trying to counter the conservative side of gamified applications, as discussed earlier. In fact, Ingold does not simply propose a way of looking at things, but also to narratively rethink those same things and bring about new ones, possibly more interesting and, if needed, less conservative. Gamified systems, of which Nike+ and SuperBetter are examples, can in fact be seen as conservative tools, where unexpected and original ways of thinking about a specific practice are ruled out. But also, possibly, they are inevitably so. The struggle to eliminate uncertainty appears in the very origin of cybernetics and digital simulations. This is what Patrick Crogan argues in his text *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation and Technoculture* (2011) through an analysis of the historical and ideological relations between the video game industry and military developments.

Crogan's text can be seen as creating a link (although not intended by the author) between the Ingold's theory and the field of game studies. Crogan in fact, while trying to reconsider the foundations of the approaches to the study of video games, similarly concludes in favour of a re-evaluation of the performative aspect of theory and its capacity to bring about specific realities. Crogan points out that the study of video games has tended towards an uncritical acceptance of the ideology of cybernetics (Crogan 2011, 145). In Espen Aarseth's (1997) original proposal for a study of "cybertexts" this meant the dismissal of a semiotic approach in the study of computer games in favour of a study of the interpretation of "cybernetic signs",

What if we consider gamified systems to be part of that same world that it is claimed they are affecting?

arbitrarily determined by the relation between a coded, invisible level and an expressive, visible level (ibid., 24–41). From Aarseth's approach, computer programming determines not only the ways in which cybertexts, including computer games, are structured but also their interpretation: "[T]he concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange" (ibid., 1). However, Crogan argues that the "intricacies of the medium", as Aarseth puts it, derive from a specific ideology. It is the same ideology that has been framing military research and the study of simulations, as systems for the pre-emption of possible future events. His proposal is to counter, from an academic and artistic perspective, what he describes as:

[The] overarching tendency of the program industries to standardize and predetermine the nature of access and utilization of their products. Nevertheless one can play, and design and co-create [. . .] or becoming the bugs, artifacts, mods, critical and creative readings and appropriation, and other accidental becomings that alter what we can do with games, what games do with us, and what they give us to think about what we are doing with them now and tomorrow. (Crogan 2011, 174–175)

Similarly to Ingold, Crogan also proposes to bring the focus on our possibilities for reading creatively. Crogan's contribution to the recurring question of how to do things with games, and of what they do to us, which I have argued is also the basis of the discourses surrounding gamification, is useful and relevant for a variety of reasons. First, Crogan highlights how the logic of the "war on contingency" subsumed by the military-industrial complex is not only important in the development of forms of digital entertainment, but is also present in the ways we (gamers and scholars) tend to make sense of these entertainment forms. Second, he proposes that one possible way of thinking outside of such *weltanschauung* is to rethink the physical presence of the players and the materiality of games and game technologies. The problem of materiality and of our physical and intuitive participation is seen by Crogan in the light of an historical and ideological background that shapes both the medium of the video game and the theory about it.

I would like to expand on these suggestions and connect Crogan's analysis of the medium of the video game with Ingold's proposal for an anthropo-

logical rethinking of the concepts of performativity, materiality, and agency. I believe that these two perspectives, distant from each other with regard to the objectives they aim to achieve, can in fact contribute by saying something different about gamification.

I think that what calls for some alternative modes of thinking is the rather unproductive dead-end into which gamification and its critique have confined themselves. Drawing on the introduction to this paper, the statement “movement is life”, presented by Nike in the advertisement of NikeFuel, is interpreted by the sport company as if being alive could somehow be a problem: “[L]ife doesn’t come with convenient ways of measuring movement”, says the advertisement (Nike Inc., 2013). Nike’s response to this problem is that each singular activity of the body should come to be quantified and counted by the application. In doing so NikeFuel disregards movement as a process of knowledge, as wayfaring (in Ingold’s terms), and applies instead a notion of movement as homogenous, and divisible into homogenous unities. In this sense, movement is spatialised here, as the notion of scientific time introduced by Bergson in his *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (2001 / 1889). Bergson proposed that to account for duration we cannot limit ourselves to the scientific time but also allow an intuitive understanding of time and space. Scientific time, the kind of time we measure and quantify, is expressed through numbers. As such, it is based on the idea of a homogenous space as it implies the presence of a unit of measure, which is juxtaposed to the next unit, as if temporal units were linearly disposed. Spatialised time also brings the notions of determinism and causation, as individual moments are seen as one being the effect of the other, following one another in a cause-effect relation.

The production of a “single universal way to measure all kinds of activities [. . . to track] your active life” (Nike, Inc., 2013) is another way of regulating movement, and in fact also performatively produce, in a Foucaultian sense, a notion of life as measurable and traceable through data. By tracing, measuring and quantifying, NikeFuel, and gamification in general, freeze movement and life through the separation and invention of fixities, through what Bergson would define as an intellectual approach, and replicating the notion of time that Bergson identifies as belonging to ancient Greek philosophy (and Zeno’s conception of time and space in particular). Bergson’s contribution is highly relevant in the context of this paper because it is

ultimately concerned with the possibility of freedom within such a notion of time.

