

Playing to Be Heard: Rethinking Participation in Digital Ageing through Governance-Oriented Gamification

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Abstract: As health and social care becomes increasingly digital-first, “participation” for older adults is often treated as a simple question: did they sign up, can they use it, and do they follow the rules? This paper argues that such a view misses what happens in everyday life. Many older people are not simply “non-compliant” or “low literacy”; they are trying to make sense of confusing systems, relying on family or community support to get things done, and sometimes stepping back when digital services feel risky, unfair, or hard to trust. If these experiences matter, then methods are needed that do more than measure uptake or performance. Older adults need ways to explain frustration, dependency, workaround, and refusal as part of living with digital-first systems. To address this gap, the paper proposes gamification not as a behaviour-change tool, but as a structured, low-pressure participatory format for sense-making and collective reflection around digital governance. Used in this way, gamification may help make visible where people get stuck, how support networks shape access, and what kinds of responsibility and control digital systems silently place on them. The paper develops this as a conceptual and methodological proposition, outlining a preliminary workflow, key design principles, and potential application scenarios rather than reporting a tested intervention or prototype. In doing so, it argues that digital participation should be understood not only as use, but as a lived and negotiated relationship with digital ageing governance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Ageing is becoming a key area of digital governance (Kolotouchkina, 2023). In New Zealand and comparable contexts, health and social care systems are increasingly organised around digital-first models, enabled through portals, online booking, telehealth, and related forms of digital service coordination (Health New Zealand, n.d.; Newbould et al., 2024). These reforms are commonly framed through a language of participation, empowerment, and co-

design, promising greater autonomy and access for older adults alongside improved system efficiency (Sanz et al., 2021; Varjakoski, 2025). Digitalisation is therefore presented not simply as a technical upgrade, but as a way of enabling older people to play a more active role in managing care.

Yet a persistent paradox sits at the heart of these reforms. While participation is repeatedly invoked as a guiding principle, older adults’ lived experiences of digitalised governance often remain difficult to articulate and translate into institutional knowledge (Petrakaki et al., 2021). In policy and applied research,

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participation is often narrowed to uptake-oriented measures such as access, log-in, usability, or compliance (e.g., Knotnerus et al., 2024; Zainal et al., 2023). Within this framing, difficulties are easily read as signs of exclusion, low literacy, resistance, or lack of confidence (Norman & Skinner, 2006; Schreurs et al., 2017). What receives less attention is how older adults make sense of digital systems and negotiate digital requirements in everyday life.

This narrowing matters because digital-first systems do not simply change service delivery; they also reshape how responsibility, visibility, and dependence are organised in later life. Older adults often rely on family members, community intermediaries, or informal strategies to navigate digital systems, yet this labour of mediation often remains only partly visible within formal systems (Reneland-Forsman, 2018; Latulipe et al., 2018). As a result, participation may appear absent precisely when it is being actively negotiated in practice, creating not only a conceptual problem but also a methodological one. Existing research on ageing and digital technology has often focused on technology adoption or behaviour change, evaluating interventions by their ability to increase use, compliance, or measurable outcomes (Bertolazzi et al., 2024; Stamate et al., 2024). While valuable, such approaches leave less room to examine how governance is lived and negotiated in everyday life (Sanz et al., 2021).

This paper argues that digital ageing research needs a participatory method better able to surface how governance is experienced and negotiated in everyday life, and proposes a rethinking of gamification for that purpose. Rather than treating it as a behaviour change technique, the paper develops governance-oriented gamification as a structured, scenario-based, and non-evaluative interface for making governance discussable from the standpoint of those living within it (Johnson et al., 2016). In doing so, the paper makes three contributions: it reframes participation in digital ageing beyond uptake, usability, and compliance; it introduces governance-oriented gamification as a methodological proposition for eliciting older adults' lived interpretations of digital systems; and it outlines an operational framework and design principles to guide future participatory research and co-design.

