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Gamification in virtual events

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Gamification is a fascinating concept that has been gaining momentum in recent years. The idea is simple: by applying game elements in non-game contexts, we can create meaningful and enjoyable experiences that foster engagement, motivation, and skill development. Whether it's through providing rewards for certain actions or using game mechanics to support learning, gamification can be a powerful tool for enhancing user experience.

Gamification has shown particular promise in the area of virtual events. With the rise of remote work and online communication, virtual events have become a popular alternative to in-person gatherings. A virtual event is a gathering that takes place entirely online. Rather than meeting in person, participants are brought together through live streaming, allowing them to interact remotely in a shared experience. This type of event is often used as an alternative to live events. It may include virtual trade shows, meetings, webinars, and conferences. But how can we make these events more engaging and enjoyable for participants? The answer may lie in gamification.

Writers of this text are working on the Hybrid Ninja (online and hybrid event producer training) project. The project aims to train event planning organisations to organise hybrid and virtual events, with an emphasis on design thinking. The training is free of charge, financed by the European Social Fund and executed by Haaga-Helia professionals in cooperation with industry leaders. This article aims to give an overview of gamification, particularly in virtual events, which we used during the training program for Hybrid Ninja participants.

Understanding gamification

The digital media industry was the first to introduce the term gamification back in 2008. However, only around 2015, it started becoming a more common term and trend which spread across different industries (Deterding et al. 2011, p. 9.). There are many definitions of gamification, the most common being “the use of game design elements in a non-game context” (Deterding et al. 2011, p. 9). A little longer definition, including a broader overview, is “Gamification is the use of game design elements respectively mechanisms in non-game contexts to [...] create a sense of playfulness [...] so that participation becomes enjoyable and desirable” (Schacht & Schacht 2012, p. 186)

According to Parapanos and Michopoulou (2021, p. 14), the concept of gamification extends beyond simply applying game mechanics to non-game settings. It involves a comprehensive examination of human behaviour to promote desirable actions like motivation and problem-solving. Zichermann and Linder also define gamification as the utilisation of game thinking and mechanics to engage audiences and address problems (Parapanos & Michopoulou 2021, p. 14).

Essentially, gamification employs game-thinking and playful design techniques (Hsu & Chen 2018, p. 2) to create an enjoyable experience that modifies the player's mindset, encouraging greater involvement and participation (Roinioti et al. 2022, p. 191). Certain game elements, such as leaderboards and social interaction within a gamified context, can result in positive emotional, cognitive, and social engagement. Players experience positive emotions like joy, undergo cognitive stimulation while undertaking gamified tasks, and become engrossed in their behaviour as they focus on the gamified activity and interaction with others. Overall, the primary objectives of gamification in non-game settings include providing incentives, motivation, excitement, action, and purpose (Roinioti et al. 2022, p. 192).

As with all recently emerged disciplines, there are no clear guidelines on how to utilise gamification in events. Still, in this paper, we will attempt to present some of the ways, when and how, to use gamification and give an overview of the benefits and different tools that could be included in virtual event creation. It is important to note that careful planning and integration of gamification should be emphasised in virtual events, right from the start, rather than simply adding it as a trendy afterthought.

Benefits of Gamification

The benefits of gamification have been well-documented across various industries, with its ability to enhance user engagement and experience and stimulate user motivation. To truly capitalise on the advantages of gamification, one must delve into the intricate aspects of game design and psychology to understand what motivates people to play games in the first place. Such an understanding can prove invaluable in creating a more enjoyable user experience and fostering deeper user engagement.

Apart from the traditional use of badges and leaderboards to encourage competition and progress, various other techniques can be employed to motivate users, such as providing rewards for completing challenges or offering incentives for meeting particular objectives. Moreover, it is vital to consider the intrinsic motivations that drive players, such as a sense of accomplishment, self-expression and recognition. These can be used in combination with extrinsic motivators like rewards or points. By leveraging these principles of game design and psychology, businesses can create more engaging experiences for their users.

According to Strohmeier (2013), organisations aiming to incorporate game mechanics into their business environment should adhere to the following five principles.

