

Implementing Serious Learning Games

Familiar territory for training execs

By Bryan Austin

Given that serious learning games represent uncharted territory for most training departments, it's natural that many executives have questions about implementation. And there's not much available information to go on. The market is still too young to easily find case studies or best-practice advice; peer groups are still largely focused on technology and "making the case."

But, according to Carol Clark, advisory game changer for Game On! Learning (www.gameonlearning.com), the implementation process for serious games is likely to be familiar to most training executives. "Serious learning game implementation is actually very similar to the best-practice implementation processes recommended for any major training initiative," she said.

"Over the years, many companies have gotten a bit lax about training program implementation. Constrained budgets, limited training resources, and business pressures have often resulted in shortcuts," she said. "Because game based learning is relatively new to managers and learners, it's imperative to have a well-thought out implementation plan. Your program's success will hinge on the implementation."

Clark developed Game On! Learning's strategy for implementing online learning games. Because this form of online training introduces new characteristics like cohort-based competition, Game On! Learning guides their customers through these steps for each phase of the overall implementation: preparation, kick off, mid-point check in, and debriefing. The objectives to be achieved throughout an effective implementation include:

- Setting expectations for, and benefits of, the learning.
- Building excitement and collaboration among participants.
- Checking in on experiences and progress.
- Anchoring learning application to job roles.
- Collecting data, feedback, and anecdotes that yield insight into attainment of the learning outcomes.

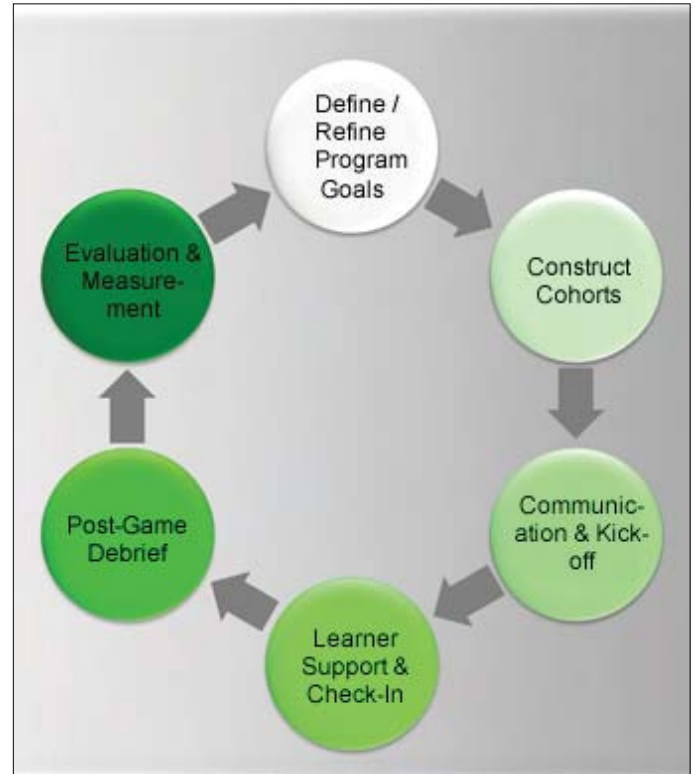
This article explores each of these steps and offers recommendations executives can apply to any game based learning initiative – whether it be a business simulation or a program targeting specific skills development.

Setting the Stage

Prior to each implementation phase, you need to focus on educating stakeholders, managers, and learners about the program and getting business and emotional buy-in.

Communication should address the purpose of the program, its objectives, and the business rationale, including several specific benefits of how the training will support identified business goals and job performance requirements. For instance, if the training is designed to sharpen negotiation skills, relate the program to relevant business goals such as increased deal sizes, more contract renewals, or improved collections.

During this stage, Clark advises customers not to go into great detail about the game itself. "When you focus on the outcomes, rather than the delivery, you'll minimize push back. If you and your vendor have done your homework, you've already made the business case for the program. You can address any questions and uncertainties about the



game itself during the kick off meeting."

Those games that require setting up cohorts (teams of employees that will progress through the game together) will require advance planning. Cohorts can be comprised of employees with different job roles across organizational functions or comprised of employees with more homogeneous job roles and functions. Your vendor can give you recommendations on cohort demographics and optimal group size. Clark also advises setting up social groups for game cohorts on Yammer, Chatter, or other social learning tools. These groups, which can be introduced at the kick off sessions, give employees a way to share experiences on an ongoing basis.

Kicking It Off

An effective kick off at each phase of the implementation is critical. Learner expectations are largely set at this stage.

