Gamification Best Practices

Purpose and Importance

Gamification is the process of using the dynamics and mechanics that make traditional games fun and engaging in non-game situations in the attempt to raise user engagement and motivation. The practice of gamification is one of the newest and fastest growing phenomenons in the fields of public relations, marketing, and engagement techniques. Some examples of gamification include Nike+, which uses challenges, goals, competition, and collaboration to gamify exercise, or Uplaude.com, which uses points and badges to encourage audience engagement with blogs. For more information on the basic premise of gamification one may review gamification.co.

As is traditional with new methods and technologies, the ability of gamification is outstripping the understanding that regulating bodies currently have of it. In addition, these game mechanics and dynamics are powerful enough to alter the behavior of participants.

It is necessary for the gamification community to begin examining their processes and proposing best practices in order to practice gamification responsibly. Miguel Sicart of IT University of Copenhagen argued in his book The Ethics of Computer Game Design that game structures function as moral frameworks, and that ethical codes are inevitably written into game mechanics and interpreted by the user. “It is the fact that computer games are designed objects what makes them ethically accountable, because it is their design what makes them powerful rhetorical devices.” He argues that we see game mechanics as ethical objects “because they are designed objects, because through their design moral values can be conveyed and experienced.” This logic easily lends itself into the field of gamification, since designed user experiences contain values and risks unique to each gamification platform or implementation.

This best practices will bring to bear the many issues and types of questions that need to be confronted by gamification practitioners as this phenomenon is implemented and expanded. It aims to create a framework for discussing gamification best practices that may be amended and improved in parallel with the practice of gamification itself. It also aims to provide a collection of other helpful resources to which practitioners may turn for more information.

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Dr. David Ozar’s Nine Categories of Professional Obligation

To begin, this paper will use Dr. David Ozar’s Nine Categories of Professional Obligation\(^2\). The answers to these questions will serve to contextualize the practice of gamification and act as a springboard for an ongoing dialogue between users, gamification practitioners, and the larger community.

1. Whom does gamification serve?

All practitioners have obligations particular to their practice, the content of which is determined largely by their clientele. In the case of those practicing gamification, every person who may be the target of gamified stakeholder engagement initiatives, or any organization that hopes to implement such initiatives, is a potential client. As a result the gamification clientele is as large as it is and diverse. It may be said generally that gamification practitioners serve two main groups of people: the businesses that have hired their services and the audience towards which the gamification techniques are employed. Because of the size and diversity of these groups, gamification practitioners would do well to consider the backgrounds and preferences of each unique user group when launching an initiative.

2. What values do gamification practitioners add to the well-being of those served?

There are 2 aspects of well-being to which gamification practitioners claim to add value: human enjoyment and stakeholder engagement. By gamifying the interactions between an organization and its public, they hope to change the character of everyday interactions into something that is more fun and enjoyable for the audience. This recharacterization adds value to the lives of those participating in a more fun medium by giving positive feedback and drawing upon dynamics like rewards, status, and achievement. Gamification also adds value to the organization that employs its tactics by increasing audience engagement, loyalty, and lifetime value. In each instance, the practitioner should ask themselves, “Does this add fun, increase engagement, or contribute to some other value?” Some other values may include generating excitement, aiding goal achievement, forging social connections, and increasing self-esteem.

3. What is the ideal relationship between gamification practitioners and their clients?

In order to deliver the engagement they provide, gamification practitioners and their audiences enter into agreements, the content of which determines the kinds of judgments to be made by gamifiers and the kind to be made by their client. This two-way relationship ought to follow an “interactive model,” which is described by Ozar as “a relationship in which both parties have irreplaceable contributions to make in the decision-making process.”

The gamification practitioner should bring their expertise in cultivating engagement to the table and the business owner will bring their own unique set of priorities and values to which the practitioner must adhere and adjust in order to benefit the client as much as possible. Ultimately the gamification practitioner acknowledges that each client poses unique challenges and has unique needs that must be met by a customizable, non one-size-fits-all approach.

