



**“Nobody really wants to go back to traditional public decision-making models. Didn’t we consign top-down, direct, regulatory approaches to history a decade ago?”**

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# Operation Beyond Fun

**What are the consequences of gamified policy-making? Is game design manipulative? What if gamified policy-making does not bring about the expected results? A story about the attempt to introduce playfulness into policy making and how it backfired.**

## INTRODUCTION

The story “Operation Beyond Fun” aims to show the complexity of using game-design nudges to engage citizens in decision-making and how the use of the wrong playful incentives may lead to a paradoxical effect: a ban on games in policy-making. Highly participatory at its core, the “convergence culture” we currently inhabit allows everyone connected to the internet to actively participate in matters that, in the past,

were reserved for an elite few (such as opinion makers and politicians). Obviously, increased convergence translates into higher expectations. Contemporary audiences are demanding. Yet responding quickly to the demands of citizens and communities and engaging them in the exercise of public power remains a complex task for public regulators. Hence, the question is whether we can make civic engagement fun.

Can games be experimented with as a way to innovate policy-making? In the eyes of public regulators, gamification seems to offer an easy, inexpensive, and potentially highly remunerative way of engaging demanding audiences while maintaining high levels of trust in the institutions.

The story is organized in chronological order: First we are introduced to a world in which gamification is portrayed as the “new normal” in policy making. In spite of a number of issues that emerged from previous experiments with games, including a lack of motivation among citizens to engage

in the long term and a risk of social exclusion, public regulators seem enthusiastic about game design. The disastrous consequences of gamified policy-making will lead the government to implement a new plan aimed at suspending the use of gamification. The plan is known as “Operation Beyond Fun.” The decision to eradicate gaming from government promotes a collective self-reflection on the intricacies of contemporary democracies, the pervasiveness of technology in our daily lives, and more generally about the future of governing.

## THE DIGITAL GAZETTE

### Swiping Pundits: Policy Making at the Tip of your Fingers

**September 1, 2039** Do you miss the good old days when dating meant swiping left or right on an overpriced mobile phone? Are you an old school digital tech aficionado?

You might be in for some good news.

On Wednesday, the government announced plans for a September

launch of a new initiative on the *GovYOUment* platform. While the official name of the initiative remains unknown for now, the content sounds exciting.

Yep—it’s time to dust off your index finger, because the government wants you to swipe on policy options. How do you feel about allocating new government funds to

space colonies? Is the time right to scale up blockchain voting to governmental level? And what about over 95s—should they be given self-driving licenses? Swipe and let our leaders know!

The initiative promises to be more than pure fun—there will also be rewards. Climbing up the ranks will give participants access to extra points for those all-important social scores. Will the promotion you've been dreaming about for years finally be within reach? Will you finally have enough points to upgrade your visa status and experience the joy of taking your family on a trip abroad?

Not so fast, dreamer. Competition is going to be fierce. Will the hyper-civics score all the points, yet again?

Mario Brossi (5.1 average social credit score; three times citizen of the year) had this to say about the initiative: "I'm already warming up my fingers"—he said—"I can't wait to participate and accumulate as many points as possible." Mario wants to raise his score to 5.5 and qualify to purchase a new luxury apartment in the city center.

Mario is not alone in his desperate search to boost his social credit score. Others, however, are skeptical about the initiative. "Competition, levels, points, and rewards: How long do we have to wait before policy makers realize that inserting 'playfulness' into public policy making won't solve

any of their problems?" said NYU's Professor Gianluca Sgueo. And it's not just academics speaking out: The public has been tepid in its response to gameplay as well.

Clearly, our policy makers have not succeeded in making the masses aware of the great opportunities offered by gamification.

Nevertheless, our government seems to have a recipe for reinventing government: a little dose of the competitive spirit of games, a pinch of playful design, and an appropriate system of rewards. Gamification, as our president stated in a recent interview, will fix democracy. Games for engagement, games for good.

Policy makers agree on this point. With playful policy making, everyone gets an opportunity to influence public choices in engaging, dynamic ways. It's just a matter of when this will happen. Soon enough, optimists claim, playful design will arouse citizens' interest in public decision making, make participation less demanding, and simplify interactions between citizens and institutions.

Speaking of interactive design: With the new initiative almost ready to go, we might expect a new wave of hires among the most in-demand professions in policy making. Designers, creative directors, networkers, and engineers: get ready! Your expertise could be needed to develop new, dynamic arenas for public debate.

It's bad news for lawyers, economists, and political scientists. But a die-hard minority of bureaucrats announced new strikes and protests yesterday. They promise they will bring governance back to its basics.

Nobody really wants to go back to traditional public decision-making models. Didn't we consign top-down, direct, regulatory approaches to history a decade ago? Not for PSTU—the Public Sector Trade Union, which released a statement following the government's decision to launch a new initiative on

*GovYOUment*. “Traditional decision making is unjustly considered incapable of settling increasingly inter-connected, cross-cutting and unpredictable issues,” the PSTU states. While smart bureaucracies encourage synergies between ideas, competences, and skills, adds the PSTU, we should not neglect the added value of traditional skills when designing efficient regulatory approaches.

