



## Approaching enterprise gamification right.

### Six things to keep in mind while conceptualizing a gamification system.

Much has been said and discussed about gamification. In the last few months we have heard people trashing it as just another fad. We have also heard that gamification is at the top of the famed Gartner hype curve.

Our firm belief is that gamification is here to stay. One just needs to design the intervention properly before taking the wind away from a theme.

Here are six things to consider when designing a gamification system:

#### 1. Having the right intent - the importance of being earnest.

Consider gamification as an application of behavioral psychology to elicit desirable behavior. It follows that any gamified experience presented to an end user runs the risk of being perceived as manipulative. Since game experiences are designed to appeal to the user's emotion, adoption or rejection is instinctive and occurs in the first few minutes of the user's engagement with the system. This is very different from the adoption curves of conventional applications. If in the first few minutes of engagement, the game experience does not seem genuine to the user, there is a good chance of alienation and rejection.

To avoid this, it is important to get the intent right while designing the gamified solution itself. A gamified solution's primary objective must be to deliver an elevated experience for the user, to make his life better. This should resonate with the user as he engages with the gamified system.


Although this may seem commonsensical, most initial discussions on gamification start with the question, "How can I make my user do what I want?", while the pertinent question to ask is, "How do I make this experience more rewarding for my user?"

#### 2. Game mechanics is not sustainable. Think game experience.

There are two conflicting schools of thought on gamification.

One of them postulates that gamification is not about game experience but about using clever incentive systems (otherwise known as game mechanics) to generate user engagement. Such game mechanics popularly include virtual points, badges, progress bars, leader-boards and challenges. The gamification industry today is dominated by product platform companies that plug game mechanics on to existing enterprise applications like Yammer, Jive, Salesforce, etc. And they are the most vocal advocates of the game mechanics world view.

The other postulates that the game experience is the driving force behind user engagement and that game mechanics by itself is incapable of driving and sustaining change. Although this is a minority view on gamification today, it will very likely become the dominant approach to gamification in coming years. According to the Gartner hype cycle, gamification is poised to slide down the 'trough of disillusionment'. If this turns out true, it is likely to be a result of user disenchantment with game mechanics based applications.



After its raging success, FourSquare became the poster boy of the game mechanics approach to gamification. But, in recent times, user engagement has reportedly dipped drastically, forcing FourSquare to shift the focus from game mechanics to social content creation. Although the causal reasons for this have not been established, it would not be farfetched to see this as a result of users' disillusionment with virtual badges. This is a case in point for the game experience approach to gamification.

Game experience and game mechanics based approaches fall on two extremes of the gamification solution continuum. The conventional wisdom on gamification leans towards the game mechanics world view. But conventional wisdom is rarely the most reliable touchstone when it is based on anecdotal evidence accumulated over just a couple of years. Gamification is an emerging concept undergoing tremendous flux. While what the future holds is anybody's guess, game mechanics alone is unlikely to prove a sustainable solution for user engagement.

### 3. Give away tangible rewards to the extent possible.

Consumer motivation is a contentious area of academic research with conflicting theories on the efficacy of intrinsic and extrinsic mechanisms of motivation. While the jury is out on this topic, it is important for gamification designers to decide whether to conceptualize a virtual rewards system or to dish out real goodies.

Instead of delving into the theoretical quagmire of motivation, it might be more fruitful to raise the question of sustainability in engagement while making this decision. The value of virtual rewards tends to diminish over time as the novelty of virtual rewards like badges and achievements wears off. On the other hand, the value of a movie ticket or the value of hard currency remains constant over time. The question of sustainability, therefore clinches the argument in favor of real rewards.

### 4. Process mindset won't take you far. Imbibe a creative approach.

Designing and implementing an effective gamification solution is as much about having the right mindset as it is about making the right strategic and design choices. There is an inherent conflict between the approach towards IT solution development and the approach that gamification necessitates. The standard approach to IT solutions is process centric. While a process-based approach for gamification could evolve over time as the industry matures, it should be made clear that the standard SDLC mindset does not fit well with the creative process involved in gamification.

The gamification mindset involves two critical aspects. First and foremost, to understand the psychological motivations of the end user not merely from a theoretical stand point, but also from the particular context of the game experience envisioned. Secondly, the game conceptualization must be approached like a creative agency would, while designing an ad campaign. This is important as any game experience must first and foremost appeal to the emotional rather than rational side of end users.

### 5. The days of coercion are passé. Prepare to woo the enterprise user.

Gamified experiences can expect to have a shelf life as well as adoption pattern which mirror the penetration curves of consumer products. The 'innovators' would lead the pack, followed by 'early adopters', 'early majority', 'late majority' and 'laggards' respectively. Any gamification rollout should be approached as if it were a new consumer product with the objective of accelerating market penetration. A conventional corporate application rollout approach could be counterproductive for gamified solutions.

Adoption in a conventional rollout is driven top down, where the line managers pass the buck down to their reporting employees and use coercive methods to drive adoption. Coercion is fatal to the adoption of gamification solutions as its core idea is voluntary immersion in a new experience. Enticement should replace coercion. And the gamified experience should be advertised like a consumer product where the end user believes he is empowered to accept or reject the experience being offered.

## 6. Avoid big bang rollouts. Put your money in several small baskets.

Any innovative gamification solution carries with it a significant element of uncertainty as player behavior cannot be predicted with accuracy. It is therefore not advisable to make large investments in make or break gamification solutions. The focus must be on minimizing risk by designing lightweight game layers which integrate loosely with the process being gamified. This allows the flexibility of switching game experience layers without affecting the underlying process or work activity. Rigorous play testing by control groups and phased rollouts can minimize the risk involved.

We have embarked upon our own journey and we see excitement in the way it is being received. There is much left to fine tune and redesign before we can say that we have mastered the art and science of gamification.

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