In addition to the terms of the partnership between gamifiers and their business clients, one must consider the relationship between those designing the gamified experience and the users engaging with it. This is a one-way relationship in which there is a power imbalance favoring the designers, and therefore more emphasis must be put into analyzing the ethical decisions where the outcome would negatively or positively affect users. Practitioners must carefully monitor their system for feedback and adjust their gamified mechanics to ensure the maximum possible utility is conferred upon the user. Gamification only works when end users are satisfied. Because of this, a nuanced and deliberate balance must be struck between the wishes of the user and the wishes of the client. To do anything less results in an enjoyable and more exploitative user experience.

4. What are the norms of competence for gamification practitioners?

Atul Gawande once wrote, “As patients, we want both expertise and progress; we don’t want to acknowledge that these are contradictory desires.” There are certain standards of knowledge that one needs to have in order to be a gamifier capable of adding value to clients and their audiences. On the other hand, gamification is rapidly evolving through a process of refinement and innovation. Therefore, practitioners must work to stay on top of new developments in methods and practice. Some areas of expertise that gamification practitioners or enterprises need to consider for their skill set include social technology, game design, coding and web development, animation, graphic arts &

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3 http://dent.osu.edu/perio/PDF/Cutting%20edge,V8,I2.pdf (page 12-13)
design, digital media, research methods, analytic tools, and client and customer relationship management.

5. **What sacrifices are required of gamification practitioners what is the relative priority of the clients’ well-being?**

Each company that employs gamification should have internal discussions to determine where the priorities of their clients lie in comparison to the priorities of the company. Because gamification is a tool used in similar relationships to achieve similar results as other public relations and marketing tools, the guidelines written by the Public Relations Society of America are useful here. When considering end users as clients, one specific sacrifice is that of complete data sets for the sake of user privacy. Gamification practitioners will have to accept some level of generality in their metrics and reports in order to accommodate user trust and privacy. These issues will be addressed further in this best practices.

6. **What is the ideal Relationship between gamification co-practitioners**

Gamification often revolves around competition, so it is no surprise that the gamification market is competitive. However, practitioners following the guidelines established by the PRSA regarding fair competition will help create and enforce a field in which hard work and fair play result in an elevation of the quality of products and services offered.

7. **What are characteristics of the ideal relationship between the profession and the larger community?**

Each practice brings a level of expertise to a valued area of normal human life. In the case of gamification, the value added is fun. Gamification’s best offerings to society are situations in which a person is interested in an interaction with an organization. In this case gamification serves as a new channel that makes engaging more enjoyable and fun. Gamification may be particularly useful for organizations with which users want to interact but are discouraged to do so because they either hold the organization in confusion or suspicion (such as one's bank) or they do not think the organization is accessible. A major contribution of gamification is to take interactions that used to be tedious (but necessary), uninspiring, boring, or difficult, and make them more fun and enjoyable.

Perhaps the argument for the large contribution gamification has for society is best stated in Jane McGonigal’s bestseller *Reality is Broken: Why games make us happy and how they can change the world*. McGonigal argues that games teach us to be super-empowered hopeful individuals and offer us blissful productivity, urgent optimism, epic meanings, and social collaboration. McGonigal sees the relationship between games and society as one in which we apply the things about games that grant us these benefits to real world problems like climate change, poverty, and government accountability, and
more. Thus, the ideal relationship between gamification practitioners and society is one in which practitioners take advantage of the super-empowered hopeful collaboration skills that game dynamics and mechanics develop in people and use them to tackle society’s most pressing social, economic, and environmental problems.

8. How should gamification enterprises account for the availability and access of their services?

Gamification platforms should strive to offer as much accessibility as is possible. This ranges from practices that include browser and operating system compatibility, as well as being accessible to users with various disabilities. There are resources available for designers and publishers who wish to be compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Federal Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility and Compliance Act.

Having a more accessible gamification platform will also increase the implementation’s user base. This will result in a more diversified set of users, which should be natural benefit to any practitioner. However, it is worth considering that some users may not have the ability to complete all challenges. If this is the case then leaderboards should be tiered to allow for competition within like ability ranges.

9. What standards of integrity and education are relevant to gamification?

As with any industry, gamification has a growing knowledge base and evolving theories of what works and what is unsuccessful. Similarly, certain practices can damage a company’s reputation and damage the integrity of gamification overall.

