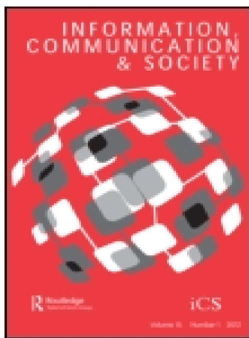

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# A GENEALOGY OF BADGES

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**Alexander M.C. Halavais**

# A GENEALOGY OF BADGES
## Inherited meaning and monstrous moral hybrids

*The use of badges on the web, particularly on community sites, has become very popular, and these badges are becoming both more easily carried from one site to another and more valuable in the process. But badges are not new; the metaphor of the online badge draws on centuries of use in the offline world. And the use of badges online has the potential of bringing with it the echo of these earlier uses and the values that they were imbued with. This article explores online badges, drawing on their history and the ethical framework presented by Jane Jacobs in* 'Systems of Survival' *to suggest some ways of ensuring that badges are used effectively online.*

**Keywords** computer-mediated-communication; Web 2.0; gaming; social media; social networking; sociology

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The web badge might at first seem to be little more than a visual conceit, a visual metaphor that allows the user to identify something as a marker of skill, experience or merit. Once a rarity on the web, now badges appear on a large and growing number of community sites. Badges are available to users of foursquare, Google News, the Huffington Post, Stack Overflow, and dozens of others. New sites and systems are being created to keep track of badges on multiple systems and allow for them to appear in other contexts on the web. Some have suggested that badges represent a viable alternative to existing methods of assessment in educational institutions and work environments. But each of these badges arrives with a ghostly recurrence of a long history of social badges in other contexts; badges have baggage. This article explores the ways badges have been used in the past and the implications of their use online.

In particular, it argues that when online badges are introduced, they often are being used in settings where autonomy and community are emphasized,

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**FIGURE 1** Two badges for a TripAdvisor user, one based on number of contributions, the other based on peer review.

but that the imagery often suggests a more regimented and hierarchical past. These two perspectives are not easily reconciled and they may lead to significant conflicts in how the badges are used and the kinds of community they lead to. Take, for example, the badges used on TripAdvisor (Figure 1). When released, TripAdvisor indicated that these were a way to ‘recognize’ contributors and to allow users to filter the content they found on the site (Schall 2011). Especially since they explicitly email users encouraging them to contribute more to earn the next level of badge, we can surmise that that these badges are intended to drive contributors to provide more reviews and to make them more engaging.

As we shall see, TripAdvisor’s use of badges is similar to their use on many other sites. The moral confusion they engender is also common. On one hand, these badges are intended as markers of trust, of open exchange, and dedicated to the idea that peers can effectively evaluate one another and vendors: hotels, restaurants, and attractions. On the other, the badges represent a ranking, and resemble both markers of rank and of experience earned in the most regimented and authoritative of organizations: the military. The confusion of the commercial and the state, of ranked organizations and networked organization, is inherent to the use of badges.

What follows represents a brief history of the idea and application of badges in various settings, and this history means to their application in online communities. In particular, the conflict between two contrasting moral codes is explored. Finally, some preliminary recommendations are made to those implementing badge systems for online communities.

## Online badges

Like other parts of our lives, badges have made their way from the real world into a virtual analog. In some cases, they seek to be representations of badges

that exist in the real world. Sometimes, as with badges in military games, they hope to simulate or represent those badges. Sometimes the online badge is a parody of offline versions, as in the case of 'nerd merit badges'. More generally, though, virtual badges serve many of the same functions as their real-world counterparts: marking authority, expertise, experience, and identity.

The visual form of a badge has existed on the Web nearly as long as graphical elements could be displayed. The Electronic Frontier Foundation employed a 'Blue Ribbon Campaign for Online Free Speech' in the mid-1990s as a response to the passage of the Communications Decency Act in the United States, encouraging website owners to post an image of a blue ribbon to support free speech online, which then linked back to the EFF's website for the project. The badges were widely adopted, and the EFF site became one of the most linked pages on the web (Klienberg 1999).

This kind of badge has much in common with a 'button', like those used to support causes or candidates in the real world, though it has the additional functionality of linking directly to the supported cause. Similar functionality was found in many badges used on MySpace, allowing users to identify their relationship to a cause (Gueorguieva 2008), or to a brand (Li 2007). Many of these badges were also the result of a quiz that acted to classify users according to some rubric (e.g. 'What *Star Wars* character are you most like?') and provided a snippet of code to include on your MySpace page or a blog. These kinds of individual indicators became an important way of shaping an online persona and finding others with similar interests.

