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The de-gamification of *Foursquare*?

Rowan Wilken

*Social gaming was about customer acquisition optimisation
and marketing, not about games.*

(WU 2014)

Introduction

New York-based start-up *Foursquare* has grown to become a key player in the area of location-based mobile social networking. *Foursquare* rose from the ashes of *Dodgeball*, the pioneering mobile service that Dennis Crowley and Alex Rainert created in 2000 and subsequently sold to Google in 2005. At the time of *Foursquare*'s successful debut at the SXSW (South by South West) Interactive festival in Austin, Texas, in 2009 (the same year Google closed *Dodgeball*), Crowley and *Foursquare* co-founder Naveen Selvadurai were launching their service into a more mature location-based start-up scene, with a suite of applications already available, including *Loopt* (founded in 2005) and *Whrrl*, *Brightkite* and *Gowalla* (all founded in 2007). Of these, only *Foursquare* continues to survive as an independent operation: Brightkite sold to HDmessaging (formerly Limbo) in 2009, *Whrrl* to Groupon in 2011, *Gowalla* to Facebook in the same year and *Loopt* to Green Dot in early 2012.

What set *Foursquare* apart, and was of particular appeal to its early adopter heavy users, was the emphasis it gave to its various gameplay elements, where

each *Foursquare* user collected badges for venue check-ins and competed with other users to become ‘mayor’ of a venue. Recently, however, and in order to stay commercially relevant, *Foursquare* would appear to have dramatically changed tack. *Foursquare*, it is said, is no longer about leader boards, badges and points; rather, it is about local search and discovery. As *Foursquare*’s then former head of business development, Holger Luedorf, put it: ‘we’re positioning ourselves as the location layer of the Internet’ (quoted in Panzarino 2014).

In this chapter I examine these ongoing evolutions to *Foursquare*’s service and business operations as viewed through the lens of ‘gamification’. I consider what it means that the company appears to be intentionally downplaying its gameplay elements at the very moment that gamification is said to be gaining wider commercial purchase (Harbert 2014). My argument is that, despite this well-publicized change in corporate direction, the reality is, in fact, rather more nuanced. From a close reading of industry reportage of company developments, the picture that emerges is of the performance of a delicate balancing act that aims to satisfy multiple competing desires and demands with the need for richer end-user-generated data and commercialization opportunities than cannot be achieved through game-driven interactions alone. In short, *Foursquare* is attempting to maximize its commercial opportunities not just as a mobile check-in service, but, increasingly, as a location platform. These tensions, I suggest, can thus be productively understood as strongly discursive and part of the company’s attempts to work across at least four different registers, speaking simultaneously to end-users, advertisers, the trade press and investors in such a way as to ‘carve out a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each’ (Gillespie 2010, 353). I begin this examination by turning to the concept of gamification and *Foursquare*’s integration of gameplay elements into its service.

Gamification and *Foursquare*

Gamification, conventionally understood, refers to ‘the use of game design elements in non-game contexts’ (Deterding et al. 2011). Elsewhere the term has been defined in a way that gives explicit emphasis to the commercial imperatives of the concept: ‘gamification is a business strategy which applies game design techniques to non-game experiences to drive user behavior’ (Welcome to Gamification Wiki n.d.). It is this second definition that best captures *Foursquare*’s embrace of gamification.

Foursquare is commonly regarded as a gamification pioneer, and is widely cited as a successful example of how businesses can integrate gameplay elements into their operations. When it launched in 2009, gamification came

in the form of three distinct features of its user interaction design: badges, a leader board, and honorary titles. With respect to the first of these, individual users could collect a variety of merit-style badges. These often whimsically titled badges were scaled to reward various progressive levels or stages of user engagement. So, for example, new users could achieve the 'Newbie' badge before progressing, following heavy enough check-in use over a given time, to unlocking the 'Super User' badge or the 'Swarm' badge when a check-in was received in close temporal proximity to those of over fifty other fellow *Foursquare* users. In late 2011, *Foursquare* also introduced scaled achievement levels within each badge (as well as a small suite of additional badges) so as to, in their words, reward venue exploration and help show individual user 'expertise' (Level up 2011). This meant, for instance, that an occasional café-goer might achieve Level 2 of the 'Fresh Brew' badge, whereas a café-frequenting coffee aficionado might achieve Level 10 of the same badge. As far as *Foursquare* is concerned, the second user is of far greater interest in terms of the check-in information and recommendations data they contribute to the service's metrics.

