MIND THE GAP
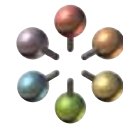
IS LEARNING A GAME?
LEARNING SERIES ENGAGEMENT: PART 1 0F 4

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LEARNING SERIES ENGAGEMENT: PART 1 OF 4

Is learning a game?

Video games are ideal learning machines

It's unfortunate that the elearning industry has gotten a bad rap due to a few poorly designed learning modules. You know the ones. They're designed in PowerPoint as more of a presentation than training. And what's worse is that they don't engage the learner.

Has the elearning industry gotten lazy? Made up of a giant, one-way information dump, leaving little room for asking questions and interacting with the information. Most times, the delivery of these modules leads to boredom, and the learner just checks out and pushes the next button until they get the questions over and done with.

So how do we get somebody to focus on elearning that is long and difficult and takes a lot of commitment—and get him or her to learn the material well? Video games!

Yes, video games are ideal learning machines. And they have many good principles built right into their design, which get gamers to learn them—and learn them well. These video game principles are actually methods that research has shown works, not just for gaming, but also for elearning in general.

Here's how: engaging elearning uses scenario-based learning, much akin to video gaming. For instance, when training for the workplace, instead of giving people the information first and then asking them to perform at the end, you challenge them to adapt and apply their existing knowledge right away.

Modern workplaces are very complex environments—very similar to video game environments. Within both you're forced to interact with a lot of different personalities, and both employees and gamers understand that their game/workplace is a system, and that their actions in that environment impact the outcome of the game and the entire company.

Games also teach us that practice makes perfect. After all, your son or daughter didn't get a course on how to get the Mario Brothers from point A to point B. And they didn't read the manual either. They played until they failed and then they started over, and over again, learning as they progressed further and further in the game.

This is an important concept that video games teach—that mistakes are a part of the learning experience. After all, if you got to the end of a video game the very first time you played it, you'd return the game because it wasn't challenging enough.

When we play a game, we learn from our mistakes through experience—much like how we learn on-the-job. Think about it, when you first started your job, you probably made plenty of mistakes, but you learned from them and improved over time and with repetition. So why isn't this concept applied to job training?

Gaming principals get people to learn in the following ways

Start with a scenario

Present a question ("What would you do?") at the start. This will get their attention right away, rather than letting them sit back and passively listen to all the information before they respond. Games teach us to think about complex systems to solve problems in complex environments. For example, in a game, your identity has to grow and adapt to the alternate environment to survive. Doesn't that sound a lot like your workplace?

Challenge the learner

When your child gets a new video game, they jump in and start playing because they assume they know all of the necessary information. This is how games get the learner thinking about what they know and what they don't know. And they get them to repeat the experience again and again until they get it right. This can be applied to workplace training through scenario-based elearning modules.

Award small wins

Let's face it, elearning doesn't always offer a challenge to push learners forward. Human beings have an innate tendency to want to do well. This naturally pushes us to improve. When we finally make progress, we celebrate a little. Video games award this type of celebration by offering small wins (progress) and push us to get to the end of the game. Training can offer wins through a points system, prizes, or even company recognition.

Respect adults for what they know

Video games acknowledge that players already bring skills to the table while traditional elearning modules tend to do the opposite—even though many learners taking your module may have worked in their role for years. If elearning treated learners with the same respect that video games did, it would get respect and attention back.

Ensure help is available

If you need help when gaming, you have a place to go—a help button or the manual. Help should always be available during elearning as well, whether it's an icon that you can click on, a link to a resource library or a live moderator—learners should always have access to information so they don't feel stuck.

Find out if your elearning could improve by incorporating these principals from video games? Ask yourself:

- Does the material pull me in?
- Is it a little bit fun and challenging?
- Does it apply to my job?
- Will it teach me something to improve my job (e.g., make my job easier, more enjoyable, will it help me get more done)?
- Will I gain wins from the training (e.g., a promotion, recognition, a prize, bragging rights)?

Lesia Crocker is a training professional with a passion for helping people through instructionally-sound learning programs. She has developed self-directed, synchronous and asynchronous applications, product information, and new-hire orientations and has a proven track record of designing training modules that balance client needs and learner experience.

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