



# Game on: Engaging customers and employees through gamification



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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Managers are frequently tasked with increasing the engagement levels of key stakeholders, such as customers and employees. Gamification—defined as the application of game design principles to change behavior in non-gaming contexts—is a tool that, if crafted and implemented properly, can increase engagement. In this article we discuss how gamification can aid customer and employee engagement, and delineate between four different types of customers and employees who act as ‘players’ in gamified experiences. We include illustrative examples of gamification and conclude by presenting five lessons for managers who wish to utilize gamification. © 2015 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. The promise of gamification

Gamification and engagement are hot topics within the business literature (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014; Robson, Plangger, Kietzmann, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2015). In this article we bridge these two topics by illustrating how gamification can improve the way in which firms engage customers and employees. We begin by defining and explaining the concept and

practice of gamification. Then, we introduce different types of players and explain how managers can create gamified experiences for customers and employees that conform to each of these types of player. We illustrate such gamification efforts through extended examples. More specifically, we add to the literature by explaining and illustrating how traditional approaches to employee and customer engagement can be gamified to create richer and more appealing experiences that motivate changes in the behavior of the players involved.

This article follows an earlier *Business Horizons* piece wherein we introduced and demarcated the principles of gamification; here, gamification was defined as “the application of game-design principles in order to change behaviors in non-game situations”

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(Robson et al., 2015, p. 411). Specifically, these interrelated principles include mechanics, dynamics, and emotions (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004). Gamification *mechanics* specify, among other things, the rules, goals, setting, and interactions of the game. Gamification designers determine these mechanics, which remain constant from player to player, before the gamified experience begins. For example, mechanics specify the goals of the game and how players, individually or in teams, ‘win’ or progress through the online or the real-world experiences. Gamification *dynamics* are the player behaviors (e.g., cheating, bluffing, bragging) that emerge when the mechanics are executed during the gamified experience. Finally, gamification *emotions* (e.g., excitement, disappointment) are the affective states evoked during the experience. Ultimately, we suggest gamification can change stakeholder behavior when it taps into key motivational drivers of human behavior, including extrinsic reinforcements (e.g., money, status) and intrinsic rewards.

## 2. A matter of engagement

In this second article, we focus specifically on how gamification efforts can create engaging experiences with the objective of solving organizational problems. In a management context, engagement is a key issue that has, not surprisingly, received considerable attention. Two types of engagement are of particular interest to managers: employee engagement and customer engagement. These topics have been the focus of many research articles, as well as a number of special issues (see Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Saks, 2006).

From a psychological standpoint, engagement in an experience comprises the energy, involvement, and efficacy felt by the individual in the experience (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Employee engagement entails ‘harnessing’ employees to their jobs through their involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work (Kahn, 1990). Engagement can have impactful implications for managers: it can be positively associated with organizational commitment and organizational citizenship, but also negatively associated with intentions to quit (Saks, 2006). Moreover, increased employee engagement has been linked to increased customer satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), which is why it is not surprising that it is in the interest of managers to improve internal behavioral attributes. However, achieving high employee engagement is not easy.

Customer engagement can be conceptualized as a psychological state that is context dependent and

