



Gamification Done Right—The Do's and Don'ts

Ever since Gartner identified “gamification” as an emerging technology in its *2011 Hype Cycle Report*, the term has become a new buzzword across multiple industries.

The idea is simple, and it comes from the recognition that **games are extremely good at engaging their players**. Gamification applies the elements of games that make them engaging to drive interaction, competition, and other gaming behaviors in a non-game context. Non-game contexts can be anything from work, learning, health and fitness, civic engagement, meetings, to incentive program participation, and more.

The elegance of the idea in conjunction with several poster children of gamification success (e.g. FourSquare) popularized this concept. Startups from every industry are building gamified apps; consultancies, big and small, are helping companies implement gamification strategies.



Although gamification success stories abound, there are just many (if not more) failures. In fact, by the end of 2012, there was enough evidence about unsuccessful gamification efforts in the industry that Gartner published a report stating “80% of current gamified applications will fail.” The primary culprit? As Gartner suggested, the greatest obstacle to success with most gamification efforts is poor design.

So how can we design gamification better? After all, gamification is not that simple. There are many nuances that could undermine its success. To guide your future gamification efforts, this compilation of do's and don'ts learned through experience is at your service.

Turn the page to start with the do's, along with tips that apply to incentive travel and rewards and recognition programs.

Due to the wide applicability of gamification, we will refer to the target audience you are trying to gamify as “players.” They may be customers, employees, students, community members, attendees of a meeting, or simply participants of an incentive program.



1. Understand The Behaviors You Are Trying To Drive—What Are You Trying To Gamify?

One of the most important success criteria of gamification is an understanding of the behaviors you are trying to drive in fine-grained details. The granularity is very important, because it is often the case that people know what they want to drive at the high level, but not in specific detail. For example, you may be interested in driving productivity in your customer relations teams or relationship building amongst your employees during an incentive trip. But productivity is not a single human behavior, nor is relationship building. Instead, each of these high level results consists of many specific detailed behaviors.

Likewise, productivity is actually a result of many behaviors, possibly hundreds. Think of all the different activities that people employ to gain productivity (education, adopting new tools, etc.). You must know all these behaviors well enough to list them in detail: It is these detailed behaviors that gamification is able to drive effectively, not the high level outcomes.

If you cannot list the detailed constituent behaviors, then you don't actually understand what it takes to drive the results you want, or how to design the proper gamification to drive them. You will need to take the time at the beginning of the design process to understand the desired

results and the *primary* associated behaviors in order to design your gamification strategy well.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

See below for an example of Relationship-Building Behaviors:

- Meeting someone new or introducing a colleague to someone new
- Telling colleagues a story about your childhood that others don't know about
- Enjoying an activity together such as tennis or golf
- Teaching others about something about which you are passionate
- Sharing ideas on how to solve a major business problem
- Making a plan to meet a colleague at one of the event functions
- Checking in to all of the major event locations with a friend

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

See below for an example of Productivity-Building Behaviors:

- Completing online courses
- Organizing and maintaining administrative duties
- Early adoption of new technologies
- Sharing ideas or tips on how to solve operational problems or constraints
- Checking in to online forums
- Serving as an ad-hoc mentor



2. Have A Sophisticated Analytics Platform For Behavior Tracking, Measurement, And Inference

After developing a list of behaviors you are trying to drive, you must have ways to track those behaviors so you can measure them. After all, what good is knowing the behaviors that lead to success if you can't measure (or improve) them?

The good news is that with almost 7 billion mobile phones in the world and billions of Internet users, we now have many devices that can assist with behavior tracking and measurement.

Although gamification is mostly about psychology, not technology¹, behavior tracking is where technology can really help.

The right technology depends on the type of behavior you want to track. If the behaviors leave behind digital footprints, such as a tweet, or many other behaviors of productivity, then there are many platforms that can track or at least infer the behaviors. However, there are often many behaviors we would like to track in the physical world that don't have digital footprints (e.g. telling your colleague a story about your childhood or serving as an ad-hoc mentor). Such behaviors as these require us to be more creative

¹ (e.g. very successful gamification has been implemented among grade school students using trading cards to track their behaviors)

in our strategies, using combinations of peer-to-peer collaboration, and mobile technology to obtain accurate behavior data.

Incentive Industry Tips

Even with an analytics engine in place, you will have to use creativity for ensuring some behaviors are tracked. For behaviors such as mentoring or sharing best practices, individuals must be educated to log their behavior once completed. This needs to be structured in a way that it ties into a feedback loop or reward system that incentivizes the behavior.