1. Have a measurable goal – For instance, if the goal is to boost the number of product reviews on a website, incentivise users by rewarding them with points each time they write a review.
2. Focus on things people already want to do – reward behaviour that is already happening. In other words, focus on rewarding behaviours that individuals already incline towards, tapping into their pre-existing motivations.
3. Make it social – Provide individuals with the means to share their accomplishments and badges, thereby adding significance and meaning to their achievements through social recognition.

4. Measure the change – Monitor the targeted behaviour before and after implementing gamification to assess the approach's effectiveness and determine whether the desired changes occur.
5. Reward incremental progress – Encourage individuals to persist by rewarding their incremental advancements toward larger goals. Acknowledging and incentivising these smaller steps motivates continued engagement.

Understanding human behaviour in gamification

In exploring gamification, Wu (2011) investigates the science and psychology underlying its effectiveness. He suggests that the primary objective of incorporating game dynamics is consistently driving user-desired behaviours. To achieve this, it becomes imperative to understand human behaviour as a foundation for comprehending game dynamics.

Choo (2013), on the other hand, emphasises a crucial aspect of gamification known as “human-focused design,” which stands in contrast to “function-focused design.” The human-focused design recognises that individuals within the system possess emotions, insecurities, and unique reasons for desiring or avoiding certain actions. Consequently, it seeks to optimise their feelings, motivations, and engagement, recognising the significance of the human element in the design process.

A noteworthy insight from Choo (2013) is that effective gamification design does not solely revolve around selecting and implementing game elements or mechanics. Instead, it begins by understanding the core drives that motivate individuals. This understanding serves as a foundation upon which gamification can be built.

To delve deeper into these core drives, Choo (2013) introduces the Octalysis framework, a gamification framework that identifies and analyses eight fundamental motivators that influence individuals' actions. These motivators have been extensively discussed and explored in various studies, including those conducted by Ewais and Alluhaidan (2015) and Mora et al. (2015; 2017), underscoring the significance of the Octalysis framework in gamification research.

In summary, understanding human behaviour and incorporating human-focused design principles are crucial elements in the effective implementation of gamification. By recognising the diverse motivations and drives influencing individuals, gamification can be tailored to optimise engagement, motivation, and overall user experience.

Knowledge increases courage

The Hybrid Ninja study module revealed an awakening result when participants were asked to consider the use of gamification or gamified elements in their past or future events. The question was asked at the beginning of the gamification studies and repeated at the end of the topic. On the first question round, 38 answers were collected from the participants, of which 26 (68 %) answered “yes” and the rest 12 (32 %) answered “no”. When the study group had studied the whole gamification section and reflected on their

experiences and attitudes with others and the materials provided, the score had changed: 30 answers altogether were collected, of which 29 were “yes, I will use gamification in designing of future events” and only one was “no”.

This is an awakening result, as the study module participants can be assumed to represent the innovative and fearless-in-front-of-new edge of the event industry. Conversely, gamification as an approach in the context of event design is not yet self-explanatory. The results might tell that increasing the level of understanding and knowledge can be a powerful way to lower the threshold to apply gamification in event design.

Several participants had experience with games in events. Still, the gamifying entire events were not familiar to most participants, but some had a good experience with that as well, as participants or organisers. Typical barriers to utilising, or even thinking about utilising, gamification as a principle in designing events seem to be fear that games can cause anxiety, distract or irritate people. Games and gamification are considered suitable for kids and entertainment, or just funny extra features added on top of the important activities in an event.

There were mixed opinions on the effectiveness of gamification when it comes to presenting important content. While some expressed fear that gamifying content may distract from the intended message, others gave examples of how this approach can be more effective at communicating a core message. Packaging the content in an inspirational, engaging and participatory way, which may even involve gamifying it, can be transmitted far more effectively than the traditional, dry approach.

In discussion, even moments of enlightenment had been experienced: workshops with their typical phases, from icebreakers to group activities with a clear goal, are an example of a more or less gamified event. A good workshop or company event day – online or in-person – is built most likely using gamification thinking with game design elements. This means many may have more expertise in gamification as an approach, a way of thinking, than they may think. The important part is still to separate gamification from only adding games to an event.

