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Game on: Engaging customers and employees through gamification

Karen Robson [a,*], Kirk Plangger [b], Jan H. Kietzmann [a], Ian McCarthy [a], Leyland Pitt [a]

[a] *Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University, 500 Granville Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 1W6, Canada*
[b] *King's College London, University of London, 150 Stamford Street, London SE1 9NH, UK*

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Abstract   Managers are frequently tasked with increasing the engagement levels of key stakeholders, such as customers and employees. Gamification—defined as the application of game design principles to change behavior in non-gaming contexts—is a tool that, if crafted and implemented properly, can increase engagement. In this article we discuss how gamification can aid customer and employee engagement, and delineate between four different types of customers and employees who act as 'players' in gamified experiences. We include illustrative examples of gamification and conclude by presenting five lessons for managers who wish to utilize gamification.
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1. The promise of gamification

Gamification and engagement are hot topics within the business literature (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014; Robson, Plangger, Kietzmann, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2015). In this article we bridge these two topics by illustrating how gamification can improve the way in which firms engage customers and employees. We begin by defining and explaining the concept and

practice of gamification. Then, we introduce different types of players and explain how managers can create gamified experiences for customers and employees that conform to each of these types of player. We illustrate such gamification efforts through extended examples. More specifically, we add to the literature by explaining and illustrating how traditional approaches to employee and customer engagement can be gamified to create richer and more appealing experiences that motivate changes in the behavior of the players involved.

This article follows an earlier *Business Horizons* piece wherein we introduced and demarcated the principles of gamification; here, gamification was defined as "the application of game-design principles in order to change behaviors in non-game situations"

* Corresponding author
  E-mail addresses: krobson@sfu.ca (K. Robson),
kirk.plangger@me.com (K. Plangger), jan_kietzmann@sfu.ca
(J.H. Kietzmann), imccarth@sfu.ca (I. McCarthy), lpitt@sfu.ca
(L. Pitt)

(Robson et al., 2015, p. 411). Specifically, these interrelated principles include mechanics, dynamics, and emotions (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004). Gamification *mechanics* specify, among other things, the rules, goals, setting, and interactions of the game. Gamification designers determine these mechanics, which remain constant from player to player, before the gamified experience begins. For example, mechanics specify the goals of the game and how players, individually or in teams, 'win' or progress through the online or the real-world experiences. Gamification *dynamics* are the player behaviors (e.g., cheating, bluffing, bragging) that emerge when the mechanics are executed during the gamified experience. Finally, gamification *emotions* (e.g., excitement, disappointment) are the affective states evoked during the experience. Ultimately, we suggest gamification can change stakeholder behavior when it taps into key motivational drivers of human behavior, including extrinsic reinforcements (e.g., money, status) and intrinsic rewards.

2. A matter of engagement

In this second article, we focus specifically on how gamification efforts can create engaging experiences with the objective of solving organizational problems. In a management context, engagement is a key issue that has, not surprisingly, received considerable attention. Two types of engagement are of particular interest to managers: employee engagement and customer engagement. These topics have been the focus of many research articles, as well as a number of special issues (see Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Saks, 2006).

From a psychological standpoint, engagement in an experience comprises the energy, involvement, and efficacy felt by the individual in the experience (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Employee engagement entails 'harnessing' employees to their jobs through their involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work (Kahn, 1990). Engagement can have impactful implications for managers: it can be positively associated with organizational commitment and organizational citizenship, but also negatively associated with intentions to quit (Saks, 2006). Moreover, increased employee engagement has been linked to increased customer satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), which is why it is not surprising that it is in the interest of managers to improve internal behavioral attributes. However, achieving high employee engagement is not easy.

Customer engagement can be conceptualized as a psychological state that is context dependent and characterized by dynamic iterative processes (Brodie et al., 2013), as well as behavioral manifestations (e.g., providing feedback, writing social media reviews, participating in branded events) beyond merely completing transactions (Hollebeek, 2011; Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). In what follows, we focus on the behavioral manifestations that are key outcomes of gamification that increase organizational and customer value, and discuss measurable outcomes.

3. Player types matter

Four different parties are involved in gamified experiences: players, designers, spectators, and observers (Robson et al., 2015). *Players* are those individuals who participate in the gamified experience itself, often customers or employees. *Designers* are those individuals who create gamified experiences; in an organizational context, these individuals are managers. *Spectators* are individuals who do not directly participate in the experience, but who may influence the experience through, for example, supporting players. Finally, *observers* are individuals who are aware of the gamified experience but have no direct or indirect impact on it. In this article, we focus on one category of people involved in gamified experiences: the players. Understanding different players is key to creating successful gamification experiences, and with the goal of solving organizational problems we focus on gamified experiences designed for those players who consume a firm's offerings (i.e., customers) and those who create them (i.e., employees).

One challenge for game designers is that individual players vary, and understanding this variability is both difficult and necessary for creating engaging experiences. We reason that across all gamified experiences players can be described based on two dimensions derived from the work of Bartle (1996): player orientation and player competitiveness. Player orientation describes whether the player is oriented predominantly toward other players or toward themselves. For example, a player who is primarily oriented toward others would be interested in social aspects of the experience such as learning about other players, interacting with other players, and empathizing with them. In contrast, players with a self-orientation would be more interested in self concerns, such as personal growth and/or personal achievement, than the concerns of others. The next dimension, player competitiveness, describes the extent to which the individual engages in competitive behavior. At one extreme, players may exhibit high competitiveness through