Many community sites have provided some form of visual indication of experience or reputation so that other members may see them. These do not always take the visual form of a badge, even if they appear to fulfill some of the same functions. Many of the large discussion systems provide some form of an icon to distinguish moderators from other users, or distinguish more and less recent members. These are usually little more than small icons, however, next to the user's name.

Players of popular games have seen 'achievements' and badges become increasingly available as well. There are a number of reasons for this shift, not least providing an outlet for those who want to find their own way through a particular challenge. Badges coming from military games most likely started the trend, but now a large number of games provide some form of achievement system, and many allow the achievements to be transported from one system to another.

The vast majority of the badges available online are simple experience or achievement badges. So, for example, you might get a badge for doing something as simple as consistently logging your exercise on Livestrong.com, or for 'checking in' at your favorite coffee shop using foursquare. A handful of these badges are peer reviewed or otherwise extract feedback from your peers. Far rarer is the badge that requires a thorough assessment or a significant sacrifice of time or

energy. Nonetheless, they pattern themselves on a social convention of badges that has a long and deep history in the social organization.

These functions of badges are rarely exclusionary – any particular badge is likely to mark authority, skill, experience, and identity in some way. Most are a complex collection of all of these. In some cases, such combinations of functions can be complementary, while in others, they can be confusing and lead to social dysfunction.

## Badges of honor, authority and privilege

Perhaps the essential function of a badge is to identify an individual as a member of a group. Insignia identifying cohorts and legions of the Roman armies were originally carried aloft (held by standard-bearers known as *signifiers*), but by the sixth century, these images were carried on individual shields (Berger 1981; Webster 1998). Such insignia provided for more effective command structures and battlefield strategy by making units identifiable as friend or foe, and discerning their functional role.

'Badges', in the original use of the English word, were subsets of coats of arms intended to identify an individual or a household (Boutelle 1867). Initially, they were embroidered on clothing, eventually being embossed on various metals. By the fourteenth century, such badges were often inherited and were in wide circulation. Parallel uses of badges on clothing could be found outside of Europe during the same period (Mayer 1933; Cammann 1944). These insignia eventually came to be the pins and other badges worn to identify military regiments.

Badges are used to signal group membership not just to enable systems of command and control, but also to create rapid rapport and trust. Sosis (2006) provides the example of a community of ultra-orthodox Jews (*Haredim*) in Israel who wear many layers of clothing and fur hats, both clearly unsuitable to the desert heat, as an obvious signal to others that they are members of the group, and therefore worthy of trust. The fact that these badges are hard-won and expensive to maintain adds to their value as a signaling device and to their stability over time. They require a sacrifice of time, money, or effort that produces no direct economic return.

This religious use of the badge is the prototype of secular badges that in some way attempt to provide similar expectations of honor and authority, across a number of contexts and cultures. The iconography of the Chinese Triads, for example, borrowed directly from existing religious authority (ter Haar 2000). Such appropriations undoubtedly are in the hope that the iconography will legitimate an organization's authority and that they may be imbued with the trust given to religious institutions and leaders.

Schools and universities are rife with symbols intended to identify those who can be trusted as a member of the group. Most directly, many schools borrow

heraldic insignia to mark their own group, and intercollegiate sporting events make clear that the friend or foe designation remains paramount. Likewise, sports clubs, fraternities, and universities borrowed many of the visual icons of the military world to create their own badges: the repp tie, pins, and even (as in the case of dueling scars) ritual markings. The adoption of heraldic symbols may seem to be little more than an aesthetic crutch, but as Synott and Symes (1995) argue, these symbols are more than just logos intending to differentiate one school from another, they carry with them a consistent set of messages about how education should work.

It is difficult to find parallels of these kinds of badges of solidarity in online settings. Members instead tend to use badges in order to show their experience within a group, rather than identifying members outside of the group. Someone may indeed be a well-respected member of one community, but loses any reputation or trust gained by that work when they move to another platform. So, if you carry a 'Real Name' badge on Amazon (which indicates that the company has verified that you are using your own legal name) or have the reputation of being a trustworthy seller on eBay, those badges are generally limited to the platform on which they are issued. It would seem that especially universities would have an interest in seeing their alumni using badges on the Web, but so far the mechanisms for verifying such badges do not exist. Just as you have no guarantee that someone wearing a sweatshirt from Princeton actually graduated from that institution, you have no way of knowing how much weight the Princeton badge on their LinkedIn profile carries.

But badges are used not only as a way of identifying members of a group, they are also used to identify those with particular authority over others. Clothing has always been used as a way of expressing identity and authority within a community, as assigned by both the wearer and by the community (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992). In military, police, and similar organizations, that authority is made explicit through rank, and rank is clearly marked on the uniform. Often that badge represents the capacity to explicitly exercise power over another individual. Nowhere is that application more explicit than the police officer's badge; so much so that 'the badge' is often seen as a synecdoche for police work more generally, and represents the personified use of legitimate state power.

