



The Importance of Definitions (and Why They Don't Matter)

Description

Yep, paradoxical title alert!

Recently I got into a very interesting debate on LinkedIn about the definition of Gamification. Now, I have long had my definition of gamification, one that doesn't stray too far from the closest thing we have to a "proper" definition.

- Mine: The use of game design metaphors to create more game-like and engaging experiences.
- Proper (From Deterding et al): The application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts

Whichever definition you follow or whomsoever you may ask in the industry, 9 times out of 10 you will get something along those lines. The core of most peoples definition revolves around the use of game "bits" to improve things that are not games. What they don't often say is that it is creating a game.

There is a very important reason for this.

Expectations

One consistent complaint from people who don't like gamified solutions, that they are not games, they were expecting a game. I had a professional reviewer review my book [Even Ninja Monkeys Like to Play](#) who gave it 2 stars out of 5. Their complaint was "I thought it was going to teach me how to make a game". This was despite spending an entire chapter at the start of the book explaining why gamification was not the same as making games!

If we could all agree that gamification is not about creating actual games, then we could avoid this sort of issue with people's expectations. If they expect a gamified solution and not a game, they won't be disappointed when they get a gamified solution!

When is A Digger Not A Digger?

The discussion on linked in was triggered by a silly meme I made that equated comparing games to gamification to comparing sports cars to diggers. They share similar DNA but have totally different purposes. The argument was that the purposes were contextual. If you race two diggers, did that not make them race cars? The answer is **no**, they are still diggers, they are just racing. Their intended purpose has not changed, just how they are being used. They were still built to be diggers, to move earth. The fact that someone raced them did not change their nature.

Taking that a little further, imagine a wall that you wish to put a screw into. All you have is a hammer. You can use the hammer to smash the screw into the wall and that may well work. Does that make the hammer a screwdriver? **No!** Imagine now that you have a knife, not a hammer. You could use the knife to actually screw the screw into the wall, as the tip of the blade might fit the screw head. Is the knife now a screwdriver? **No**, it is still a knife. If you took the knife into a workshop and cut chunks out of it, and refashioned it into a screwdriver – then you have redesigned and repurposed it into a proper screwdriver. It has been physically transformed into something new.

The thing we suffer from with gamification is that many people don't feel it has been properly defined. But really, it has. We all know it has, we just like to add our own spin to it. At the end of the day, it is almost defined by what it isn't. Gamification is not the process of creating a game. The process of creating a game in a non-game context is the process of creating a serious game. But of course, that has some sticky points as well.

What Is Entertainment

Take a very well known game, Sid Meier's masterpiece, Civilization. When this was created it was created to entertain people. That was its "designed intent". Now, many people have played this game and have discovered that it is also a great teaching tool. You can learn about geography, history, politics, military strategy and more. So, it is a game that teaches you. Does that mean that it is actually a serious game? **No!** It is still an entertainment game, that can be used for non-entertainment purposes.

The flip-side would be the serious educational game, the Oregon Trail. This was created in 1985 to teach students the realities of life in 19th century America as a pioneer. It was designed to teach, but it is a very fun game to play. Does that make it an entertainment game? **No!** Its designed intent was to teach, so it is a serious game focused on education. I have more on those differences in my [Game Thinking pages](#)

Why Does This Not Matter?

Ok, so as I have said, this does matter, of course it matters. If we can't define things, how can we set expectations of what they will deliver? If we have no definition of what a table is, we could not complain when we buy a table and are handed a sofa!

In the world of gamification solution design, the definition should not define how we think about solving problems! The definition is there to give us the language we need to describe concepts. However, if we

find a problem that needs a serious game, we build a serious game. If it requires a gameful interface, that's what we do. We don't turn to the client and say "Sorry sir, I think you are talking about serious games, I just do gamification, you know the process of not making games!" At least I hope none of you does!?

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