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3 Step Conference Gamification Guide

What is Gamification, Why Should I Be Bothered and How Can I Use it at my Next Conference?

Gamification is a relatively recent word but, in reality, the concept has been around for a very long time. Gamification is the creation of an environment designed to stimulate learning through game play techniques.

As a member of generation X, I grew up on a diet of video game consoles. There were two main schools of thought back in the 80's. Were you a Sega, Sonic the Hedgehog, fan. Or had you been seduced by the cuter, and at the time mind-blowing, graphics of Nintendo's Super Mario Kart and Mario World. Either way, there is one thing that everyone from that generation agreed on; and that was Streetfighter II was, and possibly still is, the best 2D fighter of all time.

Gartner research predicted that more than 50% of corporate processes will be gamified and that 40% of the Global 1000 organizations will employ gamification to improve their business operations.

But what is it that kept us playing all night, and maybe even keeps us playing to this day? How can we use this to create an immersive and engaging learning experience for our annual conferences and team meetings?

Running high quality PowerPoints to engage your audiences just doesn't really cut it anymore. You need to look at ways to innovate how you present content to make your events both different and memorable.

Gamification is a broad subject, so we will start with a look at elements across the whole genre and present some research statistics to help you see that it is not just for computer games. Finally, we will look at how this applies to the world of conferences and workshops and what you can do to create an immersive experience at your next conference or team meeting.

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What is Gamification?

The following list is a good overview of typical gamification elements:

- Scoring/Progress Mechanism – Points, coupons, badges, leader boards
- Story – The use of a story to keep the interest of the 'player' and build the immersion level
- Player input – how much control does the player have in the game
- Speed of feedback – how quickly is the player updated as to their progress/scores/peers
- Collaboration – How much is the player able to connect with other players in the game
- Kudos – This is beyond simple scoring, how can the player level up and gain social status
- Social element – What communities can be built

These elements are most easily explained through the world of video games. Although you may not have been a gamer in the past, chances are you have downloaded at least one iPhone game and you should see some obvious parallels with these games and the following stories.

If we take each point in turn, the scoring or progress mechanism is quite straightforward. The inclusion of a scoring mechanism and the ability to see top scores leader boards is a strong gamification element.

The use of Story helps to create an immersive experience and draws the player in. Before video games, one of the first gamification and story blends was done with books. Maybe you remember the fantasy books where you met a goblin who had a question? Turn to page 8 to join him for lunch (and meet your impending doom), or turn to page 25 to engage in battle (and continue your quest).

Going back to my Nintendo vs Sega story from earlier. Super Mario World world was one of the first games where you could go in any direction and explore the entire world. Until then players could only control going left or right in 2D platform games. Nintendo gave you more player control and this additional level of control spawned a whole new generation of 3D platform games.

For a very long time, with video games, you would be able to see top scores against fictional players. A benchmark top score of 1,000,000 from a mysterious player was always your personal target. Or, you would share scores at school the following day to see who of your friends was the current champion. With the merging of games and the internet this became an instant global playing field. You could quite literally become the champion of the world…

The first time I ever saw collaborative game play I was blown away. We connected two consoles together back in the 90's and played Wipe Out with two TV's. This was amazing, but it was just the start. I went to a friend's house a few years ago to see his teenage son, headset on, going on a secret Desert Storm mission with his friends, battling against some other friends. All of this was done online, they could talk to each other and plan their strategy all in the comfort of their own homes. Arguably not great for society, but an incredible immersive experience.

When Mario Run was released on iPhone last year, I was one of the first to download it. Despite its hefty price tag for an iPhone game, it was worth every penny. After completing all the levels, you were given a second challenge. Collect all the pink coins on each level and get access to a new world! Collected all the pink? Now get the purple and another new world! I am still working on the black coins which seem near impossible to finish. But just getting to the black coin level gives me a social kudos with fellow players and shows a determination and resilience to succeed.

