Gamification is often accused of creating activity rather than engagement. Whilst this can be true, is it a bad thing?

First, let’s look at the difference between activity and engagement. Engagement is very hard to define and has plenty of definitions out there. For our purposes, we will consider it as a state where a person is voluntarily participating in an activity with commitment, without the feeling of being forced or coerced into participation. It is heading towards them “wanting” to participate.

This is very different to just an increase in activity. Without engagement, activity needs constant prompting and that is where people start to feel negative about gamification. What is the point of constantly having to prompt or incentivise activity? Isn’t gamification all about intrinsic motivation?

Of course, that is the ideal. we want to create systems that will help people find their intrinsic reason to continue doing whatever it is the system requires them to do. However, is it a bad thing if that never happens – as long as the activity continues?

Take fitness bands as an example. If you are not intrinsically motivated to do exercise, a fitness band is not going to change that. In fact, I posit, that this is deliberate on the fitness band creators side. If we wanted to exercise without the band, we would not buy the latest one. However, I digress. If wearing the fitness band prompts you to exercise – surely this is a good thing? If it requires constant prompting, but you are at least doing the exercise, that is fine! The goal has been accomplished. Sure it would be better if you are intrinsically motivated, but at least you are doing it and your heart thanks you!

If you look at more common uses for gamification, such as making training materials more interesting, do we need long-term sustainable, engagement? No! We just need people to finish the training. If gamification helps that training to suck less, then it is a win for everyone!

We get hung up on the words engaged and sustainable. More often than not the behaviors we are looking for in gamification are very short term. Not always, of course, but let’s be real about it and stop making rods for our own backs!

Is an increase in activity, however short term, better than nothing – of course it is and it is worth every penny if it achieves its goal!