

Be A Game Changer

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Gamification, an innovative approach that has recently emerged, is the application of game design, thinking and mechanics to non-game processes and systems. For changemakers, its possibilities as an engagement tool and behaviour change technique are only just beginning to be explored.

Games are everywhere – Angry Birds on public transit and in waiting rooms, Sudoku and crosswords in the coffee shop, World of Warcraft on the computer, X-Box in the living room, not to mention a wide range of physical sports and games from darts to basketball.

People spend hours playing them, almost always with no monetary reward or other incentive – except autonomy (creating and directing our own experience), mastery (developing skills and ability) and purpose (complete the puzzle, defeat the Boss, win the final).

Not coincidentally, these are also the three aspects [Dan Pink](#) identifies as key to intrinsic (self) motivation, as distinct from the extrinsic motivators of ‘carrots and sticks’.

Gamification harnesses this existing human appetite for gaming, but instead of tugging the cherry bush to open a secret door, beating the Boss and opening the next level, or piling hotels onto Mayfair, game dynamics are redefining how people participate in life as citizens and consumers.

Why Gamification Works

The concept of gamification has gained traction so quickly that according to a 2011 [Gartner Research Report](#), it was estimated that by 2015, more than 50 percent of organisations that manage innovation processes will gamify those processes.

Gartner identified four main reasons why gamification creates, maintains and amplifies engagement:

1. accelerated feedback cycles. In the real world, feedback loops are slow (eg. annual performance appraisals) with long periods between milestones. Gamification increases the velocity of feedback loops to maintain engagement.
2. clear goals and rules of play. In the real world, where goals are fuzzy and rules selectively applied, gamification provides clear goals and well-defined rules of play to ensure players feel empowered to achieve goals.
3. s compelling narrative. While real-world activities are rarely compelling, gamification builds a narrative that engages players to participate and achieve the goals of the activity.
4. tasks that are challenging but achievable. While there is no shortage of challenges in the real world, they tend to be large and long-term. Gamification provides many short- term, achievable goals to maintain engagement.

[Research](#) has shown that playing games releases the feel-good hormone dopamine, which is associated with reward and pleasure centres in the brain, meaning players return and keep pursuing the activity.

Gaming Our Way To Sustainability

Often, behaviour change approaches rely on extrinsic motivators 'sticks' (punishments) or 'carrots' (rewards), yet the real traction for change comes when the motivation is intrinsic.

Giving people 'laundry lists' of things to change about their lives, even when it means saving money, translates as 'tasks to do' – 1. switch to energy efficient lightbulbs 2. install a low-flow showerhead 3. recycle etc etc reduces engagement by disempowering the participant, and rendering sustainable behaviour as merely another chore to add to people's already busy lives.

These lists have been out there for years and years, and while some progress has been made in awareness, and some improvements have taken place, what could really ignite change is making it fun, and making it something people want to keep doing.

There are a myriad of [game techniques](#) that could be employed to involve people in shaping sustainable communities, including:

- achievement '[badges](#)' – collected for completing a task or challenge or accumulating a certain number of points
- achievement levels – unlocking higher levels of play and rewards
- leaderboards – comparing results with others and establishing status/reputation progress bar or other visual meter – to indicate how close people are to completing a task
- systems for awarding, redeeming, trading, gifting, and otherwise exchanging points

While there are also several [valid critiques](#) of gamification, if techniques are designed and executed well, it can create a buzz and momentum around a campaign, involve people who might not otherwise be engaged, and keep people coming back.

In [this talk from TEDx Boston](#), SCVNGR founder Seth Priebatsch discusses how his enterprise is seeking to build a 'game layer' on top of the world, a concept which has the potential to transform commerce, governance and everyday life.

Arguably the greatest sphere in which to leverage involvement using game dynamics is online, but that's not to say that successful gamification can't happen offline, in the real world.

Gamifying the Offline World

Although digital technology has driven the recent rapid development of online gamification, the [Speed Camera Lottery](#) is one example of gamification that is offline.

The Fun Theory invited ideas from the public for a Fun Theory Award, which was won by USA's Kevin Richardson, who asked himself: 'Can we get more people to obey the speed limit by making it fun to do?'

Richardson's idea was to capture on camera people who stick to the speed limit, with their registration numbers recorded and entered into a lottery. Winners received cash prizes, which were sourced from the fines raised by those motorists caught speeding!

This approach was considered so innovative that Volkswagen and the Swedish National Society for Road Safety implemented it in Stockholm, Sweden. The Fun Theory also tested ways of getting more people to take the stairs with their '[Piano Stairs](#)' and to put rubbish in the bin with '[The World's Deepest Bin](#)'.

So next time you feel guilty for 'time-wasting' on X-Box, Playstation or Wii, or you chastise your kids for doing so, remember that they (and you) are engaging with a phenomenon that is just at the beginning of radically redefining how we engage with the world, both online and offline.

Can you see any ways where 'gamification' could help motivate involvement in your work or projects?

What excites you about the concept of gamification? What worries you about it?