
Gamification: Moving from ‘Addition’ to ‘Creation’

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Abstract

This paper proposes an approach to gamification that moves away from thinking of gamification as an ‘additive’ process and towards thinking of it as a ‘holistic’ process. To do so, this paper proposes a definition that treats gamification as a complete system in itself, positioning it as *the process of adding an actionable layer of context*.

Author Keywords

gamification; game design; engagement

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: Games; J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Psychology, Sociology

General Terms

Design, Theory

Introduction

From nearly the moment gamification entered the spotlight in 2012 it became infamous in both industry and academic communities alike. Its strong positioning in these communities has encouraged and stimulated hearty discussion concerning what gamification is and what gamification can (or cannot) accomplish. This paper explores the state these discussions have left gamification in and proposes an approach to

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gamification that can overcome many of its perceived limitations.

Gamification

Many academics and industry professionals have addressed gamification, and have taken a stab at defining it. Many of these definitions, although different in opinions on usefulness, are found to have a unifying theme. Take into consideration the following definitions:

Sebastian Deterding, Rilla Khaled, Lennart E. Nacke, and Dan Dixon during CHI 2011 tackled the challenge of defining gamification by proposing it be defined as: “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” [3]. Gabe Zichermann, a voice more on the industry side of the discussion, defines gamification as “[t]he process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” [6]. Similar to these lines of thought, other players like Michael Wu and Joey Lee and Jessica Hammer define gamification as “the use of game attributes to drive game-like player behavior in a non-game context” [5] and “the use of game mechanics, dynamics, and frameworks to promote desired behaviors” [4].

What all of these definitions (and many more similar to them not included in this paper) have in common is the focus on the use of elements (mechanics, attributes, etc.) with a basis or foundation in gaming (game design) in existing environments. In many cases, this definition is extended to include the purpose for the use of these elements: to change behavior.

On a pure industry side, gamification companies use definitions similar to the ones mentioned above, yet

with more of a focus on the purpose of use. Badgeville views gamification as “a modern business strategy that uses proven techniques from social gaming to measure and influence behavior” [1]. Bunchball is similar, yet focuses even more on the end result, the change in behavior: “The overall goal of gamification is to engage people to participate – to share and interact in some activity or community by offering a compelling, dynamic, and sustained gamification experience, and which can be used to accomplish a variety of business goals” [2].

Once again, the focus of the definition is on the transplantation of *game* mechanics into different situations and environments to illicit a change in user behavior. The word ‘game’ appears in almost all definitions – academic and industry. But what is the word doing in such definition? On the surface it appears to have a natural fit as gamification is derived from *game* design. But what does it mean? What constitutes a ‘game’ mechanic? Is feedback a game mechanic? Is competition? I would challenge that the word ‘game’ has no more a place in a definition for gamification than it would in game design itself. It alludes to a fact that somehow gamification uses self-standing pre-existing entities (game entities) in its design process, which I argue is not the case.

Challenge

By considering the commonalities between gamification and game design, many current definitions for gamification begin to appear lacking in depth. It becomes harder to view gamification as the *addition* of solitary, stand-alone ‘game mechanics’ or ‘game elements’ *into* an existing environment. One would be hard pressed to find a large quantity of definitions

defining game design as such (e.g. game design as the use of game mechanics). Therefore, I would argue that gamification appears more as a process of *merging* a deliberate arrangement of mechanics *with* an existing environment.

Although the difference in phrasing may be viewed as slight to some, it is anything but when considering the practical application of gamification. The difference between adding and designing is incredibly dramatic – especially for expectation management (of both clients and consumers). To put it another way, the danger of many current definitions is that they lend themselves to viewing gamification as a pre-package solution as opposed to a process that needs to be designed.

For example: Competition does increase engagement. Thus a leaderboard (a traditional example of gamification) can be a practical mechanic to implement in many situations. But what about the situations where the main goal of the environment or experience is to increase cooperation? Now, even a situation which may successfully support a leaderboard (in theory) may not have the end result of increased engagement as the mechanic isn't the right mechanic for the environment.

Definition

Taking this discussion into consideration, I propose to redefine gamification. Gamification can be seen as *the process of adding an actionable layer of context*. Gamification is the addition of a layer of structure (in

games frequently known as goals and rules), a *context*, in which the user can interact with, or in other words, *take action*. A definition such as this strengthens the approach, making it less about *addition* (adding pre-existing mechanics into the existing environment) and more about *creation* (developing a new environment from the combination of mechanics and the existing environment). By approaching gamification as such, it becomes a more versatile concept.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is unlikely that a true consensus will be reached concerning the definition of the term gamification. From an industry perspective, reaching unanimity on the term is not crucial to the advancement of the development of the technology. What is paramount to achieving innovation in the field, as discussed in this paper, is the reconnection of gamification to its origins in game design.

If we move away from the thought that gamification is successful simply as the addition of stand-alone game mechanics (like leaderboards or achievements) to existing situations to increase engagement, we can find new and perhaps more successful methods outside of these existing stereotypes. By designing gamification experiences as though designing a game – considering the dynamics of the relationships between all parts of the experiences – designers can create an engaging environment that provides a complete experience using elements conducive to the pre-existing environment.

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