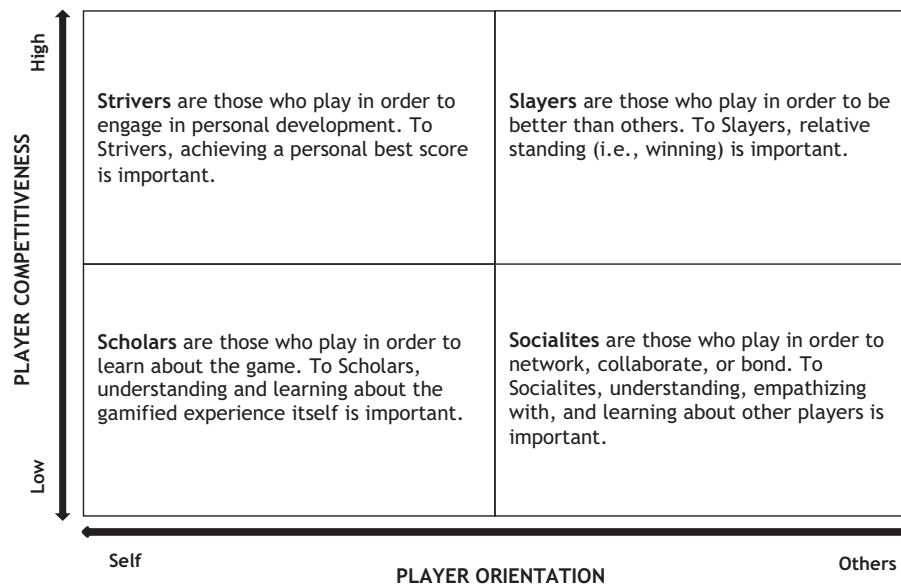
characterized by dynamic iterative processes (Brodie et al., 2013), as well as behavioral manifestations (e.g., providing feedback, writing social media reviews, participating in branded events) beyond merely completing transactions (Hollebeek, 2011; Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). In what follows, we focus on the behavioral manifestations that are key outcomes of gamification that increase organizational and customer value, and discuss measurable outcomes.

## 3. Player types matter

Four different parties are involved in gamified experiences: players, designers, spectators, and observers (Robson et al., 2015). *Players* are those individuals who participate in the gamified experience itself, often customers or employees. *Designers* are those individuals who create gamified experiences; in an organizational context, these individuals are managers. *Spectators* are individuals who do not directly participate in the experience, but who may influence the experience through, for example, supporting players. Finally, *observers* are individuals who are aware of the gamified experience but have no direct or indirect impact on it. In this article, we focus on one category of people involved in gamified experiences: the players. Understanding different players is key to creating successful gamification experiences, and with the goal of solving organizational problems we focus on gamified experiences designed for those players who consume a firm’s offerings (i.e., customers) and those who create them (i.e., employees).

One challenge for game designers is that individual players vary, and understanding this variability is both difficult and necessary for creating engaging experiences. We reason that across all gamified experiences players can be described based on two dimensions derived from the work of Bartle (1996): player orientation and player competitiveness. Player orientation describes whether the player is oriented predominantly toward other players or toward themselves. For example, a player who is primarily oriented toward others would be interested in social aspects of the experience such as learning about other players, interacting with other players, and empathizing with them. In contrast, players with a self-orientation would be more interested in self concerns, such as personal growth and/or personal achievement, than the concerns of others. The next dimension, player competitiveness, describes the extent to which the individual engages in competitive behavior. At one extreme, players may exhibit high competitiveness through

Figure 1. Typology of players in gamified experiences



ving to gain points, social status, or other game-related goals. At the other extreme, players may have very low competitiveness; these players will be more interested in the experience itself than in winning or in achieving high scores.

These dimensions permit the delineation of four types of players: strivers, scholars, socialites, and slayers. We argue that most players involved in gamified experiences fit into one of the four descriptive quadrants of Figure 1. For example, players who are highly competitive and who have a self-orientation are *strivers*. These individuals focus mainly on achieving their personal best score or increasing their own performance over time. In contrast, those players who are highly competitive but who are oriented toward other players and are more interested in their standing as compared to others than their score in isolation are known as *slayers*. For slayers, winning and beating other players is what matters the most. *Scholars* are those players who have a self-orientation and low competitiveness. To scholars, understanding and learning about the gamified experience is important. Finally, those players who are oriented toward others and who are not very competitive are *socialites*. To socialites, interpersonal relationships and getting to know others is highly rewarding.

#### 4. Engagement through gamification: Cases

In what follows, we provide illustrative cases of using gamification to create engaging experiences for different player types. In our first case, we illustrate

how gamification can create engaging customer experiences to improve the way customers interact with a brand or firm. Our second case illustrates how gamification can increase the engagement of employees, leading to higher degrees of productivity at work. Importantly, however, we do not want to suggest that gamification is a panacea for all organizational ills, and thus we also present unsuccessful examples of gamification to offer a balanced perspective. Managers considering a gamification initiative in their organization can vicariously learn as much from the failure of others as from their success.

