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Do you have a moment to increase world awesome? Game-based engagement with social change

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Abstract

Altruistic, prosocial activities intended for social change are essential to the continuance of societies. These activities, however, require time, coordination and re-direction of resources towards communal rather than individual goals. With the prevalence of hedonism in many societies, recruiting participants and getting resources for altruistic, prosocial activities have become challenging. This chapter draws a parallel between playing of (video) games and engagement with altruistic, prosocial activities. We argue that both can and often do involve similar mechanics and psychological rewards. Accordingly, we examine two examples of social change communities, that have managed to remain active and affect a level of social change over

an extended period of time. The two communities examined; Nerdfighteria and a Change.org campaign for the 'Bilo family' in Australia, are of similar social purposes although of different sizes and locality. Through this analysis, we highlight how practices of game-based engagement can be utilized to engage individuals with social change.

Keywords: Gamification, prosocial behavior, long-term engagement, goal-setting

1. Introduction

Playing and seeking out positive experiences is innate in all beings. Most individuals wish to enjoy time they spend on activities they carry out. Many go so far as to restructure their daily activities to afford more autotelic hedonism. Thus, it is no surprise to observe the growing pervasive spread of entertainment, play and games in our culture (Deterding 2015; Hamari 2019; Landers et al. 2018). This pursuit of autotelicity is reshaping our society, work, play, organization practices and perhaps all facets of modern life (Koivisto & Hamari 2019). Work is merging with play, giving rise to phenomena such as playbour, where the lines between what is work and what is play have been blurred (Dipper & Fizek 2017; Törhönen et al. 2019a, 2019b). Serious careers are being built around activities that were traditionally seen as fruitless, such as the playing of games, as seen in the rise of esports (Hamari & Sjöblom 2017). Educational practices are being transformed by serious games, and gamification to become more self-purposeful and enjoyable (Lee et al. 2013; Majuri et al. 2018). These are all facets of a phenomenon many have come to coin as the gamification of culture (Dipper & Fizek 2017) amongst other terms. Our society and practices are being consciously transformed through intentional gamification and unconsciously transformed as society grows accepting of the perceived virtuous of these practices (Hamari 2019). Social change, altruistic and prosocial activities are no exception.

It is argued that most, if not all, prosocial acts of kindness or altruism involve some degree of personal gain or enjoyment even if they require the doer to sacrifice resources such as money, personal time or even their survival in extreme cases (Judson 2007). Giving to charity, organizing a march or a larger societal movement bring its' doers positive feelings of e.g., happiness, accomplishment and self-actualization, quite aside from the possible positive changes from these activities that the doers hope to see achieved. Nonetheless, many of these prosocial acts require a level of coordination of, for example, social and financial capital (Batson & Powell 2003; Riar et al. 2020). Larger scale impact is often facilitated over long periods of time, through accumulations of small contributions. On the short run, however, potential gains from this altruism are often small compared to the coordination work, effort and time invested. Hence, a large number of organized, motivated volunteers engaged for longitudinal periods of time are imperative to social change, especially when such change could not be facilitated through the work of one person.

Social change, altruism and prosocial activities, however, are essential to the well-being of most societies and the world as a whole (Judson 2007). Efforts by large organizations with relatively larger funds and social influence can have a wide scale impact on, for example, poverty, education and diseases management (Dy & Ninomiya 2003; Pittet et al. 2009). Individual, smaller contributions may accumulate to relieve, for example, natural disasters (Hinck 2012) or attempt to bring about political and social change (Abdelghaffar & Hassan 2016). The question, hence, becomes: *How can we engage organized, motivated individuals for longitudinal periods of time, to bring about social change?* One approach to attempt to uncover an answer to this question is to investigate existing communities that have managed to engage a large number of organized volunteers, over longitudinal periods of time, to attempt to bring about a level of social change in their societies.