When used as a symbol of authority, the badge is mainly found in military (or quasi-military) and religious organizations, but its influence can certainly be found in commercial settings as well. I do not refer to the 'policeman's discount' (Van Maanen 1979), by which shop owners might provide free or discounted merchandise to police officers, but rather the affiliated reverse: seemingly commercial badges that afford special legal privileges. So the taxi medallion, for example, not only certifies particular knowledge of the driver, but allows her to do things the ordinary driver is not permitted to do. In a more extreme case, the holder of a certain rank within a frequent flier program (for instance,

a 'gold medallion' holder on Delta Airlines), can bypass much of the wait at a security checkpoint. More broadly, trademarks carry within them the power to restrict the speech of others when it might undermine the efficacy of that particular form of commercial distinction.

This sort of badge, of course, already has wide use online, and was one of the earliest uses of such badges. Even in cases where a moderator or experienced user does not have explicit powers beyond a regular user, the moderator badge can provide an informal indication of authority. So, for example, in the Kongregate forums – like on many forums on the web – certain users have the ability to temporarily silence other users as a punishment for violating the rules and norms of the community. The users with this special power are marked with a small badge next to their name to indicate their authority, so that others can appeal to them and so that their words hold more weight in an argument over the process.

Finally, badges of dishonor are also forced upon those whom a ruling elite wishes to mark as unworthy of trust or respect. The branding of prisoners, often with marks indicating their crime, has a long history, as does forcing groups to be shorn, tattooed, or to wear particular devices. Perhaps the most familiar use of this particular form of badging was its reintroduction during the Second World War to mark enemies of the Nazi party, including Jews. In this way, badges can be used to socially license particular behaviors (e.g. carrying a gun in public, detaining individuals) or to forcibly remove rights granted to the community at large. Not surprisingly, such negative badges have largely fallen out of use in modern society, and despite being suggested in online venues on occasion (Dag 2010), are likewise sparse in the virtual world.

## Badges of achievement, qualification, and experience

There are other applications of badges beyond those of privilege or rank. Sometimes, badges are used to identify excellence, or at least competence. Sometimes they are used to mark particular experiences or sacrifices. As noted above, the latter is a hallmark of all badges: to carry social currency they must represent a significant sacrifice.

We generally do not think of an Olympic medal as a badge. Like other medals – Nobel prize medals, arts medals, and the like – 'going for the gold' owes more to military tradition than the laurels bestowed on the winners of the ancient Greek games. Such medals, even when minted in gold, carry much more symbolic value, and serve to highlight the sacrifice made by the holder. Such medals are also often awarded for exceptional heroism or valor in war.

Badges of achievement do more than just celebrate a particular victory or ability. From very early on, it became clear that they encouraged excellence

and the development of particular skills, or even just participation in a collective action. While a trophy or medal is one way of inducing competition among a group to see who might become the most skilled, this does little to motivate neophytes. As a result, indications of more discrete skills, and of levels of skill, have frequently been adopted as a way to shape behavior.

A clear example here are the marksmanship badges that were issued to civilians and then to US Army soldiers in the 1870s (Emerson 2004). In order to encourage skilled use of firearms, a number of groups established competitions with elaborate trophies. Over time, in order to motivate training in firearms more broadly, these were issued to anyone who qualified as a marksman, based on a standardized set of criteria. These badges (by 1876, gilded bronze stars manufactured by Tiffany & Co) continued to be issued in one form or another through the end of the First World War. At that point, a system of badges that were awarded for each weapon became expensive and unwieldy. It was replaced by a system that awarded based on skill (e.g. sharpshooting) and was awarded at different levels (e.g. second class, first class, and expert). This allowed for the badges to remain relatively stable even as the particular technologies changed.

The grading of skill, as opposed to a binary indication, calls to mind another mark of martial ability, the martial arts belt. The idea of the black belt indicating an expert martial artist is closely tied not just to the Japanese martial arts, but to many traditions from around the world. This, however, is a relatively modern development. During the Meiji period – roughly during the same time that marksmen began receiving badges in New York – Jigoro Kano was establishing the art of judo along modern lines. Trained in pedagogy, he divided his students into ranks. In the modern interpretation, there are usually up to 10 ranks below the expert rank (from 10-*kyu* to 1-*kyu*) and then 10 above (1-*dan* to 10-*dan*). The newest students were easily identified by their white belts, more advanced students brown, and expert students black. This approach replaced the licensing schemes that had been associated with martial arts for centuries and did not have clear, testable gradations. The modern system that is popular with many martial arts, which involves a rainbow of colors denoting each of the *kyu* ranks, also started with judo, but was developed later in Europe (Carr 1993).