##### 4.1. Engaging customers through gamification: Jay-Z's *Decoded*

Traditional book launches are usually not particularly interactive or exciting, let alone engaging. With the possible exception of book signings where an author reads passages from the new publication, launches typically consist of press releases, book displays at retailers, and online and print advertisements. However, when American rapper Jay-Z published his book entitled *Decoded*, the book launch was a gamified experience. Jay-Z employed advertising agency Droga5 to gamify the book launch so that it led to an engaging customer experience. To accomplish this, Droga5 turned the book launch and reading into a scavenger hunt. Droga5 first partnered with Microsoft's search engine, Bing, and designed an integrated online and on-the-street gamified experience—named Decode Jay-Z (referred to as Decode)—in which players (i.e., Jay-Z fans) set out to find pages of Jay-Z's book. Droga5 displayed all 320 pages of *Decoded* in various sizes in some

unexpected places: a rooftop in New Orleans, a pool bottom in Miami, cheeseburger wrappers in New York City, a pool table in Jay-Z's 40/40 Club, and many more. The advertising network combined old-school billboard advertising, new-school social media, and mobile apps with the power of a search engine to create an interactive and engaging experience that allowed players to unlock pages of the book and win concert tickets and memorabilia. Bing offered an online platform for the scavenger hunt by allowing players to use its search features (e.g., Bing maps) to decode hints and post the resulting answers.

Decode employed a variety of gamification mechanics. For example, the scavenger hunt setup provided ample opportunity for strivers and scholars to connect with the gamified environment: in the month before the book's release in stores, the pages of *Decoded* were shared across 200 physical locations in 13 major U.S. cities. The content of the prose on any given page was related to its spatial location, and players could find hints about where pages were located online using Bing. For example, page 24 referred to a street corner on which Jay-Z had sold drugs, so that page was posted on that street corner in the form of a billboard. Another example is that of page 156, which discussed Jay-Z's restaurant, The Spotted Pig, and appeared on the restaurant's plates (Elberse & Owusu-Kesse, 2012). Furthermore, players were not spatially restricted by location or device, as they could play offline 'on the street,' and online on Bing. They were tasked with using the hints to find the pages in the real world either by finding the page on the street or alternatively by using Bing's virtual map service.

Decode also provided opportunities for players to connect with other players, thus appealing to slayers and socialites. For example, pairs of clues were released on Jay-Z's Twitter and Facebook accounts, the Bing website, and a wide selection of radio stations across the United States each day of the campaign. As a result, a collaborative dynamic emerged: a first clue narrowed down the general geographic location and the second allowed players to pinpoint the exact location. Thus, in the quest to unlock all 200 pages online, players could partner with street players offline to find pages and then share rewards in a collaborative dynamic that would appeal to socialite player types. Progression mechanics and achievement rewards were given to the first player to find a page, thus providing motivation to strivers or slayers, who value their standing in the gamified experience.

Ultimately, Droga5 turned the traditional book launch experience into a gamified experience. Players received clues about pages and gained information about Jay-Z's life and consequently were

motivated to seek out pages, either physically or online. Players thus increased their involvement with the book launch because the gamified experience created levels of intrigue, including adventures and puzzles—potentially reducing the cognitive dissonance involved in purchasing *Decoded* through providing value in other ways (e.g., entertainment). The outcome of the *Decoded* book launch was successful in a number of ways. First, over the course of the book launch, Jay-Z's Facebook friends increased by over 1 million. Second, *Decoded* spent 18 weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list and was covered by many major international news outlets and cultural influencers (e.g., bloggers). Third, Bing saw a nearly 12% increase in traffic with over 1.1 billion global media impressions, moving it into the top 10 most visited Internet sites for the first time in its history (Droga5ny, 2011).

#### 4.2. Engaging employees through gamification: Freshdesk

As illustrated by the case of Freshdesk, gamification is not just for promoting exciting autobiographies of famous and pseudo-criminal rappers. It can also improve everyday, routine, and relatively mundane work tasks. Freshdesk is a helpdesk software program for customer support centers that aims to improve not only employee productivity but also customer satisfaction, thus creating value for the client firm and customers by reducing costs and boosting service quality. Freshdesk claims that by gamifying the everyday work of helpdesk employees, who are often demotivated and over-stressed, its program results in reduced response times to customer inquiries and the ability to expand beyond its traditional channels of support by motivating employees to keep on task and perform well at their jobs (Finley, 2012). The Freshdesk solution involves transforming customer inquiries (e.g., telephone questions, comments posted on Twitter and Facebook) into virtual tickets that are then randomly assigned to players (i.e., customer service employees). In this way, Freshdesk inspires a real-time, competitive environment via which players compete to improve their performance.

