



Gamification 101

Description

How do you turn a routine, everyday activity into something engaging, enjoyable, and even addictive? Answer: you turn it into a game. That's called *gamification*. I stumbled across a site that presents the [10 best productivity apps](#) that make use of gamification.

The site shows [a fitness app](#) that runs on your smartphone. It keeps a log of your activities; you can set goals; and schedule what's coming up. That's pretty ordinary. What makes this routine into a game?

Focus on competition

I ran a short focus group of seven postgraduate students on the theme of gamification. We started by watching a short video promoting the gamified fitness app. None of us had used the app. So we relied on the video for information about it.

If it wasn't already evident from the video promotion, the focus group participants were quick to identify the app's game elements. The list delivered a combination of the app's claims and the participants' own experiences with gamified apps.

- The group thought the fitness app looked as though it would be engaging, interesting and fun to use as it was based around the idea of *competition*.
- It uses a numerical scoring system. You get points for performing certain tasks.
- The app offers game-like rewards when you achieve your goals. These rewards may be virtual tokens that you store up for your own satisfaction, or that you display to others. I'm not sure this particular app worked this way, but the scoring could be a means of unlocking access to certain privileges.
- There's a social media aspect. You can have fitness friends and form fitness groups. This allows you to compare scores with others, either anonymously or with others you know. Like much game play there's a sociable aspect.
- There's also a cooperative element. You form teams and it looked as though you could compete with other teams as you compare scores.

- After a while some in the focus group identified the potential of this kind of app for meeting people and dating. (After all, *Tinder* is a gamified dating app.)
- The fitness app has a game-like appearance, with light-hearted, cartoony graphics and sounds.
- Like many mobile apps, you can pay, in-app, for certain privileges. This particular app offered to give you access to a live coach in a team context, extending the game metaphor further.

The group noted a couple of positives for this kind of app.

- If it works well, the app might encourage engagement and provide motivation to stick with your fitness programme.
- The group referred to the repetitive, and potentially routine and boring aspects of regular exercise regimes. Gamified apps help users undertake important, beneficial and necessary repetitive tasks. Some in the group pointed out the benefits of a particular language learning app they had used that deploys similar gamification tactics for learning vocabularies.

Gamification in learning

I put the gamification idea to the test in my Media and Culture class using a platform called [Mentimeter](#). It's a presentation platform (like Keynote or Powerpoint) but with built in features that encourage audience interaction.

Audience members connect to the Mentimeter website with their smartphones, type in a unique project code, their own name or ID, and then respond to survey, multiple choice or quiz questions, or provide free text responses to questions and instructions. So material appears on the main display screen in the classroom, and individuals respond via their smartphones.

The results are incorporated into the main screen display in real time and for everyone to see. The default setting on the free version of this platform provides a game-like interface. I ran a simple quiz. The class of 65 students sat in groups at tables, as if in a pub quiz, and answered as a group.

After each multiple choice question, a leader board appears on the screen showing the top ten scorers. The competitive element emerged immediately, with intense engagement in the 15 trivia quiz questions: e.g. What is the capital of Scotland? In what movie does Dwayne Johnson play Luke Hobbs? What is a leaderboard? â?



The negatives of gamification

Returning to the focus group and the fitness app â I asked about the individual and social disadvantages of such systems. The group raised 4 main points.

- Trust. Can you trust the advice and guidance offered by the app and others in the group. In the light of a fitness app this could lead to frustrated goals or injury.
- Playing the system. How reliable is the advice delivered by the app? Even if itâs connected to some kind of bio-sensors (like a fit bit) you could probably fake the record and the scores.
- Privacy concerns. Disclosing personal profile information, including fitness performance could be exploited by the developers, sold on to advertisers, etc.
- Such systems could induce pressure and anxiety as you try to outcompete others, or achieve impossible goals.



The dark side

Can everything be gamified? The responses indicated that the group thought the approach applicable in many cases, but at worst would be ineffective.

In order to provide a [twist](#) to the focus group discussion I included a video segment from the *Black Mirror* episode titled *Nose Dive*, which presents a dystopian scenario where people award each other social credit points depending on how they interact with each other. One of the group thought that this indicated the “dark side” of gamification. Time constraints prevented us from taking this further.

Notably, nothing emerged immediately from this particular focus group session about the potentially insidious nature of video gaming, or of gamification – the charge that gamification is a further step towards commodification in life, or consumerism, or the idea that the value of everything can be turned into a score, across a unified system that pays no regard to context, diversity of value judgements, and that promotes dubious notions such as social credit.

Nor did we discuss whether competition and scoring are essential elements of play and the game. That would require a different focus.

Bibliography

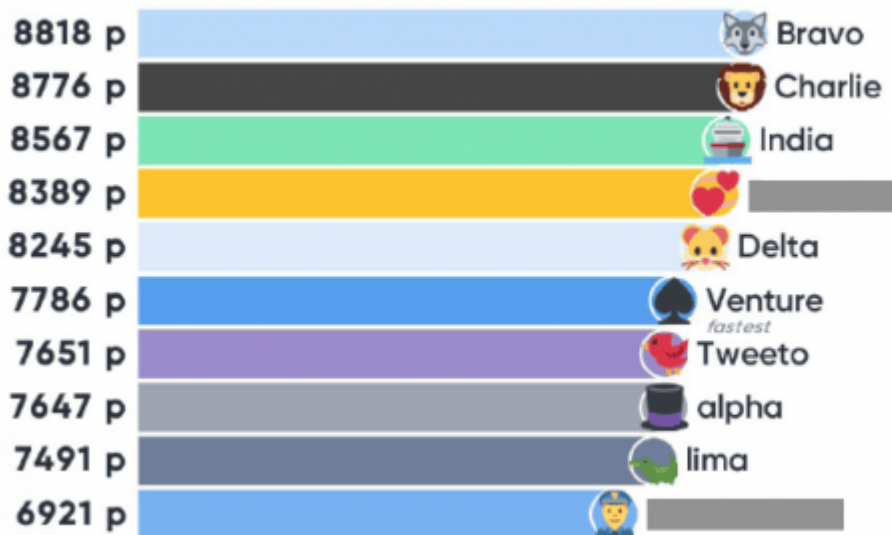
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Notes

- The focus group was actually part of a demonstration to research students on how to conduct a focus group. The class quiz occurred the day before the focus group exercise. The focus group participants also took part in the quiz. It was called: *Iâm smarter than you: Donât burst my balloon*.
- Iâm grateful to Negar Ebrahimi for introducing me to Mentimeter.
- The images on this page: students responding to the trivia quiz; the winners receiving balloons as a prize; the final quiz leaderboard.
- For an accessible survey of gamification in training see Apostolopoulos, Aris. 2019. The 2019 Gamification at Work Survey. *TalentLMS*, August. Available online: <https://www.talentlms.com/blog/gamification-survey-results> (accessed 6 October 2019).

Leaderboard



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Category

1. Play

Tags

1. focus group

2. game
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