The second of *Foursquare*'s three gameplay elements is a dynamic table that maps, in the form of a constantly updating leaderboard, who, in a given user's social network, is achieving the most check-in points over a seven-day period. The aim is to encourage playful competition between members of a user's social network and, presumably, drive up the number of total venue check-ins. Some venues also offer discounts and other deals for these check-ins.

The third gameplay feature encourages *Foursquare*'s users to compete with each other to become 'Mayor'. This is the honorary title given to an individual user who has checked in most frequently to the same venue over a sixty-day period.

So successful was *Foursquare*'s gamification integration that it was rapidly replicated by other competing services. For instance, soon after *Foursquare* launched, Yelp introduced a 'royalty' system of its own. Rather than become 'Mayor' of a venue, Yelpers were competing to become Duke/Duchess (most check-ins to a venue), Baron/Baroness (most titles in a neighbourhood), and King/Queen (most in a city) (Siegler 2010). Within the tech sector, numerous other companies have tried to follow *Foursquare*'s (and Yelp's) lead, with Facebook, the Google-owned crowd-sourced traffic information service *Waze*, language-learning platform Duolingo, communication app Line and numerous others, all incorporating game elements into their operations (Mishra 2014).

While games scholars have been scathing about gamification (Bogost 2011), it is a concept that continues to gain wider traction outside of the tech sector in a variety of fields, including education, health, the open governance movement and marketing and advertising, to name a few. The business

sector, in particular, is especially enthusiastic about the potential efficiency and workforce information gains that follow from incorporation of gamification into their enterprise systems (Harbert 2014). International corporate interest in gamification is also growing. For example, in 2014, Thailand-based start-up, Playbasis, announced that it had received \$US770,000 in seed funding to build commercial gamification initiatives in South Asia (Mishra 2014).

While *Foursquare* is viewed by the technology and marketing industries as a gamification success story, the company's use of gameplay elements within its app has attracted robust critique within media and communications scholarship. One of the concerns expressed in relation to location-based mobile media is that the commodification that structures use of these platforms 'threatens to turn the user into another object within the network, finding value only in the accumulation of a user's movements, locations, and habits' (Farman 2012, 61). This is a particularly strong criticism of *Foursquare*. A very clear example of this is David Phillips's (2011, 180) claim that, within *Foursquare*'s points system there is an inherent tension whereby the company 'mediates the exchange of social for economic capital'. In a damning assessment, Phillips refers to this as *Foursquare*'s encouragement of 'a sort of competitive sedentary egocentrism' (180). 'One's economic capital may increase', he writes: 'if you get free drinks for enticing your friends to buy' (180). Thus, Phillips concludes, through its incentive structure: 'the places [*Foursquare*] makes most visible are places of consumption', and, because of this, it 're-entrenches the hegemonic relation of work and leisure, production and consumption' (180). Developing a similar line of critique, Alison Gazzard (2011, 410) suggests that the way *Foursquare* 'is linked to potential commercial gain' fixes the overall database of potential places that might be accessed 'within a rigid structure of the service industry' thereby undermining *Foursquare*'s credentials as an urban exploration mobile gaming application.

Jordan Frith (2013, 259) makes the point that, while 'we should certainly remain critical of how mobile applications make money off people who use their products, [. . .] we must do so in a way that recognizes that commercial products can be valuable objects of analysis'. Moreover, what the above critiques of *Foursquare* fail to fully acknowledge is that *Foursquare* was from the outset and remains a commercially oriented enterprise. It is a venture capital-backed technology start-up which, to date, has attracted US\$112 million at a current valuation of around US\$600 million. The point being that this form of funding is by no means an endless stream, and the individuals and companies who have backed the company will want to see a return on their investment, and it is the expectation that those running *Foursquare* – CEO Dennis Crowley and his team – will work hard to fulfil the company's economic and investment return potential.

Even so, for a long time, *Foursquare* – like Twitter, and Amazon before it (Yglesias 2013) – has focused its energies on acquiring a critical mass of users. As Crowley once put it: ‘the point isn’t to become profitable right now, the point is to grow as quickly as possible, to really push the boundaries of what you can do with location based services on mobile devices’ (140 Talks 2011). One of the key ways *Foursquare* set about doing this was via its gamification strategies. As Susan Wu (2014) bluntly puts it in a tweet that forms the epigraph to this chapter: ‘social gaming was about customer acquisition optimisation and marketing, not about games’. It is in the context of this remark that *Foursquare*’s recent pivot away from gamification must be examined and understood.