The last social element is just beginning to be explored. Initially Second Life allowed you to create a brand-new life for yourself and immersed you in a new 3D world. Add Social Media and gaming and you have a powerful addition to your gaming experience.

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Why Should You Be Bothered?

Gamification is moving beyond the world of video games and into mainstream corporate world. If you have kids at school, you will notice many of the previously mentioned elements are in use. Chances are you have some evidence of this stuck on your fridge door. But it isn't just for kids, the corporates are now beginning to introduce the concepts of gamification, let's have a look at some of the statistics and see what we can draw from this:

Expected Corporate Demand.

Gartner research predicted that more than 50% of corporate processes will be gamified and that 40% of the Global 1000 organizations will employ gamification to improve their business operations. So clearly there is an industry trend to use gamification principles in the corporate world. The following Statistics were presented by TalentLMS from a survey looking at what eLearning players would value:

- progressing to different levels (30%),
- points/scores (27%),
- real time feedback on performance (26%),
- progress bars (25%)
- activity feeds (24%).

From the above list we get to see a view of which of the elements are valued from the previous list of gamification elements.

Gamification Effectiveness

But what about the actual effectiveness of Gamification? So, it might be more fun and engaging, but are there any real tangible benefits?

According to a study conducted by the University of Colorado looking at the impact of simulations and games in adult learners, participants in gamified eLearning experiences scored

- 14% higher in skill-based-knowledge assessments,
- 11% higher in terms of factual-knowledge
- 9% increase in retention rate.

The above information is open to more scrutiny but clearly shows that the knowledge retention trend is moving in the right direction

Dangers of Gamification

Whilst Gartner were backing the trend for Gamification, predicting as many as 70% of Global 2,000 companies would have at least one gamification application. They later raised alarm bells related to "Novelty and Hype" and suggested 80% of gamification applications would fail to meet business objectives due to poor design. They were concerned over distracting workers by having them "overly compete with each other".

A Forbes report quotes an experiment where some sales employees were engaged in a gamification approach and some were not. One of the conclusions, and relevant for our discussion, was that for those in the gamification process, some generated good feelings about their work, and some negative feelings. They concluded if people buy into the game, we see big increases in positive effects. But, if they don't buy into the game, there is a negative effect.

So, it seems the choice of game is critical.

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How Can we use Gamification in Conferences and Workshops?

Whilst the above statistics may not be directly connected to the world of conferences and workshops, what is clear is that there is a trend towards the use of Gamification in the corporate world. Whilst research shows that information retention levels can be increased, it is clear that design of the activities is critical to make sure we do not alienate the audience.

At Turnaround, we have been using experiential learning for the last 10 years. The use of themed simulations and strategic challenges is a form of gamification and this has always been our core focus. When you get the balance right, you can create a highly immersive experience that is meaningful for all participants and drives significant changes in behaviour.

Over the years we have seen some excellent client gamification approaches where an inclusive theme has been used that connects with everyone. But we have also seen too many warrior themed "let's go to battle" gamification approaches that visibly turns off half the audience before the conference even starts.

We have also been using technology based Gamification principles in our workshops for 10 years, adapting our programs as technology evolved. The launch of the iPad was a game changer for our industry and the ability to create custom apps gives us limitless potential in this area.

Whether you are designing a broader Gamification theme to run over a number of weeks or months, or a one-off activity just for the duration of the conference or workshop, the following 3 rules have guided us over the years and can be useful to help deliver a successful gamification activity.

- Interesting, not Insulting
- Fun, not Forced
- Competitive, not Consuming

If we consider these above three rules, let's see how they apply to these to the previously mentioned gamification elements:

Scoring/Progress Mechanism

Think about how you can create a scoring mechanism that is engaging but not insulting. Collecting pink coins makes sense in Mario World, but not the corporate world. Consider the interest across the different cultures in the organisation. You may love the idea of a football goal scoring theme, but if 80% of the workforce prefer Cricket, you may not get they buy in you are looking for.