Should we swipe left on them, too?

## BRIEFING PAPER FOR PRESIDENT’S NEWS CONFERENCE —EXCERPT

\*\*\*declassified\*\*\*

October 01, 2040

### QUESTION:

Mr President, should the head of *GovYOUment* resign following the comments by [REDACTED] regarding “Swipe Your Regulation?” What is your response to accusations that “civic engagement” experiments of this type—and gamification efforts in public policy in general—should be permanently [REDACTED]?

### CURRENT SITUATION REPORT:

- “Swipe Your Regulation” concluded yesterday.
- The 30-day initiative ran on the “*GovYOUment*” portal from September 1, 2040 to September 30, 2040.
- Project results are still being analyzed: The following report is an umbrella review of the broader issues.

\*\*\* THE FOLLOWING ANALYSIS IS PRELIMINARY AND MAY CHANGE \*\*\*

### INITIAL ANALYSIS

#### **Engagement Curve.**

The initial signs were encouraging.

Visits to the “*GovYOUment*” portal peaked during the initial run (“*call to action*” phase) of the initiative, causing traffic problems with the “*GovYOUment Portal*.” In particular, the decision to adopt “**vintage**” **swipe left technology** as part of the holistic gamified “look and feel” of the site may have contributed to initial registration problems. However, this issue is thought to have contributed to the overall project outcomes.

Participation dropped halfway through the initiative (“*engagement*” phase), and bottomed out during the conclusive phase (“*commitment*” phase). Only 500 players completed the game—a mere fraction of the hundreds of thousands that had registered in the initial phase. As proven

by the “curve of engagement,” time and engagement on the “GovYOUment” portal are mutually exclusive.

Initial estimates suggest that *Swipe your Regulation* experienced an unexpectedly high and rapid drop-out rate. Despite our assumptions, it appears that neither the intrinsic rewards (impact on policy making) nor the extrinsic rewards (higher social credit score) seem to have offered a sufficient motive to continue participation for most citizens. Initial reports put this dropout rate on a par with similar gamification efforts in the 2020s (which were deemed failures). However, this is yet to be confirmed.

### **Tyranny of the Actives.**

The participants who remained active throughout *Swipe your Regulation* appear to have been the same individuals who dominated previous gamified participatory procedures. The problem of the “hyper-civics,” as they are widely known, has long been recognized and is problematic in two respects: 1) Their overweening presence delegitimizes participatory processes. Rather than leverage social inequalities, the hyper-civics exacerbate them. 2) They are not opposed or criticized by other citizens. Indeed, they are celebrated by the majority of people—“the masses”—who self-exclude from participation.

### **The Capture of the Civics.**

Further, we believe that interest groups may have been actively involved in influencing hyper-civics, leaning on them as a way to unduly pressure decision making. These actors include both general interest groups like the Public-Sector Trade Unions (PSTU) and special-interest groups (e.g., tech companies). The risk of “civic capture” is particularly concerning because it contradicts the original spirit of gamified governance. Back in the early 2020s, when the government committed to systematically instilling playfulness into policy making, the goal was to avoid the risk of an authoritative allocation of public assets that would favor private interests, also known as “capture of the regulator.” With civics mobilized by interest groups via gamified policy making, regulatory fairness may be again threatened.

### **Delegitimization.**

It is too early to come to any conclusions about *Swipe your Regulation*. However, it should be noted that, if the project is deemed a failure, it will

likely increase the existing disaffection of citizens with policy making. According to the latest polls, seven in ten Europeans have no interest in policy making. Here, the “apathy civics” have grown by more than a sixth since June despite heightened playfulness in governmental decision-making. Our institutions may be blamed for two reasons. First, they failed at creating more participatory and inclusive decision-making via gamification. Critics claim that civic engagement has never been so unevenly distributed. Second, bureaucratic powers are accused of having increased the distance between them and citizens with gamification. Interestingly, they expected gamification to bridge this gap.

MOVING FORWARD:

There is no doubt that controversy has crept into the *Swipe your Regulation* project. But with the success (or the failure) of the activity TBD, the following points should be noted:

1. Call for a back-to-basics approach. Critics have questioned the morality and usability of gamified nudges. The weak response of citizens to *Swipe your Regulation* has encouraged new critical voices to join the debate. Academics and practitioners have suggested a “back to basics” approach: top-down, direct policy-making, with selected spaces for participation.
2. Government legitimacy. The outcomes of gamified governance have impacted on the (perceived) legitimacy of public institutions. The structural innovations introduced over the last decade to make government more playful have not proven efficient. Bureaucratic structures have been torn apart by the tensions between those who recommend a return to more traditional policy-making skills, namely legal and economic skills, and those who instead suggest reinventing government once again. The latter recently proposed the creation of an “enlightenment officer.”
3. The meaning of “fun.” The results of *Swipe your Regulation*, as well as of previous similar initiatives have shown how difficult it is to instill a pre-fabricated sense of playfulness into citizens. Reflection is urged on how to inject fun into definitions. This leads to a reflection on the opportunity to identify an exit strategy from gamification. The intelligence services have named this “Operation Beyond Fun.”

## EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 01 OF JANUARY 1, 2041

### Minimizing the Burden of Gamified Policy Making, and Introducing the “Beyond Fun” Social Program

By the authority vested in me as president by the constitution of this country, and to foster the democratic values of our nation, make our politics more participative, and our administration more engaging. I hereby declare the following:

**Section 1(a).** It has been the policy of my administration to limit the damage produced by the excessive commodification of gamified nudges in our policies. Playful decision-making has exacerbated social inequalities; turnout from citizens has been lower than expected, leaving many underrepresented in our political processes; gamified nudges have exposed decision-makers to undue influence from interest groups; the participatory platform “*GovYOUment*” has not improved the level of trust in our administration.

**Section 1(b).** Our government is committed to adopting innovative, measurable, and outcome-driven initiatives that could foster civic engagement and establish solid, long-standing, relations between citizens and decision-makers. For the purpose of this order, fun shall be abolished from public decision-making. The platform “*GovYOUment*” shall be taken offline.

**Section 2(a).** The “Beyond Fun” social program is hereby introduced. The government program establishes a new system for calculating citizens’ social credit scores. In the “Beyond Fun” program, points shall be attributed on the basis of four individual skills:

1. Social-interaction skills—all socially interactive activities (house parties, restaurant dinners, movie-theater trips) between individuals and groups of individuals shall be rewarded with +1 point per month.
2. Family-caring skills—providing home care to relatives shall be rewarded with +2 points per month.
3. Political competence skills—all political-literacy skills shall be rewarded with +1 point per action. Voting in local and national elections shall be rewarded with +2 points per vote. Other actions like signing a petition, volunteering for a candidate or a political party, or engaging in meaningful debate on political topics through major social networks

shall be rewarded +1 point (NB. *Exceptions apply. See Section 2b*).

4. Dietary habits—+1 point per semester shall be awarded to those with adequate dietary habits; points may be deducted for unhealthy dietary behavior (e.g., excessive fast food consumption).

**Section 2(b).** An Office for Citizens Behavior (OCB) shall be introduced. OCB, in consultation with the Office of the Secretary of State, is hereby authorized to register and assess individual applications for points.

OCB may, consistent with applicable law, apply sanctions to individuals who have been reported by the competent authorities for neglecting their social competences.

## THE DIGITAL GAZETTE

### 2040—When Gamification Backfired

**March 3, 2048** Who can forget 2040, the year when gamification backfired?

What began as a long list of botched attempts to instill a sense of fun into policy making by our government ended with the monumental failure of “Swipe your Regulation”—remember that? It was such a disaster when those who had celebrated the virtues of playful policy-making were proven incontrovertibly wrong.

2040 will also be remembered as the year when social division worsened. Citizens separated into two broad social groups.

On the one hand, there were those with preferential access to time and knowledge, who had quickly developed an addiction to gamified nudges. They were deemed the “hyper-civics.” The juicy dopamine provided by gaming transformed them into super-committed and highly skilled players. And, to further complicate things, they managed to monopolize civic participation due to their extraordinary expertise in regulatory issues.

If you are one of our faithful readers, and you have a good memory, you might remember the opinions of Mario Brossi—a contemporary celeb we used to interview.

These new celebrities remained, however, became a minority. The

majority of citizens didn’t have the time to participate or simply lacked the knowledge to do so.

They only engaged occasionally, seldom committing for long periods, and generally showing little interest in being pushed out of their comfort zones. In short: It was a disaster.

Actually, it was a collective disaster. There were so many of these uncommitted individuals that they soon got lumped together under the collective moniker “the masses.”

What about public authorities? Surprising as it may seem, they went back to square one when they started to experiment with games. Policy makers were the newest villains. They were supposed to save us all with gamification; instead, they failed twice.

They aimed to create more participatory and inclusive decision-making; what they achieved was even more unevenly distributed civic engagement. Bureaucratic powers were expected to bridge the gap between them and citizens. Instead, gamified governance alienated them even further from civics.

In short: gamification backfired. The “Beyond Fun” social program, which recently turned 7 years old, seems to be working pretty well. No need to develop your skills at gaming, no more use for garishly

colored, annoying engagement platforms. All you need to do—all WE need to do—is to behave like optimal citizens.

Eat your cereal at breakfast, take your 8 hours-a-night of beauty sleep, work hard, stay with your family, and your score will grow. The sky is the limit for those who commit to being good citizens.

What about the others? The “leftovers,” as the Office of Citizens’ Behavior recently named them, are now obliged to attend reintegration classes. Nobody shall be left behind,

as our president has declared many times. The rehabilitation program was launched by the government to give anyone an extra chance to redeem themselves. After 7 years of the successful application of the governmental program, which eliminates fun from policy-making, the time is right to nudge optimal collective behavior. “Society has never been so inclusive and moderate”—declared our president yesterday, during his weekly speech to the nation.

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