

One of the most tedious arguments in gamification is that of Intrinsic [Motivation](#) vs. Extrinsic Motivation . Not only is it tedious, it is also one of the most written about topics on the web relating to gamification and is one of the main reasons people cite when they tell you why they think gamification is rubbish. They feel that all gamifiers rely too much on extrinsic motivators.

I have tackled this in various forms of the last 2 years, but not directly written an article mentioning those two words in the title. As such, I am often accused of not understanding the whole argument because I sometimes say that extrinsic rewards don't always suck. So, here we go, oh and do a search for better articles after you read this one!

Much of what follows is taken from my book [Gamification: A Simple Introduction & a Bit More](#).

Have changed a few bits here to help with context though!

## The Psychology of Motivation

Motivation is a strange and often counter intuitive thing. We are brought up to believe that if you want to motivate people you give them something they want. In a job, that would be more money, with kids it may be stickers on a chart for behaviour. Whilst this certainly can be the case, in the modern world it is beginning to become less and less true. In his book Drive, Daniel Pink talks about Motivation 2.0 and Motivation 3.0.

Motivation 2.0 firmly drew on the idea that if you give people more money, they will produce more work. In the days of factories and manufacturing, this was certainly true. These were jobs that required very little creativity.

However, over the last 40 years there has been a great deal of research done into what truly motivates us as humans - our intrinsic motivation. One often cited experiment was to prove something called Over justification (Lepper et al ) . This involved asking three groups of children who enjoyed drawing to draw pictures. These groups had the following conditions.

- The first group were told they would get a reward at the end of the activity.
- The second were not told about any rewards, but received one as a surprise after the activity.
- The final group were not offered a reward and got no reward.

This was repeated over time and the subjects were monitored. They found that the group

who expected a reward, spent far less time drawing than the group who were getting no reward. The group that were getting the surprise reward, spent the most time drawing. It also transpired that the group who expected a reward actually produced less creative work. The fun, the intrinsic motivation, had been replaced with the expectation of a reward.

These kinds of experiments have been repeated over the years - each one proving the same thing. In the 90's a research group led by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, did a meta analysis of 128 different papers on the subject. What all of the research found, was that for tasks that required even the slightest level of creativity, offering predictable extrinsic rewards (e.g. money), had a negative effect, or as they put it

“[engagement](#)-contingent, completion-contingent, and performance-contingent rewards significantly undermined free-choice intrinsic motivation”

Does that mean that everyone in gamification is getting it wrong and we need to rethink it all?

Well, not quite. You see there are a few important things to consider. The first is this bit about “free choice intrinsic motivation”. This can be seen as a rather round-about way of describing creativity. What if your task is not creative? Take the example of data entry. You have to do it, most don't enjoy it, but it has to be accurate every time. Applying a few game elements from the PBL range, may actually help to keep those people a little more engaged. More importantly, it won't have a negative effect - as long as they are willing participants in the “game”.

Another big thing to consider is that certain extrinsic rewards are needed for us to feel secure (think Maslow) - money for instance. As I talk about in [Motivation, let's get real for a moment](#) , until money is no longer a burning issue for you, it will always be desirable.

## Are Extrinsic Rewards Evil?

No, not really. The over reliance of many gamified systems on nothing but extrinsic rewards can be problematic though. The biggest issue is that they just are not engaging for most people over an extended period of time.

When you are bringing people into a new system, they can actually be pretty helpful. They can bridge the gap between learning how something works and finding the intrinsic reasons

to continue using it. The points and badges and the like, when done well, can be a light hearted pat on the back for doing well as you move up the [User Journey](#) from On-Boarding to Habit Building and beyond. The thing is, that you have to have a system built that gives the user a reason to keep using it once the shine of the extrinsic stuff wears off.

That is where most get it wrong!

Ok, done. I promise I will not write this kind of article ever again. I just had to get it out of my system as I was challenged on it recently. I was annoyed as I had to send several links to the person to show my actual point of view - now I just need to send the one!

More stuff on this from me can be found around the site. A few links to get you going

- [The Intrinsic Motivation RAMP](#)
- [Intrinsic & Extrinsic User Types](#)
- [Gamification User Types and the 4 Keys 2 Fun](#)

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