



# Is it all a game? Understanding the principles of gamification



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**Abstract** There is growing interest in how gamification—defined as the application of game design principles in non-gaming contexts—can be used in business. However, academic research and management practice have paid little attention to the challenges of how best to design, implement, manage, and optimize gamification strategies. To advance understanding of gamification, this article defines what it is and explains how it prompts managers to think about business practice in new and innovative ways. Drawing upon the game design literature, we present a framework of three gamification principles—mechanics, dynamics, and emotions (MDE)—to explain how gamified experiences can be created. We then provide an extended illustration of gamification and conclude with ideas for future research and application opportunities.

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## 1. Press play to start

Games are everywhere. We play games while traveling, while relaxing, or while at work, simply to create enjoyable experiences for ourselves and for others. Firms, too, have long motivated their

employees and customers with game-like incentives (e.g., competitions among financial traders, leaderboards for salespeople, participation badges). However, increasing engagement and rewarding desired behavior with such incentives has always been hard to perform at scale. Only now, at a time when much of what we do is mediated by digital technologies and social media, may firms change that behavior by turning traditional processes into deeper, more engaging game-like experiences for many of their customers and for their employees. This process is commonly referred to as *gamification*.

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Gamification has potentially wide applications in contexts such as healthcare, sustainability, government, transportation, and education, among others. For instance, more than 75 energy companies are already using Opower, a service that equips homes with sensors enabling residents to compare their household energy consumption with that of neighbors, and broadcasting their achievements on Facebook (Wingfield, 2012). Samsung Nation, Pepsi Soundoff, and other online loyalty programs use points, levels (e.g., gold status), or badges to drive customer engagement and deepen the relationships they have with the brands they use or aspire to use. Drivers of a Nissan Leaf can collect points for driving in an ecologically friendly manner, and can compete with their friends on Facebook. Xerox employs gamification to train managers who collaborate online to complete quests, and Salesforce uses challenges and leaderboards to increase sales. Microsoft has gamified the relatively tedious but important process of translating its Windows 7 operating system into different languages and adapting it to work in different cultures.

Although studies suggest that 70% of the world's largest public companies will have at least one gamified application in the next 2 years (Gartner, 2011), there are warnings that about 80% of current gamified applications will fail to meet business objectives (Gartner, 2012), primarily because processes have been inappropriately gamified. A likely reason for this is a lack of understanding of what gamification is, how gamification works and, more specifically, how to design gamification experiences that inspire player (e.g., employee, customer, citizen) behavior changes and result in desirable outcomes.

However, the academic business literature offers little direction to, or understanding of, gamification, its design principles, and the key underlying psychological motivations by which gamification changes behavior and achieves organizational goals. Thus, we begin by defining gamification and describing its application in organizations. Next, we explain the psychology behind the promise of gamification. We then introduce a framework, rooted in game design, that includes three principles for creating gamification experiences: mechanics, dynamics, and emotions (MDE). Next, we link the MDE framework to employee and customer engagement by illustrating its application in the popular reality television show *American Idol*. Finally, we present concluding remarks on gamification and present ideas for future research and application.

## 2. Gamification defined

The term gamification could be misleading, suggesting that it represents the use of actual games,

real-world simulations (Keys & Wolfe, 1990), or game theory in organizational settings (Camerer, 2003). It does not. Rather, *gamification* is the application of lessons from the gaming domain to change behaviors in non-game situations. 'Gamified' experiences can focus on business processes (e.g., customer acquisition) or outcomes (e.g., employee sales). Moreover, these experiences can involve participants—or players—outside of a firm (e.g., to co-develop products with customers) and/or within it (e.g., to improve employee satisfaction).

While firms' use of such game-like experiences to control behavior and increase loyalty and engagement is not new, efforts to date have neither sought to learn from formal game design principles nor been labeled gamification. In fact, the term gamification only started to attract widespread attention in non-gaming contexts in 2010 (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). We suggest the heightened interest in gamification today is the result of three recent developments.

First, over the last 20 years with the growth and importance of the computer game industry, game designers and researchers have invested significantly in studies to better understand what makes a computer game engaging and successful. This has led to a number of theories and lessons about the design and management of gaming experiences, and to frameworks about incentives that motivate individuals to play. In the next section, we build on this work and introduce three important gamification principles that are based on the gaming literature's lessons: mechanics (i.e., the goals, rules, and rewards), dynamics (i.e., how players enact the mechanics), and emotions (i.e., how players feel toward the gamified experience).

Second, the pervasiveness of social media and mobile and Web-based technologies has changed how individuals and organizations participate in, share, co-create, discuss, and modify any type of experience (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Today's firms can request and generate previously unattainable amounts of data about people and their opinions, feelings, and behavior. The quantity and quality of the resulting insights has only now become useful for producing gamified employment or consumption experiences at scale, which in turn will yield new data.

Third, firms are continually looking for new and impactful ways to better connect with, learn from, and influence the behaviors of employees and customers. Three recent developments provide a rich landscape of opportunities to innovate in this regard: (1) new knowledge about the design and management of gaming experiences (2) combined with the advent of social media and technology and

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