2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

2.1 Participation Has Been Narrowed to Measurable Uptake

In digital-first reforms, participation is often reduced to observable acts such as registration, log-in, self-booking, form completion, and compliance with prescribed digital pathways (Bertolazzi et al., 2024). Within this framing, difficulties are easily read as signs of exclusion, low literacy, resistance, or lack of confidence. This is a politically convenient interpretation because it shifts attention away from institutional design and towards the supposed deficiencies of individual users (Selwyn, 2004).

This paper adopts a different view. Participation should not be understood only as visible system use, but also as the ability to interpret the system, explain how it reorganises everyday life, and question what it makes difficult or impossible. Under this view, a person who never directly uses a portal may still be participating in an important sense if they can describe how the system shifts labour onto family members, reshapes privacy and decision-making, or makes certain needs harder to express. The issue, then, is not simply that older adults are hard to engage, but that many institutional formats recognise only a narrow kind of voice: fluent, confident, and individually autonomous (Helsper, 2012). As a result, confusion, hesitation, dependence, and refusal are too easily treated as failure rather than as evidence of how governance works in practice (Wyatt, 2005).

2.2 Ageing under Digital-First Governance Is Relational, Mediated, and Negotiated

Ageing is often framed either as a biological stage or as an individual project of resilience and self-management (WHO, 2002; WHO, 2020). Digital-first governance can intensify this logic by rewarding those who can self-navigate and quietly problematising those who cannot.

This paper treats ageing not simply as a matter of individual ability, but as a relational and institutional position. Older adults live within families, care obligations, community networks, and service systems that shape how responsibility and dependence are organised. In digital settings, access is often mediated rather than individual. Older people may rely on adult children, neighbours, or community workers to interpret instructions, complete tasks, and judge what is safe to disclose. Much of this labour

remains invisible within formal systems, even though it is central to how those systems function in practice (Latulipe et al., 2018).

Digital participation in later life is therefore often negotiated across relationships and everyday circumstances. What appears as non-use or disengagement may instead reflect workaround, delay, selective disclosure, privacy concerns, or the redistribution of digital labour across social ties. Older age, in this sense, is increasingly governed through systems that presume autonomy while often producing new forms of dependence.

2.3 Why a Different Participatory Method Is Needed

If participation is understood as the lived interpretation and negotiation of digital governance, then a methodological question follows: how can research create conditions in which older adults can express not only barriers or preferences, but also how digital systems are made workable in practice? Interviews, surveys, and usability-focused approaches are still useful for understanding barriers, attitudes, preferences, and patterns of use. But they may not always capture how digital governance is experienced and negotiated in everyday life (Sanz et al., 2021). This is especially true for workaround, dependence, quiet resistance, or selective non-use, which often unfold across several steps and relationships. Yet these are often the moments when governance is felt most clearly, as older adults interpret system demands, decide what to disclose, and coordinate help across family and community ties.

For this reason, the paper argues that digital ageing research needs a participatory method that is scenario-based, collective, low-stakes, and non-evaluative. This is the context in which it turns to gamification. Gamification is commonly framed as a motivational technology built around points, badges, rewards, and behavioural nudges (Deterding, 2011; Hamari et al., 2014), and in health and ageing it is often linked to behaviour change or engagement goals (Johnson et al., 2016). That is not the purpose here. Instead, the paper proposes that gamification can be rethought as a structured participatory interface that helps make digital governance easier to see, name, and discuss.

3 DESIGNING A GOVERNANCE-ORIENTED GAMIFICATION

3.1 Defining Governance-Oriented Gamification

In this paper, governance-oriented gamification refers to a structured participatory approach that uses gameful and scenario-based formats to help older adults express how digital systems are understood, negotiated, and made workable in everyday life. Rather than treating gamification as a behaviour change technique, it is used here to make older adults' sense-making processes, as well as the assumptions built into digital systems, easier to see, describe, and discuss.

This approach is grounded in the alternative practices and interpretive work that older adults develop around digital-first care systems, which are not sufficiently captured by outcome-oriented views of participation. What is retained from gamification is therefore not a superficial reward logic, but the use of structured situations, roles, choices, sequences, and guided interaction to support participation and reflection. In this sense, the value of gamification lies less in encouraging compliance and more in creating a form through which difficult, fragmented, or tacit experiences can be expressed without immediately being judged as success or failure (Deterding, 2011; Hamari et al., 2014; Jessen et al., 2018).

