

# Understanding Gamification of Consumer Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, organizations have begun to tout 'gamification' as an effective method of increasing motivation and engagement of employees, customers, patients, and students, among other stakeholders (Wingfield 2012). Nonetheless, despite projections that such gamification will become a widely adopted phenomenon, estimates are gloomy with respect to the real impact these projects will have on the experiences of 'players' (i.e., participants who are supposed to have fun), and on the organizations that would like to use gamification to improve the players' behavior in their favor (Burke 2011). Gamification is difficult, and fraught with problems that can lead to strategic and resource-based problems for the firm. In this article, we present an experience framework in order to show the effect of gamification on consumers' experiences that is illustrated through four extended examples. We conclude this article with a few implications for future research into, as well as practical application for the successful gamification of consumer experiences. But first, we discuss what gamification is and what it is not.

## GAMIFICATION

The term 'gamification' is misleading and has introduced a number of myths. For one, it suggest that we ought to play games at work, which would be a difficult proposition to make to managers who try to keep their employees on task, for example. In fact, gamification is not about games or the gaming industry at all. It is neither about simply adding rewards and points (Robertson 2010) to incentivize consumers, nor about merely adding leaderboards to work contexts to compare employee performances. Likewise, gamification is also not just about adding fun competitions and using 'Game Theory' (Peters 2011) to introduce cooperation and conflict into decision-making processes. The distinguishing characteristic in games is that game design principles are brought to bear within a game, whereas with gamification, game design principles are applied to existing organizational, real world problems, situations or processes.

We define gamification as: the application of lessons from the gaming domain in order to change stakeholder behaviors and outcomes in non-game situations. Arguably, this is a fairly academic definition, but at its heart lays the notion that through gamification, we turn traditional organizational processes into fun, game-like experiences. To better understand gamification, it is necessary to break this definition down into its core components, beginning with lessons from the gaming domain. Specifically, we present the MDE Framework, which posits that there are three game-design principles, known as mechanics, dynamics, and emotions (adapted from Hunnicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004). *Mechanics* are the instructions of a game, specifying its goals, rules, and prescribed playing sequence, and rarely change. *Dynamics* emerge when people start to play, and are defined as the interpersonal results of following, bending, or breaking the mechanics. Dynamics are harder to predict, as they depend on the players and can change over time. *Emotions* are the affective states that occur when people partake in the game that are formed around how players feel about the mechanics and dynamics of the game.

Together, these three game principles describe how good games are designed. We argue that the same principles apply for designing gamified consumer experiences. Somewhat surprisingly, given the popularity of the gamification today, we only found one study that explored gamification in the context of consumer behavior. Lounis, Neratzouli, and Pramataris (2013) conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen consumers, in which consumers expressed their opinions regarding environmentally friendly products and gamified shopping. The results of this study reveal that gamification has potential to increase consumer purchase intentions, as well as potential to increase their willingness to pay (Lounis et al. 2013).

Thus, market research (Burke 2011; Meloni and Gruener 2012), as well as initial academic research on gamification, and reports from industry, suggest that gamification can lead to a number of important outcomes, both desirable and undesirable, in the consumer behavior realm. In order to shed light on how gamification can change behavior in desired ways, we apply an experience-lens to the processes that are to be gamified. For example, rather than arguing that saving energy becomes fun when people turn off appliances that are not in use (which is not fun), we think of it as an overall experience that can be made more fun by adding appropriate mechanics, dynamics and emotions to it. In what follows, first we introduce our experience framework, and then we present four cases that illustrate how through MDE, gamification can make consumer experiences more fun and more successful.

## A MATTER OF EXPERIENCE

We reason that gamified experiences can be described using two fundamental dimensions (adapted from Pine II and Gilmore 1998, 2011): variations in player participation and in player connection with the gamified environment. Player *participation* describes the extent to which the individual is either passively involved in the experience or actively contributes to it. Player *connection* describes the type of environmental relationship that unites the individual with the experience. In absorption, the experience unfolds before the person and occupies the person's mind, whereas in immersion a person becomes part of the experience itself.