By introducing a question about life, rather than engagement, in the discourses about the things that we can do with games (and gamification) I have tried precisely to propose that we have freedom, that is, a multitude of possibilities of movement (not only physical but intuitive and creative). In the final part of this paper, I will attempt to map some possible ways for such forms of intervention which exemplify how a different way of “doing things with games” might take form. In these examples, taken mostly from the art context, our engagement with video games is understood through a different configuration, which inquires – rather than merely replicating – the dualities and separations that tend to frame the processes of understanding of digital games. These proposals investigate the materials which video games are made of, and the significance of dwelling and playing in a world of materials. Yet, they also propose temporary fixities, cuts in an ongoing process of mediating our presence in such a world.³

GAZIRA BABELI AND GAME ARTHRITIS: GAME STUDIES BY DIFFERENT MEANS

The works I would like to introduce are by the artist Gazira Babeli (an avatar in the game *Second Life*) and a piece by Matteo Bittanti and the collective IOCOSE. In these investigations, conceived and presented mostly within the context of art galleries and festivals, I believe a suggestion can be found as to what else game studies could be, and on what is at stake in finding an alternative.

The work by Babeli that I would like to introduce is a piece she made in 2006, entitled *Come to Heaven*. I will propose to look at this performance as a potentially different perspective on the relationship between digital games

3 The perspective I propose while looking at these two examples is strongly inspired by Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska's work *Life After new Media: Mediation as Vital Process* (2012). I do not articulate this reference much further in this context, for the sake of brevity, but I encourage exploring their approach. Kember and Zylińska look at possible ways for “doing things” with media, as a form of invention and scholarly critique. The theoretical foundation for their intervention is also strongly inspired by Bergson's vitalism, although much more fully developed in their text than in this paper.

and the materials they are made of, the ways in which games are played and how they can be understood to reach unexpected results. I suggest that thinking about video games in the terms proposed by Babeli entails, possibly, looking less at the performativity of games and more at games as “performers.” In the example I will now introduce I believe this happens in quite an interesting way. I propose that this artistic investigation explores the materials of which video games are made, and our co-existence with these materials, in a way, which is radically alternative (although not intentionally, considering its date of publication) to the ways in which the question of performativity is currently debated with regard to gamification.

Babeli was a code performer, and avatar in *Second Life* (2003) – her artistic career was intentionally stopped a few years ago, so it is appropriate to talk about her in the past tense, as a dead artist. Her work investigated the possibility of performing in a digital online environment such as *Second Life*. In *Come to Heaven* (2006), one of the pieces I find to be most relevant to her career, Babeli lets her avatar (her “body” in the digital simulation) fall from a very high point in the sky of *Second Life*. While falling, the 3D model of the avatar tends to lose its integrity, and generates a series of unpredictable glitches.⁴

Babeli’s work centres on one essential property of digital simulations. That is, digital simulations, by participating in the “war on contingency” (as proposed by Crogan), will replicate the same script with the same identical results, regardless of the spatial and temporal context where the script is performed. Babeli’s intervention consists in allowing her avatar to automatically repeat the same script, which forces the avatar to fly up to the highest point in the digital simulation and then freefall down to the ground. She repeated the same script on different computers, with different hardware and at different times of day (i.e. with different Internet connection speeds and traffic).

The outcome of her work is a series of still images of the falls. The performance stresses the graphic engine of the game and the graphic capabilities of each of the computers on which the same code is performed (or, rather, “performs”). Babeli highlights the unpredictability of the engine

4 Documentation of Babeli’s *Come to Heaven* is available online at: <http://www.gazirabeli.com/cometoheaven.php> (accessed May 6, 2014).

itself, which mixes the textures of the 3D model in different ways each time it is run. At stake here is not only a way of playing with the logic of the script. Babeli, more interestingly, questions the iterability of the code, which makes it reliable and worthwhile, through the material from which the computers are made.

Babeli's crucial move is that she does not play the video game *Second Life*, but rather sets it up to perform itself. She is not producing, or consuming the game. Babeli's intervention is not, simply, a form of re-appropriation of the game product, or a form of "active consumerism". Indeed, she had to program the script beforehand, take the screenshots and so on, but the interesting part of the work is when the hardware performs such a script, when the game plays itself and makes itself visible for the materials from which it is made. It becomes crucial, in Babeli's concept, to document and report not only the screenshots of the performance but also the precise hardware that has been performing in each instance. Graphic cards, CPUs, and RAMs are the performers, communicating with the *Second Life* servers in California, and unpredictably generating graphic deformations while overheating and "crashing". As Babeli comments, "[. . .] millions of meters away, at a very high speed. The effect obtained on the graphic card of the computer is hard to anticipate and it depends on the creativity process of the card itself. Yes, cards go bananas [. . .]" (Gazira Babeli 2006).