One issue discussed was whether the participants should have the option to choose the gamified customer journey or skip the whole gamification part and concentrate on the content only. This can be problematic since it would demand again to create of one kind of hybrid event and a dual customer journey for the virtual event. However, as the topic seems relatively fresh for most of the event production industry, this shall be good to test, discuss and test again in real events in future.

When and how to use gamification

Gamification can be used to increase engagement and motivation, as well as to develop skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, and critical thinking. By understanding the motivations behind gamifying an experience, it is possible to craft game elements tailored to the desired outcome. For example, an experience can be designed to motivate users to complete tasks and reach goals by providing rewards for certain actions. Additionally, gamification can be used as a tool for learning, with game mechanics and elements used to

support the development of new skills. Ultimately, gamification can be used in various contexts to create meaningful and rewarding user experiences.

Drawn from the literature and our experiences with the Hybrid Ninja we can provide some scenarios where gamification can be effectively utilised.

- **Icebreakers and Energisers:** Use gamified activities at the beginning of the event to break the ice, energise participants, and create a positive atmosphere. This can include virtual team-building games, quizzes, or challenges that encourage interaction and friendly competition.
- **Learning and Education:** Incorporate gamification elements to make educational sessions more engaging and interactive. This can involve quizzes, polls, or interactive challenges that allow participants to test their knowledge, earn points, or unlock rewards as they progress through the content.
- **Networking and Socialising:** Gamification can facilitate networking and social interaction among participants. Implement virtual scavenger hunts, digital badges, or leaderboards to encourage attendees to connect, share experiences, and engage in conversations.
- **Incentivising Participation:** Use gamification to motivate attendees to actively participate in various aspects of the event. Offer rewards, prizes, or recognition for completing specific tasks, attending sessions, or contributing to discussions.
- **Exhibitor Engagement:** Gamify the experience of exploring virtual exhibitor booths or sponsor areas. Incorporate challenges or activities encouraging attendees to interact with exhibitors, collect virtual tokens, or complete tasks to earn rewards or qualify for giveaways.
- **Post-Event Engagement:** Extend the gamification experience beyond the event by providing post-event challenges, quizzes, or contests that keep participants engaged and connected even after the event.

Remembering that the key is to align gamification strategies with the event's objectives and target audience is important. By incorporating gamified elements strategically, virtual events can become more interactive, enjoyable, and memorable for participants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gamification can be a powerful tool for enhancing virtual events and creating more engaging participant experiences. Event planners can achieve various goals and create a buzz around their events by carefully considering the strategic implications of gamification and leveraging game design principles. Whether through immersive visuals, sound effects, or compelling narratives, gamification can help foster a deeper emotional connection with participants and make virtual events feel more like fun and rewarding game.

By gamifying virtual events, event planners can achieve various goals, such as improving networking opportunities, increasing engagement with sponsors and exhibitors, boosting session attendance, and raising brand recognition. To do this, planners must carefully consider the strategic implications of gamification and select the correct event platform to support their needs.

In order to ensure a successful event and create a buzz around it, it is important to inform your audience about your planned games ahead of time. This will help you to attract a wider audience and make event gamification a part of your event marketing strategy. When selecting a gamification method for your event, finding the right event platform that supports your needs and clearly defining the game's rules is essential. It is important to remember that people have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, so challenges and missions should be integrated with the rest of the event. Awards, competition, and social recognition should be offered to ensure that everyone can take part and enjoy the event.

Event planners must consider the strategic implications of gamifying their events. Event gamification should be used to support and achieve the event's primary goals. These may include improving networking opportunities, increasing engagement with sponsors and exhibitors, boosting session attendance, and raising brand recognition. In addition to these objectives, planners can use gamified challenges to showcase their sponsors or emphasise values important to the event organisers.

In order to ensure a successful event and create a buzz around it, it is essential to inform your audience about your planned games ahead of time. This will help you to attract a wider audience and make event gamification a part of your event marketing strategy. When selecting a gamification method for your event,

Using immersive visuals, sound effects, a compelling narrative, and game-like environments can help foster a more engaging event experience. Moreover, by utilising game mechanics such as levels, achievements and rewards, the learning process can become more rewarding for participants, motivating them to continue to engage in the activity. Carefully crafting the story and characters within the game-like environment can help build an emotional connection with participants, keeping them more invested in the activity.

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