The de-gamification of *foursquare*? From badges to ‘location and discovery’

In recent times, *Foursquare* has made a much-publicized strategic shift in direction that has taken it away from gamification. It is a decision generally regarded as a response to persistent questions the company has faced by industry analysts questioning the long-term sustainability of its business (Isaac 2013). Owing to reported slowing in user growth, including in the emerging markets of Indonesia and Istanbul (Evans 2013), and underwhelming revenue generation to date, investors are said to have become reluctant to give the company additional injections of capital investment (Fiegerman 2012). Indeed, the fact that *Foursquare*’s US\$41 million round of investment in early 2013 was a refinancing of debt, rather than an injection of fresh equity, could be seen as confirmation of this. Even so, it has been noted that this was in fact useful for *Foursquare* in that it enabled them to delay a fresh valuation of the business which, if not improved on the 2011 valuation of US\$600 million, could potentially hurt their prospects for ongoing growth or a successful exit (Geron 2013).

Faced with these challenges, rather than choose to exit by selling to an interested buyer, *Foursquare* opted to rethink its corporate strategy, specifically by redesigning the application (and splitting it into two separate apps), as well as the services it offers end-users, and by further honing their still nascent business model, including by building services to cater for business.

With respect to the first of these, *Foursquare*, as one commentator puts it: ‘disassembled the entire app and put it back together again’ (Griffith 2012). Following the redesign, greatest emphasis and visual prominence within the app was given to local search and venue recommendations capabilities.

The redesign was done, Dennis Crowley maintains, in response to extensive user-experience research that revealed a decline in check-ins by *Foursquare's* users:

People are using the app, but they're not checking in. [...] I asked myself: did we break something? But in fact, it's because people are using *Foursquare* to look for where their friends are, to find things, and as a recommendation service. It's almost like it doesn't occur to them to check in. (quoted in Lunden 2012)

In light of this, one gamification commentator views *Foursquare's* decision to move away from gamification not as a mistake, but as 'a mature design decision'. They write, if all *Foursquare's* users 'all continue to perceive value in the service without the gamification (which seems like the case), then why have it? Gamification isn't any service's endgame; it's a design construct to engage users further' (Kuo 2013).

Crowley's response to this realization was, on the one hand, to repeatedly downplay the importance of gamification, while, on the other hand, introducing new functions, such as 'Explore', a feature aimed at what *Foursquare's* head of search sees as the app's next generation of users (Griffith 2012). In essence, Explore is a recommendations and ratings system – or, in the words of one commentator, an 'interactive city guide' (Gobry 2012) – utilizing a series of metrics drawn from each user and their social network history (including tips, likes, dislikes, popularity, local expertise and so on) (Kerr 2012). This information is then targeted to that user in the form of 'recommendations for places you would probably like to visit based on your profile and check-in history' (Goldman 2012). Accompanying the Explore feature is an upgraded website, which is said to attract 1 million visits per day, with a prominent search box (Kerr 2012) – arguably in recognition of the fact that a considerable amount of entertainment planning occurs at work or in the home. In addition to the above, in 2013 *Foursquare* also created for its iPhone app a series of venue-related questions (such as, is it quiet here? would you grab a quick bite to eat at this venue? does it have Wi-Fi?) that pop-up when users check-in (*Foursquare* filling 2013). This enables *Foursquare* to further populate its places database with 'richer' crowd-sourced venue information.

In a second development for its end-users, in late May 2013, *Foursquare* added what it calls 'super-specific search' to Explore (Welch 2013). This applies a range of filters to search results that combine common queries (such as price, opening hours and so on), with additional information drawn from check-ins and user data. By September, restaurant menu search capabilities had also been added (Sterling 2013). Thus, in Crowley's words, *Foursquare*

is no longer about leader boards, badges and points; it's about local search and discovery.

With respect to the sharpening of its still evolving business model, *Foursquare* focused on the building of merchant platforms. These initiatives fit squarely with *Foursquare*'s plans to 'get most of its future sales from software that helps merchants track the behavior of potential customers' (Crowley quoted in Chang and MacMillan 2011). While *Foursquare* already collects some revenue through strategic partnerships with competitors and a variety of companies (Van Grove 2013), these recent developments are quite different in that they want businesses to pay for help in analysing the data generated through *Foursquare*'s service by its users (Chang and MacMillan 2011). *Foursquare*'s 'first revenue-generating product' (Fiegerman 2012), launched in 2012, was 'promoted updates': advertising messages sent to users who are in the vicinity of a restaurant or other business. What distinguishes this service is that, rather than buy 'advertising impressions', participating brands pay on a 'cost-per-action model related to how consumers interact with the updates' (Kelly 2012).

