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The "Playful Paradigm". A Smart Transformation for the Contemporary Society?

Ilaria Iannuzzi

Abstract. This article aims to offer a critical examination of the current gamification process existing in contemporary society. One example of this process is the "Playful Paradigm", a European-level project aiming to help cities – considered increasingly smart – to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable and that integrate urban economic, social and environmental topics. What critical issues hide behind prevailing gamification? In terms of general theorisation, discussion will be hinged on the conceptual category of the "*homo ludens*" and, more generally, the "casino culture", so as to thrown new light, through a sociological examination, on the potential and critical issues of an increasingly invasive and capillary process.

Keywords: Playful Paradigm, game, smart society, homo ludens, puerilism.

Riassunto. Il presente articolo mira a porre sotto una lente critica l'attuale processo di gamification esistente nella società contemporanea. Un esempio di questo processo è rappresentato dal cosiddetto "Playful Paradigm", un progetto formulato a livello europeo volto ad aiutare le città – considerate sempre più *smart* – a sviluppare soluzioni pragmatiche che siano nuove e sostenibili e che integrino temi urbani economici, sociali e ambientali. Quali criticità si nascondono dietro alla gamification imperante? In termini di teorizzazione generale, ci si soffermerà sulla categoria concettuale dell'"*homo ludens*" e, più in generale, alla cosiddetta "cultura del casinò", per gettare, attraverso uno sguardo sociologico, una nuova luce su potenzialità e criticità di un processo sempre più invasivo e capillare.

Parole chiave: Playful Paradigm, gioco, smart society, homo ludens, puerilismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Playful Paradigm" is a project that was developed, starting 2017, by the URBACT network, a European programme, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Member States, established to promote sustainable urban development through the exchange of ideas and the sharing of knowledge between European cities. URBACT aims to help cities develop new, sustainable pragmatic solutions integrating urban economic, social and environmental topics (European Commission 2021).

The "Playful Paradigm" is based on gamification (Vanolo 2019) as an innovative concept by which to promote social inclusion, healthy lifestyles and energy awareness, intergenerational and cultural mediation and economic prosperity. It is also based on the idea that games can offer new strategies to engage city stakeholders in urban development.

The city of Udine, in Italy's North-East region – which started incorporating game into its urban policy in the early 2000s – led the project.

During the European Week of Regions and Cities held digitally in October 2020, the Playful Paradigm partner cities organised a "participatory lab" to present their idea to launch the "European Capital of Game". To drive the initiative, they proposed a three-pillar manifesto of what being a Playful City means. The first pillar, "Play for Green", gathers actions aimed at promoting sustainability and addressing healthy lifestyles. The second, "Play for Inclusion", focuses on integrating marginalised people and those in need through game. The third, "Play for Placemaking", identifies participatory tools to support urban planning and claims squares and streets open for game.

As can be seen, game is increasingly being introduced into an urban setting and it would appear to be a new way of managing the city of the future, a city that is called to be "smart" (on the concept of smartness, see, for example, Iannone 2018; Bolognini 2017; Mezzapelle 2016). But what are the critical issues of this gamification process?

Ever more frequently, in fact, the term "gamification" is being used more extensively, expanding and becoming a real social imperative, which progressively involves an increasing number of spheres, from education through to economy and finance – which becomes "creative" and takes the form of the "game" of the stock exchange – and even work.

The social consequences, in terms of social control, privacy, safety and the critical capacity of subjects and the definition of reality – to mention just a few – that may derive from the application of such models are extremely risky.

In terms of general theorisation, these processes would appear to represent the specification of a more extensive process, which refers, for example, to the *homo ludens* and, more generally, the "casino culture". Through a sociological examination, the gamification process in progress in the smart societies will be analysed to highlight the potential and critical issues in terms of social order development possibilities.

2. ON THE IMPORTANCE OF GAME

«Playful activities are powerful tools when applied in cities. Game can be used for working in deprived neighbourhoods with local communities or in schools with students. It can determine participation in civil society, involving citizens and local associations». Thus Paolo Manini declares, head of play for Udine City Council in respect of the "Playful Paradigm" project. In Italy, the importance of game has been enshrined in national law since 2000. Law 328/2000, The Social Services Reform Law – From social centralism to solidarity federalism, introduced the concept of the "ludobus", a mobile toy-library for city dwellers. The municipality of Udine saw that infrastructure alone was insufficient to benefit from the full potential of game. It established an "office of game" to coordinate the ludobus and toy-library activities, promote ongoing "game education" for schools and other institutions, organise game-based events and generally advocate for the expansion of game-based initiatives.

