Winning with enterprise gamification

Visakh Sakthidharan from Mindtree looks at the complexities involved in creating a successful gamified experience

Much has been said about gamification. Certainly in the last few months we have heard people trashing it as just another fad, and we have also heard that it is at the top of the famous Gartner hype cycle.
However, gamification is here to stay and one just needs to design the intervention properly before taking the 'wind' out of a theme.

There are six things to consider when designing a gamification system:
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Having the right intent – the importance of being earnest
Consider gamification as an application of behavioural psychology to elicit desirable behaviour. Of course, 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 emotions, 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.

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 like common sense, 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?'

Game mechanics per se is not sustainable. Think game experience
There are two conflicting schools of thought on gamification.

The first 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 typically include virtual points, badges, progress bars, leader-boards and challenges. The gamification industry today is dominated by product platform companies that plug game mechanics into existing enterprise applications like Yammer, Jive, Salesforce and the rest. And they are the most vocal advocates of the game-mechanics world view.

The second suggests 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 today, it will probably become the dominant approach to gamification in coming years. Indeed, according to the Gartner hype cycle, gamification is poised to slide down the 'trough of disillusionment'.

If this turns out to be true, it is likely to be a result of user disenchantment with game mechanics-based applications.

After its earlier raging success, Foursquare became the poster boy of the game mechanics approach to gamification. However, in recent times, user engagement has reportedly dipped drastically, forcing Foursquare to shift the focus from game mechanics to social content creation. Although the causes of this have not been fully established, it would not be a flight of fancy to see this as a result of user 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 within two extremes of a 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, and, while what the future holds is anybody's guess, game mechanics alone is unlikely to prove a sustainable solution for user engagement.

Give away tangible rewards
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 remains out on this topic, gamification designers must decide whether to conceptualise a virtual rewards system or to dish out real goodies. Instead of delving into the theoretical quagmire surrounding 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 such rewards, like badges and achievements, wears off. On the other hand, the value of a cinema ticket or of hard currency remains constant over time. The question of sustainability, therefore, clinches the argument in favour of real rewards.

A process mindset won't take you far. Get creative
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 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 mindset does not fit well with the creative process involved in gamification.

The gamification mindset involves two critical aspects. First, 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 that is being envisioned.

Second, the game conceptualisation must be approached in the same way a creative agency would while designing an ad campaign. Any game experience must first appeal to the emotions rather than rational side of end users.

The days of coercion are past. Prepare to woo the enterprise user
Gamified experiences can expect to have a shelf life as well as an adoption pattern, mirroring the penetration curves of consumer products. The innovators will 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. The 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.

In addition, 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.

Avoid big-bang rollouts. Put your money in several small baskets
Any innovative gamification solution carries with it a significant element of uncertainty – player behaviour 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 minimising risk by designing lightweight game layers that 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 minimise the risk involved. We have embarked upon our own journey and we see excitement in the way it is being received.
In the end, however, 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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