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*Gamification in Libraries*

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The topic of “gamification” is a relatively new one. The term itself has only seen popularity in the last decade: “The term gamification was coined in 2003 by Nick Pelling, but it did not gain popularity until 2010” (Doyle, 2016). Still, it has garnered a lot of buzz in a variety of industries such as health, business, education, and libraries. In an age of rapid digital change, libraries are actively seeking new ways to remain relevant and appealing to modern users. Both public and academic libraries have expressed interest in “gamification” and other strategies to increase library engagement and improve existing services. However, the concept is rife with confusion and unrealized promises. The term “gamification”, which broadly means the application of game elements in non-game spaces, is often used interchangeably with other, similar ideas like “game-based learning” and even “games” themselves. Library and marketing literature often tout it as the newest, revolutionary tool in the toolkit. Yet, the topic demands clarity- about what it is, about what it can do, and if it is a viable strategy.

The rising interest in gamification and gaming in general is a natural result of our increasingly technology-drenched world. Yet, implementing game-like attributes to non-game spaces is nothing new. Marketing and business sectors introduced consumers to sweepstakes, punch-cards, and leaderboards time and time again. Take McDonald’s widely popular Monopoly promotion, which has been running off and on since 1987, where consumers peel off game pieces for the chance to win free food and prizes (Wilson, 2018). The renewed interest within the last ten years, however, can be attributed to the rapid adoption of the smartphone, the expansion of the mobile web, and the increased use of social media. In *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 51, no. 2), Bohyun Kim writes, “What is new about gamification is not necessarily the idea of applying gaming elements to a real-world activity, but how seamlessly, ubiquitously, and socially those gaming elements are now applied” (2015, p. 8). In short, the rise of mobile apps and social media makes reaching- and influencing- a wide audience easier than ever.

Although gamification is most often associated with marketing, the topic is gaining traction in a variety of industries- including libraries. Libraries are actively seeking ways to increase engagement among its users and demonstrate relevancy to the community. Modern day technology users expect convenience and usually have many options on where to obtain information and where to spend their time. As more and more library programming and services move online, the demand for successful user experience and interaction grows too. Gamification or game-based learning (a term that will be addressed later) could especially benefit the instruction/education role of libraries by improving learning tactics. According to Phetteplace and Felker, “[g]amification sits at the crux of these two trends. It can be both a strategy for engagement and a framework for immersive learning and play” (2014, p. 20). The idea behind this is that incorporating games and the game-like can make learners active participants in the learning process, present knowledge in a contextualized framework, and introduce knowledge incrementally.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of gamification is its likely effect on its users: “Gamification is a powerful tool due to its ability to capture people’s attention, to engage them in a target activity, and even to influence their behavior” (Phetteplace & Felker, 2014, p. 20). Gamification asks what elements makes games engaging, fun, and immersive and can that be applied to real life contexts? (Šimko, 2014). From a psychological perspective, well-designed games can engage players in a variety of ways: cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, and even socio-culturally (Plass et al., 2016). In a world of fierce competition for a consumer’s time and money, the potentiality of attracting users and getting them to stay on your application is essential. Incorporating game-like elements that inspire fun or competition can encourage users to spend more time on your product: “Research shows that individuals are more likely to remain engaged in an activity if they find it enjoyable and/or of value” (Looyestyn et al., 2017, 2). Indeed, user enjoyment promotes a better user experience overall and will make it more likely for them to return as well as positively associate with the brand/product.

Colasanti, Fiori, and Frondizi discuss the role of gamification in libraries in their 2020 exploratory case study within Italian public libraries. The library system implemented a point system to reward users for interacting with library services such as borrowing books and leaving comments and feedback on the library website. By looking at behavioral economic and nudge theory, the study aims to apply a theoretical framework to gamification within libraries. The concept of “nudging” is the act of influencing a consumer’s decision-making processes by leading them to a certain choice. There are a number of ways this can be achieved such as presenting default rules and a simplified, intuitive order; increasing convenience; pre-commitment strategies (bonus points); and reminders (notifications). “Both gamification and nudges can influence human behaviour, but each works at a different level: the former focuses on motivation, the latter on abilities and triggers” (Colsanti et al. 2020). This echoes the claim “…all gamification features aim to have an effect on users’ motivation, which in turn promotes better user experience and engagement” (Looyestyn et al., 2017).

The dream behind gamification is the ability to motivate individuals in un-fun but necessary situations by appealing to people’s inherent senses of competition, discovery, fun. Phetteplace and Felker even go so far as to posit that gamification “can function as a win-win strategy that results in fun, self-improvement for individuals, and even a social good all at the same time when it is carefully designed to create fun and joy with a goal closely aligned with players’ own desires and values” (Phetteplace & Felker). Šimko writes that gamification could help create ideal learning communities, where learners help each other willingly and are motivated autonomously to improve their knowledge. Gamification is the tool used to fulfill learning goals and inspire knowledge-seekers in natural and engaging ways.