You also need to consider the comfort levels of the participants. Forcing people to compete is different from making it fun to compete.

With the scoring mechanism, we believe the third rule is possibly the most important. You should be careful with competition, if you get the balance of competition wrong, participants will focus more on the winning part than the process itself. For an extremely competitive sales group you may need to tone down the competitive element to ensure they are focused on the task rather than the winning.

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Story

In Gamification, the story becomes the theme for the workshop. Getting your theme right is critical to overall success. The biggest mistakes we see with the use of themes is a lack of consideration to the diversity in the team. This often occurs when a senior manager pushes a theme that works for them, but doesn't necessarily consider the diversity in the group.

Your theme should also drive the style of activities you use. If your theme is Winning as One, or Together We Grow and you have a series of individual challenges for teams to take part in, then your message will be confusing.

Player Input

To help us understand how Player Input connects to the world of conferences and workshops, let's remind ourselves of the earlier example. Historically in the world of arcade platformers (adventure games), you could go left or right until they introduced full 3D worlds to explore. We also mentioned the fantasy books where you had a choice of where to take the story, page x or page y?

The key element for us to take home here is the idea of choice. How can you build choice into your activities? More choice, more discussion; more discussion, more immersion; more immersion, more engagement.

Speed of Feedback

We have been at the forefront of using technology in our workshops for the last 10 years. The apps we have access to allow for instant scoring, instant feedback and visibility of other player scores. We can interact with teams, they can interact with us, they can even interact with each other. The days of collating paper sheets and furiously typing data into excel sheets are long gone. Think about how you can speed up the rate of feedback with your players?

Collaboration

The paradox of competition and collaboration needs careful consideration in Gamification. Typically, companies are wanting their employees to improve collaboration with each other, so putting them in teams and having them compete against each other goes against this principle. When designing your activities, the more collaborative elements you can put in, the more you change the paradox to a balance of having healthy competition but with a collaborative element.

Kudos

The Kudos element of gamification applies more to longer-term activations, with kudos being built over time. In the world of conferences and workshops, it is unlikely that you will have the opportunity to build kudos without over engineering the solution and confusing players.

Where Kudos does become more important, and is slightly outside the focus of this white paper, is in the use of long term themed activations. Global Sales activations with leagues and levels run over a longer period.

But what can we learn from the world of video games about kudos. If we go back to Mario Run, firstly you complete the level, then you complete the level collecting pink coins, then again collecting the harder purple coins, and finally the near impossible black coins. What is happening here is a graded approach to the same activity, where players are rewarded for showing perseverance with a task and wanting to perfect their skills.

In your gamification approach, how can you design an element where the same activity can be run, but with different levels of perseverance and reward? How can you design a different level of scoring for each activity? This creates an opportunity and a decision for the player(s). How much time do we invest in scoring these points before we move on to the next challenge? Hopefully you will see this discussion will create a deeper level of engagement for the player.

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Social element

Social media is taking over our lives, it seems mandatory to post updates on just about every aspect of our personal and corporate lives.

Whenever we look at building a social element into our gamification activities we always look for direction from the organisation as to what would be appropriate for the team to be sharing.

Should we be uploading images of team activities to the corporate social media platform? Or should we be sharing insights about the activity?

Whilst sharing is caring, careless sharing is not.

Conclusion

If you believe Gartner and Forbes, and, why wouldn't you? It seems that Gamification usage is on the rise and this trend will continue.

In our 10 years of experience in this area, getting the balance right is the single most important part. Whilst we can draw from the world of video games for inspiration on the different elements of gamification, selecting how to apply each of these elements requires skill and careful consideration. Get the balance right and you can engage, inspire and transform your team. Get it wrong and you can alienate, disengage and frustrate your team.

As a last thought, the next time you stop your child playing video games on their iPad, perhaps they are learning a valuable life skill for the future corporate world.

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