Accordingly, this chapter examines two examples of such communities; Nerdfighteria and a Change.org campaign for the 'Bilo family' in Australia. These two communities emerged organically - and perhaps accidentally - on online platforms, and grew unexpectedly larger than their leaders imagined. They are of similar social purpose although of different size, and locality. The purpose is to showcase how game-based organizational practices can, and actually are, utilized to create, manage and grow communities dedicated to social improvement.

2. Background

2.1. Games and altruism: two sides of the same coin?

Societies are complex, socially constructed webs of activity and meaning in constant flux, actively shaping and being shaped by their members. As societies and life unfold, change occurs to and through them due to these fluxes and natural developments. The status and experience of its members change: some fall into poverty while others acquire excessive wealth. Some find themselves living under empowering social rules or institutional laws. Others begin to lose those feelings of connection and belonging that are important to happy living.

As societies change, individuals may choose to engage in social, or political prosocial activities to alter some of the negative circumstances befalling themselves or others and better their community. It can even be argued that many individuals have a genetic disposition to pursue and enjoy such altruistic activities (Batson & Powell 2003; Judson 2007). Bettering a society, however, is a complex concept raising questions about what betterment is and for whom. Nonetheless, individuals around the globe continue to come together working towards this elusive goal (e.g., Abdelghaffar & Hassan 2016; Dy & Ninomiya 2003). For example: *The Harry Potter Alliance*, run by fans of the fictional novel and movie series, has channeled fandom of average

individuals into activism towards social, gender and educational equality as well as towards natural disaster relief (Hassan et al. 2018; Hinck 2012). Many churches, mosques and communal groups provide, on a daily basis, important avenues of socialization, community building and altruistic activities for individuals around the globe towards the same goal of bettering communities. Muslim communities in the UK, for example, in collaboration with local businesses of different faiths, lead fast responses to the pandemic of 2020, providing safe meals and medical donations to healthcare workers as well as financial and social support to individuals economically impacted by the pandemic (Nazeer 2020).

A significant and growing trend in our changing societies, however, is that individuals are, in contrast, increasingly spending their time on entertainment activities in general and on video games in particular. Where games were previously often seen as a foolhardy, casual activity for children, nowadays, the average gamer is 35 years old and invests increasing time and financial resources into playing games (ESA 2019; Juul 2010). This playing of games is seeping into all aspects of life, including, but not limited to, education, exercise, productivity and even social and altruistic activities (Hamari & Keronen 2017; Koivisto & Hamari 2019).

Playing games, and altruistic activities, could seem to be at opposite ends of a spectrum in terms of their purposes: one focuses on personal entertainment, while the other is about giving to society. Despite this apparent disconnection we propose the unconventional idea that these two activities could be quite similar in terms of motivations, experiences, immediate outcomes and possible impact on society, although the outcomes and impact of these two activities are usually likely to be on different individual and societal levels.

Both playing (video) games and altruistic activities can occur individually (single-player games, individual donations to charity) or through organized groups (multi-player games, NGOs

and organized groups). Both also require investments of money and time. In the short term, prosocial, altruistic activities can bring individuals feelings of connection, build communities, and contribute to improving mental health self-actualization and accomplishment (Batson & Powell 2003; Judson 2007). Similarly, playing games is connected to feelings of connection, accomplishment, achievement, community building and self-actualization and perceived development (Deterding 2014; Riar et al. 2020; Rigby 2015). Wherever dedicated gamers are found, we also find individuals willing to go beyond the call of duty to volunteer their time and resources for society (Asquer 2014; Thiel 2016). Outcomes, however, from many altruistic, prosocial activities are not always as clear nor as immediate as those from games and might involve large personal sacrifices, that can, on some metrics, be considered significantly higher than the returns (Judson 2007). Hence, a key difference between playing games and undertaking altruistic, prosocial activities remains that of their respective purposes: giving mainly to the self (playing of games) and giving mainly to others (altruistic social activities).

