

Book Review

Games, Powers & Democracies

Gianluca Sgueo

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Governance has never been easy. Today, governments are facing an existential crisis. Popular discourse on the role of the state is dominated by challenges to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the entire political apparatus. Effective public participation, it transpires, is essential to good governance. E-government has become a reality in the last two decades. It serves to make government more efficient, effective, and transparent. Furthermore, the application of information technologies to state functions has paved the way for substantive innovations in policy-making. Gamification is one such innovation. The term “gamification” is seldom used with any considerable degree of specificity. It is nonetheless possible to identify some common feature of the various “gamifications” of our era. Gamification strategies attempt to capture and direct citizens’ attention through the transplantation of game design techniques onto non-game contexts. Gamification in governance thus intensifies civic participation. The commingling of intrinsic motivations and extrinsic rewards may eventually lead citizens to become more active in the production of policy and regulation.

Although gamification is nowadays both credible and widely used, it has only benefited from sporadic coverage in the academic literature. The book by Gianluca Sgueo constitutes an important first step in tackling the phenomenon in a fashion that is methodologically and conceptually robust. Aided by numerous high-quality examples, the book describes and explores the practical application of gamification to policy-making. The various experiences of gamified strategies in the public sector around the world are then systematised under a tentative rational framework. The volume does not, however, go further. It is plausible to speculate that the author had a wide audience in mind, so much so that a great deal of institutional specificity had to be sacrificed to keep the text accessible. So much is evident from Sgueo’s judicious use of terminology, as well as the labours that have clearly gone towards ensuring the smooth flow of the argument. The readership is likely to be diverse. It is perfectly possible for academics to construct and refine long-standing analytical assumptions on the basis of the arguments advanced in this volume. Practitioners and policy-makers will appreciate the depth of the descriptive material presented, all while acquiring a different viewpoint on gamification. Recent initiates to gamification will indubitably benefit from the comprehensive exposition of the central trends in the modern literature.

Games, Powers & Democracies takes a systematic and descriptive approach to the classification of gamification strategies by national and supranational regulators. The examples of concrete forms of gamified elements in public governance are instrumental both comparatively and as a matter of theory. The first two chapters complement the foreword by Stefaan Verhulst in setting the scene. They introduce the causes of our interest in gamification. They also make it clear that the uses of gamification are markedly heterogeneous. Common ground, where it may be found, is also highlighted. The subsequent chapters conduct a mapping exercise and suggest a taxonomy of gamification techniques in national (Chapter 3) and supranational (Chapter 4) governance. One of the main findings is that supranational regulators have not been eager to complement policy-making with gamified strategies as much as their municipal counterparts. Chapters 5 and 6 advance some theoretical propositions on the impact of gamified public governance. The fifth chapter focuses on the impact that particular types of participants – policy entrepreneurs, citizen lobbyists and, citizen activists – may have on democratic governance if they tap into the potential of gamification. In this regard, prosumerism, collective intelligence and network theories are the conceptual lenses through which this issue is analysed. The sixth chapter examines the risks of gamified governance. These range from marginalisation on linguistic grounds to manipulation and capture. The last chapter employs the theory of “mini-publics” to suggest that gamified decision-making should strive to reach a more diverse array of social spheres than it currently does. The concluding remarks are limited to describing proposals made elsewhere, be they by politicians or academics. There is little that is new in this section. This said, the volume’s stated aim is to “shed some light on each of the practical and theoretical problems raised by the use of gamification in governance”. It is beyond doubt that Sgueo has achieved this here.

While exploring the hitherto overlooked subject of gamification in policy-making, *Games, Powers & Democracies* gives real content and structure to the study of one of the foremost regulatory novelties of our day. The analysis is thorough, incisive, and thought-provoking, laying the foundations for further research in the fields of law, economics and public policy. Last but not least among the achievements of this book is the fact that it combines a hands-on, practice-oriented exposition with the sort of theoretical rigour commonly associated with specialist publications in dedicated periodicals. *Games, Powers & Democracies* is thus likely to be of considerable interest to both the curious generalist and the seasoned expert.

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