Inspired by Udine's example, and with support from the Playful Paradigm, partner cities identified and developed game-based initiatives that would fit within their specific local contexts.

In Cork, Ireland, the project group launched a Game Forum to involve local stakeholders in a collaborative way, and developed placemaking activities such as removing cars from key areas of the city and making them "open for game". Other examples of initiatives included a Toys of World summer camp in Larissa, Greece; creation of games about nature and sustainability by students in Esplugues de Llobregat, Spain; and a city treasure hunt game in Katowice, Poland.

These are just some examples of a more extensive gamification process, which is gaining increasing standing within contemporary urban contexts, which are ever more frequently being termed "smart". "Gamification" is used to refer to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts (Deterding *et al.* 2011). Reference is specifically made to play not only as an object but also and above all as a *process*, which involves the simultaneous engagement of multiple elements and, in particular, the deployment of a specific operating logic[1]. Gamification should not be confused with "game theory", a theory that "mathematically analyses optimal conduct of vari-

[1] Naturally, there is extensive, very varied literature on game, as it encompasses several different disciplines. Here, sociological literature is prioritised over psychological or pedagogic approaches. For a multidisciplinary view of the topic, see, amongst others: Fink 1987; Colozzi, Landuzzi and Panebianco 2017.

ous players before possible strategies applicable to solving the game".

For a long time, in sociological terms, game was considered a marginal aspect, almost seeking to claim, more or less explicitly, that studying game was in itself a game, considering that this dimension was unable to add anything really significant to the sociological theory (Mongardini 1993). Often, moreover, being difficult to define, the dimension of game has been considered as a "residual" category, into which all processes whose components cannot be fixed «in a linear fashion» can be flowed (Mongardini 1993: 19). The fact that there is a close relationship between society and game – even only in terms of the values that game can convey and the methods used to structure relationships between subjects – would now appear to be undisputed and had already been pointed out by Simmel back in 1917 (1983).

The social gamification we are currently witnessing would not appear to be purely a passing trend, however recurrent, but rather a process that has emerged from the route taken by the economistic and efficientistic logic so pervasive in contemporary society and that would appear to have absolutely nothing "playful", in the meaning that is first spontaneously and instinctively attributed to the term, about it (Iannuzzi 2021).

And if it is true that it cannot be claimed that game has no meaning other than itself – as is instead sustained by Caillois (2000) – as this assertion can apply to game intended as an institution, but is not valid for game as a «form of sociality» (Mongardini 1993: 72) -, if it is true, therefore, that game is not only an *end*, but can also become a *means* by which to achieve very different ends to pure entertainment, it is equally true that it is essential to understand which aims are pursued by game as a tool. The ultimate ends would appear today to be a far cry from optimising the strictly social sphere. The significance of game within today's society therefore grows, but its «meaning and sociocultural function» mutate (Colozzi, Landuzzi and Panebianco 2017: 9). It is, in fact, a question of highlighting processes involving fun, entertainment and recreation, bending the constituting dimension of sense of such areas, tracing them to a logical economistic system, equipped with specific operating dynamics.

The techniques used to increase the smartness of the cities include an ever more assiduous use of moments of game. What are termed "serious games" (Aldrich 2009; Cavada and Rogers 2019) are often used in this sense, with the aim of involving participants in games that, through entertainment, seek to develop and consolidate specific capacities. It is by no coincidence, in fact, that the use of games as a means by which to generate, develop and strengthen certain behaviours is discussed repeatedly. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that through exploiting the recreational desires of the subjects, game can teach and engage through incentive and persuasion mechanisms (Kazhamiakin *et al.* 2015; Gabrielli *et al.* 2014; Cowley *et al.* 2011). This idea would not have appeared to have had any difficulty in penetrating the urban matter, in particular as regards the smart potential it encompasses.

Using game processes means activating a series of elements and dynamics that are the hallmark of game operation. More specifically, logics are involved of *points*, *levels*, *rewards*, *badges*, *classifications*, *challenges* and *missions*. Through these elements, it is considered that players can be more engaged than they are when using programmes based on the transmission of information – for example technologies, such as smart metering, which can provide reports on domestic energy, in terms of energy efficiency within the home – or education and training programmes.