All practitioners need to realize that the relatively unknown nature of gamification makes each implementation especially significant in a user’s mind. One bad experience can turn someone off from putting effort into other loyalty programs down the line.

Practical best practices that maintain the integrity of gamification are to be found in the succeeding section.
Preliminary Best Practices Recommendations

Along with the thoughts above, these recommendations constitute a list of actionable practices that should be considered with each gamification implementation.

1. Consider the player experience
One of the most important best practices is to think of all aspects of the game through the eyes of the player. As Jane McGonigal said at the Symposium for Digital Ethics and Policy: if one is using gamification to only get people to do what one wants them to do, then one is not using game mechanics and dynamics responsibly. But if one is using game mechanics and dynamics to help people do things they already are interested in doing, then one is practicing gamification responsibly. This acknowledges that designed game-like experiences are moral objects and that gamification practitioners should be mindful of the power they have to impart values. This means going through the actions and reward system through the player perspective to make sure that the experience is actually welcome, smooth and enjoyable. It also means that a system should not aggressively try to cross-sell players products that are not relevant to their level or type of participation. This type of system behavior only serves to turn users away.

2. Accessibility

Gamification processes should include taking measures that ensure a fair level of accessibility to all users. The US Government has passed legislation to ensure IT access to variously abled groups of people. To learn more about how this would apply to a platform or website, one may review the 508 compliance website.

3. Plan, Model, and Test

No gamification platform should be implemented until the proper planning has been done. The gamification practitioner should spend enough time researching the service, website, or other user base that they are going to gamify that they can make well-informed and researched decisions about the kinds of things in which the user base will be interested. Then there should be considerable attention spent on modeling and testing versions of the platform to be sure that it works as designed.

This work is never quite “finished,” since it is a best practice to constantly update and change the system with which the practitioner is working. In other words, responsible testing needs to occur before any significant changes to the system are made. Nobody knows better than the users what the users will enjoy, so the best course of action is to

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roll out changes to small groups first. This may involve A-B testing in which two or more versions of a change are first introduced to small test groups in order to measure their effectiveness, or some other method of testing entirely. Whatever methods are used, planning, modeling, and testing are an important part of gamification best practices.

4. Granular user involvement ranges

A gamification system should give users the ability to control how little or how much they participate in the system. Games are fun because they are voluntary; a gamification system will not be successful if it forces gamified engagement in order to access the core product, service, or experience offered by the organization employing it. To this end, the 5 best practices tips from the Gamification Wiki\(^5\) are useful:

- Gamification should not distract from the website's experience.
- Gamification elements should visually blend seamlessly into the website.
- Gamification should enhance site features that directly affect ROI, engagement, brand loyalty, time-on-site, or click through.
- Gamification should consider weighting the experience of Game Mechanics to value specific actions over others.
- Gamification should primarily be concerned with enhancing the site's experience and not focus on the attention on the Gamification service itself.

5. Rules & FAQs

Each gamification implementation should have a visible rules page and FAQ page. A rules statement serves multiple purposes. First and foremost it provides users with a place to go to learn about the basic mechanics involved in a particular gamification system. Ensuring that everybody has easy and equal access to the rules of your reward and incentive system is important to ensure that all players are on a fair and equal playing field. But it also serves as an arbitration tool to use when settling disputes between players and the organization, or players and other players.

Having FAQs that are relevant to the gamification platform and the service around which it is based is an extension of this idea. It has proven difficult to encourage users to read through full rules guides. However, FAQs are an easy way for people to get the quick answers they need.

There is always a question of how much information to put in rules and FAQs, since imperfect information is often an important part of what makes game mechanics work.

Practitioners should spend time placing themselves in a player’s position and thinking about what information they will need. It is a best practice to have information as transparently and easily available as possible, in as many forms as are practical for users to review.

6. Frequency of Updating

Good game balance and high engagement both are resultant of updating gamification platforms frequently. Not only must one provide a changing experience in order for the challenges to be fresh and the rewards to be incentivizing, but failure to update can result in things that ruin the player experience, such as bugs, errors, or imbalanced rules being in place too long and giving undue advantages or disadvantages to players.