Clearly, one reason for this process of opening up ranking was to motivate students who would otherwise have to wait for years (and at the highest ranks, decades) before promotion. It encouraged people to participate and continue learning. It also routinized and rationalized these processes. Beyond this, there are obvious organizational advantages to making each person's skills immediately visible. While there may also be some indication of prestige, there is a very practical need to know on sight whether someone has the necessary knowledge for a particular task.

Both ranks and skill-related badges made their way into quasi-military groups also dedicated to learning and training: the scouts. Scouting organizations

around the world made use of merit badges to encourage young people to learn important skills. However, particularly the skill-related merit badges represented something of a departure from the way in which badges had been used in the past, as they provided scouts the opportunity to choose from a relatively diverse range of challenges rather than being restricted to a single path.

Other badges and licenses play a similar role. Certifications of drivers, pilots, and SCUBA divers certainly are provided privileges by law or by agreement that others may not have. But they are essentially markers of expertise, and are available to anyone who is interested in taking them up. Professional drivers and pilots may be obligated to qualify for a license, but unlike a detective's badge or paratrooper's wings, it is generally possible for any interested person to earn the badge.

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate badges based on skill with those based on experience. It seems that many badge systems conflate the two, which is not entirely surprising since it appears that users tend to adopt the community standards as they gain more experience on a site (Halavais 2009). Nonetheless, particular behaviors can be seen as demonstrating skill, rather than just repetitive action. While some of the badges on the Huffington Post site, for example, can be earned merely by being an active member of the community, others are based on the ability to spark conversation or on receiving kudos from peers ('gift badges'). Even without such badges, providing such an endorsement seems to be a common instinct within communities – badges merely formalize and make visible that process (Lampel & Bhala 2007).

## Badges of experience and expression

Medieval pilgrim's badges probably made up the earliest form of 'campaign badge' – a public indication that the wearer had made a pilgrimage to a particular location, and was therefore somehow part of a community who had done the same. The iconography of the badge provided something of a reflection of the monument or the features of the site, and served as an indication that the person had sacrificed the time and resources to go there. Certainly, some element of group identification was present here as well, so that someone among the 1,300 who wore a pilgrim's badge from Canterbury could be identified as being an adherent of the cult of St Thomas, for example (Lee 2011). Moreover, a pilgrim wearing several such badges marked himself as someone deserving of special privilege, and was expected to receive aid and hospitality along his route (Birch 2000).

The campaign medal similarly recognizes those who have seen action in military campaigns. In many cases, simply contributing to that effort is enough to be awarded the medal and ribbon. As a representation of experience, it marks the person in a way that rank may not. And as with skill-based badges, it has the

secondary effect of encouraging continued service, by representing an award of glory rather than money. As Blanc (1844) writes:

> ... is it necessary that recompenses should be material, should have money value? Thank Heavens! mankind have shown that they can be influenced, and more efficaciously, by other and far higher motives of action. Incited by the promise of a bit of ribbon, to be stuck in the button-holes of the bravest by their emperor, whole armies of Napoleon's soldiers rushed on to meet death. (pp. 555–556)

The original indicator of war experiences, of course, was the battle wound – the 'red badge of courage'. Sometimes, surviving is its own triumph, and one that may make up an important part of one's identity.

Wearing such a badge, when not mandated, is an effort made by the individual to shape her identity. The most common badge today is not that of the police detective or general, but a small ribbon worn to express support of a particular health or political campaign. Political buttons serve the same function. These badges, often chosen and affixed by the wearer as an expression of her opinions or support, have a history as long as any of the other types seen here, and indeed are not entirely distinct. It seems clear, for example, that a pilgrim's badge not only served to indicate prestige of the wearer, and identify her as a member of a group, but also served to advertise a particular site and served a decorative function.

Many of the medieval badges that have been located were purely secular in function, as most jewelry is today. The prominently displayed logo on many of today's fashions not only marks the wearer as part of a brand's 'family', but demonstrates how little such badges mean when lacking significant sacrifice. They require little more than purchase – and often not even that – in order to display them. Anyone can wear a peace symbol as there is no qualification or authority behind it. As such, it also is ultimately susceptible to deception, and requires little in the way of sacrifice from the wearer.

As has already been noted the support badge and campaign badge are by far the most common sort of badge found on the web. When MySpace was at its peak popularity, some referred to the range of badges available as 'MySpace bling', a clear reference back to the use of badges to adorn at the same time they present a public self. Certainly, the political badge has made its way online directly, with campaigns providing the equivalent of a campaign button to those who want to show it on their Facebook page. A more grassroots version of this might be found in the changing of Twitter and Facebook profile pictures to include a green tint or ribbon in support of the Iranian revolution. Like the blue-ribbon campaign these provide double duty: promoting a cause while also signaling the holder's interests and attitudes.

