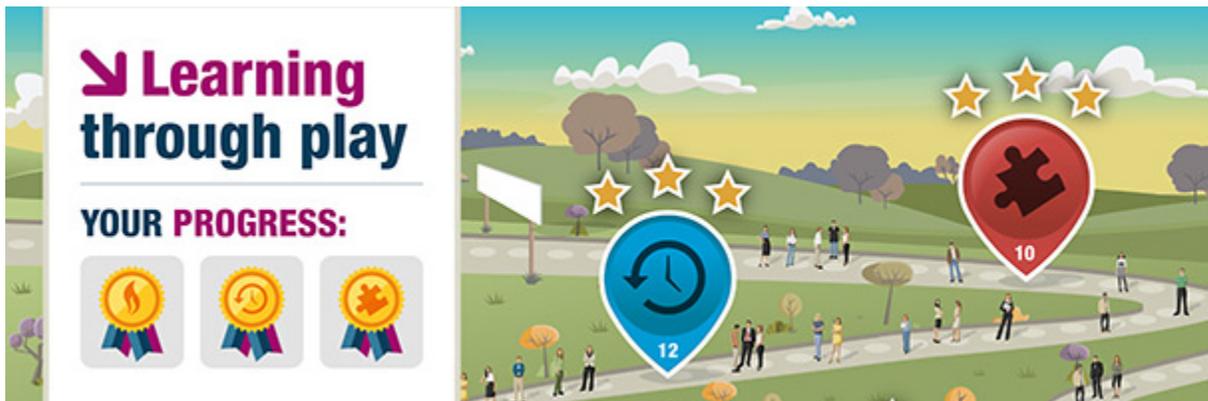# Time to Get Serious - A Rough Guide to Serious Games (Jan 15)

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"As serious games increase in popularity, you may find yourself faced with a raft of new terms and phrases that can be mystifying to the uninitiated. These terms come from the world of video game design and are starting to cross over into sectors such as eLearning, where serious games or game elements are being used."

Serious games are being used by more and more organizations as part of workplace training, but despite their growing popularity they are still a relatively new phenomenon for some sectors. According to the *2014-15 Towards Maturity Benchmark Report*, just 24 percent of learning and development (L&D) leaders use games or simulations in their training. *What's holding them back*?

It may be the view that serious games are still a bit of a novelty, or that the world of work and gaming simply don't mix. But perhaps it is more likely to be concern over issues such as complexity, cost, production time, and the practical application of serious games.

To shed light on the subject, here is a rough guide to the use of serious games as a workplace training tool.

Quick definition

Very simply, serious games are learning games. Their primary purpose is to allow a person to learn something through game play while having fun. They are designed with the specific intention of achieving a particular learning outcome linked to a training need. Serious games focus on real life issues or problems that the player will recognize within their working life. They use the same techniques and devices as a video game designed purely for pleasure.

Key differences

To understand more about serious games and the role they can play in workplace training, it is helpful to consider how they contrast with standard eLearning. In Table 1, I've compared aspects that are typical of eLearning with aspects of serious games. Some key differences start to emerge.

TYPICAL OF ELEARNING	TYPICAL OF SERIOUS GAMES
Learning objectives	Explicit challenges
Scene setting with words	Scene setting with images
Learning guided by instruction	Learning guided by intuition
Interaction at intervals	Complete interactive experience
Learners often just read it	Learners have to experience it
Uses tests or assessments	Uses points or rewards

Table 1: **Contrasts between eLearning and serious games**

Gamification expert Karl Kapp believes the acceptance of failure and "replayability" is also key in setting serious games apart from traditional instruction. He points out that in most instructional settings failure is portrayed as negative and the emphasis is on learners getting the right answer. "In most modern work environments, there are many ways of solving problems, dealing with obstacles, and creatively finding solutions," writes Kapp. "Games encourage failure and exploration, two keys to modern workplace success." He says that it is this exploratory quality of serious games that encourages people to play them over and over, and in doing so, review the information and reinforce their knowledge.

Workplace applications

A group of more than a hundred L&D professionals were asked to come up with a business challenge they thought would be suitable for a serious game. Compliance and health and safety were the most popular suggestions, but what really stood out was the breadth of topics. From conflict resolution to prescribing medicines, there are a wide range of possibilities. Figure 1 is a word cloud that summarizes their suggestions.

Figure 1: **This word cloud summarizes the thoughts of over 100 L&D professionals on business challenges most suitable for a serious game**

There are no hard and fast rules, but serious games tend to be most effective when they deal with *real risks and real consequences* in topic areas that impact on an employee's safety, job, life, or money. For example, health and safety training is a good candidate for a serious game because it has real workplace relevance and could ultimately impact on an employee's safety or the safety of the public. Likewise, a healthcare game about injectable medicines could explore the real-life risks to patients. A serious game that helps an employee to learn about protecting trade secrets would be compelling because getting it wrong could cost them their job.

Real-world examples

So how are organizations using serious games right now? Here are some real-world, albeit anonymous, corporate examples:

- *Social-media compliance*: A serious game has been developed to help employees of a major organization test their knowledge and ability to successfully apply the company's social-media code. As part of the challenge, staff must work against the clock to decide which Tweet to make in response to a particular scenario.
- *Information security awareness*: A global company has experimented with teaching information security tips through an animated interactive game where employees have to complete a set of six game challenges on protecting their personal and company data.
- *Fire safety*: Learners at a major organization are being taught how to spot fire hazards in a serious game. They must play against the clock to identify potential risks in an interactive, animated challenge.

Jargon-buster

As serious games increase in popularity, you may find yourself faced with a raft of new terms and phrases that can be mystifying to the uninitiated. These terms come from the world of video-game design and are starting to cross over into sectors such as eLearning, where serious games or game elements are being used.

Here's a short jargon-buster to help anyone new to the world of serious games:

- *Casual Game*: This is the term used to describe a game with simple rules that requires no special skills on behalf of the player. This is in contrast to commercially produced video games where player skill and commitment is a key factor.
- *Cut Scene*: Also known as an event scene. This is a non-interactive scene that breaks up the game play. It could be video or animation and is useful for moving a narrative forward.
- *Experience Point (XP)*: This refers to a unit of measurement that quantifies a player's progression through the game. These are generally awarded for completing tasks, overcoming obstacles, or meeting challenges.
- *Juice*: This term refers to the extra touches that bring a game to life. Developer Martin Jonasson sums it up as things that "wobble, squirt, bounce around, and make little cute noises; it's sort of a catch-all phrase for things that make a game more satisfying to interact with."
- *Permadeath*: Sometimes called PD. Both terms are short for permanent death which refers to a situation where a character who "dies" in the game cannot regenerate and continue without restarting the game.
- *Power Ups*: This means any object or icon in a game that instantly adds an extra benefit or "power." This added boost will normally only work for a limited time.

Your move!

I hope this brief introduction to the usage and jargon of serious games will help you in your exploration of effective ways to facilitate and support learning in your organization.

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