The capacity of game to engage its users often lies in its ability to include various different elements at the same time, such as (Tanghe 2016):

a) the elaboration of a story, a narration, planned in such a way as to be appealing and that functions as a sort of themed thread for all activities;
b) the introduction of elements of personalisation, which mean that the subjects can recognise themselves personally in the characters or game situations;
c) the presence of feedback systems, mainly immediate and constant, which make it easier for the subject involved to know their learning level and, consequently, generate quick manners of self-correction;
d) the existence of missions and challenges, which stimulate interest based on the competitiveness between participants;
e) the interactivity, which helps ensure that the game in question is perceived as a significant experience as a whole;
f) the processing of reward systems, which can take different forms, from extra points to virtual goods (clothing, weapons, coins, accessories and so on) to access to higher levels.

The capacity of gamification to be applied in urban contexts is hinged strictly on the growing request, by social players, to trial, test and try out ever more emotionally engaging experiences (Sakamoto and Nakajima 2015). The relationship itself between the subject and the city re-emerges as an unresolved question, as in this respect, in the city there are no elements with intrinsic qualities, but rather only elements considered on the basis of their «emotional effect» (Amendola 2015: 12).

The same occurs in the product sale mechanism: it is not the product in itself, which is currently sold, but rather the experience it offers, the narration it communicates, the message it conveys. In this respect, the accessibility of practices otherwise unknown and the illusion of an infinite life – the possibility of accessing the new game as many times as desired – make the game a reality in which it is increasingly exciting to take refuge.

3. CAN ALL AREAS BE GAMIFIED?

In 1938, in his book entitled *Homo ludens* (1955), Johan Huizinga sustains that the designations of *homo sapiens* and *homo faber* applied to our species were at that point clearly insufficient in representing the condition of the contemporary subject. Far from being simply a "biological function", Huizinga claims that game is, to all intents and purposes, a cultural phenomenon. The question therefore arises spontaneously as to whether or not all areas of human existence can be gamified.

Mary Poppins, the famous nanny who stars in the film by the same name, in her song "A Spoonful of sugar", sings (Carreras 2017):

In every job that must be done
There is an element of fun
You find the fun and … snap! the job's a game
And every task you undertake becomes a piece of cake
A Lark! a spree!
It's very clear to see
… That a spoonful of sugar…

In this scene of the 1964 film, Mary Poppins's aim is to show the Banks siblings that tidying up their room can actually be a fun task. In this sense, the entire film can be considered as a claim of the playful side of life, against the seriousness with which the family's father addresses all areas of life: work, family, etc. (Carreras 2017).

If every activity has a fun part, then this means that game is not merely a technique, a method applied or applicable to a certain task but rather an aspect that is part of that task. In this sense, the fun aspect should also be the way in which each subject addresses the task assigned them and it is precisely this attitude that makes it possible to grasp the fun element in everything we do not call game. From this point of view, gamification is not merely applying the mechanics of a game to contexts extraneous to it, but rather the identification of that fun element that can transform a task into a game (Carreras 2017).

Is this perhaps the meaning of gamification? The actual possibility of making any area of life into a game?

If we go back in time to when the word "gamification" began entering common language, in 2003, we can see that this is bound to when Nick Pelling founded the consultancy firm Conundra Ltd, which precisely offers the idea of using a game mechanism as a resource for selling consumer products. Thus gamification appears for the first time applied to the world of marketing, from where it spread rapidly to reach a huge variety of segments: education, culture, scientific research and so on (Carreras 2017).

It is the entertainment that becomes the current «connective tissue of the global society» (Russo 2014: 15), the fun as a means to express one's freedom within a «rationalised society» (Mongardini 1993: 83). But what freedom are we talking about?

The urban game transforms the city space into «ambient advertising» (Russo 2014: 20), i.e. into an environment used as a tool to communicate brand messages (Russo 2014). This is the case, for example, of the "Vodafone loves Bologna" event, a 2011 project in which Vodafone proposed initiatives for the city of Bologna, supporting major local sports, social and cultural events (Russo 2014); or the "Red Bull Stash" campaign run in 2012-2013: a 2.0 treasure hunt with the aim of finding a pack of Redbull cans and its code, with the help of clues left throughout the country (Russo 2014).

The *smartification* achieved through the playing of urban games in this structure risks becoming an economistic mechanism focussed on efficiency as the ultimate aim. The search for game space can, in fact, become – and indeed this is what is taking place – a real *market* (Mongardini 1993b). In this sense, the smart city may represent a valid example of what is defined as corporate storytelling (Bria and Morozov 2018), namely an «enterprise narration» lacking any «political meaning and critical apparatus» (Degli Esposti 2019: 173), which considers spaces by virtue of their capacity to give rise to economic opportunities. Gamification is used as an emotional activator of the marketing process/model defined in the Anglo-Saxon context as "AIDA": Attention Interest Desire Action (Di Gregorio 2019).