7. Track & Analyze Data

In order to make your gamification model as good as it can be, it will be necessary to track and analyze your data. Failure to do so will result in an implementation that feels dead and stale. However, as stated above, be sure that players are fully aware of the kinds of actions you are tracking and why you are doing so. Recording actions can help give insights into parts of the game that are not working and need fixing, as well as parts of the game that players are clearly wishing for more of. Be sure to dedicate time to analyzing data using as many metrics and dimensions as possible in order to optimize the experience for your users.

8. Protecting Privacy: Responsible Tracking & Disclosure

If a website, organization, or platform tracks user data, it should tell them what kind of information it is tracking and how it plans to use it. The goals for tracking should be easily findable and understandable to all players. The statement should indicate to users whether they will be tracked after they leave the website, exposed to targeted ads, and any other ways that anyone will be using the data collected on the site. Having users consent to terms and fully disclosing intentions not only helps insulate an organization from negative privacy fallout, it also adds to the integrity to a gamification practice. For help developing a privacy disclosure document, one may visit TRUSTe and read the White House’s Privacy Bill of Rights.

9. Anonymity & Accountability

There is a long running debate on the internet about anonymity versus accountability. Your gamification platform will have to consider how much personal information needs to be divulged by its participants and why. The more information about themselves that participants are required to provide, the more likely it will be that civil and positive discourse ensues. However, asking for too much information makes users feel uneasy and less likely to enjoy or even participate in the system. When considering anonymity,
practitioners should ask themselves “will providing this information help me deliver a better experience, or is it non-essential?”

There is a general trend away from anonymity in online spaces due to phenomena such as signing in with Facebook accounts. In this situation it is imperative to identify and protect the non-essential information about users from both other users and third parties. Linking to other social networks such as Facebook or Twitter poses another challenge for practitioners because users may not know what information is being shared between platforms. Whenever possible a gamification practitioner should plainly state whenever a user is about to disclose information that is normatively considered personal. Additionally, if users link social media logins to a platform they need to be able to control what kind of posts the platform will make on their behalf.

10. Encouraging positive behavior: Moderating Comments, Forums, and Messages

Internet flame wars are a well-documented phenomenon. Moderators need to be vigilant but conservative in their detection and obstruction of flame wars. It is commonly the case that communities find an inverse relation between comment quality and anonymity. It is true that practitioner’s goals are to increase engagement, and a good, healthy, and that intense discussion is one of the best ways to engage users and allow them to feel invested in a community. But when users turn to ad hominem attacks or other forms of harmful rhetoric, moderators need to act quickly to let users know that hate, discrimination, or violent rhetoric will not be tolerated. Conversely, rewarding users for positive feedback and healthy discussions is a good way to shape a user community that frequently produces healthy and sustainable social interactions. Using the game mechanics in a gamification system (points, badges, achievements, or more) is one of the best ways to encourage positive comments and contributions from users.

11. Dealing with Griefers & Cheaters

It is inevitable in large online communities for some people to show up who are interested more in causing grief in others and gaming the system than participating in good faith. Gamification practitioners need to stay vigilant for this type of behavior and have a plan for dealing with it. Included in the rules & policy statement should be provisions about what kinds of behaviors will be considered unacceptable and what kind of moderating will be enacted to prevent or rectify it. Another good way to deal with griefers and cheaters is to allow the user base greater freedom to police itself and easy means to report abusers of the system. Empowering users not only makes them feel responsible and appreciated but helps the system self-regulate and removes pressure from the practitioner to be in all places at all times.

12. Copyright, Creative Commons, and Attribution
When handling user-submitted content your company should be mindful of the pitfalls surrounding improper attribution. Also, one should be clear in the submission process whether the user or the company will own content. If a platform uses sponsored badges or any other content as a part of its interface, mechanics, or rewards, it should be sure to have the proper consent and attribution included.

Resources

2. Public Relations Society of America Code of Ethics
3. Section 508 Compliance
4. White House Privacy Bill of Rights
5. TRUSTe
6. Gamification Wiki
   a. 5 best practices