Game Thinking: From Content to Actions

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People around the world love games. They are engaging and motivating. For example, a recent Guardian article describes how gamification within a ride-sharing company motivates drivers to drive more, how feedback encourages them to pay attention to customer satisfaction, and how employees can earn badges by completing special quests.

“Click here to accept this challenge. I tap the screen to accept,” Guardian author Sarah Mason writes. “Now, whenever I log into driver mode, a stat meter will appear showing my progress: only 21 more rides before I hit my first bonus.”

According to Limelight Networks’ 2019 report The State of Online Gaming, individuals around the world, in various age groups, are playing more games—on average more than seven hours a week. It’s no wonder, then, that L&D professionals think of games and gamification as silver bullets for engagement and motivation issues that add fun to workplace learning.

In today’s world, which the World Economic Forum calls the “Fourth Industrial Revolution,” continuous learning is one of the key
competitive advantages and top issue on senior leaders' minds. However, continuous learning does not mean taking courses. It means the ability to adopt, reskill, and grow.

And just like the cab industry is falling behind Uber and Lyft, if L&D professionals don't want to be left with the question “How did we not see this coming?” we must use tools such as games and gamification to show value rather than showcase fun. Showing value starts with reframing the problem. It means a mindset shift for L&D professionals—moving from content to actions through game thinking.

In this issue of TD at Work, I will:
• Examine the definition of games and gamification.
• Provide considerations for building a game-based learning strategy that is engaging and effective.
• Present case studies of when to use game-based learning or gamification and when not to.
• Offer tips on how to keep learners—that is, players—in mind as you build your learning game.

Game Terms Defined

Before you can embark on developing game strategies, you need to understand the various definitions involved with games and gamification.

Learning games, game-based learning, and serious games. These three terms generally mean the same thing: a game where you learn through gameplay. Gameplay is the immersive interaction that engages and motivates players to navigate through meaningful challenges to achieve their goal. The building blocks of games are game design elements such as points, feedback, surprise, branching, and a timer. In a well-designed game, these elements work together seamlessly for the gameplay experience. In this issue of TD at Work, I refer to this approach as game-based learning.

Gamification. This is different from game-based learning. In Gamification: Toward a Definition, Sebastian Deterding and co-authors explain that while gamification can use the same game design elements, the goal of gamification is not learning through gameplay. In fact, often there is no traditional gameplay involved at all. The goal of gamification is to motivate people to do something using the psychological effect behind game design. Gamification won’t cause people to do what they do not want to do. The best way to think about it is tackling procrastination and habit building: nudging people in the right direction.

L&D often refers to gamification as the process of making learning gamified, which may result in gamification or game-based learning at the end. The more game elements you’re adding to a non-game context (such as learning), the more it feels and acts like a game. No wonder there’s still confusion among learning professionals about what to call what.

While it is good to understand these definitions, don’t worry about them. Your target audience is most likely motivated by gaining knowledge or skills to grow its ability to perform, not by theoretical definitions behind the design. It is more important that, as a designer, you move from the traditional content-centric approach to a more problem-solving-thinking approach, combining learning and game design. In this issue of TD at Work, I refer to this approach as game thinking.

Now that you have a general understanding of those terms, let’s delve further into putting game thinking into practice.

Establish Your Foundation

To begin practicing game thinking, you must start by laying the foundation of design for games and gamification. But that doesn’t mean you start with technology; rather, it’s about the mindset of how thinking like a game designer is different from the traditional learning design approach.

In L&D, we are often tasked with producing training courses and are even sometimes given the modality and length of time up front: “We need a 20-minute e-learning course on compliance. The topic is dry, so let’s gamify it. By next week.”

Order-taking mostly leads to unrealistic expectations and boring, ineffective courses packed with content that is now sugarcoated with “gamification.” At the same time, saying no to stakeholders is not easy. How, then, should you respond to the request of gamifying content?

Align Your Focus

First, tap into game thinking. Amy Jo Kim, author and game designer behind Rock Band and The Sims, defines
game thinking for product development as: “the art and science of engaging customers on a compelling path to mastery. This approach combines game design, systems thinking, Agile/Lean [user experience] and design thinking to help you build deeply engaging experiences and accelerate your path to product/market fit.” Similarly, L&D professionals need to have this mindset to develop gamified learning that lead learners to develop necessary skills.

As I’ve already discussed, gamification can mean different things to different people. So, rather than delving headfirst into gamifying content, use the figure below as a starting point for a discussion with your stakeholders on what gamifying means to them and what the end product may look like.

Never begin the design process with content. Instead, you need to know the target audience members’ goals, their authentic needs and motivation, along with your available resources for the project. Before you decide to design and build anything game-related, make sure you have the right mindset. More important, you may need to change how your stakeholders think about gamified learning.

In the figure, as you move to the right, the amount of game design elements increases, as does the gameplay your users will experience. The further to the right you go, the more your solution will look like a game, the more important gameplay will be in the learning process, and the more complex your design will be. That means you will likely need additional resources and expertise.

Think about this figure as a sliding scale rather than distinct definitions for each solution. A sliding scale explains why some solutions may be borderline.
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