For example, you can create a process where the listeners rate the best practice sharer or storyteller. That way, not only will you know who's been sharing best practices, you will also know how well-received their information is. Moreover, those who share such information now have an incentive to share more, since the rating process enables you to reward them.

If you are incentivizing mentorships, a process can be created whereby mentees rate their mentors. In this case, the rating process enables you to further reward the best mentor.



3. Keep An Eye Out For Unintended Consequences

Once you are able to measure the behaviors you want to gamify, you must watch out for the unintended consequences of each of these behaviors. Gamification changes behaviors in the physical world and can affect people in real, tangible ways.

One of the great dangers of rewarding any behavior with an incentive is that people try to game the system. As a result, cheating is one of the most common unintended consequences of gamification. Your analytics system must not only monitor the gamified behaviors, it must help monitor the unintended behaviors.

Another unintended consequence of gamifying a behavior is that people might overdo the behavior. This often leads to excessive, obsessive (and in extreme cases), addictive behavior.

Building in stop points to the game (for example in Candy Crush there is a built in limit) can help mitigate these obsessive behaviors. An example would be to limit a specific behavior (e.g. uploading images to a gallery, or sending tweets) by **setting a daily maximum number of points** for that activity. This reduces the odds of people overdoing a specific behavior by removing the incentive once that daily maximum is reached.

The ability of gamification to drive behavior means that there may be behavioral repercussions. Designers must be mindful of this and watch for unintended behaviors.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

Limiting the amount of points awarded for particular behaviors will sometimes be necessary. Using one of the constituent behaviors of relationship building as an example, introducing colleagues to others could become an annoyance if overdone. This is because the new colleague will simply hear a lot of names that he/she probably won't remember, and won't have the time to build any actual relationships.

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

Scan your program for potential behaviors that may need to be restricted. For example, recognizing the same person over and over every day at the exclusion of others is not the intent of the program and should be limited.



4. Know Your Players

Another key to successful gamification is to understand your players—the people you are trying to engage via gamification.

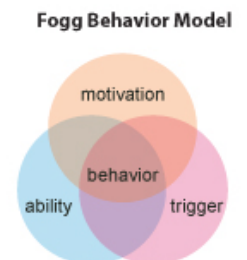


Figure 1

In terms of the Fogg's behavior model (Figure 1), this means knowing if your players have the following three underlying behavioral factors:

- Do they have the motivation and want to perform the behavior?

- Do they have the ability (and access to all the resources necessary) to carry out the behavior?
- Is there a trigger that prompts them to take action?

Most importantly, do they have all three factors at the same time? Only then will your players carry out the behavior you want reliably.

As with incentive programs, the motivation is often clear—it's the incentive rewards, whether it's a trip to the Caribbean, or a gift card to your favorite shop. Although there are triggers, they are usually not carefully timed, when the players have the highest motivation and ability.

In most cases, the trigger is simply the announcement and deployment of the program. However, most incentive programs don't give their players greater abilities. They simply assume the players will have the abilities, which is not always true.

Knowing your players means knowing what motivates them, what limited resources are preventing them from carrying out the desired behavior, and the most effective time to trigger them into action. Once you know these three factors about your target player, then you are in the position to drive the action you want through effective design.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

When gamifying an event, ensure that all participants (at least) know the basics of how to participate, namely:

- How to interact with their phone to play the game if using a mobile event app (which may vary via platform)
- How to receive advance notice of what behaviors gain points
- How prizes will be awarded and announced.

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

When gamifying a reward and recognition program, ensure that education on the program (and the behavior that it is groomed to drive) is widely available and marketed. In addition, ensure that:

- Details of the program are widely communicated and supported by general management.
- Employees receive frequent (most important) communications on their progress—what they did right or wrong, how they can advance towards their goal, and how prizes will be awarded and announced.