Perhaps the most common implementation of a badge in community sites is something that expresses tenure or experience. Most discussion forums provide a

mechanism for identifying those members of the community who are veterans and those who have newly arrived. These are referred to as 'ranks' in the most popular open forum software, phpBB, and they provide an explicit visual indicator of expertise that might otherwise be signaled in physical settings through subtle proxemics and other non-verbal behaviors.

## Fake badges

Anything of value is worth stealing, especially a technology that signals authority, privilege, skill, and experience. If it can be obtained without the expected expense in time, energy, or risk, it will be. For this to be avoided, the creation of false badges must also be expensive, time consuming, or risky. At least at present, there are few badges worth faking, because they carry so little worth. There are exceptions to this, particularly in games, where certain achievements are hard-won and can be traded for money or reputation in the game. But up until now, badges have been too low-stakes to attract efforts to forge or finagle. This is in marked contrast to many traditional badges.

Biologists note that one of the features of badges is that they can be faked; though faking the badge often comes at some expense. Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) suggest that the costly signaling model may be taken from animal behavior and applied to forms of cultural communication in human society. They illustrate costly signaling with the example of a deer that, when spotted by a predator, might display a prominent rump patch or leap high into the air, seemingly making the predator's task easier and delaying their efficient escape. In fact, they argue, such displays are intended to communicate to the predator that the prey is aware of their intentions and is capable of escaping, so it would be mutually beneficial not to waste both of their energy by trying. Naturally, there is some benefit in falsifying such a display – attempting to trick the predator into believing that the prey is more agile or energetic that it may actually be – but the expenditure of energy required to make such a display is great enough that badges are rarely falsified.

In the case of badges in human culture, the built-in difficulty of obtaining a false badge is often fairly minimal. The exception here may be body modifications. Originally, such scars, brands, and tattoos were forced on criminals as a stigma, but for some they come to serve as a badge of authority and trust among criminals. Permanent marks on the skin, particular on the face or hands, make it in some sense the ultimate signal for the criminal underworld, as it marks the bearer as someone who has cut herself off from mainstream prestige, and placed her hope only in criminal enterprise (Gambetta 2009).

Even more drastic are changes that cannot be undone, and bear a substantial cost. As Fujimoto Kizan, author of a seventeenth-century guide for courtesans writes:

> The other variety of pledges – fingernails, oaths, locks of hair and tattooing – can be carried out, as part of a calculated scheme, even if the woman is insincere. But unless she really loves a man, it is hard to go through with cutting off a finger...Nails grow back in days, oaths can be hidden away, and tattooing can be erased when a woman no longer sees a man. But giving up a finger makes a woman a cripple for life, and she can never restore things to what they were. The act should therefore be performed only after grave deliberation.
>
> (quoted in Keene 1999, p. 163)

The Mensur – dueling scars meted out by academic fencers, mainly in German and Austrian universities – were often 'faked' in that they were not the result of true insults, but rather phony disputes initiated with the sole intent of inciting a duel and receiving the scar, which might then have been 'improved' while it was healing to make sure that it remained visible (McAleer 1994). While in this case, the scar may have lost its original function as a marker of true experience, the cost of bearing the scar remained: you would be judged by it in any context.

Once the badge is no longer a visible and permanent part of the body, it becomes more susceptible to forgery. The Church did not directly produce or sell pilgrim's badges, but they quickly found themselves in a position similar to that of modern universities licensing their trademarked logos. As reputation came to be tied to the number and type of pilgrim's badges worn, unscrupulous sellers would provide the badges, often somewhere other than the site of a pilgrimage. In order to maintain the integrity of the badge system, the Church provided a monopoly on the production of certain images, as when the Pope decreed in 1199 that only pilgrims visiting the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome could collect badges depicting Saint Peter or Saint Paul, and those producing such badges elsewhere were subject to excommunication. Despite this severe penalty, these fake badges (*adulterina insignia*) continued to be produced and constituted a profitable market. The other solution was to require that pilgrims carry further proof of their actions, including letters of recommendation and certificates indicating successful pilgrimages (Birch 2000).

## Badges of survival

Jacobs (1994), in her book *Systems of Survival*, extrapolating from a confusing claim in Plato's *Republic*, argues that there are two 'syndromes' of ethical imperatives that govern any human society. While many moral precepts are shared widely, there seems to be certain values that are held by a guardian class that are in direct conflict with a set held by the commercial class (Table 1). Such an argument would come as a little surprise to, for example, a Confusion scholar, who sees the role of a guardian and merchant to be guided by entirely different imperatives (cf.