2.2. Gamification of altruistic, prosocial activity

While altruistic, prosocial activities are essential to the wellbeing of both individuals and societies, in societies that are growing increasingly hedonistic, a key challenge is to motivate individuals to actively and consistently engage with altruistic, prosocial activities that may not bring about the same levels of personal gratifications as other activities (e.g., playing of games) do. It is often the case that intrinsic interest in altruistic, prosocial activities is a key driver for engagement with them (Batson & Powell 2003; Judson 2007 Riar et al. 2020) and the question arises whether there are ways to stimulate intrinsic motivation and interest in these activities. Furthermore, could altruistic, prosocial activities be structured in ways that highlight the gratifications that game-based activities provide so that they become engaging to more people?

There is an increasing amount of work being done, seeking to uncover answers to these questions. Policy games, designed to engage citizens with policymakers in their societies have existed for decades (Duke 1995; Mayer 2009). Simulations have been designed to show people different future scenarios for the development of their community based on how they choose to engage with these communities (Duke 2011; Gnat et al. 2016). Games, gamification and gameful designs have been channeled to engage people for altruistic and prosocial purposes (Hassan 2017; Hassan & Hamari 2020; Riar 2020). All these developments indicate a growing movements to utilize gme-based means to foster and support prosocial altruistic activities

Arguably, a common thread in these game-based efforts is the breaking down of large goals and connecting the resulting manageable goals and activities to a framework of meaning-making that can be more attainable, engaging and comprehensible for people. For example, many exergames take the looming goal of losing weight or becoming more fit and break it down to smaller goals of a certain number of steps per day that are relatively more manageable and attainable for people. Then, attainment of these smaller goals is supported through various design mechanics; such as badges, points, missions, narratives and competitions, that are thought to speak to people's inner motivations for mastery, self-development, achievement, and relatedness (Hamari et al. 2018; Rigby 2014) amongst other motivations. The resultant gamified/game-based design, seen in many exergames such as Fitocracy, Run keeper, or HeiaHeia amongst other applications, is thought to be engaging because of how it invokes a gameful experience around an activity that many would wish not to engage with, namely, exercise (Hassan et al. 2020). Furthermore, unintentional gamification of exercise and other activities is seen in how individuals, for example, sing while working out to entertain themselves, or impose meaning on their walks by

imagining that lava is seeping through the cracks of the pavement that they are walking on, and hence, they should not step on the cracks while exercising.

Similarly, work has been done to intentionally and unintentionally make altruistic, prosocial activities more manageable and engaging (Thiel 2016; Gnat et al. 2016; Hassan & Hamari 2020; Riar et al. 2020). Larger goals such as, for example, to eradicate poverty, are broken down into smaller goals that can, for example, focus on eradicating poverty in a certain community. That goal in turn is further broken down into smaller fundraisers and community activities where immediate gratifications for engagement are easier for participants to attain. Different roles are assigned to those participants, depending on their interests and skills in manners that reflect traditional human resource management practices, as well as collaborative, multi-player gameplay.

3. Case examples

Communities, dedicated to altruistic, prosocial, can be organized and initiated in various manners (e.g., organically or hierarchally) and have a wide range of purposes. Nonetheless, when observed, these practices pertaining to breaking down of large goals to manageable ones, meaning making, role assignment and collaborative work/gameplay are common to most of them. While a systematic study of these altruistic, prosocial communities is needed, this chapter examines two case examples of such communities, that have managed to remain longitudinally active and affect some level of social change and dialogue. The aim is to highlight and initiate a discussion of their game-like practices to altruistic, prosocial engagement.

3.1 Nerdfighteria

In 2007, YouTube was still a new, fascinating technological development. The platform was sluggish, offered low quality videos, many of those videos infringed copyright laws, and the

platform faced several legal and technological threats. Many analysts predicted the platform to go under in a few months. Meanwhile, two brothers with the names of John and Hank Green attempted to utilize YouTube and investigate if and how it can one day become a meaningful means of human connection. John and Hank Green created the channel *Brotherhood 2.0* (Green 2007), now named *Vlogbrothers* (Vlogbrothers 2020), a channel they shared and used to send public video updates to each other daily, for a year, while eliminating other text communications between them

“Hello John, by now you have received my message that we will no longer be communicating through any textual means. No more instant messaging, no more emailing. Only video blogging and possibly phone calls. Starting on January 1st, today, I will send you a video blog. Tomorrow you will reply to that video blog. We will continue like this until the year is up. If one of us fails to send a video blog on a weekday, there will be certain punishments. The punishments will be outlined later. Brotherhood 2.0 commences today! Does that make us crazy?

