



What can comedy teach us about gamification?

Description

I was reading an old article, on [the Telegraph website](#), that had Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves explaining how comedy works. It was actually much more interesting than I had expected and offers valuable insights into how to apply gamification in a more engaging way.

Whilst it is true that we all find different things funny, the general **way** in which jokes are constructed and delivered is as important as the content or the context of them.

Surprise

Surprise is the fundamental joke mechanism. Most punchlines rely on an element of surprise – that's why they're not funny the third time you hear them.

In gamification we make use of surprise in the form of random rewards. Jokes tend to do this by leading the audience towards an assumption and then veer off at the last minute – shattering that assumption.

Taking an example from [Jerry Corely](#)

I woke up in the hotel this morning and the housekeeper was banging on the door, just banging... Finally, I had to get up and let her out.

You make the assumption at the start that the housekeeper was outside the door, wanting to get in. The punchline is funny because it totally goes against this, it reverses the assumption.

With jokes, as the original quote suggests though, if the punchline is always the same, the surprise wears off after the first telling. The same is true of gamification. If you stick to the same "random" rewards, there is no "replay" value. Make random truly mean random so that there is no way to predict when they might happen. At the same time, make them contextual and relevant to the circumstances

surrounding them being awarded.

Timing

The surprise mechanism doesn't work without effective timing.

A good joke requires good timing, 10 people can say the same words in the same order, but the only one that will be funny is the one that gets the timing right. The pauses between words are as important as the words themselves.

In gamification, don't just blast rewards and content at people. Take your time and deliver at the optimum time.

Culture

Individual jokes have finite significance because they rely on joke and audience inhabiting the same world.

What people in England find funny, people in America may not understand at all. This is because of cultural differences. Consider the "Fanny Pack". In the UK this is shocking and hilarious in equal measure. We called them "Bum Bags", because in the UK fanny means something very different than in the US!

The same is true of gamification. Certain things just don't appeal to certain cultures. [Horst Streck](#) says that his research shows that there are significant differences between America and the Netherlands around the importance of competition. The same is true of prestige. He says that in Dutch culture, standing out or making a show of your status is frowned upon.

Modesty is key here, because even when you have a lot of money, Dutch culture prohibits you from showing off exactly how rich you are.

Making the audience work for it

If the audience does not understand the context of the joke, they won't find it funny. They also won't find it funny if they can't understand it at all. Jokes are often funnier if there is some work to be done – a logical leap – but the punchline needs to have some level of context to the set up. For instance;

They all laughed when I said I wanted to be a comedian. They're not laughing now.

Bob Monkhouse

The joke works because it takes a moment to get, this makes it all the more satisfying for the audience. Bob Monkhouse was a comedian, but the fact no one is laughing is a self deprecating comment that is funny and it makes sense in the context.

In gamification, rewards that are earned have a much longer lasting value than those that are just given away.

For gamification to work, just as with comedy, you need to work hard at the craft. You need to get the timing right, get the element of surprise fine tuned, understand the audience and play to them and make sure that what you are doing makes sense to people – not just you.

Category

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