

As

I was leaving my local Citibank branch the other day, a customer service rep flagged me down. Smiling and eager, she had what looked like a pamphlet in Citibank blue to press on me. But it wasn't an announcement of a new type of account or a branch opening. It was an invitation to play a game. If I returned in exactly a week, it explained, I could have the card's Quick Response code scanned – on that date and that date only – and if it proved a winner, I would get a cash prize: \$15, \$50 or, at most, \$200.

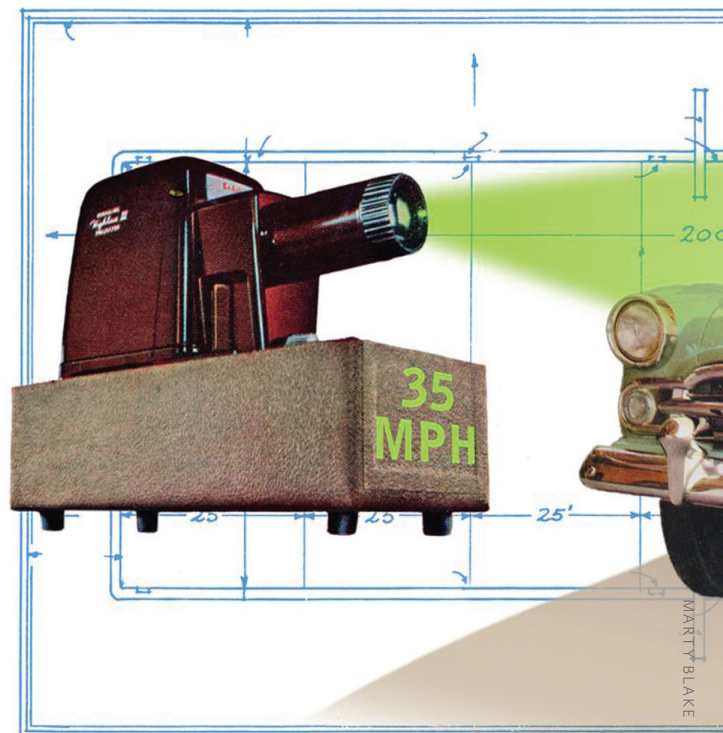
by David Berreby

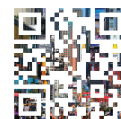
I'd just been gamified.

It was the first time a bank wanted to play with me, but it wasn't my first experience. And given current trends, it certainly won't be my last. ♣ "Gamification" – weaving games (or at least the compelling elements of games) into work, banking, marketing, Internet security, school, health care, politics and many other serious pursuits – is suddenly pervasive. By 2014, the technology research firm Gartner predicts, more than 70 percent of Forbes Global 2000 organizations will offer at least one "gamified" experience. And in a recent poll of 1,021 Internet experts conducted by Pew and North Carolina's Elon University, 53 percent expected gamification to be widely used in workplaces by 2020. ♦ Governments, too, are chasing gamification as a means to encourage healthy behavior, tax compliance, power conservation and highway safety. Pro-gamification arguments have won converts around the world at the top of the leadership pyramid. In the fall of 2011, for example, Constance Steinkuehler, a University of Wisconsin expert on video games in education, joined the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and was charged with exploring the potential of gamification for a broad range of policy goals.

No wonder, then, that there are some (for example, the experts at the Web site gamification.co, an indispensable hub of information and opinion on the movement) who have proclaimed gamification the next big disrupter, bound to bring profound change to many aspects of business and society. No wonder, either, that this has led others (including Gartner), to warn about inflated expectations and hype. A year after it made that prediction about widespread gamification in the Global 2000, the research firm added another forecast: "By 2014, 80 percent of current gamified applications will fail to meet business objectives primarily because of poor design."