Understood in this way, governance-oriented gamification is not a softer version of task testing, nor a tool for simply making older adults more willing to comply with digital systems. Its purpose is not to assess whether participants can complete digital tasks independently, but to examine how those tasks are interpreted, negotiated, and made workable in practice. Its immediate value lies not in producing quick solutions, but in generating governance insight: showing where labour is shifted, where dependence is hidden, where autonomy is assumed, and where participation is formally invited but practically constrained.

3.2 A Preliminary Workflow

The workflow proposed here is not a fixed protocol, but a preliminary sequence for future research. It begins with governance-relevant situations in which digital participation is shaped by friction, dependence, mediation, or uncertainty. These should not be generic examples of technology use, but situations in

which older adults need to interpret system demands, make practical judgements, or rely on help from others. Examples may include online appointment booking, patient portal access, proxy use by family members, telehealth participation, or digital form completion (Hvalič-Touzery et al., 2024; Latulipe et al., 2018). Starting from such situations keeps the analysis grounded in lived governance. These situations are then translated into structured and discussable formats, such as scenario cards, pathway mapping, role prompts, decision points, or sequence-based activities (Bromark et al., 2023; Tunc et al., 2023). The aim is not entertainment for its own sake, but to make difficult or fragmented experiences easier to externalise and examine. Figure 1 presents this preliminary workflow in schematic form, showing how governance-relevant situations are translated into structured participatory formats and turned into governance insight through non-evaluative participation and guided reflection.

Participation is organised in a non-evaluative and non-competitive way. Participants are not asked to demonstrate competence or produce the correct answer. Instead, they are invited to describe how they would move through the situation, where they would hesitate, when they would ask for help, what would make them uncomfortable, and why they might stop or opt out. A lower-pressure format makes it easier to express uncertainty, dependence, and selective refusal without turning them into signs of inadequacy (Darlet & Carroll, 2022; Pradhan et al., 2020). The analysis therefore focuses not only on what final decision is made, but on how participants move through the situation. Narration, hesitation, workaround, reinterpretation, disagreement, silence, and requests for help may all be analytically meaningful.

The final stage is to turn the process into governance insight through guided reflection or debrief. Participants may be asked which moments felt most difficult, where help became necessary, which steps seemed unfair or unclear, and what kinds of responsibility the system appeared to shift onto them or others. The output is not a score or a measure of successful participation, but a more grounded account of how participation is organised in practice: where labour is shifted, where dependence is hidden, where autonomy is assumed, and where participation is invited but practically constrained. In this sense, the workflow is intended to show how governance-oriented gamification can move from situated interaction to interpretive insight without reducing participation to performance.

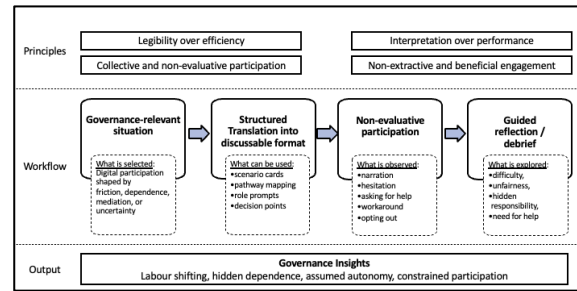


Figure 1: Preliminary framework of governance-oriented gamification.

4 DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND BOUNDARIES

The principles below are not principles for designing digital systems themselves. They are principles for designing the governance-oriented gamified process proposed in this paper. Their purpose is to clarify how this participatory method should be structured if it is to surface lived experiences of digital governance rather than reproduce familiar logics of digital engagement research.

4.1 Designing for Legibility Rather than Efficiency

A first principle is to design the participatory process for legibility rather than efficiency. The point is not to make the activity as smooth, fast, or streamlined as possible. Nor is it to turn a user-friendly digital system into an artificially awkward one. The issue lies in the translation process itself. When real digital situations are turned into playable formats, there is a risk that small but important points of difficulty are removed in order to make the activity easier to run. Yet these seemingly minor details may be exactly where older adults' engagement is shaped.

