

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL: HOW TO DESIGN THE RIGHT GAMIFIED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Gamification should reach beyond polarised Good-vs-Evil stereotypes to reflect life's complexities. Ruth Neligan argues for a more nuanced approach.

Take a look around any learning technologies industry show, and you'll be amazed at the gamification on offer. A systems training treasure hunt might appeal from a user-experience design point of view, but these displays are also feeding a misconception that gamification is something bold, expensive, and 'all or nothing'. For newcomers to the gamification scene, this could be a little overwhelming. Gamification doesn't have to mean a console-style extravaganza, and, in many cases, it actually shouldn't mean that.

The idea that gamification is something 'done' or 'not done' is working to its detriment as a credible learning technique, by failing on the basics. That's about recognising the complexities of realistic

scenarios learners will face rather than attempting to shoehorn it in to a cookie-cutter 'gamification format'.

I'm not belittling all attempts at gamification. As a child, for example, I loved playing Mario Kart because the characters involved represented ideals. The characters Peach and Daisy were damsels in distress and Bowser represented the

absolute villain. Super Mario himself was absolutely good, setting out to rescue Peach from her kidnapper. Whatever issues this storyline raises with regard to gender roles (that's another article altogether) the reality is that, as a child, this kind of polarity in a gaming environment is helpful. It makes things as simple as possible. One can't be distracted by character complexities, looking at problems from different points of view when there are coins to be won and a Princess to be rescued!

Having looked at what's on offer, I can't help but feel that while appearing graphically and technologically more advanced, some of the learning on offer is actually regressive in terms of learning and development. It's more like Mario than management performance improvement. Yes, there's a time and place for a dunce who forgets to wear his hard hat when it comes to Health and Safety training, but there are shades of gamification that are often overlooked.



Nowadays, the average age of a gamer is 35, and the gaming industry has moved towards recognising this with complex scenarios and moral 'grey areas' in gaming, which force the player to give those concepts real thought.

As the gaming industry diversifies, gamification in e-learning should mirror the complexity we see there. Black/white or good/evil oppositions are great techniques in certain environments, but in others a more nuanced approach will enable learners to discriminate between different actions and apply what they've learnt.

SO WHICH APPROACH IS RIGHT FOR MY ORGANISATION?

Selecting a), b) or c) from following questions will give you a better understanding of which gamified approach will be best suited to meet your learning needs.

1. What kind of an e-learning course are you hoping to create?

- a) A tool to improve performance
- b) Compliance based, but it's a refresher/part of a blended programme
- c) A standalone compliance based course

2. Pick a pedagogical quotation which most accurately represents your attitudes towards learning and development

- a) 'The true test of character is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave'



Above: Place your learners in realistic scenario to really test their knowledge

Below: Interactions effect behavioural change as people learn to recognise the subtleties of real behaviour





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This was written by John Holt, famous for his views on 'un-schooling' and his opposition to traditional education. You're probably not keen on learning that's formally structured, but favour immersing your learners in new situations to see how they'll react

b) *'Without some goals and some efforts to reach it, no man can live'*

John Dewey, made this comment in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. He believed that education was 'the social continuity of life'. You believe that putting your learning objectives in to action is the real mark of success, and learning through experience is vital.

c) *'Gripping and enduring interests frequently grow out of initial learning efforts that are not appealing or attractive'*

William Chandler Bagley, the American educator, came up with this statement. He was a member of the Essentialist movement, and believed that a focus on an engaging and exciting approach doesn't always result in enduring lessons being learnt. Your aim is to fulfil your objectives, and you're not convinced that a novel learning approach will always guarantee results.

3. What do you wear to work?

- a) Jeans and a t-shirt
- b) Smart casual
- c) A smart suit

4. What's your idea of an awesome business system?

- a) Yammer
- b) Salesforce
- c) SAP

5. Has your target audience taken an e-learning course at your organisation before?

- a) Yes
- b) I'm not sure
- c) No

6. Where was your last staff night out?

- a) We went to a karaoke bar and a group sing-along of the Dolly Parton classic 'Jolene' (or equivalent high jinks)
- b) We went to the local pub
- c) What's a 'night out'?

7. Pick your secret Super Mario weapon of choice

- a) Banana peel (to trip up your opponents)
- b) A star (to help you glide past opponents)
- c) A mushroom (for speed)

If you selected MOSTLY A's – Go Grand Theft Auto!

You can afford to go all out! Your learners are ready for an immersive gamified experience, and you can be imaginative when it comes to introducing new concepts. Something like Saffron's Bribery Act Challenge – with characters that look like Barak Obama or Steve Jobs (among others) – will enable your learners to get stuck-in as they navigate the shady world of bribery.

They'll value an original approach with a competitive edge. Do away with conventional methods of meeting your objectives, and instead focus on the 'learning through experience' that this course can offer.

MOSTLY B's – Tread carefully

Your learners will relish some opportunity to experiment with the way they learn, but be careful not to over-do it. A good idea here would be to jump in with some scenario-based content, employing a 'test then tell' instructional design technique to remind learners of the pitfalls of the way they currently behave, before getting learners to reflect on the sort of behaviour change you're looking at.

Storytelling is also a great way to maintain interest without overwhelming learners. It will also enable characters to be developed in a more complex and nuanced way.

MOSTLY C's – Gamify the context, not the learning

While your learners might not be ready for a fully gamified learning experience, getting them engaged with e-learning could be the objective of your gamified efforts.

If e-learning as a concept is unfamiliar/unpopular, you can look at rewarding participation with badges (I've heard of one company offering bottles of wine as incentive) if virtual rewards won't suffice!

Sending out an e-mail with the five highest scores in your department will give your learning intervention a competitive edge and encourage participation.

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