Gamification

Ed Latham

BEFORE YOU READ: Have you ever participated in something (eg., work, learning, chores, exercise) that was turned into a game to make it more fun? If so, describe the situation. What was the effect of turning the activity into a game?

You're Not Just Buying a Burger, You're Playing a Game!

In the mid-1980s, McDonalds was looking for a way to boost sales during slow times of the year. The company wanted to offer something new and fresh that would bring people in to buy more products. Someone came up with the brilliant idea to turn purchasing into a game, and the company eventually settled on the idea of using Hasbro's popular Monopoly game as the backbone of their marketing. In effect, each purchase would include a game piece that could be used to fill in a Monopoly board. When cus-

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tomers made enough purchases and collected all the game pieces, they received a prize. Of course, the people at McDonalds who developed this game made sure to make some pieces readily available, while others would be very rare and hard to get. In addition to the grand prizes, the company added many little prizes like free merchandise, small cash awards, and discounts on other products to encourage people to buy more.

By adding game elements to what is normally a fairly mundane consumer transaction, the company made a ton of money! In September of 2013, the company reported profit increases of 5% with much of the credit for that surge attributed to the Monopoly game promotion.
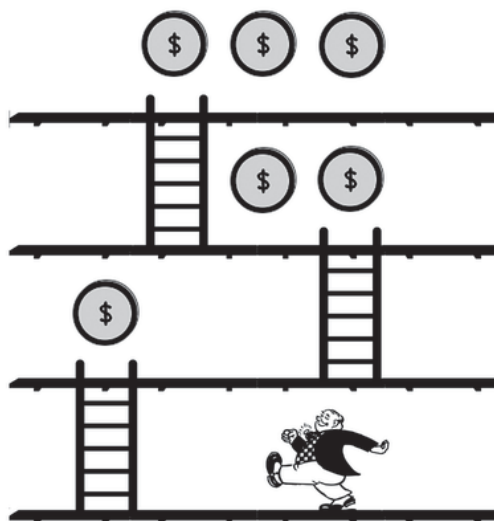
Interestingly, there are laws that prevent a business from promoting any of their products with games of chance. McDonalds got around this by subcontracting with a company that was solely responsible for the creation and distribution of the game pieces. For three years, this subcontracting company would make the pieces and ship them to McDonalds stores where employees would simply add those pieces to customers' orders. After three years of great success, the subcontracted company was found to be engaging in corrupt activities. They were withholding the winning pieces and distributing them to employees or friends and family members. This corruption forced McDonalds to stop running the game.

Gamification Makes It Compelling

The idea of adding game elements into a task that traditionally is not fun or desirable is called gamification. There are many companies that have used gamification in the last three decades and in almost every case, the companies have found great results. You may often be presented with a loyalty card for something like a coffee. With each purchase of a coffee, you get a stamp on your card and when you accumulate enough stamps, you get a free coffee. This is a very simple version of gamification and one we can easily see with most any services today. Another example is when credit card companies offer a percentage of your

purchases back in the form of free services, virtual credit, or free products.

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that people normally don't take advantage of. The company decided to award points for reading articles, tracking their nutrition, and taking health surveys. If participants collect enough points, the insurance company rewards them with a $25 gift card. Participants can earn up to $250 a year in gift cards simply by engaging with the website. Their $250 investment keeps people engaged throughout the year in health and healthy thinking—all the while making it feel more like a game.

Why Not Make Learning into a Game?

With decades of success in the commercial sector, there are many who are experimenting with how

Read about how Texas teachers are helping students improve their standardized test scores by creating opportunities for them to play Dungeons and Dragons <tinyurl.com/teachwithd-d>.

to use gamification in education. For example, Khan Academy gamifies their educational website in a few different ways. Within every practice, the user has to get five consecutive problems correct in order to "pass" that level. Once the user passes a certain threshold, she receives a digital badge indicating her mastery. Khan Academy even gives

Word Play

In English, we add the suffixes "ify" and "ification" to words to turn them into verbs and nouns respectively. Look at the following chart. Can you fill in the missing words?