Unfortunately, there is currently little evidence to support the claims that gamification is as powerful a motivator as promised, especially within a library context. Of the few studies conducted, most conclude that, though promising, further research is necessary. A 2017 systematic review sought to answer the question, “Does gamification increase engagement with online programs?” by examining over a thousand peer-reviewed studies, published 2012-2015, across eight databases. They concluded that there is some evidence that gamification “positively impacts engagement and downstream behaviours (e.g. health behaviours and academic performance), especially in the short term” but “more rigorous research designs are needed to determine effectiveness of gamification in different settings and to investigate how gamification can be used to increase long-term engagement in online programs” (Looyestyn et al., 2017, p. 16). The studies they reviewed spanned across disciplines and sometimes lacked detail. They also observed that most implementations include multiple gamification elements in combination, such as both leader boards and rewards. This made it difficult to draw strong conclusions about which gamifying aspects succeeded or failed.

More research on the application of gamification is needed but there is also a need for an expanded theoretical framework and a defined terminology. The frustrating reality is that “gamification”, as presented in library and education literature, is presented as a broad, nebulous term with seemingly extensive applicability. *A Dictionary of Marketing* defines it” as “[t]he concept of applying game-design thinking to non-game applications in order to make them more engaging and effective” (Doyle, 2016). Most library literature seems to agree, with a *Reference & User Services Quarterly* article stating similarly, that it is the “process of applying game mechanics and game thinking to the real world to solve problems and engage users” (Phetteplace & Felker, 2014). However, it is not the definition that is the issue but rather the examples used to support them that further confuse the already broad definition of “gamification” until it becomes functionally useless: “The conflation of games and gamification is not uncommon in the library literature, making an already confusing concept murkier still” (Hughes & Lacy, 2016, p.315).

Part of the problem is that the definition of “game” is unclear in most literature: “there is an ongoing debate among scholars as to the exact definition of a game, and especially what is not a game” (Plass et. al, 2016, p. 259). The distinction of games and non-games “seems intuitively possible” but “is very difficult to achieve on an abstract, generalizable level” (262). Indeed, the understanding of games and their influence has only begun to be studied due to the historical belief that games were distinct from work and learning (Ifenthaler et al., 2012). Some of the discourse about games present gamespace as an abstracted and separate view of reality: “Author and game designer Ralph Koster defines a game as a system of rules that, taken together, creates a simplified model of some aspect of reality” (Phetteplace & Felker, 2014, p. 20). McKenzie Wark, author of *Gamer Theory*, states, “Games are not representations of this world. They are more like allegories of a world made over as gamespace. They encode the abstract principles upon which decision about the realness of this or that world are now decided” (2007, p. 020). Much of the confusion around what is a “game” and what is “game-like” seems to be around this distinction.

Yes, the line between game-like and actual game can be blurry, but you cannot “gameify” a game because it is already a game. A lot of examples that involve playing a game to teach a concept are confusing “gamification” with “game-based learning”, which is a separate but similar approach to instruction. The University of Waterloo’s Centre for Teaching Excellence defines gamification as “the integration of game elements like point systems, leaderboards, badges, or other elements into ‘conventional’ learning activities in order to increase engagement and motivation.” Game-based learning, however, “involves designing learning activities so that game characteristics and game principles inhere within the learning activities themselves” (2016). This is to say that attempts at gamification must distinguish themselves from games and game-based learning.

Furthermore, some attempts at gamification are conducted without a clear goal. Libraries should not embrace gamification because it is a trend but because it the best strategy for the project: “[o]ur design is a tool, not a goal in itself” (Šimko, 2014, p. 102).

“Gamification efforts fail precisely because they misunderstand what games are and how they work on player psychology to produce motivation, diligence, and learning. In other words, players do not necessarily care about points, levels, or badges but instead value the choices or the agency that produces those symbolic rewards. What are points, after all, but a way to indicate achievement?” (Hughes & Lacy, 2016, p. 318).

Just because game elements are present in a project or product does not guarantee engagement or learning. Games and their elements are complicated and widely misunderstood and any library that seeks to incorporate gamification must be deliberate and knowledgeable with their choices.

In conclusion, while promising, gamification is still a new area of study that lacks much in terms of research, theoretical framework, and consistent terminology. In order for the gamifying trend to produce effective results, more careful research is needed. While there is some evidence that applying game elements to non-game contexts can motivate individuals, a lot of the specifics are unknown. Libraries that seek to explore or incorporate games and gamification should be deliberate with their goals and realize that there is much to be learned about the subject.

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