Chapter 6

Deep and Shallow Gamification in Marketing: Thin Evidence and the Forgotten Powers of Really Good Games

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ABSTRACT

Gamification started trending as a term around 2010 and enjoyed a rise to mainstream prominence over the following years. The trend extols the use of game elements and game thinking to support behavior and experiences in non-game contexts but has been hotly debated and is currently facing a serious limitation of evidence. This chapter critically examines the field. Combining theoretical perspectives from game design and psychology with marketing examples, the chapter develops a continuum from deep to shallow gamification as an interpretative framework where game qualities and engagement potentials are seen as a function of design richness and integration with the behavior context. The chapter strongly underscores the need for methodologically consistent data collection before conclusions can be drawn about the economic and psychological efficacy of individual design elements and the gamification fad as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Your local power provider has been marketing a new greener brand. You log onto your profile on their website, and a little animated tree grows out of your front page. Congratulations! You kept your power usage in the to 25% the second month running. Your tree is 2/3 grown. If you manage another month, the power company will be planting 10 square meters of rain forest under your name.

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You set your smartphone brand-app to notify you, if your house starts gobbling up too much electricity. As you adjust the slider, you notice that tonight your colleagues are displaying slightly less sustainable consumption patterns than the neighborhood company you are competing with outside softball season. “Again? Come on, guys!” you think. You need to find a way of bringing it up tomorrow without sounding too preachy…

Gamification refers to the use of game elements to influence users in real life contexts - from online services to the workplace. The idea is now used to address objectives in at least three types of settings: 

- **External gamification** related to customer relationships, like in the vignette. Behavior change gamification meant to nudge (as per Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) people to change actions or habits like jogging or overt power consumption. And **internal or enterprise gamification** used to stimulate productivity or task resolution within organizations (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). For instance, the Danish national railroad service launched the *Echo.it* gamification initiative as an internal communications application to spur sharing of ideas and encourage employees to actively read and comment on each other’s contributions.

As the name implies, the underlying game mechanics made popular ideas echo visibly throughout the system, while awarding badges and attaching “digital jerseys” similar to Tour de France’s *maillot jaune* to user profiles for being the most active and creating ideas that resonated with colleagues throughout the huge geographically distributed organization. Echo thus added a simple layer of game mechanics, including a sports metaphor and highly visible feedback, to a web platform that was already in place. Similar approaches can be found for store websites, running apps, and cross-platform marketing campaigns where users are triggered and enticed to engage with established activities or brand messages at a deeper level.

Gamification was declared the next big thing at its ascension in tech and marketing circles around 2010 (e.g. Lumeria, 2013; McCormick, 2013), but the idea is also perched precariously on the peak of inflated expectations on the Gardner Hype Cycle (LeHong & Fenn, 2013), denoting a technology trend that has garnered considerable buzz but will soon have to stand its practical and academic test.

While we might have seen only the beginning of digital game elements in everyday situations (DeBurr, 2014), we have now reached a point where it is possible to analytically map a variety of discourses and practical approaches, and where a much needed basis of evidence is beginning to emerge from the peer-reviewed literature (e.g. Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014; Kovisto & Hamari, 2014; Lieberoth, 2015).

Departing in psychology and game design, this chapter critically analyzes the brief history and current evidence for gamification, and discusses central dimensions of good games that are not easily replicable in non-gaming contexts.

Formally, gamification is most commonly defined as the “use of game design elements and game thinking in non-game contexts” (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; Deterding, Khaled, Nacke, & Dixon, 2011; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). While this view has been discussed analytically in quite some depth, the phenomenon and common discourses surrounding it as both emerge “in the wild” to two interpretations of the phenomenon’s exact meaning:

The “orthodox” interpretation sees gamification as the addition of game elements to a practice, service or technology that is already in place, stereotypically (but not necessarily) fueled by relatively shallow mechanics like points, badges and leaderboards (PBL) to mark progress and give feedback. The orthodox interpretation has the advantage of delaminating a phenomenon that is qualitatively and functionally distinct from emerging sister-phenomena like advergames, newsgames, edutainment and game based learning.
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