The second business feature was the *Foursquare* for Business app (*Foursquare* Blog 2013a; Isaac 2013). Launched in early 2013, it allows businesses to offer 'digital punchcard' deals when users check-in, as well as send messages to regulars (Isaac 2012). Additionally, by October 2013, they had also opened up *Foursquare* Ads to all small businesses around the world (*Foursquare* Blog 2013b) and, by early 2014, had partnered with ad tech company Turn to deliver ads to its users on desktop computers, tablets and mobiles (Delo 2014).

Soon after unveiling these services, in December 2013, *Foursquare* announced that it had raised a further US\$35 million from a Series D funding round, led by investments from DFJ Growth and the Capital Group's Smallcap World Fund (Swisher 2013). As part of the deal, DFJ Growth's Barry Schuler, a former AOL executive, secured a board seat at *Foursquare* (Swisher 2013). Crowley's explanation of the timing of the new investment (and perhaps giving insight into why the previous round of financing was a restructuring of debt rather than fresh equity) was that it was harder to secure new funding until the revamped app functionality and business services were up and running. Crowley states: 'We had not been able to demo what we were talking about until it was out there. [. . .] But once it was in place, it was easier to see [and convince investors of] where we are going' (quoted in Swisher 2013).

Further corporate partnerships and deals have followed since. For instance, in February 2014, *Foursquare* further built on its local search service, and the small business opportunities this presents, by striking a deal in Brazil with the group buying platform Peixe Urbano (the Brazilian equivalent of Groupon),

which allows *Foursquare* users to find offers in establishments near to them (Mari 2014). This is not a particularly surprising move given that Brazil forms another key emerging market for *Foursquare*. More significantly, in that same month, *Foursquare* announced that it had formed a partnership with Microsoft worth US\$15 million (Tate 2014). As part of this arrangement, Microsoft will make additional 'substantial' regular payments to *Foursquare* for access to its proprietary location data (Tate 2014). It is a deal that is viewed as Microsoft's attempt to compete with Facebook and Google in the local mobile search and advertising markets (Tate 2014). However, for *Foursquare*, the success of the deal was arguably soured by news, less than a week later, of a similar, competing data partnership deal struck in the United States between Yahoo! and Yelp that will mean that Yelp's listings and local business reviews will be incorporated into Yahoo!'s search results (Griffith 2014).

For end-users, the biggest change came with Foursquare Labs Inc.'s decision to 'unbundle' its service, splitting it into two (interconnected) apps: Swarm (for social and check-ins) and a rebranded *Foursquare* (for local search and discovery). Initially, many of the gameplay elements – badges, leader boards, mayorships – remained available to users (albeit somewhat hidden within the mobile app interface). However, following various updates, these elements, once synonymous with *Foursquare*, have now been removed, with badges replaced within Swarm by 'stickers' (Zeckman 2014).

Meanwhile, within specific international markets, *Foursquare*'s traditional gameplay elements were actually further bolstered. For example, it was over the course of *Foursquare*'s alleged pivot away from gamification that the company released a series of new badges in Turkey, including a Vogue Türkiye badge, and one each for two of the country's major football clubs, Galatasaray S. K. and Fenerbahçe S. K., both of whom are based in Istanbul, one of *Foursquare*'s key growth cities. More recently, Crowley is also reported as restating the importance of gamification for *Foursquare*: 'Crowley thought the game mechanics would drop off over time, though he's since realized they've become integral to *Foursquare*'s success. But he doesn't want the company to be known as simply a glorified check-in service' (Colon 2014). The inclusion of stickers within Swarm could be seen as an admission that retaining some gameplay aspects remains important.

The above quote by Colon, I would suggest, is also illuminating in hinting at what is really at stake in *Foursquare*'s concerted refocusing of its business over the past few years. The issue here is not so much a retreat from gamification. Rather, the real pivot, I would argue, is in moving from a stand-alone mobile social software (check-in based) application to a more overtly commercially focused *location platform*. In making this shift to a *platform*, Crowley and his team at *Foursquare* 'must speak in different registers to their relevant

constituencies, positioning themselves so as to best suit their interests in each moment' (Gillespie 2010, 354).

