



When is gamification not gamification?

Description

A few different conversations this last week have triggered a little built of thinking. This usually leads to me brain dumping a blog – and this is no exception. Don't expect to find any answers here!

The first question was – should you tell people that they are using a gamified system?

Straight off the bat, I replied, no. However, when asked why, I was a little stuck. My brain knew it was the wrong thing to do, but I struggled to vocalise it initially. There are a number of issues that trouble me about telling people they are using a gamified system. The first is people's perceptions of gamification. Very often their best view is that it is some kind of benign manipulation. At worst, they feel it is a deliberate, cynical and underhanded form of manipulation.

However, telling them that the system they are using has a few fun elements (what ever they may be), is not quite as bad. It doesn't conjure up this manipulative image.

Another thing that came to me was this idea that you can't tell people to play. If they know that the goal of the new system is to get them to do stuff through the use of game mechanics – will it still have the same impact. If you just let them use the system, say nothing and see how they get on, would the results be the same?

Personally, I would not mention that it was gamified at all. Gamification is not meant to be there to show off to the players how clever you are, it is to motivate and engage them.

The next question was – is there a magic number of game mechanics that you need to be using to say something is gamified.

This came about after a discussion about reCaptcha. if you don't know, this is one of those devices that websites use to prove you are human, presenting you with two squiggly words to read and enter. What makes reCaptcha a little different is that the data you enter is actually used to help digitise real books. My argument is that this is gamified. It sets a challenge (read the text and enter it correctly) and if you read the info, it tells you that you are doing something that has meaning. The argument was that as this is not exactly fun, is it gamified. The other was that it doesn't use much in the way of game

mechanics.

When you look at a standard gamification definition “The use of game mechanics in non game tasks”, there is no minimum number of mechanics specified there. It does not say “The use of at least three game mechanics in non game tasks”. So for me, even if there is just one tiny, slightly hidden game mechanics / element in place – then yes, it is gamified.

This led to another interesting thought – At what point, does a gamified system become a game?

So you have all your game mechanics, dynamics, elements etc. in place. You have designed a fun and a playful system with a great UI and great intrinsic motivation in action. You have found the sweet spot for flow and people are using it happily and productively At what point does that become a game in its own right?

One thought was that games have some kind of narrative – that is what separates gamified from game. I was trying to think of a game that has no story of any sort and have failed. Even things like Space Invaders have a story – something is under attack by the bad guys and the good guy (you) must stop them. Pong had a kind of story (ish) “avoid missing ball for high score”. Of course, I may be mixing up story with goal there. Again, one of the main things of gamification is setting goals – so that must count...

This one really has me stumped. Whilst the definition of a game includes the idea that games are deliberately designed to entertain – what happens if a gamified system becomes enjoyable and even entertaining?

Retrospective edit alert! It is funny how things change, I now have a pretty good answer to this. It becomes a game, when it has gameplay! <http://gamified.uk/2013/02/25/gamification-and-serious-games/>

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