Even though you're going to be seeing and reading a lot about what gamification can do for your business, it's clear that this new approach can't solve all the problems companies hope for it to address. Yet it's equally certain that gamification is not just a buzzword. When the task is learning algebra, quitting smoking, military recruiting, mastering regulations, improving the way one interacts with custom-





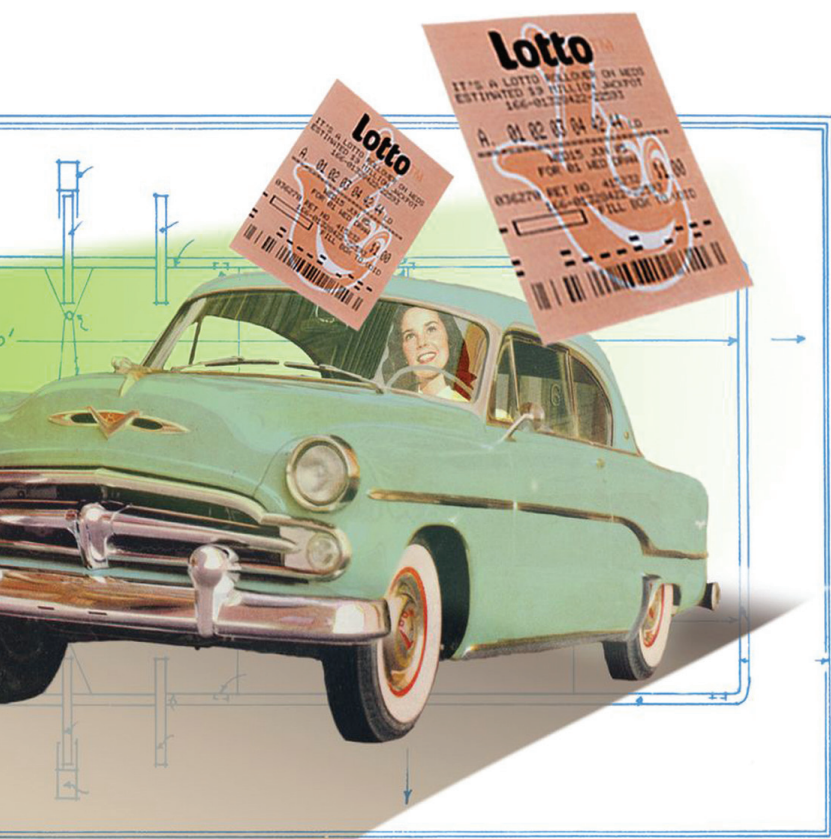
ers or making a life worth living out of a 99-year prison sentence, gaming elements have been shown to make players abler, happier and more committed to their goals. Gamification is here to stay, and insight into its workings can help you distinguish substance from hype.

Gamification has most clearly proven itself in situations requiring a lot of brainpower on a well-defined but demanding task. Since 2008, for example, thousands of people around the world have played a video game called Foldit, in which they fold and twist greenish balloon-like shapes into structures. The chains are models of amino acids – the building blocks of proteins – and as they play the gamers eventually find the best possible structure for the available amino acids (the one that requires the least amount of energy to maintain). When they reach that end point for a specified collection of amino acids, the players have completed a job that used to be done exclusively by computational biologists with sophisticated software: They’ve worked out the structure of a protein. In fact, Foldit results have appeared in many high-impact journals. And according to a recent review in the magazine *The Scientist*, strategies that the competitive players have devised have proven to be better than the state-of-the-art algorithms that the

game’s inventors use in their own protein-folding research.

The science projects seek to harness brainpower for discovery, but gamification can also engage and motivate participants to learn new things and change their behavior. For example, last year, the Swedish National Society for Road Safety created a “speed camera lottery” in Stockholm. At select traffic spots, drivers would see a digital display of their speed, as measured by radar, and a camera would snap a picture of their license plate. If they were over the speed limit, they got a ticket in the mail. However, drivers who were at or under the limit were automatically entered into a lottery to win money at the end of each month. The amount of money depended on the speeders – their fines went into the prize fund. The results were impressive. Over three days (24,857 cars photographed), the average car’s drive-by speed went down from 32 kilometers an hour to 25 – a 22 percent reduction. (And the idea was itself a product of gamification: “speed camera lottery” was the winning entry in a contest sponsored by Volkswagen.)

Similarly, the Stockholm School of Business (which, oddly enough, is in Latvia) applied game principles to its alumni fundraising campaign. The school used digital media to create leaderboards. After contributing, a donor



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immediately appeared on a dynamic infographic. Alumni were also constantly informed about how much designated groups of graduates – from different nations, graduating classes and companies – were giving compared to others. (The size of each country on a world map reflected its citizens' generosity.) Compared to 2011, alumni participation in fundraising went up 300 percent.

