

Gamification: When Badges are Better than Badgers

Description



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Many years ago, I made a typo in a tweet when I mentioned **badgers** instead of badges. I even turned it into a blog, "[Adding badgers would be more gamification than badges.](#)"

It was a slightly idealistic view of badges, where I was almost saying "don't use badges as they are bad". I was young and impressionable! However, it was the first time I mentioned my philosophy on badges and rewards in general

"Rewards should recognise achievement, not be the achievement"

This is as true now as it was then, but it is not the only viewpoint and it is not 100% accurate. Badges get a bad reputation in and around the gamification industry, often seen as a lazy way to try and inject some activity into a system. This is true of far too many implementations, so I wanted to look at a few ways in which badges are better than badgers and what we can learn from that. To be honest, I could have called this article "50 Shades of Badges" as there is no black and white at all when you start to dig into their benefits and their pitfalls!

What is a Badge?

A badge can have several functions. In this article, I am viewing them as some sort of award or reward. In this instance, they are a token that is either bestowed upon or earned by a person in recognition of

actions or activities. It can come in many forms such as a digital badge, a patch, a trophy, a certificate, a medal more. I will be using **badge** as the standard term for all of these unless otherwise stated.

A more important question than “What is a badge?” is “What does a badge represent”, which we shall explore later.

To begin, I want to explore what can make a badge meaningful and how we may categorise badges based on their meaning to the individual.

Investment

First, what kind of personal investment was required to earn the badge. Investment can be several things, time, money, effort etc.

In the example of a medal for bravery, the investment was a willingness to act and accept the potential sacrifice as a consequence of that action. If we then consider another type of medal, that of a medal for winning a race, the athlete had to invest time and effort as well as a personal sacrifice to attain the level of expertise needed to win. Both have significant meaning to the recipient but required very different types of investment.

However, it is possible to get a badge with no direct meaningful investment. For instance, being given a certificate of attendance at school. The likelihood is that the child who received it had no real influence on that and invested nothing more than being present where they were expected to be present. They just were not ill during the school year. A simpler example could be a badge of identity within a school. You are arbitrarily given a group that you belong to at the start of school, you have no influence on that. In this case, as I will expand on later, the badge may still be highly valued by the recipient, even if it is not immediate.

Expectation

It is unlikely that the recipient of a medal for bravery undertook the activity that led to being awarded it, with the express expectation of being given a medal! They did not go around looking for opportunities to be brave! However, when someone enters a race, there is a much higher likelihood that winning the gold medal is on their mind, even just a little bit! If they win, they expect to get the medal.

The same can be said of education. Whilst you may not be in education for the certificate of achievement, it is certainly an expectation once you have completed the education (for most). I can say with fair certainty that the majority of people who do a degree or a masters, don't just do it for fun! There is an expectation that earning that degree will lead to greater things in the future. However, a child that is given a certificate of achievement from the head teacher is unlikely to have been expecting it.

However, a child that is given a certificate of achievement from the head teacher is unlikely to have been expecting it, but will value that reward highly due to what it represents for them, recognition of their effort during the year!

Social or Individual

For our purposes and within the context of badges as awards or rewards, they can also be considered as individual or social. For instance, they may recognise a personal achievement, or acknowledge a particular action such as the case of a certificate of achievement. This is an individual achievement, although you could also say it might carry an indirect level of social status with it.