Freshdesk shows that employing gamification mechanics, dynamics, and emotions can increase fun, enthusiasm, and excitement at work in customer support centers. As call centers are notorious for being stressful work environments (Proper, 1998; Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004), and often rely on a 'sacrificial HR strategy' (Wallace, Eagleson, & Waldersee, 2000) whereby employees are deliberately and frequently replaced in order to maintain enthusiastic customer support, the successful

application of gamification in this context is particularly striking. Indeed, gamification in this context can lead to increases in job satisfaction and improved employee engagement and performance, and ultimately in superior organizational success.

As in the case of Decode, the Freshdesk experience has elements that appeal to all player types. Strivers and slayers, for example, can work toward achievement rewards, such as:

- The 'First Call Resolution' trophy, for resolving a customer inquiry on the first try;
- The 'Customer Casanova' quest, for resolving 10 tickets in a week and receiving a customer rating of 'awesome,' or;
- The 'Fast Resolution' badge, for players with particularly speedy responses to customers.

In addition, and of particular importance to slayers, Freshdesk players are tracked on a leaderboard. Players who accumulate a certain number of points move from the lowly starting position of 'Support Newbie' to a high of 'Support Guru.' By collecting points and consequently earning badges, trophies, and quests, players and teams receive social status, which is visible to superiors and often to other employees depending on how the management team has set up the program. As such, employees are not only rewarded for their efforts through the use of points, but they are also recognized for their efforts through the use of social achievement rewards. Furthermore, the multiple levels and various tasks would appeal to scholars, who value learning more about the gamified experience itself. Finally, Freshdesk offers opportunities for socialization, as the player structure can be set up as a multiplayer or multi-team environment. Even when teams compete, individual players are involved in coopetition or cooperation at the team level while also vying for the lead within their team (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000). This coopetition dynamic is highly desirable for managers and organizations, as it improves individual, team, and ultimately organizational success.

Freshdesk players enjoy the emotions associated with these dynamics, including the excitement of leading, the amusement of watching others try to catch up, the surprise when they come close, and the frustration of not winning. To overcome the problems associated with the negative emotions of losing or not reaching objectives, Freshdesk resets the leaderboard regularly, the collected points and badges deplete, and individuals and teams can restart the competition with a clean slate and aspire to win the next round. Indeed, this transformation

of virtual tickets solutions into points—and also badges, quests, and trophies—is amusing and exciting for players, thus hopefully inspiring another positive transformation of employees' attitude toward their work; Freshdesk (n.d.) contends that "happy agents = happy customers." Ultimately, Freshdesk has been successful in enhancing workplace productivity because it better aligns the goals of both employees (i.e., having fun at work) and employers (i.e., addressing customer inquiries efficiently and effectively).

#### 4.3. Cautionary tales: Unsuccessfully gamified experiences

As most of us learned growing up, not all games are fun and many are not worth playing. The same applies to gamified experiences in organizations. The success stories of Decode and Freshdesk should not suggest that gamification is easy or that it always achieves the desired result. Many otherwise very successful firms have tried gamification and not realized improved engagement levels or accomplished their performance goals. Google, for instance, allowed users to win badges for reading the news, which failed since players did not want to share with others what kind of news they searched for. This is an example of poor setup mechanics that led to undesirable dynamics and unwelcome emotions. Just because gamification is trendy does not mean that it always works or is the best strategy.

In another unsuccessful attempt at gamification, the Marriott Hotel chain may not have understood the motivations of potential employees when it designed its gamified 'My Marriott Hotels' in 2011. In order to attract new employees, Marriott developed a Facebook game—similar to the popular Facebook game, Farmville—via which players simulated work in an actual Marriott hotel kitchen. Players imitated activities including decorating the hotel dining room, ordering food inventory, and adhering to a budget. Throughout, the mechanics were structured such that players would earn points for making customers happy, and would lose points when poor customer service was delivered. In addition, players could easily apply for jobs at Marriott hotels through a link to Marriott's career page from the Facebook game. While an innovative gamification attempt, after 1 year Marriott chose to remove My Marriott Hotels from Facebook, as it failed to meet the company's original objectives in attracting potential employees.