5. Know The Effective Timescale Of Your Desired Behavior Change

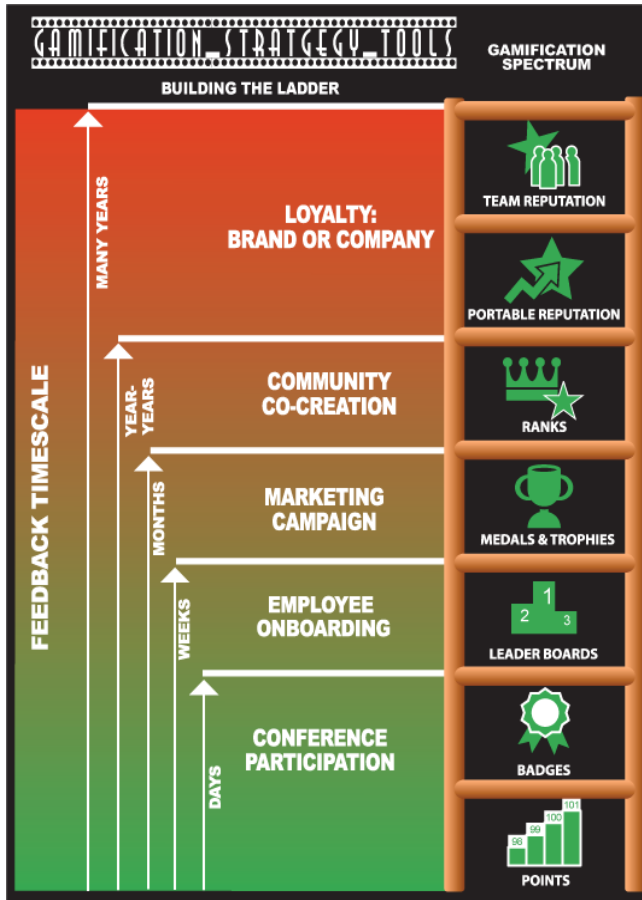


Figure 2

Not all the behaviors you want to drive are intended to last forever. The effective timescale of any behavior change is how long the change in behavior will last, or at least is intended to last.

Because there are many gamification tools with a wide range of feedback timescales, knowing the effective timescale you want to achieve really comes down to picking the right tool for the job.

Gamifying engagement of a marketing campaign that lasts a few months requires a very different set of tools from driving participation during a meeting or conference that lasts for only a few days. Likewise, driving loyalty that lasts for many years is very different from gamifying other short-term behavior changes.

There are hundreds of gamification tools out there, ranging from something as simple as points, badges and leaderboards, to different kinds of reputations (see *Figure 2*). These tools have different feedback timescales. Points are a feedback mechanism that is almost immediate. Reputations, on the other hand, are a feedback mechanism with a much longer timescale, because it takes time to build someone's reputation.

The key to choosing the right set of tools is to build a ladder with successively longer feedback starting with immediate feedback for the effective timescale you want (*Figure 2*). Using the wrong tools for the effective timescale of your desired behavior change is not only costly, but also counterproductive.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

If you only want to drive participation during an incentive travel event, a meeting or a multi-day conference, then all you need to use is points: These events typically don't last very long—on the order of few days to a week. You may employ tools with a longer feedback time scale (i.e. badges and leaderboards to provide different kinds of feedback to your players), but the main focus is the point earnings.

Reward & Recognition Program Tips

Most rewards and recognition programs operate on a longer timescale—from quarterly to yearly. That means if you want to drive behavior changes to increase performance on those timescale, you will need to use gamification tools with feedback timescales up to and including months and years. You will need to start with tools with short feedback timescale (i.e. points and badges). But you will also need badges, leaderboards, trophies/medals, and reputations as your players progress toward their goal.



6. Create A Community For Your Players

Having a community for your players is very important, especially when you are interested in achieving a behavior change that lasts more than several weeks. As shown on our ladder graphic, gamification tools with a feedback timescale longer than a few weeks require a community to be most effective.

For example, without a community, leaderboards don't work very well because your players will be playing with people they don't know and don't care about. Consequently, the competition will be less meaningful, and thus less effective at driving the behavior you want.

A more profound reason why community is so important in gamification is because many gamification tools leverage our inherent need for esteem (e.g. status, access, and power).

This is basically the fourth level on the Maslow's hierarchy of needs (See Figure 3), which sits right above our need for belonging.



Figure 3

However, we know from psychology that when lower levels of needs are not met, people generally won't care about the higher level of needs. If our physical needs (e.g. food and water) aren't met, we won't care about safety. We will overcome the dangers in front of us to get food and water to meet our physical needs. Likewise, if our needs for safety aren't met (e.g. if there is a war going on), we won't really care about belonging. We would rather split up to get to safety first, and then reunite when peace resumes.

Similarly, when our needs for belonging aren't met, we won't truly care about esteem. The community plays a crucial role to meet the players' need for belonging. It provides your players with a group of peers to whom their performance can be compared meaningfully.

Achievements must be compared with a relevant group of peers for others to judge if you are an exceptional performer or an underachiever. The community also provides the players a meaningful venue to show off their achievement

(e.g. their elite airline status or top performer sales status). This inflates the value of the status, making it a stronger motivator of behavior.

So, if you are only interested in short-term behavior changes (such as a short onsite engagement), then you probably don't need a community, although enlisting an existing community (i.e., a company's sales force) can be very effective. For anything longer, you will definitely need to build a community for your players. Without it, your gamification might still work, but it will be much less effective, because your players won't really care about the status, access, and power they gain through playing your game (i.e., there will be less or no motivation).

