



WORK AS A GAME

ABSTRACT

Successful gamification is incredible, you might say it is a game changer!

Motivation Matters Limited



Introduction

A game? Work should be a game? Does your Protestant Work Ethic rebel? Surely everyone knows people work to survive, they need money – that isn't a game! Would you dismiss gamification as some new-fangled technical solution to a problem that doesn't exist?

What if I said gamification has been alive and kicking for all my working life? And that is a long time!

When I was a middle manager we had the luxury of company cars before the taxman spoilt the fun. So you always surreptitiously checked out your peers to see if they had the 1.6L like you or even the 1.8L but surely not the GL!!!

Then, when you reach senior manager, your status is measured by the number of carpet tiles in your office; obviously having an outside window is a big step up. Really important managers have corner offices with windows on two sides. Directors have the key to the Executive Washroom and, maybe, their own dining facility.

I don't think having a 1.6L or a 1.8GL makes much difference in reality, it's just a status thing – a game.

People love to play games, we did as children and, although, as adults we "know" we shouldn't, we still love to play. If people love to play, why not use that to improve performance?

It would not be possible to list the gamification applications that exist, they are sprouting faster than I care to count.

Let's get into the meat of this article: I've set myself a target of 90 minutes to write this and I don't like to lose!

What makes a game?

A game is fun. If it isn't fun the majority of the time, it isn't a game.

A game is not life critical. Walking a tightrope way up high with a safety net may be a game, take away the safety net and, now, it is much more important. Losing the game is now life changing. The performer may still be having fun, but it is a performance, not a game. You see the difference, I am sure.

A game needs to involve a process that you can improve with practice. If you are stuck at a level playing a game of pure chance, then, no amount of experimentation or experience will improve your performance. That is not a game, merely a way of frittering away time.





S'apped

Remember how much fun you used to have playing? The hours shot past as you were totally absorbed in play. A game has to have that element of absorption; you have to be engaged with the game.

Finally, a game has to have that Goldilocks' character: not too hard and not too easy. You have to be challenged but, also, have to be able to improve and succeed, sometimes.

Gamification is a system that focuses people on achieving the desired results. As such, it encapsulates a model of the real world, giving a process to play and a measurable outcome to win.

That sounds like a SMART objective doesn't it? At best it is a **model** that is wrong the minute after it was developed. We have a lot of examples around us, the banks, the NHS and ... well to be honest, I have never seen a model that actually worked in the medium, never mind the long, term.

It seems that no matter how clever the designers of the SMART model are, the users will always find a way to game the system: because they can, because it's fun, because they want to see if they can out SMART you!

One big innovation is the internet of everything and astonishing computing power. This gives an enormous range of possibilities to design systems to turn almost anything into a game.

But just because you can, doesn't mean you should, design a system that incorporates a bigger and bigger subset of the real world variables to, more precisely, define the outcome: to keep the winning play relevant to that required. Technology is a game in itself, sometimes, the game being to look busy on an app while really just wasting time. Perhaps we need a new word – appicts – to describe those addicted to apps.

People

For a game to be a game, it must be accepted as non-threatening by the players. A game has to involve winners and losers, but only in the game, not in the real world. If you bring the game into the real world then it is just another incentive scheme, with trust in the management the casualty.

Winners and losers in a game can be a problem too! The best games pit you against yourself not your co-employees. Competition between employees can (often) be destructive and keeping the balance is difficult, whereas pitting your performance against yourself is still a game. All the tasks I have to do today have an estimated time, even the tasks that are brand new with times that are a guess. This drives me to beat the time with all that involves. Yesterday's tasks were wiped out due to a vast overrun on an external meeting. I'm not devastated at the lack of progress from yesterday but I am thinking how I can catch up today!





Games vs. Rewards

That is the engagement you want to get from your people: how do I do this better/faster/more?

The feeling of Flow – being totally absorbed in your activity in the moment – is a delight that everyone deserves to experience. It is also very effective at getting lots done! Designing the work environment to encourage flow is essential as it rarely happens by accident, unless you are the Boss and can choose your own environment.