We conclude that My Marriott Hotels failed to meet expectations because the designers did not fully understand the players' motivations for participating. First, the mechanics of My Marriott Hotels were



not structured such that the rewards were attractive to players: players collected points for no meaningful purpose, other than the sake of simply collecting them. By contrast, in the case of Freshdesk, points and rewards were meaningful to the players. Had accumulating a certain number of points in My Marriott Hotels led to a job interview, for example, players may have been more engaged and keen on participating, and ultimately may have been more inclined to apply for jobs at Marriott Hotels. In order to keep players playing, thereby contributing to the desired outcome, it is important to provide a sense of achievement and meaningful rewards for player behavior.

Second, although My Marriott Hotels may very well have been enjoyable for some player types—namely scholars—the gamification strategy would have been unlikely to engage slayers, socialites, or strivers. That is, My Marriott Hotels did not allow social playing or the opportunity to interact with other players; as such, it did not inspire dynamics, emotions, or person-to-person connections that would appeal to slayers or socialites. In addition, collecting points simply for collection's sake would be unlikely to motivate strivers or slayers. The experience failed to elicit desirable dynamics, such as competition or coopetition, or emotions such as pride or challenge. Without the appropriate dynamics and emotional responses—which emerge due to gamification mechanics—players will ‘bounce’ and seek the same response elsewhere (Tsotsis, 2011).

#### 4.4. A summary of the cases

These cases represent a very small sample of how gamification can be used to motivate behavior changes to address managerial issues. Freshdesk demonstrates how customer service departments can gamify their operations to increase employee engagement by rewarding success and providing motivation. The Decoded example demonstrates how traditional marketing promotions can be gamified in

order to increase customer engagement by first motivating and then rewarding customer participation in the marketing promotion. In Figure 2, we present a summary table that will help guide designers and managers in using appropriate gamification mechanics to engage different types of employees and customers: slayers, strivers, socialites, and scholars. This figure is not intended to provide a comprehensive list of gamification mechanics; rather, it is designed to highlight how different player types may respond to some of the most popular gamification mechanics.

### 5. Ready, set, go! Guidelines for creating engaging experiences through gamification

Ultimately, managers must remember that the root of engagement is establishing a connection between the experience and the people involved in the experience (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). In gamification, this requires close alignment of the gamification mechanics and the emotions, dynamics, and rewards that potential players value or yearn for. Next, we provide five guidelines that will help designers and managers thinking about the strategic application of the gamification principles to engage employees and/or customers.

#### 5.1. Understand your players *before* deciding on gamification mechanics

Once a manager has identified a problem with a customer or employee base, he/she needs to assess what types of players are involved so as to choose the right mechanics. Indeed, gamification mechanics must be determined with care: they are often static and can be difficult to change once the experience has started. Importantly, gamification mechanics are key to ensuring players receive rewards that will

**Figure 2.** Key gamification mechanics for player types

	Slayers	Strivers	Socialites	Scholars
Leaderboards, Badges, and Points	✓	✓		
Increasing Task Difficulty	✓	✓		
Finite End	✓	✓		
Multiplayer Orientation	✓		✓	
Infinite Play			✓	✓
New Levels		✓		✓
Team Playing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Online Playing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Real World Playing	✓	✓	✓	✓

motivate the desired behavior change and contribute to the dynamics and emotions of the players.

Furthermore, understanding the desires and motivations of players is key to designing engaging gamified experiences. For some players, leaderboards will be highly effective in motivating behavior changes. For others, opportunities to collaborate and empathize with other players will be more compelling. Of course, in some cases managers may wish to attract all types of players. In these cases, there is a risk that mechanics which will attract one type of player might not appeal to others. Ultimately, managers must decide on whether they wish to balance mechanics such that there is something for everyone, or whether they wish to attract mainly one player type at the risk of alienating others.