These dimensions permit the delineation of four types of experiences, and we argue that most traditional experiences fit neatly into one of the four descriptive quadrants of Figure 1. Imagine the experience of a traditional boxing match. If it's a good one, it will have lots of *observers*. Glued to their TVs, they are clearly passively involved and absorbed in the fight – this is one type of experience. There are also those who attend the fight ringside. *Spectators*, as members of the audience, get a lot closer to the action. The tension in the air, the heat of the arena, and the cheers of the other spectators immerse them deeply into the fight. Of course, in hopes of one day entering the ring, there are also *apprentices* who take lessons to master the sport. Boxing is a very active and absorbing experience for them, but as long as they are only shadow-boxing, they are not fully immersed and remain outside of the action. Lastly, there are of course the boxers themselves. They are the real *performers*, who actively participate in the experience, are highly immersed and leave everything else behind when they exchange bouts with other performers.

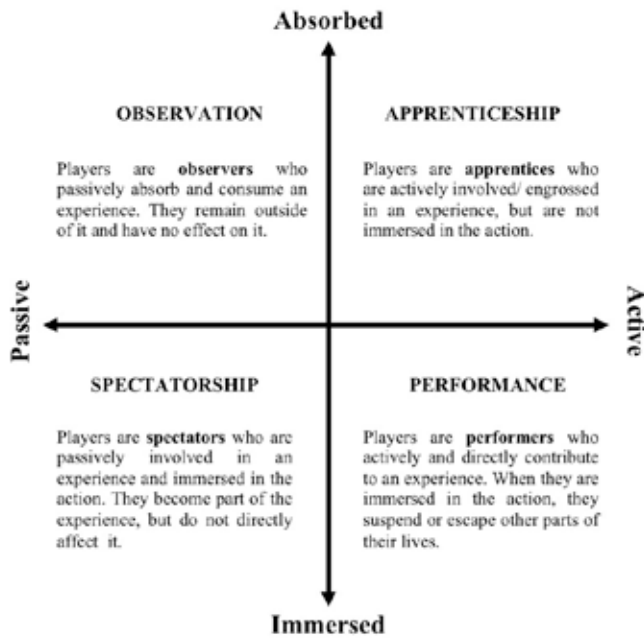


Figure 1: Types of Player Experiences

### TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES

To aid understanding of how gamification can transform traditional business processes, we present cases to show the results of applying the MDE Framework to change the role of the player. Specifically, in the following four subsections, we describe the gamification of a prostate cancer awareness campaign named Movember; the gamification of the launch of singer Jay-Z's book *Decoded*; the gamification of art-curation at the Brooklyn Museum; and finally the gamification of personnel management using software called Freshdesk. In each of these examples, the traditional consumer experience has been gamified to include other elements of experience, and the role of the individual involved with the activity expands. We present these to show how through the appropriate use of gamification principles, traditional consumer experiences can become more fun and engaging by combining appropriate elements from the four quadrants to deepen the connection and involvement with players.

#### Gamifying Awareness Campaigns: Movember

When individuals *actively* participate in an experience and are *absorbed* by it (e.g., attending a university lecture), players assume the role of an apprentice. Traditional social awareness campaigns are good examples of such experiences, often with interested members of the public engaging in conversations with outreach volunteers to learn about social issues. But garnering public interest can be quite difficult. However, Movember, an organization dedicated to raising awareness of prostate cancer, has successfully gamified its annual public awareness campaign by expanding this experience to include elements of all experience quadrants. Every November since 2003, male players grow moustaches to “change the face of men’s health”, and both male and female players work to raise money and public awareness of prostate cancer.

The *mechanics* of the experience are limited to the month of November; each male player must start November with a clean shaven face, and then throughout the month must grow and groom a moustache (Movember 2012). Male and female players both work, online

and offline, to generate donations and to increase awareness of prostate cancer. These efforts are rewarded through various achievement rewards including dollar figure milestones for fundraising, and leaderboards that track player, team, and even country performance. *Dynamics* are largely collaborative, with a friendly sense of competition where teams want to raise more money than others, but have as an overall goal the maximization of their collective donations. Movember generates a variety of positive *emotions* as players often enjoy the sense of pride and amusement of watching others’ moustaches or showing off their own regular ‘regents’ (like Super Mario’s or Albert Einstein’s) or particularly eye-catching styles (a ‘Fu Manchu’ or a ‘Salvador Dali’). Interestingly, the milestone progression rewards (e.g., coupons for razors and shaving cream) players can win are not overly attractive, rather it is the fun, gamified experience that attracts 1 million players annually to Movember.