A big problem of using gamification is people's suspicion that this is performance monitoring by subterfuge. You will need to have the right relationship with your people for them to believe you, or have to develop it before gamification can be used. Simply installing a game without the trust in management will not work.

A well designed gamified working environment gives you the opportunity to enhance the individuals intrinsic motivation (I'm doing this because it is interesting, fun, a good experience, let's try this and see what happens) and rely less on extrinsic motivation (bribery, punishment, threats, risk avoidance behaviour).

A simple target – get three of those applications processed today – can be a game providing there is no real world reward or threat associated with it. There should be no performance evaluation based on the game.

Management's role is to provide help to meet and beat the target by offering training, improving processes or perhaps, better infrastructure. Hands up everyone frustrated by their IT! I lost two hours yesterday due to a Microsoft Security update knocking out my sound!

Done right you can move people along the spectrum to where your people feel they are being paid to play. If the play is enjoyable – as play is by definition – you want to play more!

Of course people are a lot smarter than starving rats in an experimental maze. They listen to what you say about performance in the game not being linked to performance appraisal and then test you on that to see what you do.

Be prepared to be tested. Your response to the failure in the game will determine if the new model is a game or just another incentive scheme.

Those of us who enjoy games know that a game that always runs the same way provides short lived amusement. Noughts and Crosses (Tic Tac Toe) is a game of simple rules where applying the rules leads to inevitable draws. No excitement, no learning, no experimentation, no progress is possible.





A good game requires a dash of chance, of random variation, to keep it interesting.

So think about those applications your people process. Some applications may be simple and some complex, lots of information. Anyone who has completed a self-assessment tax form knows what I mean!

If you were designing an incentive scheme you would assess each form for complexity and give that form its own processing time. Obviously the amount of work involved needs to be accurately reflected in the incentive payment calculation.

In a game you'd take an average time and let the game run. Some days would be easy and people could coast, others would be difficult if there were more complex forms. So long as the work all gets done, does it matter if some days are harder than others?

You can always make the game more exciting by tightening the time and innovation of the process. How exciting is that? Now your people are thinking about the process and how to make it better, much more exciting!

Management

You can see now why management needs a soft focus on the game's results. That doesn't mean you ignore the numbers but you use the numbers to ask how we can improve the process, make the game easier to win and, then, naturally, raise the game to the next level and a higher target.

All this requires a positive management approach based on the assumption that people want to succeed, that people want to help you succeed and will work for the success of their employer. Positive management is too big a subject to go into here.

The management approach has to be one of praise for success, and enquiry into what happened when things went wrong. The manager wants to capture what went right and make that more likely by changing the environment and doing the opposite to the factors that created the missed target. That doesn't mean making the target easier to meet! Do you think soccer would be a better game with a bigger goal?

To be able to praise and enquire effectively, people have to believe you have their interests at heart and that comes down to the relationship you have built with them.

As we all know games have to evolve. Each level has to be harder to match our increased skill. That doesn't mean that in a business setting you make the process worse! You simply raise the target to make the game more interesting. Raise the target by enough to keep interest without destroying any hope people may have of winning.





Conclusion

The way you do this is through your leadership skills. It is very difficult to achieve this way of working if you are a middle manager as your boss may change the rules and destroy the trust that is required to make this work.

Get this right and you can be the catalyst that produces an astonishing improvement in performance.

Work should be fun! Does it have to be awful because someone is paying you to do it? That is the trouble with payment by results. All the intrinsic motivation people had for the work is destroyed by the bribe or threat, the extrinsic motivation. If you want examples look at the NHS and how the employee's motivation has changed.

There should be no numerate link between the game and employee's performance appraisal or rewards.

There are three definite characteristics that stop an activity being a good game:

- ⊙ A link to performance measurement
- ⊙ Internal competition in the "game" leading to real world outcomes
- ⊙ Accurate and precise measurement

If you get all this right you will be surprised by the simplicity of the system. If your system is complicated, then the chances are, you have got it wrong.

There and I'm five minutes over my target time but I did have three phone calls!





MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organizations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.

More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

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