The "right to the city", as a right intended Lefebvrian style, to mutate the social, economic and political relations of the urban fabric and not as a mere access to the city's resources (Lefebvre 1970), dissolves in the favour of a significance of the urban dimensions flattened on the economic-efficientistic model.

It is therefore considered necessary to pay particularly close attention to the theories on which basis gamification is intended as a process that emphasises the role of the social player (Olszewski, Pałka and Turek 2018) that, as such, is automatically considered a desirable process, without critically analysing the margins of freedom the player actually has available and what effective logic actually underlies the process in question.

The dynamics ongoing in today's society in fact highlight that game can no longer be considered as an «essentially sterile» activity, as Caillois (1967: VII) intended, in claiming that game «produces nothing: neither goods, nor works» (VII).

The logic of game that, amongst other spheres, also invades that of work, dismisses this belief: simply think of the "electronic whip", as it was renamed by the workers of the basements of the Disneyland Resort Hotel, in California. A digital board reports on the work of the laundry workers, constantly measuring productivity and turning different colours depending on the speed at which the laundry is washed, dried and folded. The supervisors set the goals and if work proceeds in line with these, the colour shown in green, otherwise it turns orange or red depending on how far productivity is removed from the target set. Apart from declarations of principle, according to which this "playful" method should allegedly make the work more fun, clearly the individual and social consequences deriving from the use of this mechanism should not be underestimated. These include, for example, more enhanced competitiveness that the workers cannot, even wanting to, escape and all this has inevitable repercussions on the spirit of collaboration in the workplace, not to mention the increased number of accidents at work.

4. GAMIFICATION OR PUERILISM?

Naturally, these are just some examples, but which allow for a reflection on the scope of the consequences that the distortion of the logic of the game can generate. In this sense, the workplace is one of the areas in which this distortion can take over, just as is the case in the local territorial dimension.

Can, therefore, this conception of game really contribute solutions to the main problems of the urban context? Despite the fact that the declared aim is generally to activate the engagement of citizens to generate greater and better knowledge of the territory and reference community, these games often represent «new communication environments» and, above all, «marketing» environments (Russo 2014: 16), created to respond to the social changes deriving from a society that is increasingly individualised (Bauman 2001). In this sense, they do not act with a view to solving – or at least downsizing – problems concerning, for example, the cohesion of the social fabric, but often operate contributing towards the continuation of such problems. Reference is made to the fact that it is thought that, through the temporary dynamics of game, problems linked to forms of social inequality existing between the inhabitants of a city or issues relating to social inclusion, amongst others, can be attenuated, as though in order to solve such critical issues, it were possible to adopt the exact same approach as is used to install a sensor or smart traffic light.

In this sense, we ask ourselves how and how much, games designed to respond to the smart objectives of sustainable urban mobility, energy efficiency or the reduction of city traffic, can effectively impact the solution of problems linked to the compactness of the social fabric.

It would appear reasonable to consider that the whole matter of gamification currently in progress, in its connection with the "smartification" of contemporary societies, can fall within a more extensive reflection on the trends of today's society to take on an increasingly "puerile" characteristic. Already back in 1936, in the work *The Shadow of Tomorrow*, Huizinga spoke of «puerilism», referring to the almost indivisible combination of the sphere of game and the sphere of seriousness. Apparently serious activities, like politics, conceal an element of game – political games, for example – whilst the real game was taken too seriously and had become technically over-organised (Tanghe 2016).

Puerilism is seen «in the insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism, the delight in mass-meetings, mass-demonstrations, parades, etc.» (Huizinga 1955: 205). These are elements that are now increasingly recognisable and affirmed in our societies, where each area would appear to take on more and more the form of a "contest" (Tanghe 2016). Huizinga himself claimed that the *homo ludens* could be expressed in adjectival form as *homo agonalis*. And if competitive games were certainly a strong presence in 5th century BC Greek culture, contemporary society would appear to show an exasperation of this characteristic.

The *homo ludens* currently presents as a subject "that has progressively abandoned the value of delaying gratification (a key value of industrial society and "solid modernity"), to the point that it is today considered a problem, a ballast to be eliminated as quickly as possible" (Di Gregorio 2019: 93). This value has thus been replaced with the spasmodic, continuous search

for immediate gratification. If the work ethic, Bauman claims,

> *pressed towards indefinite extension of delay, the aesthetic of consumption presses towards its abolition. We live, as George Steiner put it, in a 'casino culture' […] if an act is to be rewarded, the reward is instantaneous. In the casino culture the waiting is taken out of wanting, but the satisfaction of the wanting must also be brief, must last only until the next run of the ball, to be as short-lived as the waiting […] the desire – that most coveted of rewards in the world ruled by the aesthetic of consumption* (Bauman 2007: 184).