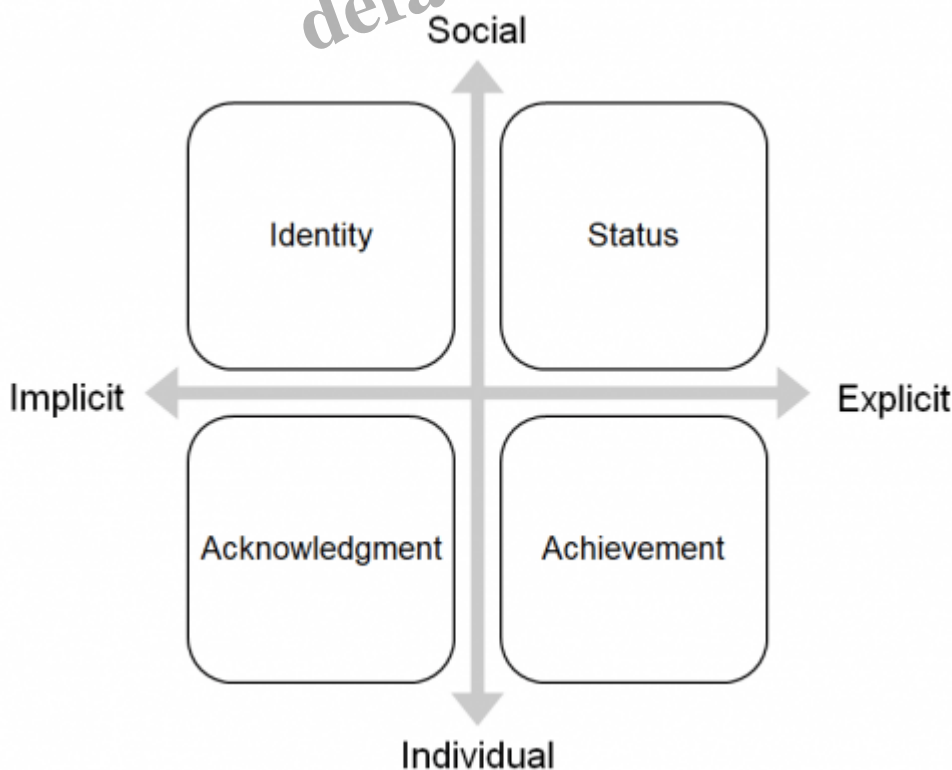
In a more social setting, a badge may represent a person's group identity, for example, your team at school or your regiment in the army. It may identify you as a Marvel fan rather than a D.C. fan. As well as your group identity, a badge can also identify your status within a group such as military rank insignia.

Four Basic Categories

To simplify things a little I will now speak of badges in 4 basic categories; Acknowledgement, Achievement, Identity and Status and will consider them as either being **implicitly** earned (not deliberately) or **explicitly** (deliberate and/or expected as an outcome of the activity).

So that is a bit about what badges actually are, but what do they represent? What does a badge mean?

Well, that's where it all gets a bit fuzzy and huggy.



4 Categories of Reward Badges

What Does a Badge Mean?

A lot of the time when we speak about rewards, we talk about the most meaningful ones being those that require some form of investment in earning. This is, for the most part true. That medal for winning a race, an *achievement* type badge, holds special meaning and required a lot of investment, The medal for bravery, an *acknowledgment* type badge, would hold significant meaning for the person who earned it based on their actions, even if it was not a deliberate attempt to earn a medal. Both hold a strong emotional attachment.

However, the child that got an attendance certificate for just not being ill during the year probably, has no emotional attachment to the certificate at all. They did nothing to earn it and it holds no intrinsic or extrinsic value!

By that notion, a badge representing one's house within a school, a badge of social *identity*, should hold no significant emotional attachment or meaning, after all, it was an arbitrary label managed by the school. At first, this may well be true. **However**, over time you may well begin to attribute pride to being in that house, acting in ways that better the status of the house. It may also have a deeper meaning if one of your parents or siblings was/is in the same house. Then you may get some deferred sense of pride. Just think of how much Harry Potter wanted to be in Gryffindor!

The reason identity is included in a conversation about awards and rewards is because some identity does have to be earned. A simple example is that of my daughter joining Guides. She had to prove herself before she could make her promise and earn her promise badge. That badge allows her to show the world that she is a Girl Guide. You see this in the army as well of course, with people earning the right to identify with particular regiments after training etc. That makes the badge special, it makes it something that only a specific group of people can say they have earned, it makes it **rare**.

