“The Protagonist Training Project”: How Simulator-Style Produsage on Social Media Shapes Our Gamified Daily

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INTRODUCTION

Gamification integrates game elements and playful experiences into non-game contexts (Deterding et al. 2011, 9). Social media serves as a prominent arena for gamification (Kim 2015; Hristova and Lieberoth 2021; Wanick and Stallwood 2023), with its applications in education, learning, work, and marketing receiving extensive academic attention (Vasilescu 2014; de-Marcos et al. 2016; Ofosu-Ampong et al. 2021; Ensmann S. and Ensmann A. 2022). While many studies underscore its positive impacts (Aydin 2015, 20), the increasing seamlessness between digital and physical spaces has enabled gamified applications to pervasively infiltrate everyday activities (Kim 2015, 8). Social media adapts and transplants diverse game elements, such as *Streaks* and *Trophies* (Hristova and Lieberoth 2021, 227), to incentivize user content creation. Moreover, in the era of participatory culture where everyone becomes a *produser* (Bruns 2005), participants are increasingly encouraged to design gamified experiences that manage and enrich their personal lifestyles: visualizing schedules with color-coded calendar blocks and task lists, crafting vision boards for the new year and compiling achievement collections at the year’s end, as well as transforming everyday activities like reading, traveling, consuming, or entertaining into little tokens, markers, and points on a personalized “experience map”. In this way, the *produsage of gamification*, guided by a ludic logic, is reshaping our daily. It alters how we interact with the world, redefines our behaviors, and generates new demands and meanings within this process.

At the crossroads of game studies, it is urgent to investigate the increasingly prevalent *produsage of gamification*[1] through the lens of game studies instead of other media studies. Specifically, the dual identity of produsers as both users and producers can be conceptualized as a hybrid role combining player-like and designer-like functions (typically those of hobbyists or amateurs), which enables a deeper understanding of how individuals *engage* with and *experience* gamified cultural practices.

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This research focuses on the *Protagonist Training Project*, a collective creative activity on Xiaohongshu (a popular Chinese social media platform with a masonry card-style layout akin to Pinterest), where produsers share gamified strategies for self-cultivation and self-motivation, fostering a space of mutual encouragement, support, and accountability. In this preliminary study, 20 posts were retrieved using the search term "Training Project" (*Yangcheng Jihua*), filtered by "Most Liked," each of which garnered over 10,000 likes. Adopting a text analysis approach, these posts were examined for their visual content, textual elements, hashtags, author acknowledgments (if any), and top comments. The study aims to explore how participants collaboratively create gamified experiences and the implications of these practices for participatory culture and lifestyle design.

KEY FINDINGS

The 20 posts were sequentially coded based on the search results. They were contributed by 17 authors, with 4 posts created by the same individual (posts 2, 3, 8, and 15). Of these authors, 11 identified as female on their profiles, while 6 did not disclose their gender. A textual analysis of these posts revealed two key findings.

First, the activity employs gamified rhetoric to promote self-discipline and motivation. In terms of identity construction, contributors referenced personas such as the "Protagonist/Avatar" ("*Da Nü Zhu"*, posts 2, 3, 7, 8, 14, 15, 16, and 18) and "Barbie" (posts 6 and 12). Regarding narrative settings, some posts adopted themes like "Restarting Life" (posts 9, 10, 11, 13, and 19). Gameplay elements included "task lists" (posts 3, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, and 20), "management" (posts 1, 9, 10, 13, 16, and 17), and "planning" (posts 2, 9, 16, and 20). Victory conditions featured themes of "overcoming adversity" ("*Ni Xi"*, posts 1, 7, 11, 13, 14, and 17). This rhetoric creates a simulator-style gaming experience, where goals and narratives are primarily constructed and navigated by produsers. The process emphasizes self-management and progress through goal-oriented "level-ups."

Second, many posts adopted an encouraging and companionable tone, incorporating phrases such as "together" (posts 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 15, 17, and 19), "become better" (posts 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, and 20), and "companion" (posts 11 and 17). Some posts also referred to other users as "players" (posts 2, 3, 8, 13, 15, and 18). In this sense, the activity fosters an atmosphere akin to that of multiplayer online games, characterized by collaboration, competition, mutual support, and supervision (Zhong 2011, 2352).

DISCUSSION

The result shows that produsers in social media use *gamified rhetorics* to infuse their self-motivated activities with game-like experiences, which consequently expand the concept, space, forms, and potential of gamification. This research argues that:

1. The activity constructs a simulator-style gaming experience. However, rather than simulating the routines or identities of Others, it exhibits a significant tendency toward self-starring identity construction—an attempt to simulate a "better" or more idealized self. In this sense, the *produsage of gamification* enables participants to adopt dual roles as both players and designers, which imbues these cultural practices with a sense of subjectivity, control, and immersion.

2. Collective play and other forms of interaction generate a social experience akin to that of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Unlike classic MMORPGs, where player interdependence is often a design feature (Taylor 2006, 32), these interactions are typically not collaborative but rather companionate. Produsers share similar goals for personal achievement and act as supporters and observers for each other, collectively contributing to and consuming a narrative universe that functions as a "protagonist training ground."

3. Given that approximately 79.13% of Xiaohongshu users are female (qian-gua.com, 2024), these activities are also imbued with feminist ideologies. For instance, the term "big female protagonist" (D*a Nü Zhu*) describes storytelling centered exclusively on a female lead, advocating for women to become the protagonists of their own lives by prioritizing self-growth and emphasizing self-investment. Therefore, these practices also enrich the forms of gendered political expression.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The phenomenon referred to as "gamification" in this paper has also been described by various alternative terms. Deterding et al. (2011) have reviewed these, including *playful design* (Ferrara 2012), *behavior games* (Dignan 2011), *game layer* (Priebatsch 2010), *applied gaming* (natronbaxter.com), and *alternate reality game* (McGonigal 2011), among others.