Indeed, Movember only succeeds by changing the very nature of public awareness campaigns. Traditionally, people attracted by awareness campaigns (think about street level campaigns of Greenpeace and SCPA) are largely apprentices who are at best actively involved and absorbed in the experience. In Movember, these individuals are also entertained by being observers as they passively absorb the progress of others (e.g., watching moustaches grow). In addition, players become performers when they grow moustaches and actively immerse themselves by educating others about men’s health. Female players, unable to grow their own moustaches, can still be immersed in the campaign and indirectly affect it by supporting their male by generating discussion about men’s health and prostate cancer. Finally, people involved in Movember can also be spectators, as they passively watch those around them and cheer them on. Movember combines all four experience types to provoke an emotionally engaging experience for players, and motivates not only friendly competition, but also collegial and supportive dynamics aimed at collectively raising funds for and awareness of prostate cancer.

Awareness and fundraising campaigns are only one example of gamifying a traditional experience in which people are predominately apprentices. There are many others – Khan Academy, for instance, attracts millions of students who support each others’ learning process through novel gamification mechanics, dynamics and emotions. More generally, employee training sessions and professional development workshops can be gamified to further motivate attendees by making them assume the role of performers, spectators, or observers.

#### Gamifying a Book Launch: Decoded

When an individual *passively absorbs* an experience (e.g. when watching a movie), players are observers. Book launches are good examples of experiences that involve passive and absorptive participation of their attendees.

Droga5, a young advertising agency, provides an example of how this can be changed through gamification. When launching singer Jay-Z’s book, *Decoded*, Droga5 utilized a real world scavenger hunt, named Decode, in which participants had to find the pages of Jay-Z’s book. The result was a highly successful book launch: Jay-Z saw his Facebook friends increase by more than one million, *Decoded* was covered by most major international news outlets and many cultural influencers (e.g., bloggers), and the book spent 18 weeks on the New York Times’ best sellers list. To understand how the Decode campaign achieved all this, we again turn to evaluating the experience.

The *mechanics* of Decode were similar to those of a typical scavenger hunt: Decode consisted of sharing the 300 pages of *Decoded* across 200 physical locations (some locations had two pages) in thirteen major US cities in the month before the book’s release in

stores. The spatial dimensions of the scavenger hunt reflected the content of the prose on the any given page, and players could garner ideas of where the pages were located based on hints they found offline “on-the-street”, and online. A fun and competitive *dynamic* emerged as individual players raced to be the first to find the page both online and offline. Progression mechanics and achievement rewards were given to the first player to find each page. This player was rewarded with a copy of Decoded, with the discovered page signed in ink by Jay-Z. In addition, the player received an invitation to a book reading by Jay-Z at the New York City Library. Players experienced a full range of *emotions*, including excitement when competing to decode a page, elation when successfully decoding a page, or frustration and disappointment when unable to find a page.

Droga5 took the traditional book launch experience, in which consumers were predominantly observers that could not affect the experience, and gamified it. Droga5 extended the experience into the other quadrants such that players assumed roles other than that of the observer. Players acted as apprentices when they received clues about pages and learned about Jay-Z’s life. Similarly, when players sought out a page either physically or online, they became performers who actively produced their own book launch experience. Furthermore, players were able to review pages already found by others as well as the clues that led to their discovery, turning players into spectators who could appreciate the creative placement of pages. This combination of the four types of experiences lead to a book launch that was successful for the publisher and the participants alike.

Some other forms of advertising have already been gamified. In 2010, a corrective tape brand called Tipp-Ex launched an advergaming (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007) on YouTube.com, called “Hunter shoots a bear”. Ultimately, this advertisement became a “choose your own adventure” in which viewers decided the outcome of the encounter by typing what they wanted the hunter to do to the bear. Beyond advertisements, many experiences in which players are observers could be gamified, such as attendance at movie theatres or plays.

### Gamifying Art Curation: Brooklyn Museum’s GO Project

Individuals can be *passive* yet *immerse* themselves in the experience (e.g., going on a scenic drive), creating the experience of players being spectators. Individuals become part of the experience, but do not directly impact it. For instance, art galleries invite visitors to view pieces of artwork that a gallery curator previously chose. Brooklyn Museum’s GO Project tried to change this by providing an opportunity to co-create (or co-curate) an art exhibit. The GO project encouraged the public to visit working studios, and invited participants to nominate artists whose work they would like to see at the museum. Over the two-day event, an estimated 18,000 members of the public visited 1,708 artist studios across 44 Brooklyn neighborhoods.

