

The 5 Steps To Effective Gamification Design



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Most gamification design efforts fail. The primary reason is that gamification as a design technique is far less understood and practiced than more familiar customer engagement disciplines like marketing, graphical design or user experience design. But when approached with intention and insight, gamification can significantly increase activity and loyalty in even the most mundane of experiences.

Ensuring the success of the gamification initiative you are about to embark on can be dramatically increased with one foundational understanding: *Gamification is not about adding a game to your current experience.*

Rather, the most useful framing when beginning your design work is to view your current experience itself as your "game" – one that already involves some level of interaction and engagement – and then to view gamification as the approach to make that "game" more compelling and attention-worthy than it is today.

Your core experience provides the default set of interactions for your users; gamification's role is to enable a new engagement layer on top of that experience that elevates it, enhances it and focuses it, with the ultimate goal of driving increased adoption and participation. In other words, your objective is *not* to create a gamification strategy. Rather, it is to gamify your existing business strategy. Here's how to do that.

Game Dynamics vs. Game Mechanics

At the outset, it is helpful to be clear on the difference between the two major levers of a gamified design – game *dynamics* and game *mechanics* (or gamification mechanics). The two are distinctly different, but work in concert to create the new approach that will activate your increased user engagement.

While there are varying ways to define both terms, here is a practical way of understanding their differences, and how they interact with one another:



Game Mechanics are the objects and elements that comprise the gamified experience, and their relationship to one another. They are the tactical building blocks, generally visible to the user, that are used to construct new interaction points on top of your existing experience. Examples of common game mechanics include:

- Points
- Tiers
- Missions
- Badges
- Leaderboards
- Teams
- Unlocks
- Progress Bars
- Recognitions
- Rewards
- Collections



Game Dynamics are the emergent emotions and behaviors that arise from engaging in the gamified experience and interacting with the game mechanics. They can also be viewed as the core human psychological drivers that, when brought to life by the game mechanics, make the new experience so compelling. Examples of game dynamics include:

- Competition
- Collaboration
- Progress
- Mastery
- Completion
- Exploration
- Discovery
- Status
- Surprise
- Discovery
- Play



Game Dynamics First

A common misstep in gamification efforts is to focus too early in your design process on tactical questions around the mechanics: How many points should we award? What should our badges look like? Do we use avatars? How many levels do we include? While all are important questions, they should only be considered after first defining an overarching strategy with clear business goals and a thoughtful understanding of what “human” experience you are seeking to create.

Focusing initially on the game dynamics over the mechanics ensures that you don't end up launching a solution that encounters the “Engagement Cliff” -- that is, an immediate burst of user activity (possible with even the most rudimentary application of game mechanics) that is soon followed by an equally steep decline. It's critical to understand that while *activity* comes from game mechanics, *sustained commitment* comes from using game dynamics to bring emotion and human connection to your design. Game mechanics help your customer understand what you want them to *do*. Game dynamics help them understand what you want them to *feel*.

So, begin by determining which game dynamics are most appropriate for your experience. Is your audience best suited for competition or collaboration? For acquiring personal reward or for altruism? For completing tasks or exploring information? Then subsequently decide which game mechanics you'll use to bring those relevant game dynamics to life.

But this approach still leaves you with a key question: How do I determine which game dynamics and mechanics are optimal at different inflection points in my gamified experience?



A Design Framework for Gamification

The good news is that there are core design principles that work for most gamified experiences, as well as a proven cadence for when to introduce specific game dynamics and mechanics to your audience. These insights are captured in a 5-step design framework shown through practice to lead to successful gamified experiences:



1. Define Your Business Objectives

Why are you gamifying in the first place? How do you hope to benefit your business, or achieve some other goal such as motivating people to change their behavior? As you state your objectives, emphasize the end goal or goals of your gamified design rather than detailing the means through which you'll achieve this goal. Basically, if your gamified system does what you intend, what specific positive results will it generate for your organization?

2. Reverse Engineer Your Current Experience for Native Gamification Elements

The next step in design is to examine your current core experience to determine if you already have game mechanics and dynamics in play (you almost certainly do). It may be possible to build off of these, or you may determine that you need to remove them to make way for your new design elements.

Ask yourself:

- How is feedback provided to my users in the current experience, if at all?
- Are there any built in mechanisms for recognition or reward?
- Is there an "engagement currency" – some form of equity I earn for participation?
- Is there an engagement cadence or feedback loop that is apparent to users to guide their participation?
- Are there any appointment mechanics (i.e. regular site updates, weekly campaigns?)
- Are there any game dynamics already at play (mastery, collaboration, status, etc.?)

3. Determine Your Target Behaviors

Decide next what you actually want your customers to do. And determine what the metrics are that will allow you to measure the result. The behaviors you target should tie to your business objectives, although the relationship may sometimes be indirect (i.e. making a purchase is direct, but logging into your website would be indirect, although both could be included in your design).

