

Everything has rules. Life works because of rules. Rules have many names and forms. Laws of physics, algebra, logic, frameworks, instructions and more. Without rules you have chaos. That said, some scientists think even chaos has rules.

In games, rules are vital. However free and open a game may seem, there will be a deep set rules that cannot be broken. Be it the size of the map or the way physics work in the game. Minecraft is a good example. Seemingly you can do anything. However, you have to follow rules and instructions to gain that freedom. You have to mine and craft and create - all within the rules of the world around you.

Without some kind of rules in a game, how do you know who has won and who has lost. Chess without rules is just two people moving pieces randomly on a board with no purpose. Even then, it is natural for humans to start to invent rules and play "properly" so they can gauge each other's skills and pick a winner.

Children playing often look chaotic and lawless, but watch them closely and you will see that their play quickly produces rule sets. They may evolve rapidly during the game, but (and this is where I start scrambling for a point) they keep each other informed of the new rules as they make them up. It is when one of them makes up a secret rule that no one else knew that you start to get tears.

In Gamification the same is true. When you start to define the "game", you need to build a framework and a rule set. This action is worth 1 point, but this more complex action is worth 5. Getting 100 points earns you this badge, 300 gets you another. If you don't have at least the basics in place, how are people meant to know how to win? I would rather know that entering 500 lines of code into my gamified editor earns me a badge and 500 more earns another. If I am just randomly awarded points and badges, how do I benchmark my success and how am I motivated to do more. I may as well just wait for the next random award to just happen. *(hindsight edit - Think of this as measure rather than achievement I am talking here about understanding my progress rather than striving to get more extrinsic rewards!)*

That is not to say that surprises are bad. Sure, chuck in random awards - humans love surprise. They make things more exciting, let me choose what I earn next if you are using tangible rewards, but make sure that the basics are recorded and visible to all. That said, don't be afraid to change the rules. Evolution is natural. Things often don't work and need to change. Just make sure that users know what the changes are and how that may affect them.

The trouble is, the word rule conjures up images of overbearing teachers and creativity

stifling jobs worth's. Rules don't have to stifle creative thinking. In some cases they can help, they let you forget about the simple things and concentrate on the important bits that require your attention. Make your rules flexible and this becomes even truer.

To break the rules you gotta know the rules, but maybe it is time we redefined the language we use to fit the true meaning as we see it?

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