Probably!”- John Green, 2017.

While this was perhaps an extreme experiment that the brothers argue was initially started for pure curiosity purposes, they gradually grew a dedicated online community of followers that eventually started to go by the name: *Nerdfighteria* (Green & Green 2009; Nerdfighteria 2020). By the end of 2007, the brothers decided to continue their YouTube channel and grow *Nerdfighteria*. *Nerdfighteria* grew to include several modes of communication outside YouTube, including dedicated wikis and websites, Facebook groups and face-to-face meetups and even an annual conference (NerdCon). Hank and John Green involved that growing community in their videos through polls for video suggestions and an annual survey to gauge the demographics and interests of *Nerdfighteria*. *Nerdfighteria* grew relatively slowly yet became highly connected with clear, though diverse interests and rules of conduct to ensure the inclusivity and diversity of the community across individuals of different genders, religions and sexual identities. It is perhaps

this slow growth of the community and the tending of the brothers to it that contributed to its relative cohesion that allowed it to carry out larger projects, such as P4A¹.

In December 2007, the brothers launched what is now known as the Project for Awesome (P4A) (Project for Awesome 2020), cementing the goal of *Nerdfighteria* to “*increase world awesome and decrease world suck*” (Green & Green 2009; Nerdfighteria 2020). This goal was to be achieved through raising donations to support notable NGOs and humanitarian organizations selected by *Nerdfighteria* members. Interested members were to produce videos about an organization of their choice, outlining why the community should support it. Collective contributions by the community were to go to the organizations depicted in the videos that receive the most up-votes (likes).

During 2007, Nerdfighteria produced approximately 400 videos for the first P4A run, promoting several charities during Christmas 2007. In 2020, P4A completed its 13th run, raising close to 1.5 million US dollars, directed towards various charities selected by Nerdfighteria through member contributions, donations from the Green brothers, as well as matching funds from notable donors. Donations have gone to notable organizations, such as partners in health to support the healthcare system in Carilion, save the children, planned parenthood, crisis text line and the clear air task force, amongst many other organizations.

3.2. Bilo (Biloela) family

In Australia, a similarly motivated community with a purpose to increase world awesome and decrease world suck, was created in 2018, with a single focus on changing the lives of a small family living in a small, remote Australian town. The, parents, of the Bilo family arrived independently in Australia as refugees from Sri Lanka in 2012 and 2013, individually, fleeing the

¹ Project for Awesome homepage: <http://www.projectforawesome.com/>

persecution of the Tamil people there (ABC news 2019). After they met and married, they moved to Biloela a small town with a population of 5758 in Queensland, where their two daughters were born. One morning they were woken up in their home, arrested and moved to a deportation center in Melbourne 1,864 kilometers from Biloela. From that point on, the legal and emotional complexities of the situation have grown as attention paid to this case has expanded.

Notably for our analysis, this family's home community of Biloela has heavily influenced their fate and present situation, taking matters into their own hands. The first step was creating an influential petition on "the world's platform for change"; Change.org², that has become a center of resistance to this (and similar) cases of perceived excessive use of governmental force against individuals.