Unsurprisingly, the power of games has drawn interest in fields where sometimes-unwilling participants have to be kept engaged in order to change their lives or master some body of knowledge. Last year, for instance, the education services company Pearson launched Alleyoop, a Web-based math and science tutor for junior high and high school students, which strongly resembles a Facebook game. Kids can even log in via the social network. Players go on "missions" and earn an in-game currency called yoops that can pay for tutoring and lessons. Most importantly, they get constant feedback on their performance and move through their missions at their own pace.

Similarly, the booming industry of wellness promotion and monitoring is keen on games. For instance, Keas, a San Francisco startup, offers its 30 corporate clients a Web-based game in which employees form teams to compete in a contest to eat better, exercise and manage their stress. And in finance, True Office, another startup, offers a gamified approach to training. For example, the company offers compliance training (an unpopular subject among bank personnel, but an increasingly important one). True Office conveys required information about insider trading regulations or know-your-customer anti-laundering rules by immersing trainees in an interactive game with a long-playing storyline.

The **most dramatic example of gamification's power, though, predates the current trend.**

Late this April, the town of Angola in northwest Louisiana will host its rodeo, as it has for 40 years. Competitors will ride a bull for as long as they can, or sit at a poker table and vie to be the last player standing when a bull charges them, or try to grab a poker chip off an angry steer. The event is run by professionals in a 10,000-seat stadium, but none of the riders is an expert. Many have had zero experience with these sports before, in fact. The competitors are all inmates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

The prison lodges the state's most-hardened criminals. Seven out of 10 prisoners are in for life; the average sentence for non-lifers is 91 years. And the money the rodeo earns goes straight back into the prison system. In other words, the contestants have nothing to gain in terms of

In Louisiana, prisoners work hard to earn the privilege of competing in the twice-a-year rodeo ... with nothing to gain.



money or opportunity. Yet prisoners work hard to earn the privilege of competing in the twice-a-year rodeo. They must rise through a system of defined achievements that lead to concrete rewards: the right to have a job in the prison, own a pet or have some freedom of movement on the grounds. At the apex is the privilege of competing in the rodeo.

The system is not new. Angola's current warden, Burl Cain, set it up after he took over in 1995. And the rodeo itself dates from the 1960s. But as the entrepreneur Seth Priebatsch noticed last year, the rodeo and the points-and-rewards system that selects prisoners to enter it are clearly examples of gamification. Indeed, writes Gary Henkle of gamification.co: "A game spanning 10 years (or more) with an emphasis on rewarding people by status is reminiscent of longstanding airline loyalty rewards. ... The rodeo gives prisoners a goal they can strive for, and the leveling up process gives them an opportunity to practice self-control and following rules."

MARTY BLAKE



A San Francisco startup offers a Web-based game in which employees form teams to compete in a contest to eat better and exercise.



For skeptics who think gamification is overrated, the prison's approach could serve as Exhibit A.

It seems obvious that chasing points and vying to ride cattle add up to an irrational approach to life, given the ephemeral goals and brief rewards that will make no difference to the “big picture”: life in prison and, quite likely, even burial on Angola’s grounds.

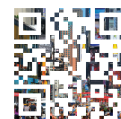
This frequently heard critique misses an important truth about human behavior, which has been well mapped by the past few decades of scientific research. It’s simply this: Most of the time in human decision making, there is no “big picture.” Yes, we can see reason if we get a grip on ourselves and work hard at it. Most of the time, though, we don’t.

What comes far more easily is responding to the suggestion of the moment (one example: evaluators who have just had a break will judge candidates more leniently than will those who have been working for hours without pause; they’ll be harsher, too, in rainy weather than they are on sunny days) chasing a goal that is immediately attainable but sufficiently challenging to bring out the competitive spirit, hope for success and anxiety about failure going all out for bragging rights – or, as a social scientist might put it, for signals of high social status relative to others whom

we see or think about every day engaging and caring deeply about contests with fixed and arbitrary rules (for example, baseball, football, hockey and other sports).

These are drivers of many of the decisions made in organizations and families. And, of course, they all share an important trait: They are characteristic of games. These elements have always been compelling to the human mind. What’s new today is the technology that can deliver a game-like experience anywhere, from the highway to the office to the Web.

