



Life is a Game: a reflection on self-surveillance and how it is used to create a quantified self

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The Quantified Self can be defined as quantifying our actions and behaviours using numbers by self-tracking. This is used for our own knowledge and to possibly better ourselves. There are countless things which we can track and measure in regards to ourselves e.g. amount of sleep, heartrate, body weight (Lupton, 2016). The Quantified Self relies on individuals finding personal meaning in their personal data. However, the ways in which we may have tracked ourselves before have now been replaced. There are now over 160,000 self-tracking applications and a wide range of wearable devices such as Fitbit, Apple Watch and Samsung Gear (Lupton, 2016).

This critical reflection will attempt to analyse the growing use of mobile applications and the way companies have innovated the way in which they are used and how this can influence the 'Quantified' or 'Digital' self (Whitson, 2013). Many of these which have been developed by incorporating game mechanics in order to improve participation and to motivate users to make

positive changes to their lives and change certain behavioural traits

(Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011) I will explain how the Quantified Self correlates with Gamification and explore the effect they have on one another. I will reflect upon this growing phenomenon by using 3 contemporary theories; Surveillance, Risk Society and the Information Society.

Gamification is a process which is used within applications or websites which uses a playful

design in non-game applications. A useful example of gamification is within the Fitbit application. This app is used to track health and fitness by counting steps, tracking sleep and tracking heart rate etc.



The way in which this application has been gamified is through the incorporation of a league table which can turn fitness into a competition amongst circles of friends and family. There are also 'badges' which are rewarded to those who accomplish certain achievements e.g. 'You've walked 25,000 steps in one day' (Kosecki, 2017). The process of

Gamification is a technique which has proved widely successful for a large volume of well-respected companies (Bunchball.com, 2018). Gamification is often incorporated by companies and this supports the theory of Digital Labour, where people engage in labour online, often unwaged, therefore not usually made obvious to the user e.g. clicking on affiliate links on YouTube videos enables the person who uploaded the video to make profit through monetisation (Google.com, 2018). To understand the success of Gamification, we have to ask ourselves why people enjoy playing games. Games are now multi-dimensional making it more difficult to generalise them (Hamari & Keronen, 2017). There is no simple way to define gamification as it is very flexible and can be applied to most problems that can be solved by targeting human behaviour and motivation (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

In order to define surveillance, we can use synonyms such as supervision and observation, terms which describe the monitoring of behaviour (Marx, 2005). We can view surveillance in various contexts, however in a sociological sense we can use Bentham's Panopticon project which Foucault later developed in relation to modern day living (Pellegrino, 2016). The Panopticon was constructed so that inmates were able to be observed by an individual watchman. Despite one watchmen not being able to look into every individual cell at once, the inmates cannot know if they are being observed meaning that they will have to control their behaviour at all times (Brunon-Ernst, 2012). Although the Panopticon was designed in the 18th century, it plays an

important role in modern day society as we can link this theory to the constant surveillance which we experience on a daily basis. We are constantly being tracked by CCTV cameras, satellites and even smartphones (Draper, 2018). However, we can now argue that we want to be under surveillance for a variety of reasons. One of the most obvious reasons being for security purposes, we want as many CCTV cameras put into place as physically possible in case of crime committed against us. We want online security to ensure we are not a victim of fraud. The monitoring of online behaviour by the government is also important to us as a nation in case of terrorism plots etc. (Draper, 2018).

However, a less obvious reason as to why we want to be watched can be linked to the growing use of social media and the presentation of the self. Being online can often feel as though everything is a competition of who can be the better person and who can achieve the most. The gamification process supports the idea of wanting to be observed by



peers, the number of steps tracked by the Fitbit starts to become a competition and the impact that the steps are having on health are becoming

meaningless as people are more concerned with the amount of attention their post will receive online and where they will rank on the leader board (Strober, 2016)

Surveillance can be viewed in both positive and negative lights. In the modern day we are now experiencing a new type of surveillance

which has been created due to the advances in technology (Sparrow, 2014). We may call this Digital Surveillance. We may question whether having our own privacy is still possible and can argue whether the US 4th amendment can still be honoured due to law enforcement departments investigating crimes using new digital technologies which do not require a warrant (Castillo, 2018). This relates to the Risk Society as increasing surveillance online can easily incriminate somebody.