Created on March 10th, 2018 by Angela Fredericks, the Change.org petition has been signed by 355,751 individuals and has raised funds to fight several court battles, all focused on the goal to "*Bring Priya and her family back home to Biloela, Queensland*". Like many aspects of life and action in the second decade of the 21st century, the petition began as a simple and apparently straightforward, goal of righting an obvious and demonstrable wrong. While the Bilo family remains in detention as we write in September 2020, they are now detained on the remote Christmas Island, where they are currently the sole residents of a multi-million-dollar facility, reopened to house them as far from home as possible while still on Australian soil. The relevant Government minister claims that Australia has 'no children in detention'(ABC news 2019) conveniently overlooking the ages of the two 'Bilo girls' who are 2 and 4 years old, born on Australian soil. The ongoing battle about the 'Bilo family' has made visible many factors in Australian society, including that:

² Change. Org homepage: <https://www.change.org/>

“Australians want to share their concerns and to demand action. However, they no longer see parliament as the primary forum to do this. Instead, people increasingly join petitions through online movements or petitioning platforms such as Change.org.” - George Williams, The Australian, 2019

The initial intention of Angela Fredricks petition was simply to ‘bring the family home’. There was no thought that such a simple intention would arouse nationwide attention or create a large social movement, yet the petition did just that, achieving and passing many milestones for petitions of this type and delayed the family’s deportation for an extended period.

Following the work that has since been accomplished as reported in the change.org page, the goal has remained constant while the action plan has repeatedly had to adapt to changing tactics – including an effort to remove the family from Australia without allowing the law to complete its course. Like a game of chess, each move against the family has been countered with action to achieve their continued safety in Australia. During the time since the petition first went live in March 2018, upwards of a dozen other similar cases have achieved outcomes favourable to the petitioners. The Bilo family – however - is now apparently caught as pawns in a giant and expensive case of the chess situation called the 50-move rule (Björnsson 2012), which occurs when the player with the stronger side cannot demonstrate a winning technique within 50 consecutive moves. In such conditions, if a pawn is moved or other exchanges occur for either side, the count starts over.

As long as the Minister chooses to play the 50-rule game the petitioners must also play the rule of peaceful petitioning. As time has passed efforts have extended far beyond the change.org petition. Media news items, videos, collaboration with parliamentary members and legal action to impede or deny government efforts have proved successful enough that the family continues to live in limbo on Christmas Island. The local community of Biloela, original petitioners, lawyers

and other members of a (by now) widely extended community of observer/petitioners are all waiting for the ‘next move’ with energy still to find and make the return move that keeps the game in play – while hoping to find a way to achieve the end goal of ‘bringing the family home’.

4. Gamified prosocial activity: initiating a discussion

In this chapter, we understand gamification or ludification of culture and activities as motivational, organizational practices that allow individuals to strive towards and possibly attain goals larger than themselves as outlined in the background section of this chapter. The cases illustrated shed light on how these practices can be used for altruistic, prosocial purposes and engage organized, motivated individuals for longitudinal periods of time, to bring about a positive impact on their communities.

It has been postulated that gamers are in search of “epic meaning” from games (McGonigal 2011); a profound purpose that motivates them to invest time and effort into solving challenging problems of the virtual world that gamers know they can solve because these challenges are matched to their skill – a feature rarely present in the physical world. Through P4A, the Green brothers gave their communities an epic goal larger than their individual selves - to make the world a better place. This epic goal, arguably, is facilitated in game-like mechanics that made it appear more attainable and easier to engage with, and so, the community did. P4A is annually organized by a highly dispersed, multinational community (Green & Green 2009; Nerdfighteria 2020; Project for Awesome 2020) with the purpose of increasing world awesome and decreasing world suck, for example by supporting organizations such as *Save the Children*. It may be easy for bystanders to rally behind that epic goal to save the world on face-value, however, this cohesion can be

challenging to the religious or political ideologies of some of community members and bystanders. An example is when Nerdfighteria supports organizations such as *Planned Parenthood*, which provides abortion services that some individuals may not favor.

The petition to bring the Bilo family home is of a national scale, compared to P4A, however it similarly utilized mechanics of epic meaning, digital means of orchestration as well as traditional activist practices. Like the Green brothers, Angela is an accidental leader of a social movement. As a member of the Anglican community she was aware of the family in question and how they had worked to settle into, and contribute to, the community of Biloela. Shocked by the sudden the arrests and moved by the unfairness of their plight she has worked tirelessly to keep their plight in front of public attention, farming it as a mission to bring the family back home.