**TABLE 1** Two moral syndromes from Jacobs (1994).

| *The guardian moral syndrome* | *The commercial moral syndrome* |
|---|---|
| Shun trading | Shun force |
| Exert prowess | Come to voluntary agreements |
| Be obedient and disciplined | Be honest |
| Adhere to tradition | Collaborate easily with strangers and aliens |
| Respect hierarchy | Compete |
| Be loyal | Respect contract |
| Take vengeance | Use initiative and enterprise |
| Deceive for the sake of the task | Be open to inventiveness and novelty |
| Make rich use of leisure | Be efficient |
| Be ostentatious | Promote comfort and convenience |
| Dispense largesse | Dissent for the sake of the task |
| Be exclusive | Invest for productive purposes |
| Show fortitude | Be industrious |
| Be fatalistic | Be thrifty |
| Treasure honor | Be optimistic |

Najita 1987). But in the universalizing West, the idea that different occupations or careers might yield different ethical codes seems unusual.

The guardian class – the government, military, police, and the like – values prowess, largess, ostentation, vengeance, fortitude, and honor. Those among the commercial class tend to place more stock in openness, honesty, thrift, innovation, and industriousness. These two sets of values are often at odds. In the most extreme case, those in the guardian class shun trade (which they associate with profiteering and treason), and those in the commercial class shun force (which represents a failure in trade and voluntary agreements).

This rough bifurcation of social values, which Jacobs argues runs to the earliest histories of man, results in a society in balance in many cases. As in Plato's *Republic*, each group requires the other in order to thrive. Jacobs seems to argue that the practice of trade is unique to humans, and plays an extremely important part in the development of civilization, but commercial actors saddled with the responsibilities of state often falter. There are some parallels here with the work of Pierre Bourdeiu among others, but the argument Jacobs makes is largely analytical, drawing from a rich set of historical examples of the moral histories she is discussing, and it clearly limits the entirety of social existence to these two systems: the commercial and guardian.

Many of the offline and online badges we have discussed can be easily located in the guardian syndrome. Indeed, the awarding of badges, rather than some form of money prize, seems to fall unmistakably into that grouping. The

prototypical badge is probably the medal worn on a military or scouting uniform. These award prowess, discipline, and fortitude – all values prized by those among the guardians. Even the use of the term 'badge' in discussing animal behaviors seems to fit neatly within the descriptions of guardian values.

It is also clear that badges, particularly when they are used in online communities, are being used in contexts much more readily associated with the commercial syndrome. The sort of values that define the commercial syndrome: transparency, honesty, open dealing, competition, optimism, innovation, and the rise of voluntary agreements could easily be a list describing the ideology of social media. If the roots of the modern social media are to be found in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s (Turner 2006), it is unsurprising that the values of such systems seem at odds with the regimented structures of military life, or the hard-fought honor codes of the police.

But just as a ribbon may be used to represent glory for the soldier, badges can act as little more than a representational mechanism. So the badges of the commercial world can represent 'achievements' that are congruous with the commercial value syndrome. A soldier may receive a badge indicating prowess (perhaps in the use of a firearm), or loyalty (placing her own life at risk for the sake of comrades). Commercial achievements tend to be about exploration. For example, the term 'achievement' in the gaming community most often means challenges that may be accomplished, but are orthogonal to the point structure and goal of the game itself. In other words, they reward innovation, novelty, and enterprise, values identified by Jacobs as belonging to the commercial syndrome. To earn a 'networker' badge on the Huffington Post site, you must exhibit a trait identified as being part of the commercial syndrome: the ability to collaborate easily with strangers and aliens.

Perhaps because of this last value among the commercial class – the cosmopolitan ideal of working with anyone worthy of trust – badges have been slow to come to the commercial world. Certainly they have existed as trademarks and logos, ways of knowing whether a product or provider could be trusted. But more broadly, the openness to those outside of one's own experience or knowledge is the hallmark of commercial culture. That ability to trust ones trading partner did not need to be enforced by traders, since it was thought that someone who violated the trust of the community could, at least in the worst case, be turned over to the relevant authorities. In the online world, some easily-read indication of trust is more necessary.

The online trader rarely has recourse to guardian authorities when someone breeches their trust. This is one of the reasons that eBay has for so long provided badges to trustworthy sellers, based on their record of sales and their feedback from other buyers. The online buyer is given a great deal of information about a potential seller on eBay, including access to much of their transactional history on the site. That, like a resume offered on a battlefield, can represent too complex a picture for the satisficing buyer, who wants to know quickly whether a seller has

generally been considered trustworthy by earlier buyers. The ability to summarize complex collections of data, while not hiding the process or the data that was used to generate the badge, represents a different sort of application from that traditionally used among guardians.