Letting cards go bananas is, potentially, one of the many ways to investigate how the narrative of pre-emption (as Crogan would put it), which underlies the computer script, can be narrated otherwise. Babeli's work does not offer an answer, neither it does crystallise into a technique for "doing things with games". It rather offers a temporary perspective on what else scripts, and video games, are, what they are made of, and how our ideas about them can be challenged by inquiring into such material presence. Babeli offers what Crogan, through Samuel Weber, has defined as a "theatrical" gesture (Crogan 2011, 141), which questions our participation in the video game *Second Life*, looks at what this participation is made of and how does it happen rather than, too simply, framing the answer on a cause-effect or producer-consumer binary.

Another example that similarly inquires about the ways in which we live and co-exist with video games is *Game Arthritis*. *Game Arthritis* is an art project presented at the Venice Biennale in 2011 by Matteo Bittanti, adjunct

professor at the California College of the Arts, and the collective IOCOSE, of which I have myself been a member since its inception in 2006. *Game Arthritis* (2011) is a photographic documentation of a “systemic study of video game induced diseases”.⁵ It investigates the topic of the alleged effects of video games, particularly from the angle of medical and scientific discourse. Moreover, it questions the ways in which we tend to narrate what video games do to us, and us to them. The project is inspired by, and directly refers to, a series of publications that, until the early 2000s, claimed that video games would affect an entire generation of teenagers by altering their bodies due to prolonged use of video game interfaces. From a Foucaultian perspective, game arthritis and the other differently named disorders (the “3D Optical Disorder”, “Playstation Thumb”, “Wii Shoulder Dislocation” and so on) could be seen to have been brought about by authoritarian statements, such as articles in medical journals on the evidence of their emergence, and reinforced by mainstream newspapers and video game magazines. However, game arthritis and other disabilities are also symptomatic of a deterministic narrative, which permeates both the scientific and mainstream discourse. According to this view, video games can harm people – a narrative not necessarily dissimilar, in its logic, when reverted through a positive connotation (as in Jane McGonigal’s “video games will save the world” slogan). *Game Arthritis*, the art project, displayed in 2011, what should have been the scientific evidence of the studies published in the early 2000s. No evidence has ever been found, despite the diseases being analysed in peer-reviewed scientific journals. The photographic “documentation” shocks the viewer with its disturbing images, which should appear familiar (as this is what we have been told video games can do to our bodies) and yet unfamiliar at the same time, as an actual image to prove the alleged effects of digital games has never been provided. Also, the images of *Game Arthritis* do not match the current trend of describing video games through positive and celebratory narratives as an art form, or as good for health and in preparing the professional class of the next generation (as enthusiastically argued, in the first

5 Documentation of the artwork by Bittanti and IOCOSE is available at <http://gamearthritis.org> (accessed May 6, 2014). More information and references are available on IOCOSE’s website at http://www.iocose.org/works/game_arthritis (Accessed May 6, 2014).

consistent study, by Beck and Wade 2004). It proposes what appears to be a sort of conspiracy narrative, according to which the game industry has been hiding evidence that would have proved the concerns of the scientific community.

Game Arthritis summarises, through a series of images, a potential narrative of our physical relation with the hardware of the medium. At the same time, however, it disputes our tendency to abstract such a relation, allowing deterministic discourses to become institutionalised interpretations. It mocks the ways in which video games are transformed into “objects” with clear and identifiable effects. *Game Arthritis*’ move is to ridicule such abstraction proposing occurrences, examples of players actually affected by their continuous contact with the materials of which video games are made. Yet, it is precisely by switching the focus from an abstract discourse to the contingent embodiments of which the various “game arthritides” are made that game arthritis, the disease that officially existed until about a decade ago, is revealed to be a rather uncanny and probably biased narrative.

Game Arthritis is not only a project about the properties of the materials from which video games are made; it is mostly about the narratives that we (both scholars and gamers) tend to formulate to make sense of our engagement with such materials. The focus is on the human, on the ways in which we participate in an environment populated by things, and how we tend to abstract them as objects and then resuscitate them by giving them agency, or a “sparkle of life”, as Ingold puts it. In *Game Arthritis* the question is about (and the joke is on) us.

When we start thinking about the properties of the materials of video games as narratives, then we can also imagine stories, which are intentionally false. However, their falsity sheds light on what video games are for us and what else they could be. In conclusion, I believe that an approach similar to the one proposed by these two examples could also be adopted more extensively in the study of games, rather than being exclusively undertaken in the artistic context. It would mean focusing less on the alleged effects of video games and the ways in which we can channel those effects through design, instead concentrating more on what sort of “things” we could bring about by living with and through video games. Following Bergson’s notion of creativity as that which reconnects to the intuitive faculty of the mind and participate in the life of things, I propose to name this potential detour

in the study of the medium of the video game as “creative game studies” – a proposal that needs, however, to be articulated more extensively in a separate context.

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