Gamification, then, is a way to use interactive technology to streamline the psychology of effort and change. Many serious activities are hard to manage because they involve complex shifts in motivations (you want to lose weight, but how can you offend Aunt Agatha when she went to the trouble to make your favorite pie?), dynamic processes in constant change (you thought you really wanted to get to the top in this company, but after this morning’s earnings report and yesterday’s sales meeting, you’re feeling maybe you should see what’s going on in other shops), and far too many interacting drivers (Aunt Agatha, your weight-loss plan, the look of that pie, the weather outside, how hungry you are, who else is in the room – all these things have been shown to affect motivation and preference). Gamification replaces life’s ambiguity and confusion with the game’s clarity and sureness of purpose. The



game elements strip away what discourages and distracts.

The nature of gamification also hints at the reasons it will never prove to be the answer to all the challenges of managing people, relationships and one's own self.

First, not every complex motivational or performance challenge lends itself to the simplifications of game play. When the challenge doesn't involve clear goals – for the organization or the “player” – then a game element won't help.

Second, since gamification distills a complex human activity into a clearer, simpler activity, gamification will make sense only if that distillation process makes sense, both to the “gamifier” and to the players. Gamification will fail, though, when the transfer from life to game isn't convincing.

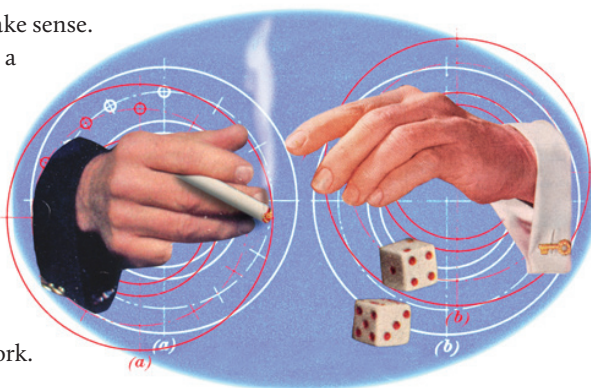
As an example, Michael Wu, chief scientist at the social customer-management firm Lithium Technologies, has cited “a large enterprise” (whose name he's kept to himself) that created an iOS golf game for its sales executives. The balls represented leads, and the holes were individual salespeople. The game was designed to get the executives to speed up the work of forwarding leads to the sales staff. But Wu noticed that the transfer didn't make sense.

“The task of assigning a lead to a rep normally takes only a few seconds, but it may take minutes now because sales execs need to roll the ball into the hole by tilting the mobile device,” he wrote. Game play and the company's goal didn't align. Players found the game interesting and compelling, but it didn't speed up their work. In fact, it slowed it down.

This kind of bad fit between game and life will be the source of much disillusionment about gamification in coming years. As Gartner's Brian Burke put it recently, “Many companies have begun to believe that people will readily do their bidding by simply slapping some meaningless badges, points and leaderboards onto their Web sites.” It's not so. When the life-game connection is “off,” players don't engage for long. They will see through what the gamification maven Kevin Shane calls “fake gamification,” in which game elements are presented without any connection to player or organization. Or players might engage with the game but not with the organization's underlying goal, because the two haven't been aligned. This sort of “bad gamification,” Shane says, is even worse for an organization than the fake kind. This sort of alienation, though, is a serious danger for any gamification effort. After all, in their pure form, games are by definition impractical pastimes, which aren't supposed to connect to real world stakes.

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— BRIAN BURKE



In “Homo Ludens,” his profound look at humanity's playful nature, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga identified this as essential to the appeal of play. “Play,” he wrote, “is connected to no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it.” Play has to be distinct from ordinary life in order to be play. This feeling about the nature of games is why some expert designers feel that gamification is basically impossible, or that, in the words of the respected game designer and thinker Ian Bogost, “gamification is bogus.”

Was Citibank's tactic a success? I'm guessing not. I misplaced the game card and had no compelling reason to be at the bank that particular day, so I wasn't motivated to play, and still have no idea why they wanted customers to come at that specific time. But I am sure about one thing when it comes to gamification: Whatever I might think of any one game experience that's offered in the course of my day, for the next few years, there will always be more on the way. 