## Boundary badges and monstrous badges

Few think thoroughly about their interpretation of badges. If someone has a particular badge on TripAdvisor, the reader might assume that the person is a real commenter, or is somewhat more trustworthy in comparison with other reviewers. But the badge in this case carries more with it than just a representation of past contributions. It also bears some mark of the badges that came before it; say, military campaign ribbons. Particularly for those who are not familiar with the community, the badge may signal authority and prowess that is not intended by the bearer.

Part of the problem with badges is simply that they continue to look like badges, in many cases. The visual representation of an achievement or skill, when placed in a visual context that calls to mind coats of arms, police badges, or other forms of traditional badges attaches to that representation a long history of values that may not match the context of use. It is not possible to borrow from a long history of badges in guardian contexts without some of the values of those badges 'leaking' into the current context.

Moreover, such leakage is often what is hoped for. While many badges are intended to signal only to the immediate community, there is often some signaling that occurs outside of that immediate epistemic community. It may be, for example, that someone is unable to recognize the symbolic meaning of particular campaign ribbons worn by a soldier in another nation's army, but the number of such ribbons should provide some indication. Badges must serve the local community, but they are often expected to have a wider footprint, and it is difficult under those circumstances to predict how those badges might be interpreted by those outside the community.

For now, at least, it is unlikely that someone who is not a heavy user of Stack Overflow will be interested in or understand the significance of the 'cleanup' badge. But there is already some indication that such achievements in Stack Overflow might appear on employment resumes or other forums not originally anticipated (Davis 2010). As such, badges are the almost ideal 'boundary object', a way of translating the practices and social capital of one community to other, dissimilar communities (Wenger 1998).

This ability to act as a focus of multiple communities is a natural part of the reification present in any badge, but the ability to move easily among contexts is likely to be enhanced by new badge aggregation systems. Badges might have been visible in multiple contexts in the past, but making them so, required some

work. Several gaming platforms, including those offered by Microsoft, Sony, Valve, and Kongregate, allow the user to collect and aggregate achievements from different games on the same platform (Medler 2009). Sites like Score.ly attempt to draw in your badges from multiple sources, and an open infrastructure for sharing badges is being tested by Mozilla. Such efforts intend to increase the transparency of badges across contextual boundaries, allowing the holders to deploy the badges as markers of identity in multiple locations. But this also exacerbates the issue of unintended leakage.

Jacobs notes that while the two syndromes are complementary on a social scale, when the same actors engage in a combination of values from each syndrome, it produces 'monstrous moral hybrids'. Her examples include the metaphors of military conquest when applied to business administration and the efforts of the state to shape the price system in the Soviet Union. Both led to breakdown, according to Jacobs, because they mixed moral precepts from two antithetical systems. Given that traditionally so many badges found a home in guardian contexts – in the military, the government, and churches – and that they are being introduced today overwhelmingly in very commercial, cosmopolitan contexts, there is a danger that they are inheriting ethical expectations that do not work well together.

## Learning badges

This can be seen particularly acutely in cases where badges are being applied to learning environments. We have seen that although badges have been used in a wide range of ways, the ability to motivate holders, and potential holders, to learn to accomplish particular skills or behave in particular ways has been among the most frequent of applications. The question is what sort of motivation a badge provides.

A badge is a symbol that something exists, and it is important to make sure that it does not come to replace the thing it represents. This is true regardless of where badges are used, but becomes particularly important in learning. If the process of earning a badge is itself a learning process, and even better, if it can lead others to learning, the badge has done its job. As Aaron Silvers (2011) argues:

> I love the idea of merit badges in education, but *only* if we're going to bring with them the framework by which they are effective. As an Eagle Scout, the thing I remember most was the different mentoring I had from people in the community I wasn't exposed to. Police officers, firefighters, forestry people, craftsmen, farmers . . . I had to have a relationship with people across many fields in order to advance. I valued the direct mentoring I had with my Scouting leaders who shared life lessons and made decisions to advance me (and sometimes slow me down to develop a little more) with great amounts of care.

In the case he describes, the badge is more than an empty symbol. It represents a process, and one that requires significant time and effort.

When badges are used as a way to certify knowledge and learning, the danger of monstrous hybridization becomes part of learning networks and educational institutions. As Chall (2002) notes, we might find some congruence between Jacob's two syndromes and student-centered versus teacher-centered learning environments. When these two approaches are combined, we are likely to see conflict. If learning badges are used at once in environments where they are 'awarded' for service, as a gold star might be used in a traditional classroom to enforce desirable behaviors, and at the same time used to represent peer-assessed, student-guided learning, the badges are likely to have little meaning outside of immediate contexts, and may easily lead to confusion or worse among students interested in them.