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

Since most incentive travel programs and meetings are relatively short-term events, gamifying participation in these events won't really need a community. However, if you like to create anticipation for the event, which could be weeks before the event, then creating communities and gamifying its participation can help drive pre-participation in the event (e.g. via twitter, online log in, posting pics, etc.).

If you want to keep the individual engaged after the event is over to increased value to your event and to drive interest for future events, then you will definitely need a community. This is because the timescale of the behavior you want to drive is now much longer than just the few days during the event, more likely it's months after the actual event.

Bottom line: Gamification tools that operate over longer periods of time need a community to be most effective.

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

As most reward and recognition programs are on-going efforts, the behaviors you want to drive there endure longer. Therefore, creating a community becomes crucial to the gamification of employees or channel partners involvement. Gamification, like games, can be competitive and collaborative. A community that works towards shared goal(s) can help companies drive collaborative behaviors (which are generally much harder) so your gamification effort don't turn into a game of cut-throat. Having a community makes it much easier to contribute toward a common cause, a powerful motivator for collaborative behaviors. With a community, gamification can be used to model best practices and provide underachievers with new skills or tools to improve their performance compared to peers.



7. Try To Create Ways For Everyone To Play Frequently

Whether it's a video game, poker or golf, not all games appeal to everyone. Similarly, gamification often does not appeal to everyone equally. Consequently, the range of participation levels in your gamification can vary widely. It's often the case that a few of your players will quickly level

up to elite status, while many others remain fairly stagnant on the ranking ladder.

When that happens, your gamification is alienating a significant population of your players. Although this group probably doesn't contain your most valuable players (MVP), it is often a very large group that comprises more than 50% of your players.

For example, the "elite" members of most loyalty programs with airline or hotel are only a small fraction of their customer base. These are the MVPs. However, a substantial portion of their customers are not frequent travelers. Therefore, their status remains fairly stagnant, and it takes them a long time to move up to the next rung of the ladder. If it takes someone 10 years to move to the next level of status, then it's doubtful that he cares about the loyalty program at all. He is merely collecting the loyalty points because it's free, and these slowly accumulating points contribute little to his loyalty to the brand.

So how can you let these infrequent travelers earn status faster? The solution is to link your loyalty points with some other actions that these players can take frequently.

A common mechanism that has been implemented in the industry is by coupling the reward points with dollars spent on one's credit card. That means your players can now earn rewards points simply by using their credit card, and this can happen much more frequently than flying or staying at a hotel. Consequently, players earn points faster. If your players can see how

quickly they are accumulating points towards a flight or a hotel stay, they will be more inclined to contribute to it. As the players invest more towards the reward, they'll be much more likely to make use of it when they've earned it. And the more frequently the players can make use of the reward, the more they will realize its benefit and continue to contribute. This creates positive feedback that drives loyalty.

Clearly, this requires hotels and airlines to partner with credit card companies, but it doesn't have to start big. The frequent actions that are linked to the loyalty points can be literally anything, as long as you can track them accurately. Furthermore, there can be more than one frequent action. This will provide the players with different ways to earn reward points and many ways to win, so that everyone can play and play often.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

Tying the gamification of the event to behaviors that can happen frequently and are accessible to all (e.g. location check-ins, picture posts, etc.) will engage a deeper part of the core audience. Although there are always "big" events that happen sporadically (e.g. interaction with speakers) or opportunities that are reserved for an elite few (i.e. chairman's receptions, etc.), your gamification strategy should engage the full spectrum of the meeting participants.

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

In addition to the final recognition (like that which culminates at the annual chairman's club), your program should have ample opportunities to earn points for simple daily behaviors (e.g., checking the website, engaging in online program training, sending real-time peer-to-peer recognition, etc.).

These behaviors must contribute toward the final recognition, which is announced at the end of the year, but it is important to have mid-term recognition (e.g. quarterly awards, smaller monthly recognitions, or even weekly status checks) to allow your players to engage more frequently.

Now that we've covered the 7 do's, let's discuss the 3 common mistakes that companies make in gamification.



1. Don't Gamify A Behavior That Doesn't Actually Provide Value To Your Players

Gamification is hyped and often touted as a kind of magic bullet for getting consumers or employees to do what you want. Yes, gamification can change human behavior, and it is effective, but your players aren't stupid. Regardless of the experience you are gamifying, it must eventually generate some real value. Otherwise, your players will eventually realize that

you've wasted a lot of their time playing, but provide no value what so ever. This leads to **gamification backlash**, where your players start to resist your future attempts at gamification. When this happens, it's game over, and you lose!

