Playing for Real

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INTRODUCTION

Furthering the proposition that the message of games is their effect on the player, this paper questions the message of games that have an intended purpose and use in non-game environments. Pymetrics is an American recruitment company which uses computational neuroscience, artificial intelligence and game design to create games that can evaluate the character traits of job searchers and then direct them to their best career fit. Pymetrics also offers employers a way to recruit talent by setting up campaigns for specific sets of traits that players have to possess. Thus, the Pymetrics games are meant to produce effects and consequences in real-life.

Drawing on Baudrillard's extensive commentary on symbolic structures as foundational to society's way of life and belief system, this paper is a theoretical reflection on the proposition that virtual experiences can serve as assessment tools for the skills and on-the-job performance of actual persons. In the context of Baudrillard's notions of the code and integral reality, the concept of gamification or applying games to non-game purposes functions as a symbolic strategy for handling "the radical illusoriness of the world" (Baudrillard, 2005, 32). The suggestion that computer games can assess personality traits or proclivity toward a specific career, directly implies the contingency between virtual and embodied experience. Pymetrics assumes the translatability of in-game action into behaviour patterns, and the game scores into evidence for inherent potential and future performance of users. Therefore, to function as promised, their game applications merge fact and artefact, blur time distinctions, and equate experience with its virtual representations. In other words, they exhibit the characteristic effects of what Baudrillard calls the "total substitution" of reality with virtuality, or what Chris Turner paraphrases as a "programme of total production which itself supplants the world, (...) turning it wholly into known" (Turner in Baudrillard, 2005, 9). Based on this, I claim, that the existence of gamification as a particular relationship to knowledge, self and time justifies the use of Baudrillard's integral reality as a descriptive term for the contemporary condition. Conversely, it is also true that the application of gamification as a design principle is bound to produce integral reality artefacts.

To defend these claims, I first examine the promotional rhetoric that dresses up Pymetrics' games as scientific instruments of high utility. While it is hard to argue whether the trait assessment is right or wrong, Pymetrics' rhetoric invites us to adopt a
worldview, a value system and an attitude that align with Baudrillard's description of integral reality. In addition, I discuss my personal impression of the games and my reaction to the assessment I receive as a result of playing. Together, the Pymetrics games and trait report create an experience, produce affective responses and modes of self-relation that comprise the impact and the message of the game. Yet, this message and effect are now meant to exceed the boundaries of the playground and reach out into real life. The Pymetrics games shape the player as a subject, and assign him/her a 'proper' role in non-game social practices and exchanges.

OPTIONAL BIO
Lyuba Encheva is a recent PhD graduate from the Joint Program of Communication and Culture at York and Ryerson Universities in Toronto, Canada. The focus of her research is the investigation of the ethical and political implications of evolving technologies of representation. Her doctoral dissertation entitled *Gamification: The Magical Circle of Technology* is a detailed exploration of the persuasive strategies of games and gamification.

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