Within this framework, legibility means resisting that kind of over-smoothing. The process should preserve enough of the original situation for participants to notice where uncertainty, friction, or burden-shifting occurs. Activities therefore should not be organised around speed or frictionless progression. They should instead make intermediate steps visible and discussable. Scenario sequencing, pathway mapping, and guided reflection are useful here because they help keep those easily erased details in view. This is consistent with scenario-based co-design work showing that structured, stepwise situations can help older adults articulate concerns

and dilemmas that may be flattened in more generic discussions (Tunc et al., 2023).

4.2 Designing for Interpretation Rather than Performance

A second principle is to design the participatory task for interpretation rather than answer production. Participants should not be asked to prove competence, complete a scenario correctly, or show that they understand the official pathway. Instead, they should be invited to explain how they understand a situation, what they think the system is asking of them, what they assume will happen next, and how they would decide what to do.

This also means avoiding question-and-answer formats that reproduce institutional logics too closely. If the activity becomes a form of health system instruction, troubleshooting, or knowledge checking, it risks turning the method back into a tool for correction rather than interpretation. The point is not to ask older adults to supply the right answers, but to make room for uncertainty, workaround, hesitation, and practical judgement. Activities should therefore use prompts that support explanation, sequence, and reflection rather than quiz-like response structures. This reflects findings from design workshop research showing that the structure of prompts and materials shapes how older adults participate and what kinds of knowledge they are able to contribute (Pradhan et al., 2020).

4.3 Designing Participation as Collective and Non-Evaluative

A third principle is to design participation as collective and carefully non-evaluative. The aim is not to compare participants, rank responses, or identify who handles a situation most effectively. It is to create a shared setting in which common patterns of mediation, dependence, workaround, and uncertainty can be recognised and discussed.

This principle also requires a more explicit boundary from conventional reward-based gamification. Quizzes, scores, rewards, and ranking systems should not become the dominant mechanism of participation. If they do, the activity can easily slip back towards compliance, performance, or strategically desirable responses. At the same time, this does not require the absolute rejection of every form of encouragement or gameful reinforcement. In some settings, a complete absence of such elements may reduce willingness to participate. The issue is therefore one of balance: reward, where present,

should remain secondary to narration, reflection, and collective interpretation, rather than displacing them. Participatory gameful design research suggests that game elements are most useful when they support exploration and expression, rather than dominate the activity itself (Jessen et al., 2018).

4.4 Designing Participation as Non-Extractive and Beneficial

A final principle is that the participatory process should not be extractive. Older adults should not be treated merely as sources of feedback or raw material for someone else's analysis. Their participation should also be meaningful to them. This is not only an ethical concern, but an epistemic one. The method depends on valuing experiential knowledge of governance: knowledge of what digital systems demand, whom they burden, where help becomes necessary, and how care relations are reorganised in everyday life.

For this reason, the process should be organised in ways that make participation worthwhile in its own right. It should create a setting in which experiences are taken seriously, where uncertainty and dependence do not count as failure, and where difficult aspects of digital life can be expressed without embarrassment or correction. It may also support recognition, confidence, and shared understanding, even if such outcomes should not be overstated in advance. In this sense, governance-oriented gamification should not only generate insight for research; it should also recognise older adults as contributors of lived governance knowledge. This aligns with co-design research that treats older adults as equal collaborators rather than merely as sources of feedback or data (Darlet et al., 2022; Sakaguchi-Tang et al., 2021).

5 WHAT THIS APPROACH CAN REVEAL

This section outlines what governance-oriented gamification may help bring into view in digital ageing research. The aim is not to claim findings in advance, but to show how a different participatory format may make visible aspects of digital participation that are often flattened, individualised, or overlooked in more conventional research and evaluation.