Individual behaviors are the most basic component upon which you'll build your gamified experience. Every interaction point on your site or platform can become an "action" that is used to trigger a recognition, a reward, or to construct a mission. A critical step in designing your experience is listing out all of those possible actions, even if you don't intend to include them in the initial gamified experience (knowing what you are building *toward* is just as important and knowing what you'll offer your customers at launch). Sample actions could include:

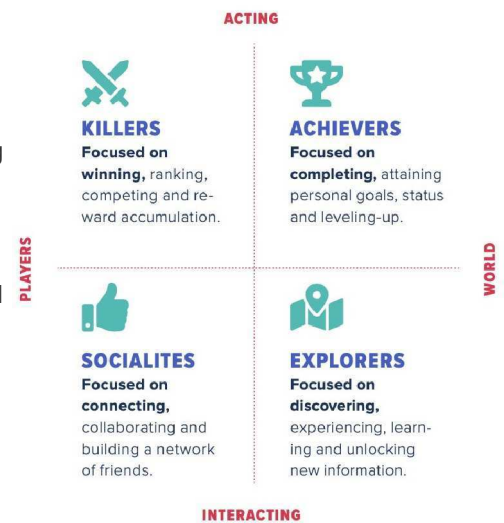
- Logging in
- Posting a comment
- Completing a survey
- Watching a video
- Taking a quiz
- Rating a product
- Reading an article
- Completing a purchase
- Posting socially



4. Understand Your "Players"

Who are the people who will be participating in your gamified activity? What is their relationship to your business? For example, are they prospective customers, tenured customers, employees at your organization, channel partners or some other community? What are they like -- what engages them and drives them? Thinking of them as your "players" can be helpful (since they literally "play" your gamified design), as well as describing them using demographics (such as age and gender), psychographics (such as their values and personalities) or by using a framework like Richard Bartle's player types (right).

You should explore what types of game elements and other structures are likely to be most appealing for this population, based on this profile. For example, consider whether a more competitive or cooperative system would work better, or whether they will be driven more by social engagement versus independent effort.



5. Create Challenges Using the Gamification Engagement Continuum

Challenges are the key engagement element of your gamified experience, and you should focus on defining these -- and determining their cadence -- before deciding on any of your other game mechanics. Challenges (or "missions") are essentially a combination of Actions + Rules + Rewards. Each mission should involve asking the user to complete a behavior or combination of behaviors, announcing the specific manner by which they need to complete them (how many times, in what time frame, with what prerequisite, etc.) and the reward or recognition they will receive for completion.

The Gamification Engagement Continuum provides a roadmap for designing the cadence of game dynamics and challenges introduced in your experience in order to drive sustained engagement. This design approach includes a recommendation that three key dynamics – social interaction, mastery, and autonomy – be introduced gradually but increasingly as users progress through three sequential phases of targeted interaction, including:

Onboarding: Your initial goal is to convert trial users to active players, or convince existing players to reassess by disrupting their assumptions about what your core experience offers them. As this is the phase where the risk of attrition is highest, you need to engage them quickly and in a manner which requires low cognitive investment. Do this by providing a clear path for required interactions that are intended to gently introduce your players to the new experience.

Challenges or missions in this phase are primarily focused on helping users feel "smart" about using the new experience. They include:

- Exploration Dynamic
- Learning Dynamic
- Sequential Challenges with Unlocks
- Early Wins, but with nominal earning (potentially mapped to low-burn reward options)
- Personal Achievement and/or Badges (as progress indicators)



Deepening: Once onboarded, your design strategy should focus on moving engaged but nominally-committed users increasingly up the engagement continuum, since the higher they climb the lower the risk of disengagement or attrition. This is accomplished by encouraging them to establish a “habit” of participation through engaging with basic repeatable and rewardable behaviors on a high-frequency basis.

Challenges in this phase are primarily focused on helping users establish a pattern of high-frequency/high-recency interaction with the experience, with increasing levels of difficulty, risk, and reward offered. They include:

- Achievements
- Mastery
- Collection
- Progress
- Status Dynamic (at the high of this phase)
- Frequency-focused challenges
- Collaborative challenges
- Newsfeeds (for social awareness of activity)

Nurturing: Ultimately, fully-committed users need to be encouraged to move past simple habitual (or “grinding”) behaviors to those which will ultimately engage them in the fullest way possible in the experience. The goal of this phase is to encourage them to make their engagement less about habit and more about “ritual” by making thoughtful choices about their interactions and leveraging their social influence as experienced and accomplished members of the user community.

Also, while risk of attrition is lowest in this phase, it is critical not to tenured players or take their participation for granted. Gamification techniques in the Nurturing stage are primarily focused on providing users with a wide range of choice in how they engage, take advantage of their social capital, and experience special hard-to-earn benefits through:

- Status
- Options
- Competition
- Scarcity
- Mastery-focused Challenges
- Leaderboards (for competitive awareness)
- Surprise + randomness
- Rituals (meaning-laden behaviors arising from the players themselves)

Ultimately, the value of mapping your design to this Engagement Continuum is in recognizing that you often are starting with low or less-than-optimal levels of engagement with your core experience (that's why you're gamifying it). So it's critical to have a deliberate approach like this one to lead players toward increasing levels of participation and deepening commitment over time.

Sustaining Engagement In the Long Term

Once you've completed your gamified design and launched it for your players, take a breath, pat yourself on the back, and then...get back to work. No matter how effective or thoughtful your design is, it won't sustain itself indefinitely. Players will eventually exhaust even the best mix of game mechanics and dynamics.

But once players have started to engage with your gamified experience you'll have a powerful new tool in your toolbox: **data!** Observe how your players do and do not engage, track and record that behavior diligently, mine it for trends, and then use those insights to continually adjust the experience to keep it fresh and relevant. That discipline will enable you to extend the impact of your gamified design indefinitely and will deliver on the engaging experience your players deserve.



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Barry Kirk is a 20-year practitioner in the field of customer experience design and a recognized thought leader in the art of building customer loyalty.

Known for creating the “Multi-Loyalty Framework,” a human-centered model for sustaining brand engagement, Barry’s work continues to be guided by the core principle, “Customers are human beings first.”

Barry currently serves as a Principal Consultant for Chapman & Co. Leadership Institute, where he supports brands in adopting a **TrulyHuman loyalty** approach to achieving growth through deep and authentic customer connection. Prior to Chapman & Co., Barry led consulting services for global incentives leader Maritz Motivation, and was in senior leadership at Bunchball, a Silicon Valley-based gamification SaaS start-up.

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