## 5.2. Timing of rewards is key

After a manager has determined what types of players he/she intends to target, consideration of the timing of rewards will be important. Regardless of the type of player a manager wishes to engage, progression mechanics should seek to reward behavior as quickly as possible after good performance. Delayed rewards lessen the probability that the desired behavior will be repeated (Rothschild & Gaidis, 1981), as any number of other behaviors could have occurred since then and the message to the player (i.e., “do that again”) could become unclear.

From an organizational perspective, managers must keep in mind that experienced players can be assigned more important organizational objectives (e.g., work on solving harder problems, learn more difficult skills). This is similar to the concept of shaping (Nord & Peter, 1980), whereby complex behaviors—which would rarely be performed by chance—are gradually shaped through rewarding simpler behaviors that approximate the desired behavior. Essentially, through rewarding a series of simpler behaviors, one can shape, or build, the desired complex behavior.

## 5.3. Add new levels, tasks, or players as needed

Once the gamified experience is under way, managers must remember that in order for the experience to remain engaging to any player type, as well as for the experience to continue to meet organizational goals, adjusting and transitioning the experience is key (Robson et al., 2015). As with games, for a gamified experience to continue to inspire desired behavior change, new experiences or tasks must be presented to players. For those players that value

competition (i.e., strivers and slayers), the level of difficulty must grow as the players progress through the gamified experience. For players that value interaction, new players or new tasks must be added as the players progress. However, as managers adjust and transition the gamified experience, they must take care to ensure they do not unfairly change the rules. In cases where the gamification mechanics are changed abruptly, players could perceive that the game has betrayed them, likely prompting them to remove themselves from the experience.

## 5.4. Managers must act as referees

Throughout, the gamified experience will need to be monitored, and managers play a key role in this capacity. Thus, the role of the manager extends beyond designing the gamified experience. Externally, managers should monitor players to ensure that players are still engaged and are not breaking the rules. Nothing spoils the fun of a game like a cheating player, and managers should be wary of players cheating and look for instances of players who game a gamified experience by colluding or breaking the rule mechanics. Although this might not negatively impact an organization’s desired behavior change, it might create damaging dynamics and emotions that could put off other players, thereby resulting in the failure of the gamification attempt to reach that organization’s goals. Even sophisticated metrics may not pick up on player cheating or on unwanted dynamics or emotions; therefore, it is the manager’s responsibility to monitor the gamified experience.

## 5.5. Use gamification mechanics to keep track of the score

Without appropriate metrics, an organization cannot measure progress or improve on past experiences. Thus, in the planning stages, designers need to determine metrics and targets that would indicate success for a gamification strategy, and they should build these into the mechanics of the gamified experience. When designers build these metrics into the mechanics, they should be structured such that as the players interact with the gamified experience, they are automatically being measured; in this manner, the organization is gathering valuable information that can be used to judge the success of the gamification strategy. For example, Freshdesk automatically collects player information for each virtual ticket—including who resolved the ticket, how long it took, and so forth—which allows rapid comparison between employees and quick assessment as to whether employees met the company goals.

## 6. Final thoughts

Despite all the interest in gamification by managers and scholars, the dearth of both research and popular literatures on the topic is noteworthy. Our exploration into gamification reveals many interesting possible avenues of future research by scholars and areas of application by practitioners. For example, the issue of consent to participating in gamified experiences has yet to be explored in research. In some cases—as with customers—consent is implicit. However, when designing gamified experiences for employees, an important question is whether explicit consent should be offered. What are the major considerations in creating gamified experiences for different groups of stakeholders, such as customers and employees?

In this article we have shown that gamification is a method firms can use to improve and develop the ways in which they engage with a variety of stakeholders. Internally these are mostly employees, and externally these are mostly customers. In the examples presented here, behavior changes were accomplished by applying lessons from game design to non-game settings. In particular, success in gamification was driven by appropriate alignment of gamification mechanics, dynamics, and emotions to specific player types; in contrast, gamification failures were linked to poor alignment between these gamification principles and players involved in the gamified experience. We hope that this article helps managers as they attempt to initiate, direct, and harness the behaviors of individuals in a wide range of organizational settings through gamification.

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