

Rewards and Reward Schedules in Gamification

Description

Anyone who has read a few of my blogs will, by now, be under the impression that I am not the biggest fan of [rewards](#). Well, that is not entirely how I feel. Those that have read earlier blogs may remember something I said – “Rewards should recognise achievement, not be the achievement”. I also found myself saying in an email “Gamification at the moment is often nothing more than an attempt to illicit Pavlovian responses to external stimuli”. I know, how up myself does that sound – but it’s true. The way many people are using rewards are as a way to encourage people to do things – like giving a dog a biscuit for rolling over on command

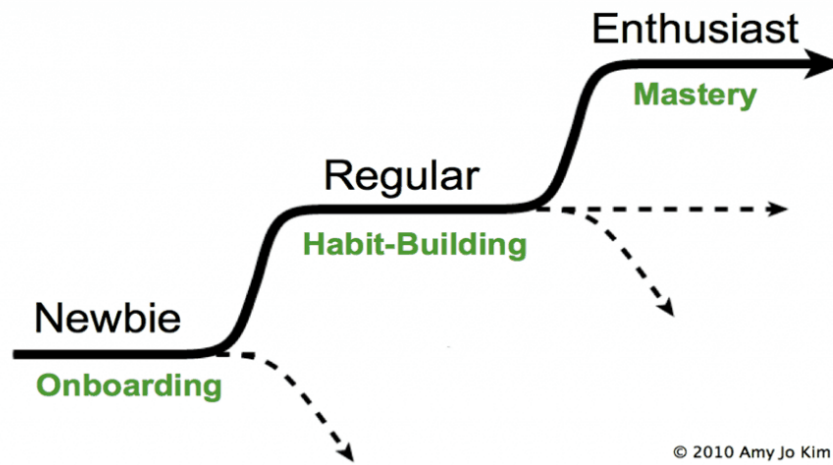
Rewards can Work.

That is not to say this can’t work, but for many there comes a point where that is not enough, especially if you don’t plan the rewards correctly.

I recently heard that the best way to use rewards is totally randomly. It is understood that random rewards can become addictive in the right circumstances. Take a slot machine in a casino or a pub. There is not a great deal of skill needed to play one of those and there is almost no way of predicting when one will pay out. The reward seems to be random. However, it really isn’t. What makes it addictive is the element of chance **AND** knowing that it actually will pay out – it has to eventually. The more money you pump in, the higher the chance that it will pay as well. The randomness is not so much what gets you as the knowledge that it will pay eventually. Digital rewards really can’t work quite the same way, there is no great meaning or value. In a casino I stand the chance to win my fortune, not really the same as the “Liked 100 pages” medal!