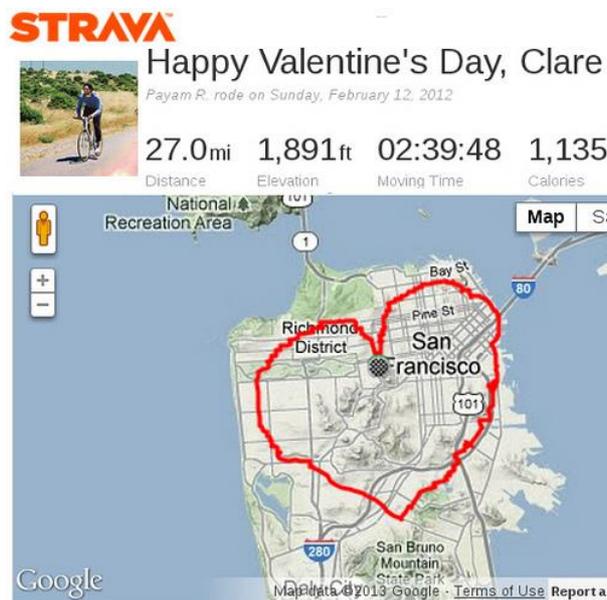
The information society played a significant role in this new type of surveillance. The progress made in regards to communication and new technologies has changed the way in which we live and is continuing to do so (Mattelart, 2003). Before we were able to track our actions with digital devices we had to use other methods. Before these wearable devices and applications were available, people may have had less interest in tracking their actions. It is more likely that there was an ulterior motive for doing so. An example of this may be a doctor asking their patient to track their heartrate several times throughout the day for a week. The doctor may believe they may be at risk of heart disease and diagnosing

Tachycardia (fast resting heart rate) may be the first step towards ruling out heart disease (Nordqvist, 2017). They will have tracked their heartrate by finding their pulse and writing down their result. Now there is technology which can be purchased by anybody that can

track heart rate at every point of the day. The increasing use of digital self-tracking technologies offer a significant number of benefits opposed to tracking the self with pen and paper. One of the most beneficial and relevant in regards to the information society is the ability to form graphs and statistics by using automatically captured data (Ajana, 2017). However, the design of these automated tracking systems often fails to incorporate emotional and practical goals. This has led to people going back to paper and using bullet journals. This could be considered a Post-Fordist method as people are moving away from the digital devices perhaps for more emotional privacy and personal customisation (Ajana, 2017).

In the modern day, there is a growing desire to share personal aspects of our lives online. New technologies have tools which are easy for the

user to use therefore, encouraging the sharing of personal information without perhaps considering the risk when doing so (Brake, 2014). This relates to the Risk Society concept which according to Anthony Giddens is “a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety) which generates the notion of risk” (Giddens & Pierson, 1998:209). The desire to create a quantified self often causes individuals to ignore the risks involved when sharing such intimate data online. Many people use Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr etc. in a way which may be deemed as confessional or diary-like (Brake, 2014). Some of the most



obvious ways that the sharing of personal information online can be viewed as a risk is the use of social media by young individuals. One of the earliest concerns being the access to pornography (Nash et al, 2018). However, we now have to consider the risks which stem from new technologies which create a quantified self, such as; MapMyRun and Strava. These may have good intentions in regards to fitness. However, we may believe that nobody would be interested in this information but personal accounts are often linked with Facebook and use GPS from mobile devices (MapMyRun.com, 2018). Meaning that the 'start' of the run will often be at the home of the user and strangers could possibly access this information and find out where they live. This is increasingly concerning in regards to minors.

Overall, creating a quantified self may be useful when tracking certain actions and behaviours to create patterns and form digital graphs. However, the aim of using personal data for personal use is being shadowed by competition with others. The use of gamification encourages participation and promotes competition. But this competition may make the personal data meaningless to the individual because they are more concerned of how they compare to others. New technologies and information mean that questions in regards to things like steps and distance travelled even being important if they are not being tracked. The boundaries are blurred in regards to what is real and what is not and what is important and what is not. It can be argued that surveillance is increasingly welcomed by those who are creating a digital quantified self and privacy may eventually be a thing of the past. Risks are often not considered and actions may seem meaningless

if they are not being tracked suggesting that life is becoming game-like and the quantified self is now an excuse to compete with others.

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