Gratification, therefore, «must be full and immediate, but at the same time ephemeral and brief to make room for new adrenalin-filled opportunities that can allow us to savour our mini-sensations of temporary omnipotence» (Di Gregorio 2019: 93-94).

We are looking at a sort of «*fun-morality*» (Baudrillard 1976: 80): «the imperative to enjoy oneself, to exploit to the full one's potential for thrills, pleasure or gratification» (Baudrillard 1976: 80). This sort of «*right-duty* to enjoyment» (Di Gregorio 2019: 94) regards not only the relationship between the subject and object of consumption, but any area: relations, culture, work, free time, politics. «It is the ludic which is becoming the dominant tone of our daily *habitus*, to the extent indeed that everything – objects, goods, relationships, services – is becoming gadgetry or gimmickry» (Baudrillard 1976: 126).

It is not that ludic aspect that has always been present in the history of humanity – consider, for example, the logic of *panem et circenses* adopted since ancient times – but rather a process that tends to make any area of human and social life into a "game", as a means by which to achieve fulfilment – temporary – and a sense of satisfaction, again temporary. The "search for happiness" also ends up falling within this pattern: Bauman notes how our society of consumers is perhaps the only one «in human history to promise happiness in *earthly life*, and happiness *here and now* and in every successive now» (Bauman 2009: 47). But it is a paradoxical happiness (Lipovetsky 2007), as it will never be definitively achievable and will only provide surrogates of happiness: dissatisfaction becomes permanent (Di Gregorio 2019). Just like a player in a casino, who does not play so much for the enjoyment of winning as for the thrill of the game. And ends up losing, increasing their unhappiness in a spiral and heightens their addiction (Di Gregorio 2019). One plays, therefore, not so much to win as to feel alive. «In our culture, everything (people, objects, services, relations) must have a maximum impact and instant obsolescence; every moment must saturate us with dopamine and immediately make way for the next emotion» (Di Gregorio 2019: 96). And this is what Christopher Lasch (2001) defines as the «philosophy of futility»:

> *a pervasive fatigue, a "disappointment with achievements" that finds an outlet in changing the "more superficial things in which fashion reigns". […] In the second place, the propaganda of consumption turns alienation itself into a commodity. It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. It not only promises to palliate all the old unhappiness to which flesh is heir; it creates or exacerbates new forms of unhappiness – personal insecurity, status anxiety* (*Ibidem*: 88).

Gamification is therefore perhaps the other side of the same coin: an increasingly pervasive process of puerilism. A «cult of youth» or a process of «becoming youthful», «a sort of *global, totalising Peter Pan syndrome*» (Di Gregorio 2019: 97). This is the affirmation of the *puer aeternus*, the individual who lives life as a gamesman.

5. CONCLUSIONS

So what conclusions can be drawn, starting from what has been affirmed thus far? Neil Postman writes that there are «two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shrivelled. In the first – the Orwellian – culture becomes a prison. In the second – the Huxleyan – culture becomes a burlesque» (2002: 182). Although both would appear to be avoided, insofar as they represent «the negation of the modern dream of freedom, critical spirit, emancipation, informed citizenship and implemented democracy» (Di Gregorio 2019: 99), however

> *an Orwellian world is much easier to recognise, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us. But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements?* (Postman 2002: 183).

So perhaps the gamification processes in progress, including the Playful Paradigm, represent that entertainment that needs to be examined and observed more critically. Is it a truly "smart" transformation for contemporary society? The answer can probably be none other than "it depends". It depends on how we are willing to consider this dimension of smartness. If we consider it as attention paid to social inclusion processes, as an individual and collective interest – to mention just some of the essential areas to be held in consideration

– then these processes can be termed smart. If, by contrast, these areas are not only not pursued as objectives but actually subjected to an economistic and efficientistic logic, then probably a rethink and renewed critical reflection will be needed on how playful (Alfrink 2014) this paradigm is.

«Did Nietzsche not write that "everything that is profound loves the mask"?» (Mongardini 1993b: 57). Far from being a futile activity for sociological reflection, play continues to represent, to all intents and purposes, one of the essential ways through which to «establish society» (Mongardini 1993: 57). The manners of such establishment, however, as we have sought to highlight, may vary tremendously and be a far cry from "game", as it is commonly intended.

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