One likely effect of this approach is that it may change how confusion is read. Research on ageing

and digitalisation often reports confusion when older adults interact with digital systems (Hvalič-Touzery et al., 2024; Laukka et al., 2024). This is usually interpreted as a problem of literacy or skills (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017). A governance-oriented gamified process allows a different reading. When participants talk through where they pause and why a step feels difficult, confusion may point not to individual incapacity, but to unclear system logic, hidden responsibility, or unrealistic expectations of self-management. In this sense, confusion becomes a governance signal rather than simply a deficit to be corrected (Schreurs et al., 2017).

Once confusion is treated in this way, other practices can also be read differently. Older adults often manage digital systems through partial use, delay, avoidance, or informal help (Wyatt, 2003; Wildenbos et al., 2019). These practices are usually treated as disengagement. This approach may show that they can also be forms of negotiation. In a non-evaluative and scenario-based setting, participants may find it easier to explain why they avoid certain functions, comply only partly, or rely on parallel arrangements. What looks like failure from the outside may instead show how agency is exercised within restrictive digital conditions (Baumer et al., 2015).

This also brings relational labour more clearly into view. Digital participation in later life is rarely individual (Nahm, 2020; Latulipe et al., 2018). Access often depends on family members, community workers, or digitally skilled peers. Formal systems usually record only the final act of access, not the work behind it. By foregrounding mediation, a governance-oriented gamified process may show how participation is sustained through hidden labour rather than independent use alone (Dickman Portz et al., 2021; Dukhanin et al., 2024; Latulipe et al., 2018). Once these hidden supports are recognised, participation itself starts to look different. Administrative logic often treats participation as visible and continuous engagement, but older adults may understand it instead as a balance between access and exposure, or between convenience and safety. What appears as disengagement may sometimes be a deliberate way of staying involved without becoming over-exposed (Zou et al., 2024; Garcia Reyes et al., 2023). Practices such as selective refusal, partial compliance, or reliance on informal support may therefore reflect not low capability, but practical judgement under unequal conditions (Wyatt, 2005).

6 DISCUSSION

This paper is not arguing that governance-oriented gamification should replace existing research on ageing and digital health. That is not the point. Existing approaches still matter for understanding adoption, barriers, preferences, service access, and outcomes (Bertolazzi et al., 2024). What this paper proposes is something more specific: when the question is not only whether older adults use digital systems, but how they make sense of them, work around them, rely on others, or quietly step back from them, a governance-oriented gamified process may help make those experiences easier to see. In that sense, the framework is meant to add to existing approaches rather than compete with them. It is better understood as a complementary participatory method that can sit alongside more established forms of interview, co-design, and user-centred inquiry.

At the same time, the limits of this paper need to be stated plainly. This is a conceptual and methodological proposal, not an evaluated intervention. It does not present pilot data, user testing, or a finished prototype, and it does not claim that this approach has already been shown to work better than interviews, surveys, or focus groups. What it does offer is a clearer account of what governance-oriented gamification is, how it differs from more familiar forms of gamification, and what kinds of insight it may be able to generate. The contribution of the paper therefore lies in methodological clarification and conceptual reframing, rather than in empirical validation.

That also points to the next steps. The first is to pilot the framework using a small number of concrete scenarios, such as booking, portal access, proxy use, or telehealth. The second is to compare what this method brings out with what interviews, focus groups, or other participatory formats bring out, not to prove that one method is always better, but to understand what each one makes more or less visible. The third is to refine facilitation, including how much structure or gameful reinforcement helps participation without pushing the process back towards performance or compliance. Finally, the framework needs to be examined across different groups of older adults, service settings, and digital contexts. That is how this work would move from a conceptual proposal towards a more grounded methodological contribution.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that participation in digital ageing is too often reduced to uptake, usability, and compliance, which makes it harder to see how older adults actually interpret, negotiate, work around, and sometimes withdraw from digital systems. In response, it has proposed governance-oriented gamification as a participatory sense-making method rather than a behaviour change technique. Reframed in this way, gamification is not used to optimise engagement or reward compliance, but to create structured, scenario-based, and non-evaluative conditions in which the lived realities of digital governance become easier to express and discuss. The contribution of the paper is therefore not a finished solution, but a methodological proposal for making participation, and its hidden conditions, more visible from the standpoint of those living within digital-first systems.

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