The GO project rule *mechanics* involved numbering each artist’s studio and then encouraging players to visit a variety of studios to observe art, or artists at work. After visiting five studios, players would receive an email ballot and could vote on their favorite artist. Voting took place over two days, and the whole event was bounded by the Brooklyn city limits and by registered artists’ studio locations. Players engaged in the GO Project to be part of a community. This resulting overarching, collective *dynamics* determined which artists would be successful for the GO exhibit. However, even those artists that were not chosen for the exhibit still increased the exposure of their artistic practice to a whole new pool of potential art enthusiasts. The results of the voting and other associated statistics were dis-

played on the museum’s GO website for public access and view. GO players could experience many *emotions*, not only by voting for their favorite artist, but also by observing artwork and meeting artists. Players expressed feelings of wonder or surprise at discovering how many artists lived around them, by observing their artwork, meeting the artists, and by voting for them. Moreover, players were exposed to other art enthusiasts and feelings of fellowship and belonging to the art community resulted.

Through gamification, the Brooklyn museum GO exhibit offered players multiple elements of experiences. Like most museums, visitors acted as spectators of artwork and other exhibits that create an individual esthetic experience. In contrast to most museums, however, the Brooklyn Museum’s GO exhibit also had elements of apprenticeship, observation, and performance. Because the Brooklyn museum GO exhibit generated awareness of the fact that art was being created in people’s neighborhoods, players had the experience of being apprentices. That is, the museum’s patrons acted as apprentice curators when they discovered new artists and their stories. Furthermore, because the experience involved going to art studios to become immersed and active in the nomination process, players also had the experience of being performers. Finally, the experience included assuming the role of the observer, as players watched artists at work and observed the process of artwork creation.

A number of other experiences in which players are spectators could be gamified. Indeed, trips to a variety of places of historic or scientific interest could be improved by incorporating roles as apprentices, performers, and observers. For example, to increase tourist traffic, zoos, science centers, or planetariums could ask patrons to help co-create their exhibits. Similarly, fans cheering or singing along at festivals, concerts, or sporting events also be apprentices, performers, or simply observers if the experience was gamified.

### Gamifying Personnel Management: Freshdesk

Finally, when the individual is both *actively immersed* in an experience (e.g., playing a sport), the experience is one of being a performer with a measure of control as to how the experience unfolds. Work can be such an experience, when employees actively perform job related tasks while being deeply immersed in the workplace environment. In this context, one problem that many employers face is to increase productivity and sustain employee engagement. Freshdesk is a helpdesk software program for customer support centers that addresses this problem through gamification.

Freshdesk’s *mechanics* convert customer inquiries, including telephone inquiries and comments posted on Twitter and Facebook, into virtual tickets that are then assigned to customer service employees. Freshdesk rewards employees with points for successfully completing a virtual ticket. Employees become players who accumulate certain numbers of points reach designated levels and receive badges for their work, which are visible to superiors and other employees. In addition, these points provide managers and employees alike with a means of monitoring performance, and serve as incentives for improvement. Players or teams win a Freshdesk period by accumulating the most points. Moreover, individual players or teams compete for the position of having the most points on a leaderboard. The accumulated points signal a clear leader in the organization on both the team level and the player level, inspiring a competitive *dynamic*. In addition, dynamics such as bragging, or cheering for other players or teams, can emerge. Players experience a range of *emotions* due to the social nature of the competition, including excitement, amusement, surprise, wonder, and frustration.

Freshdesk deepens and extends employees’ experience: Freshdesk takes a typical work environment and turns it in a gamified ex-

perience that incorporates multiple elements of experiences. That is, the experience of going to work is one of performing: employees are immersed in their workplace and are actively involved in creating the workplace experience. Freshdesk adds apprenticeship and observation aspects to the working experience; employees learn more about the service offerings through their interactions and observe the friendly competition and other dynamics that may emerge. Thus, Freshdesk creates an engaging and deeper experience by including elements of education and entertainment in addition to more the traditional experience of being a performer in the workplace.