When you reach gamification backlash, it's not only increasingly more difficult to engage your players via gamification, they will actually resent your effort and develop a negative sentiment towards it (and you). Designing gamification incorrectly can therefore be counter-productive.

Remember, no game lasts forever—all games, even great games, eventually end. Gamification is no different. However, that doesn't mean gamification strategies can't work long term. The key lies in the value that gamification brings.

Gamification isn't sustainable indefinitely. And it doesn't need to be. It just needs to work long enough for the players to realize the value of exhibiting the gamified behavior. At that point, the value becomes the primary behavior driver—as long as the gamified behavior continues to provide value, the behavior will be sustainable long term. Gamification becomes a secondary reinforcement that ensures the players realize the value.

Before you implement any gamification strategy that drives the behaviors you want, ask yourself what value these behaviors will provide to your players. Sometimes the value can simply be entertainment and fun, but on top of this it needs to include real value, whether that means awards, status, discounts, or access to unique features.

Unless you are interested in a one-time engagement that only lasts a short while, you should never gamify a behavior that doesn't provide value to both the player and the sponsor.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

As you design the gamified experience for your event, spend ample time identifying the types of activities and behaviors that bring mutual value to the players and to you as the organizer. For example, will value come from relationship-building? Education? Connecting attendees and sponsors? All of the above?

You also need to think equally of how each of these behaviors will be rewarded, and how feedback will come to the players so that they understand (and thus appreciate) the value they received by participating.

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

The Incentive Travel and Meeting tips apply to reward and recognition programs as well. Sending recognition? Identifying best practices? Taking program training? Time spent understanding specific behavioral needs -- and how they'll be rewarded and communicated back -- are central to gamification effectiveness.



2. DON'T Try To Fix A Broken Product Or Service With Gamification

Another common misuse of gamification is to think you can fix a broken product or service. Inexperienced gamification practitioners could argue that since gamification is so good at driving behavior change, we can use it to drive adoption and usage of a new product, service, or internal process that is currently not being used at a high level.

For example, many companies were convinced that if they have the magic technology that puts up some badges and leaderboards on their haphazardly designed website, this will automatically fix their poor user engagement problem.

What's the result of such gamification when it's actually implemented? Immediately, the results will be positive. They will get a spike of adoption and usage as their players use and explore different areas of the website. However, if the website is not well designed, the players will also be quick to realize how bad it is, because they use it so much. Therefore these players will quickly stop using the website altogether and move into the backlash state. Not only is it harder to get these players back later after you've revamped your websites, they may speak negatively about your poorly designed website and prevent others from actually trying it. Subsequently, the adoption and usage will drop below the level before the execution of your gamification strategy and stay there. Not only will you lose all

the initial lift of usage, it will do more harm than good in the long term.

Gamification is the icing on the cake. If your cake is bad, the icing won't make it taste any better. It may make the cake look more appealing, and many might actually take a bite to try it. But because the cake is bad, they will stop eating and tell others not to bother.

If the product is broken, fix the product first. Gamification is no magic bullet, and it shouldn't be used to fix a broken product (or service). If you do, your players will only realize much faster how broken the product is.

Incentive Travel & Meeting Tips

Simply put, be sure you have thought through creating the ultimate attendee experience before layering in game mechanics. Use the game as an enhancement, not as a replacement. Gamification is not a "repair tool."

Reward and Recognition Program Tips

You may use gamification to pump up participation and communication (word of mouth) for programs that already add value. If there's an issue with the underlying incentive program, gamification won't fix it.



3.

DON'T Build A Game On Top Of Existing Processes— Gamification ≠ Game

Finally, another common mistake that companies make stems from the misconception that gamification is about turning work into a game. This is not true. Gamification is not a game, and it's not about building a game on top of complex processes or systems to make them more fun and engaging.

Quite a few companies have tried to build games on top of their enterprise systems and workflow process to drive adoption and usage. These attempts work in the short term, but they all failed eventually, because a game on top of work is generally not fun. Moreover, they often make work less efficient. This means the players need to spend more resources, whether time or attention, to do the same work. Therefore, in terms of Fogg's behavior model, these games decrease the players' ability, making them less likely to play in the long run.

There are, however, many successful examples of gamification of work or other complex processes. They require meticulous planning and execution of your gamification strategy, which includes consideration of the 7 dos -- not by turning the work or the processes into a game.

In some of the best implementations of gamification, the players don't realize that they are playing a game.

The bottom line is: building a game on top of existing workflows or a process is not gamification.

Acknowledgement

The IRF would like to thank Dr. Michael Wu for his extensive contributions and insights into the development of this paper



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