Gamification and the discursive work of platforms

Attempting to reinvent the company in this way requires the performance of a delicate balancing act, one that aims to satisfy multiple competing desires and demands with the need for richer end-user-generated data and commercialization opportunities than cannot be achieved through game-driven interactions alone. These tensions, I suggest, can thus be productively understood as strongly discursive and part of the company's attempts to work across at least four different registers, speaking simultaneously to end-users, advertisers, the trade press and investors in such a way as to 'carve out a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each' (Gillespie 2010, 353). I close this chapter by providing a brief account of some of these 'registers' and the messages that *Foursquare* is attempting to convey to each.

For *Foursquare*'s so-called next generation of users (Griffith 2012), such as those new to the service, the message is that gamification is passé and that hyper-local search and recommendations are what will drive engagement with the service. As a longer-term strategy, this makes sense. Also, from my own research investigating *Foursquare* end-use in the Australian city of Melbourne, it became clear that more casual users of the service also happened to be those who were less motivated by the gameplay and more focused on the commercial and search aspects of the service, such as by building lists of venues they hope to visit at a future date and by looking out for special offers, deals and discounts and so forth.

Speaking in this register, however, is less likely to be effective with *Foursquare*'s high-end users who are 'seriously engaged with the platform' (Gobry 2012). The trick for *Foursquare* will be in managing commercial and new user growth, without ostracizing this core constituency of early-adopter, 'super users' – those initially drawn to *Foursquare*'s gameplay elements. Crowley's recent admission that game mechanics are 'integral to *Foursquare*'s success' I would suggest should be taken as a direct address to, and attempt at appeasing, this particular constituency.

As Carlos Barreneche (2012) notes: 'marketing services and local advertising are the main pillars of the current location-based services business model'. In the register for advertisers, *Foursquare*'s message has consistently been about the depth of end-user information contained in its point-of-interest

database in relation to what marketers call SoLoMo (social, local, mobile) patterns of social interaction, movement and consumption.

Within the register of tech trade press reportage, the issue has been one of attempting to mould industry perception of *Foursquare*. In his interviews and quoted statements, a common refrain of Crowley's is how he and his team are edging ever closer to his long-held desire for *Foursquare* to become the 'location layer of the internet'.

And, if *Foursquare* is hoping to become the location layer of the Internet, then its points-of-interest database is the rich vein of data beneath this layer ready to be mined. *Foursquare*'s ability to parse geolocational and user check-in data has become 'key to its monetary strategy' (Goldman 2012). Key to *Foursquare*'s monetization strategy, at least in the long term if not immediately, is the further enrichment of and strategic commercial exploitation of this dataset; it is this information resource that holds clearest value for advertisers and marketers, as well as pushing the firm closer to profitability – or, at very least, an acceptably high exit valuation. This is the register that *Foursquare*'s investors understand.

In this final section of the chapter I have argued that *Foursquare*'s recent repositioning moves are productively understood as strongly discursive and part of the company's attempts to work across a number of different registers, speaking simultaneously to end-users, advertisers, the tech trade press and investors, among other stakeholders, in such a way as to 'carve out a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each' (Gillespie 2010, 353).

Foursquare's repositioning efforts, it would appear, have been as much about carefully tending to the language that they (and the tech press and other interested parties) use to describe the *Foursquare* platform, and the 'technological imaginaries' that thus form around it, as it has been about tending the 'digital enclosure' they have built around location data and its commercial exploitation. In Tarleton Gillespie's (2010, 359) words, these are efforts, ultimately, that seek 'to make claims about what these technologies are and are not, and what should and should not be expected of them. In other words, they represent an attempt to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them'.

For at least one commentator, *Foursquare*'s unbundling and the removal of its gameplay elements, has been 'a disaster from the start: the move didn't result in two strong communities, each built around their app's set of distinct use cases. Rather, it alienated *Foursquare*'s loyal users, who by and large never made the move over to Swarm' (Carney 2015). *Foursquare*'s longer-term future remains unclear and much will hinge on the ability of Crowley and other key company spokespeople to continue to speak across the

aforementioned four registers. The company's recent introduction of direct and group messaging to Swarm (Weber 2015), presumably in order to stay relevant in the face of the rise of WhatsApp and other messaging services, many of which have integrated geolocation functionality, suggests that these repositioning efforts are ongoing.

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