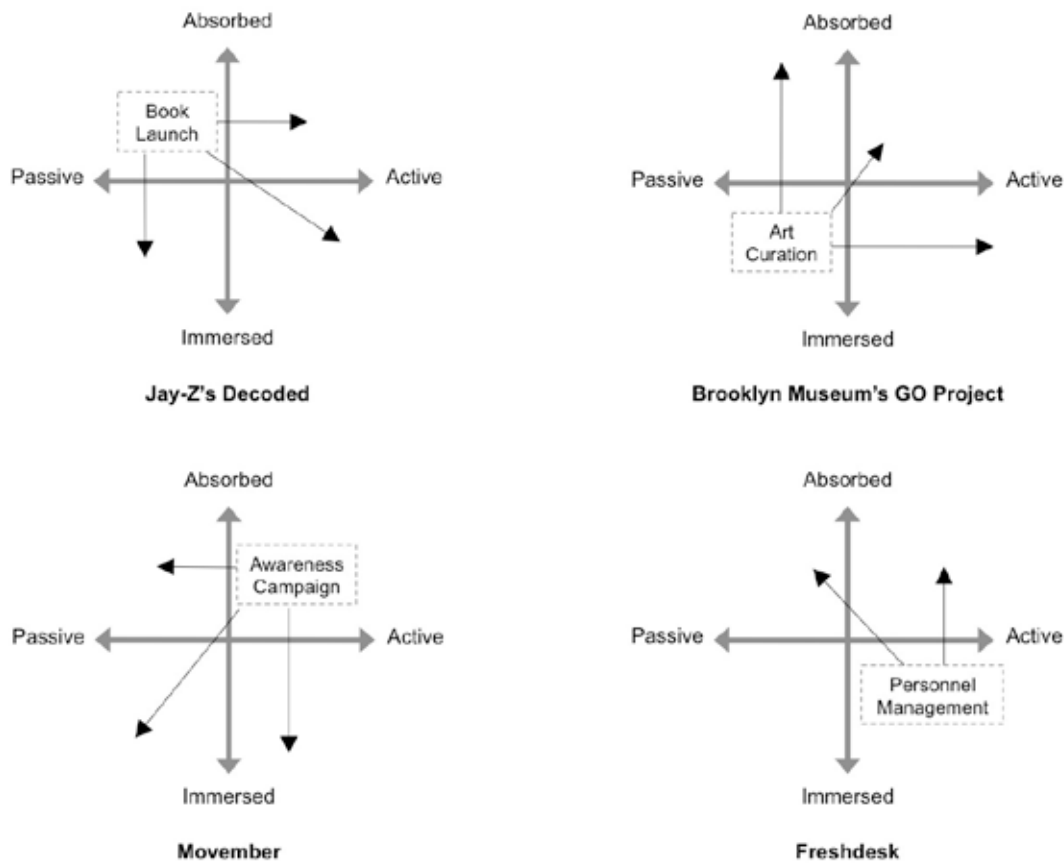
Performances other than HR could be gamified. For example, take a personal experience many people can relate to: loosing weight. Many of today's weight loss tools extend this experience through gamification. There are those that keep track of calories (e.g., Calorie Counter), offer information on how much stored energy is in food (e.g., Food Energy Calculator) and reward players with badges for each five pounds lost (e.g., Fit Bit).

**THE DEPTHS OF ENGAGEMENT**

In each of the above examples of gamified experiences, a traditional experience has been revolutionized using the MDE Framework's gamification principles to deepen and extend players' experiences. In Figure 2, we provide a simple summary of the trends in these examples; specifically, we show the traditional experience and

the general trends of expansion into the most appropriate experience quadrants that occur as a result of gamification. Sometimes, players are involved, to various degrees, in all four types of experiences, in other cases players adopt fewer roles. These four examples have offered a glimpse into how applying the gamification principles can engage the public, employees, consumers, or patrons to achieve organizational goals.

Thus, using a typology and cases, we show that gamification can transform individuals into different types of players - observers, apprentices, spectators and performers – who vary in terms of the extent to which they actively or passively participate in the gamified experience and in the degree to which they are absorbed or immersed in the gamified environment. In each experience, gamification added elements of fun – thus turning experiences such as raising money for prostate cancer or simply doing ones job as a customer service employee into something more fun and engaging. Success in gamification will depend on understanding the player experience, and thus must begin with understanding who the players are themselves. Indeed, at the root of engagement is a connection between the experience and the players (Chatfield 2010; Zichermann and Cunningham 2011); this requires not only an in-depth understanding of the current experience the player has, but also of the emotions and dynamics players for which they yearn.



**Figure 2: Expanding Experiences via Gamification**

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