Wenger (2004) suggests that the two syndromes presented by Jacobs represent two forms of learning governance, 'emergent governance', which arises through a process of individual interactions, and 'stewardship governance', which is the result of policies arrived at by traditional authorities, including governments, NGOs, and the like. Both clearly have an effect on the way people learn, and as in other areas in which badges are employed, a combination of efforts from both can be useful. However, when both exert their interests through the same system – the exchange of learning badges – it is reasonable to expect that the monstrous combination would lead to significant dysfunction, as badges develop into a currency of their own. The counter-productive form of a badge merely reproduces the problems of letter grading, relying on what Kohn (1993) called 'pop behaviorism', rewarding specific behavior extrinsically rather than building deeper passion for learning. Many of the values Jacobs categorizes as being part of the commercial syndrome seem to be closely allied with the ideals of constructivist learning. It is impossible to completely isolate badges from their prevalence in guardian contexts, but it is important when creating new systems that they explicitly reject the guardian ethics and embrace the ethics of the 'commercial' system.

The discussion above makes explicit reference to more traditional school and university settings, but the sort of design for learning applies equally in many of the contexts in which badges are employed online today. Game designers, business administrators, and community managers should all be essentially concerned with the question of who in their organizations learn, under what circumstances, and how they represent that knowledge to others.

## Making future badges

There remain a number of good reasons to incorporate badges in an online system. They can serve as a clear way of expressing what is valued by a

community, they encourage participation by those interested in the badges, they provide the means to identify more closely with the learning experience (to 'learn to be' rather than 'learn to do' as Brown & Adler 2008, put it), they allow for a diversity of self-directed gratifications among a group, and they provide a visual cue and social marketing for a particular community. Nonetheless, designing a badge system that does not attend to the longer history of badges would be unwise.

To create a badge system that is mindful of that history, it is important that the intended function of the badge be understood. If the badges will be intended to express authority, they should be consistent in how they approach the ethical choices they suggest. If they are meant primarily as a form of (self) identity, they likewise should adopt a set of values in how they are assessed, granted, and displayed that reflect this intended use. It is nearly guaranteed that badges will be used in ways outside of their intended function, but a clear idea of that intended function is important, and that the uses remain congruent.

Given that badges are intended to be a visual shortcut, it is important that they remain stable and recognizable. Even if the criteria by which the badges are awarded changes over time, given that one of the most important functions of a badge system is often to build community and to create trust, it is important that the visual display of the badge remains stable. Naturally, virtual badge designers are not faced with issues of inventory and the like, but a recognized badge builds symbolic capital within a community and outside of it.

While monstrous hybrids are to be avoided, it is important to rely on enforcement mechanisms to control who can issue a badge and under what conditions. While the transparency of the badge process depends largely on the context of use, if your badge fits most neatly within the commercial syndrome, it is important that the assessment and issuing process remain open and documented. More broadly, ideally the badge is not a replacement for other forms of assessing or communicating value. A badge that provides a pointer to deeper documentation is important, particularly for participatory communities. It should be immediately clear to the recipient and anyone challenging the legitimacy of the badge how and why it was awarded. This also avoids the issue of the badge coming to mean something on its own; it is instead always a pointer to more information.

Badges earned in the guardian context often involve significant sacrifice on the part of the bearer; sometimes the ultimate sacrifice. The value and resilience of a badge is frequently determined by how much was given up in order to receive it. In designing a badge system intended to motivate participants, remember that although rapid and early feedback is important, the badges that remain the most respected and are the longest lasting are those that require significant sacrifice.

Clearly more detail can be extracted from the particular histories of physical badges, depending on the intent of the badge. Because badges in the commercial syndrome (which for Jacobs includes scientific discourse and a range of other

modern contexts) are relatively new, a study of the history also provides approaches to avoid. Given that particular meanings of a badge are likely to leak from previous designs that are visually similar, picking the appropriate model is especially important.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1996, p. 36) wrote that 'monstrous moral hybrids' were a likely outcome of networked organizations generally. The social web, whether it is referred to by that name or the more commercial 'web 2.0', clearly reflects an intersection between two moral structures, and the two forms of power that go with them: the economic and the political. Badges are poised to become a visible marker of these conflicts. For those who wish to invent new ways of interacting online, it is vital that they recognize that any badge system carries with it a set of ethical expectations, and badge systems are likely to perform better if those expectations are consistent, cohesive, and appropriate to the context.

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