Root word	Add "ify"	Add "ification"
Game	Gamify	Gamification
Just	Justify	Justification
Beauty		
Purity		
Quality		
Clear		

What do you notice about the spelling of the words as you add the suffix? Can you make up a rule for how to add the suffix to the root word? Try using these words in sentences.

badges for certain behaviors, such as simply for attempting many lessons in a given time period. When you log in to Khan Academy, you see all of these badges proudly displayed on your page, and you get to enjoy the feeling of making progress.

Another game element Khan Academy implements is constant communication with users. The program sends regular emails, reminding users to continue on their journey, noting their progress, and updating them on their badges. All of these feedback tools are part of what good game designers build into their games. One free product (with advanced fee options), called Classcraft, allows teachers to create collaborative and competitive challenges for groups of learners. This tool allows a teacher to add a game element to their learning environment. The non-profit Games for Change supports the development of games that solve real-world problems. Their games are entertaining, informative, and promote civic engagement. And most are free.

Many organizations are exploring how to gamify education. One challenge is that some academic learning requires a certain kind of rigor and cannot be turned into a game. At the other end of the spectrum, some of the experiences that are the most entertaining do not directly enhance academic learning. But there is a lot of learning that would be more appealing if we gamified it! Educational companies and non-profits are on a quest to balance entertainment with academic rigor. This game is in full swing! Don't you want to play?

Ed Latham has worked with K-12 and adult students as an instructor, consultant, and technology integration specialist for 25 years. He combines his love of table-top board games into his mathematics and technology specializations as he engages people of all ages in learning and meeting their goals. He is a LINCS member who participates in the Integration Technology group as well as other LINCS groups.

Sources: "McDonald's Monopoly game boosts chain's profits" (2013, August 11). Retrieved from <www.csmonitor.com/Business/Latest-News-Wires/2013/0810/McDonald-s-Monopoly-game-boosts-chain-s-profits>; "McDonald's Monopoly game has a surprisingly wild history" (2016, April 11). Retrieved from <www.businessinsider.com/mcdonalds-monopoly-game-has-a-surprisingly-wild-history-2016-4>; "Monopoly Sends McDonald's Directly to Profits" (2011, November 08). Retrieved from <investorplace.com/2011/11/mcdonalds-monopoly-same-store-sales>.
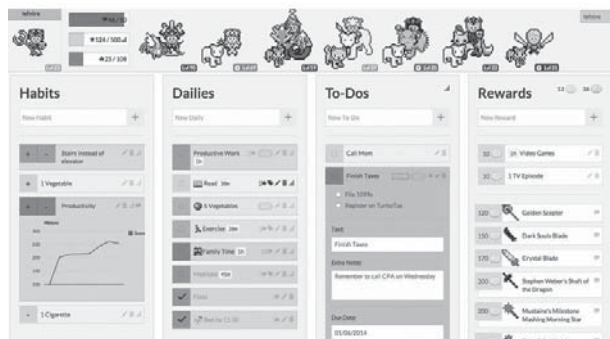
Apps like Habitica help you gamify your life. With this app, you select a character and gain points as you complete tasks and goals in your daily life. Find the free app here: <habitica.com>.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What are the advantages of turning an activity into a game? What are the disadvantages?

2. What do you think about coporations like McDonalds using gamification to increase profits?

3. Note the word subcontracting in the third paragraph. What does it mean in this context?

4. Do you use games in your adult education classroom? What do you like or not like about them?

Games for Learning

- Turn a Google spreadsheet into online flashcards at <flippity.net>.
- Find interesting things for ESL learners at <www.manythings.org>.
- Create flashcards, games, and learning tools at <quizlet.com>.
- Download and customize a Jeopardy game for free at <www.lifewire.com/free-jeopardy-powerpoint-templates-1358186> or <jeopardylabs.com>.
- Turn your classroom into a gameshow, complete with music and points, using <getkahoot.com>.