The brothers' interests and missions in life, while serious, appear comparatively humorous in approach. This difference in approaches between the two discussed cases is perhaps dictated by the sensitivity of the issues the two initiatives have approached. The Bilo case appears one with more immediate negative consequences and in urgent need of collective action. It is of a comparatively manageable scale and local significance that a serious approach to it could be enough to give volunteers a clear participation goal. The brothers' goal to make the world a better place through P4A appears more of a daydream. Perhaps their relatively humorous and clumsy phrasing of the goal to make the world a better place has contributed to how Nerdfighteria embraced the goal. Additionally, perhaps by phrasing *Nerdfighteria's* goal in a subjective, humorous manner: "to increase world awesome and decrease world suck", the brothers gave individual *Nerdfighteria* members the room to each interpret and execute the goal in a manner coherent with their interests and ideologies, while respecting community diversity and codes of conduct. This possibly increased the likelihood that *Nerdfighteria* would then be willing to invest

the time and resources needed to attain that goal. Such personally relevant purpose-making is indeed linked to motivation, goal-commitment and increased activity (Hamari et al. 2018; Rigby 2014), and the purpose of increasing world awesome and decreasing world suck does not seem to have been any different.

The leaders of both communities have, similarly, attempted to build unifying narratives to create and grow said communities; a practice often referred to as storification (Deterding 2016), where a story/meaning is connected to an activity and then employed as a motivational mechanic of onboarding and continuous member engagement. The organizing narratives in these two communities were different in tone, one being more humorous than the other, yet they both were emotional narratives. Such affect allowed community members to feel deeper and perhaps more intrinsic connections to the causes, rather than they would possibly have felt if the narrative was organized around fairness/unfairness of governmental action (Bilo) or the need for social fairness (P4A). It is also these engaging, affective narrative that perhaps contributed to growing the communities. Although, Bilo the narrative was more sensitive around immigration and human rights, it also opened the door to increased challenges on societal and governmental level (Truu 2020). The tone and intensity of the organizing narratives are important not only because of how they can impact the cohesion and engagement of the community itself but also because of how others will perceive it and interface with it.

The leaders of the two movements publicly invested time and resources needed to attain that goal. They were not bystanders asking the community to invest resources while they watched. Tending to followers through such means is often linked to increasing the popularity of content creators on YouTube and other streaming services, and growing the dedication of the online community to shared causes (Törhönen et al. 2019a, 2019b). Through P4A, the brothers also

outlined what Nerdfighteria needed to do to make the world a better place: create videos, spread them, raise donations through community contributions. Through the Change.org petitions, Angela did the same indicating that to bring the Bilo family home, the petition was to be signed and shared so as to gain support and impact. Without the breaking down of looming, large goals to make the world a better place, they would have perhaps remained wishful thinkers.

5. Conclusions

This chapter examined two examples of social change communities, that have managed to remain active and affect a level of social change over an extended period of time. Employing practices of gamification and game-based engagement, although possibly unintentionally, larger narratives of "bringing a family home" and "increasing world awesome" were used as unifying narratives for the communities. Additionally, those looming challenges that the communities were facing were broken down into smaller manageable chunks that community members were then guided through utilizing mechanics similar to those utilized in games. Charisma and intensive personal investment from community leaders, has helped grow the communities, although there is a stark contrast in the tone of the two communities: between humor and humanitarianism. Accordingly, this chapter shows the practical potential of the unifying narrative and game-like practices in engaging individuals with altruistic, prosocial behavior. It also shows how these practices can be implemented differently yet with similar intent and impact. As this is an initial theoretical treatise of the phenomenon of game-based engagement with altruistic, prosocial behavior, we encourage empirical studies of these strategies, potentially through interviews with social change catalysts and volunteers so as to discern their recruitment and/or engagement strategies with social change.

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