Kick offs are conducted as virtual or face-to-face leader-led sessions. These sessions should revisit the training program's purpose, the intended learning outcomes and benefits, and examples of what learners should personally expect to take away from the game.

You'll also want to explain in detail how the game is structured and how this structure impacts the learner experience. Learning from failure and setbacks is integral to most serious learning games. Some games also prevent learners from progressing from one level to the next until they've achieved a baseline level of competency for that level. Serious learning games also require dedicated attention and time. (These aren't the page-turning courses most employees can do while checking email or surfing the web.) Learners need to understand and

prepare for these differences to optimize their focus.

For competitive games, you'll want to explain how scoring works. Many companies implement reward systems for learners such as branded T-shirts or mugs earned when employees achieve certain levels or scores.

To further motivate employees and create a sense of fun, Clark encourages Game On! customers to have employees choose gamer names during kick off meetings. (Carlos Danger is taken!) According to Clark, employees get a kick out of sharing these names during the session.

Checking In

Because serious learning games may span multiple weeks, you'll want to plan at least one formal virtual or face-to-face check-in session approximately halfway through the game. Such sessions give learners the opportunity to ask questions, share experiences, and discuss the game itself. And perhaps talk a little trash!

You'll want to prepare in advance questions for learners that can help direct conversation, uncover any points of confusion, and elicit discussion about any "lessons learned" to date. For those games that include leaderboards, you should review scores prior to the session to familiarize yourself with learner progress.

You can also use check ins to recognize learner achievements.

While check in sessions are very important, Clark also recommends that learner progress be monitored closely throughout the game. Game On! Learning actually assigns a learner engagement manager to monitor participant progress and identify early on those who are encountering difficulty or falling behind. Such monitoring is actually much easier to do with games than other types of training, since learner scores and progress status are typically readily accessible.

Debriefing

"Debriefings are hugely important because it's during these sessions that learners move from the game scenarios to work relevance," said Clark. Effective debriefings should be designed to help employees understand how they can personally apply learned skills to their specific jobs.

While you definitely want to encourage learner feedback – both positive and negative – you want to ensure that the debriefing session goes far beyond a "learner satisfaction" assessment. Debriefings should be structured to address outstanding questions, to summarize new knowledge and skills acquired in the game, and to provide opportunity for collaboration on how to apply the training to actual work situations.

Capture and Analyze

As with any major learning initiative, an effective implementation should yield analytics that offer insight into the training outcomes. Outcomes – and associated metrics – should be aligned with organizational and business goals.

In advance of implementation, you'll want to collaborate with stakeholders and managers to determine the specific outcomes desired and ways to effectively measure them.

For example, if the game is designed to improve sales communication skills, to assess its impact on your sales representatives, you can examine quarterly sales data pre- and post-implementation (ideally for multiple quarters), along with win and loss data and new customer satisfaction scores. You can also correlate individual game scores to sales performance to determine if learner scores are predictive of individual sales performance. Consult with learning analytics experts to structure your evaluation to isolate the impact of the training versus non-training factors.

You'll also want to work with employee managers, supervisors, and

participants to identify and verify behavioral change and performance improvement. This feedback can be collected through surveys and questionnaires or through solicitation of personal observations and examples of how the training has been applied. This information is just as important as quantifiable data.

The Importance of a Vendor Partner

Because of their experience, vendors can be a huge help in planning and executing a successful implementation. Following are examples of support offerings to look for:

- Support for a carefully crafted pilot project, if needed.
- Assistance in developing a detailed implementation plan, including examples of communications, tip emails, and reward programs.
- Advice on selecting optimal cohorts.
- Detailed guidance for planning kick off, check in, and debriefing sessions, including sample questions and suggestions for case scenarios and group exercises.
- Learner support during the game.
- Best practices and advice for determining measurable business and personal outcomes.

Serious games are game-changers for corporate training. Training and talent executives must be open to their use and consider how they can supplement – and likely accelerate – critical training initiatives. According to Clark, who brings to Game On! Learning more than 20 years of corporate training and consulting experience, the reactions and changes she's observed from serious game implementations far exceed any other type of training she's managed.

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When I read the wrap up reports, I'm continually amazed by learner and manager comments. People really do enjoy the training and admit to being challenged. But best of all, I see story after story of how they are actually using the training every day. Now that's rewarding. TEL



Bryan Austin is the Founder and "Chief Game Changer" of Game On! Learning. Throughout his 25-year career with leading organizations like SkillSoft, NETg and Kaplan, Bryan has dedicated himself to helping organizations develop high performing employees through innovative learning solutions.

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