Gamified Persuasion: User Experiences of Online Activation Service

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ABSTRACT

The authors have empirically examined the persuasive properties of digital games from a multidisciplinary perspective. Besides the relevant cultural and psychological theories related to the game phenomenon, the authors have included a case study where a persuasive online activation service was tested among young men (N=280, average 17.9 year old) in the promotion of physical and social activity. The emphasis of the article is on qualitative material, which is based on in-depth interviews of 10 individuals, as well as participant observation considering the user experiences regarding the activation service and gaming in general. The authors have concluded that games contain persuasive characteristics based on human culture and psychology and that these characteristics could effectively be utilized in physically and socially activating games.

Keywords: Adolescents, Digital Games, Online Activation Service, Persuasion, Physical and Social Activation

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INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming and physical activity are often considered oppositional and mutually exclusive: the more we play, the less we move. Yet, gaming is becoming increasingly popular, despite the adverse effects of sedentary lifestyles being well known (Biddle et al., 2010; Danei et al., 2009; Höysniemi, 2006). Traditional health promotion shows only moderate effectiveness, especially among young men, and therefore exploration of new methods for physical activation is required (Ahola et al., 2013). Previous research demonstrates that computer games have a greater effect on health and physical education when compared to traditional educational methods (see e.g. Papastergiou, 2009; Turnin et al., 2001; Unnithan et al., 2006). Since games have the capability to persuade people to play (Bogost, 2007a; Fogg, 2003), it could be asked whether games could also persuade people towards more active lifestyles.

A sedentary lifestyle is prevalent among young men. Particularly in northern Finland there is a growing concern about the well-being of young men, who are increasingly suffering from problems related to insufficient physical activity. Early intervention is required, as the early adulthood plays a significant role in defining habits later in life. (Ahola et al., 2013). The specific generation is difficult to manage: on the verge of adulthood they are not easily influenced and quite often display an awkward attitude towards any attempts of guidance, especially when it comes from authorities (see e.g. Byrne & Lee, 2011). Attempting to influence adolescents by virtual means seems plausible as they are used to digital technologies and media, navigating quite effortlessly in the virtual existence (Luoto, 2011). In addition, they are often eager consumers of digital entertainment such as games (Karvinen & Mäyrä, 2011; Tilastokeskus, 2009).

This article is based on research material acquired in 2012 during the MOPO study, initially launched in 2009 as a response to the growing concern regarding the rapidly decreasing physical fitness of young men in Northern Ostrobothnia. A novel coaching service was developed in collaboration with young people to avoid a top-down design that could have increased the risk of rejection as another boring system pushed by authorities.

The objective is to empirically study user experiences regarding online activation methods, particularly games, and persuasion from a multidisciplinary perspective. We also consider the addictive nature of games, which is related to game persuasion. Our analysis is based on a case study of a persuasive system, designed for young men to promote a physically and socially active lifestyle. We will also review relevant theories that explain the factors behind the attractiveness of games. While research considering game-related persuasion is not completely new (see e.g. Bogost, 2007), we are unaware of any previous research connecting theory with practical case examples and qualitative research material.

PERSUASION AND GAMES

Persuasion is understood as an attempt to convince someone to do or think differently than they are used or prefer to. Ultimately the intention behind persuasion is to change someone’s behavior or thinking towards more desirable patterns. Persuasion is based on rhetoric, the art of discourse, aimed towards an improved capability to inform, persuade or motivate those who are being informed (Bogost, 2007a; Bogost, 2007b; Corbett, 1965).

Considering rhetorical persuasion, computers are a promising platform: they can be programmed to tirelessly bombard the user with a combination of text, sound and images – as digital games do. Ian Bogost (2007a; 2007b) has studied the procedural rhetoric in persuasive games. According to Bogost (2007a), procedurality is the programmability of computers to react on the feedback from various inputs. Thus, procedurality can be understood as interpretative manipulation of symbols (Harnard, 2004). Procedural rhetoric is a method of using the expressive power of digital games in persuasion.
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