Back to Player Journey

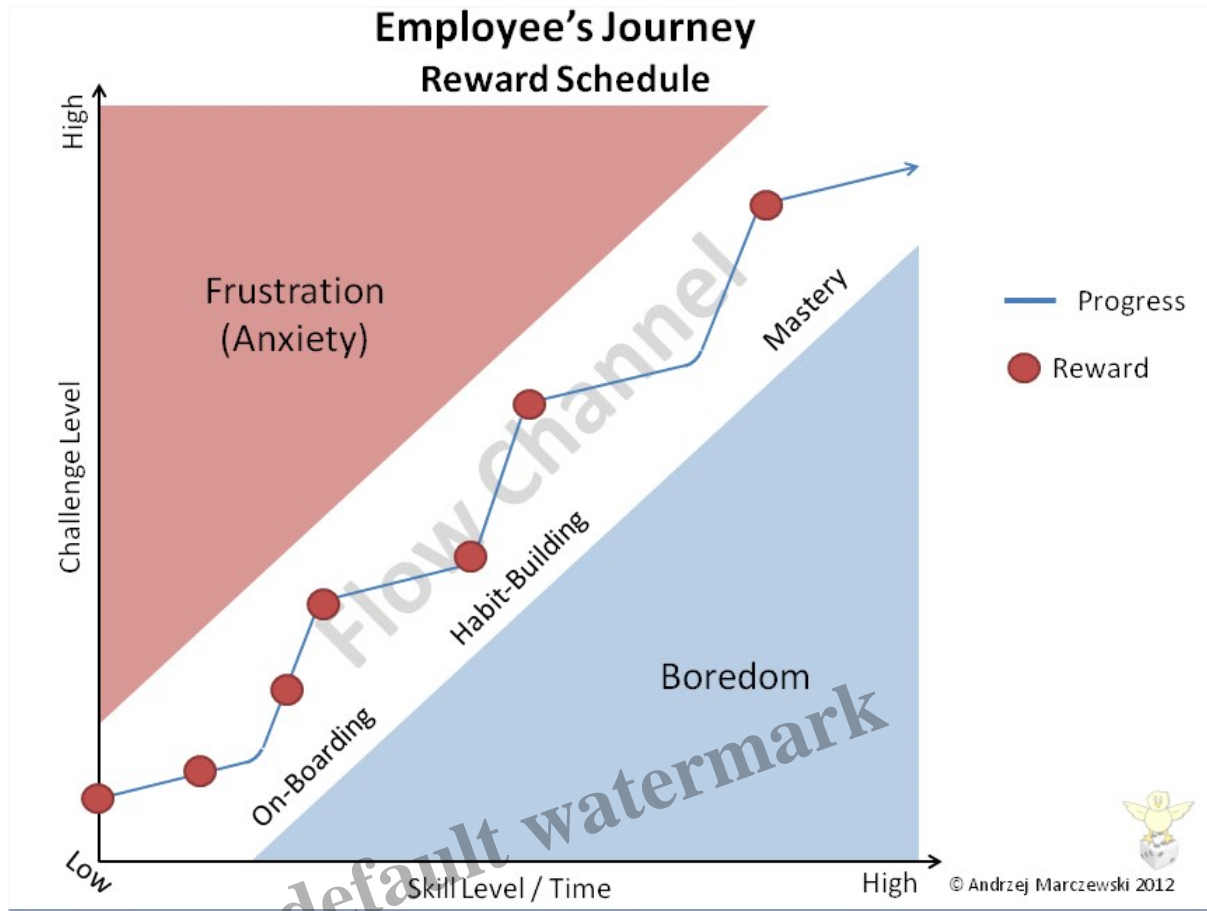
Amy Jo Kim's Player Journey



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So how can we make the most of rewards? Well, let's look at our [player journey diagrams](#) I introduced. Using Amy Jo Kim's player journey as our metaphor here, there are three main phases. On boarding, Habit Building and Mastery. Where rewards and points etc can really help is in the on boarding phase and to a certain extent the habit building phase.



As you can see, there are a few points where we can say that an achievement would seem to fit nicely.

Most people coming into a new system require a little hand holding. As they learn the system, rewards can act as re-enforcement to things that they have just learned. When they come into the system, you give them some kind of welcome achievement. Often the hardest thing is just walking through the door, so congratulate and thank them for it.

As they achieve something new, congratulate them. Recognise actions and achievements that you feel are important and that the user will feel is important. At key points in the user's journey consider giving meaningful rewards or even useful ones. In an on boarding process in a company, consider only giving your employees luxuries (such as an iPad) if they have achieved certain things in your gamified system. Be a little careful with this though, remember we are looking for quality of work – not just work to get the reward.

As you go through the habit building phase rewards and achievements can still help to re-enforce key points in the user's development, but should become scarcer as they get more skilled. By the time they have reached mastery (or at least know what they are doing), there should be less and less need to use achievements at all.

Don't get Carried Away

It is easy to get carried away with achievements and rewards, flooding the user with dozens of meaningless achievements for pointless tasks. It also helps to remember to tell the user why they have been given the achievement. If it was for completing a training course, make sure that it says that somewhere. If it is for being in the system for 12 months, let them know that. It is often frustrating to get some kind of achievement and have no idea what it was for or how you got it. It is also annoying when talking to others and they tell you they got something but then can't tell you how – it makes you feel left out if you don't understand why someone else got something that you seemingly can't get.

Reward Loyalty

People's loyalty is a fickle thing. It is worth at least thanking them and recognising loyalty and especially *longevity* of loyalty. When they have been with you for x number of months or years, say thank you. Better still – give them something meaningful. Some will like the personal feel of this, others will see it as another trophy on the wall. Either way, it is important to remember current users and not just the new ones – this is a lesson the mobile phone industry has taken a very long time to realise.

Call of Duty and Seeming Random

Let's not forget randomness though. There is a place for it in a reward schedule. Most people love a surprise and it can help to give the "Oo, I wonder what I may get next" feeling. These rewards should be available to all and I would probably say that there should be some way to know what may be coming up, there are some who will want to know what may be coming next. If we look at Call of Duty: Black Ops 2 we can see rewards done both well and terribly at the same time.

As you play the multiplayer game you get lots (and I mean lots) of regular achievements for number of kills, number of assists, number of this number of that and number of the other. It is relentless and as such utterly meaningless to most players.

However, every now and again you will get a promotion. This is nice as it shows on your player record and on the score boards – showing others that you have achieved a certain level of accomplishment within the game (I refrain from the using the word skill). It has some meaning and adds to your overall reputation in the game. What really works for me though is when you get a new weapon or an upgrade to an existing one. These are not random, but unless you read into what you get and when, it has the feeling of surprise when it happens and it is always welcome. It allows you to customise your player further to match your style and adds to a feeling of freedom of expression within the game (autonomy if you will). As I say, these are totally scheduled and relate to certain levels of achievement, but normally you are not expecting it and it certainly makes you want to play a bit more to get the next big gun.

Putting it Together

1. **Welcome the user:** Introduce the user to the fact rewards are in use and thank them for taking that first step. – *Expected, Engagement Contingent*

2. **Encourage and Re-Enforce:** use achievements and rewards to help re-enforce the behaviours you are trying to encourage in the early stages of the user's journey through the system. – *Expected, Task Contingent, Unexpected, Non Task Contingent, fixed interval and variable interval*
3. **Scarcity:** Continue this in a regular but limited way as they achieve higher status or skill within the system. If the system is built correctly, you should not need to continue with regular pats on the back once they have mastered it all. *Expected, Task Contingent, Unexpected, Non Task Contingent, fixed interval and variable interval*
4. **Reward Loyalty:** It is easy to forget this, but it is important to recognise longevity of loyalty. For most it will be nice, for some it will be something to show off as part of their status and reputation. – *Expected, Fixed Interval*
5. **Surprise them:** As well as these, use meaningful rewards in ways that the user may not naturally be expecting. Try to surprise them with things that may actually make them smile or things that may be of use to them. These can be used in moderation for as long as you want. – *Unexpected, Non Task Contingent*

One word of warning, rewards should not be used to try and “lift” people out of boring phases of their journey. If you switch the emphasis on working to get a reward away from getting a reward for achievements, you will quickly lose your employees trust. Rewards can not last forever, there comes a time where the system has to stand on its own two feet and be intrinsically engaging. I've said it before and will say it again, a bad system can not be made better with points and badges – You can't polish a turd.

Category

1. Gamification

Tags

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