From there, they will earn other badges of achievement, acknowledgment and of course status.

This neatly brings me to badges that represent *status*. Within a social group, such as the army, badges can represent one's status amongst their peers and other groups. Each new badge represents a new level of status. Of course, that sort of status is hard earned and should not be compared to earning the "I clicked like 100 times" badge in a gamified system!

An example of this kind of earned status can be seen in the tech forum StackExchange. Here people earn status by answering questions and being considered helpful and an expert in their field. It takes time, dedication and expertise to earn this level of status and so can be very meaningful to those individuals. You have to be very careful though that any system employing these kinds of status driven badges does not fall into the trap of elitism!

Quick Summary

- **Achievement:** Awarded for an explicit action, such as winning a race. Expected!
- **Acknowledgment:** Awarded for an implicit action, such as being brave under pressure. Unexpected.
- **Identity:** Given as a sign of belonging to a group or faction, such as house badges in school.

Given.

- **Status:** Given to represent ones standing among peers, such as girl guide promise badge or military rank insignia. Earned.

What Does It All Mean?

For you, as a designer, you must ask yourself one question when designing badges. “What will this mean to my user?” If you think about the badge you have created, what do you see the user reaction being when they are first awarded it. Will they go “Yes, nice one!” or “Hah, that’s pretty cool.” or will they just go “urm, ok then?” Then, consider what they will say when they look at that badge in a month’s time? Will it be “Oh yes, I am so proud I got that” or will it be “WTF? Why did I get that again?” What will be most important to your user and your system?

Back to our medal analogy. If you earned the medal, it will have great emotional meaning for you. When you look at it, you will relive the moment of pride you felt at receiving it. However, if you just got the medal on eBay as part of an effort to fill a hole in your collection, you would not get the same emotional attachment, it would be hollow and meaningless. This has been labelled the *Trophy Effect* ⁽¹⁾, an unofficial subset of the more researched and accepted *Endowment Effect* ⁽²⁾. Earning something gives it a higher value than just being given something or getting it without real effort. You may be happy that you completed the collection, but the medal would hold no real significance compared to the connection the original owner had to it.

If you look at my [BMEM](#) framework, emotions are considered before mechanics so they are certainly something that should be considered before designing badges. What do you want people to feel? If you just want a short shot of adrenaline in the arm of the user, then sure a badge for clicking like 100 times may well be enough.

Badges can serve many functions in a system beyond what I have mentioned. There was some great research on how badges can be used in a social media setting that identified 5 categories ⁽³⁾:

- Goal Setting
- Instruction
- Reputation
- Status / Affirmation
- Group Identification

Other research has highlighted that immediate rewards, such as badges in a system, are a good predictor of adherence to long term goals ⁽⁴⁾.

People primarily pursue long-term goals, such as exercising, to receive delayed rewards (e.g., improved health). However, we find that the presence of immediate rewards is a stronger predictor of persistence in goal-related activities than the presence of delayed rewards.

This is reinforced by other research that highlights that focusing on a long term goal or reward can get you started, it can also reduce your intrinsic motivation if that is your core focus, emphasising the

importance of badges and rewards as a function of goal setting ⁽⁵⁾.

Another use for badges can be seen in nostalgia and autobiographical memory ⁽⁶⁾, where remembering past positive experiences can induce similar feelings, later on, reliving strong emotional experiences. A badge or reward can be used as “physical” reminder of this helping to lead to echoed feelings of achievement, pride or satisfaction all over again, especially when those associated “autobiographical” memories can be linked to goal attainment. This gives badges potential to be powerful reminders and boosters if they are created well ⁽⁷⁾.

If you want your badges to be better than badgers and want to foster continued engagement and an emotional attachment, think broader about the intended functions/mechanisms of badges and try harder!

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Also a big thanks to [Carl Eacott](#) for all of his help as a soundboard and expert!

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Date Created

19/07/2017

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