

Exploring the Endgame of Gamification

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Abstract:

Many gamification systems are built around the “grinding” concept of a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) where players fight monsters to get experience points and powerful treasures, so that they can then fight more powerful monsters to get even more experience points and more powerful treasures. In gamification, this translates into doing activities to earn points or badges, which then improves the player’s level and status, which then encourages them to earn more points and badges. In MMORPGs, however, there is an “endgame,” where players stop grinding and move into other forms of engagement with the game. The purpose of this article is to explore the different types of endgame activities are in MMORPGs, and translate those into models for the endgame of gamification. The eventual goal is to use this concept to move people from focusing on rewards to finding a deeper personal connection with the real-world content so that the gamification system is no longer needed.

Gamification is the use of game design elements to encourage engagement with a non-game setting.¹ Most current applications of gamification focus on offering points and rewards to motivate users. This reward-based gamification takes only a small part of gaming – the scoring systems – and uses it to create the same type of loyalty system that has been in existence for decades.

These systems are designed around the concept of a core currency, such as a “point.” The name of this currency may be different – it may be “gold” or “experience” or “happiness,” but for purposes of simplification in this article, the word “point” will be used to represent the basic unit of exchange that players earn for taking on certain behaviors. The underlying concept of reward-based gamification is simple – offer points to manipulate players.

Considering the Point

This is no different than other forms of incentives like money or grades; people are used to doing things for a reward. Using a virtual reward like points is less inexpensive than

using a tangible reward, and can, at least in the short term, have the same effect. Many “citizen science” projects are thin veneers of narrative, points, and other virtual rewards used to get people to do something that used to be done by students for a stipend or extra credit.

From a game design perspective, points are used to manipulate the actions of a player. Players are offered points or other in-game awards for taking certain actions and are given punishments (which, according to Kohn², are the same as rewards) for taking other actions. Video game design used to be about taking “lives” from the player as a punishment, but now many games just take “time” from the player’s real life as the player as to repeat a section of the game. Few gamification systems employ the punishment aspects of a game.

Since gamification is based upon game design elements, the concept of points being used to control behavior is not surprising. But what are points used for? In many loyalty programs, points are good for tangible rewards, but to avoid giving out tangible rewards, gamification designers focus on more virtual rewards. The mechanics of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) have served as an inspiration for many reward-based gamification systems.

The Grind of MMORPGS

Many MMORPGS follow the same pattern to reward and motivate players:

- Experience Points – Players earn points for taking on challenges in a game. In many MMORPGs, the highest number points per hour of play are awarded through combat, and more difficult combats award more points. Some games award experience points for exploration, for using craft skills to create new objects, or for helping others. In most games, players have to go out and fight in order to level up at an enjoyable pace; however, the more recently designed *Guild Wars 2* was designed so that players would receive a reasonable number of points per hour for simply being involved with the game in some way – fighting, exploring, or crafting.
- Levels – As players reach a certain number of experience points, they go up to a new level. New levels provide players with additional skills and higher status in the game. The level structure is designed so that as players go up in level, it takes progressively more points to move from level to level. Players must then take on more difficult challenges and play for longer periods of time before reaching a new level. This system is designed to get players addicted to the excitement of achievement early by providing them with new abilities frequently; then, as the player advances, it becomes harder and harder to reach additional levels.

- Items – Another form of rewards in MMORPGs are items. By defeating enemies, players can earn items and earn an in-game currency that can be used to purchase items. These items carry special abilities that serve to make the players stronger. The games are then designed around a player having an appropriate number of these items for his or her level in order to defeat monsters.

This combination of points, levels, and items creates a style of play that is known as “grinding.” In most MMORPGs a monster reappears a short time after it is defeated. In addition, areas are designed for a certain level of player, so that players don’t run into challenges that are too easy, and therefore reward few experience points, or challenges that are far too hard. A player remains in one area of the virtual world until they finish the storyline in that area through quests or find that the monsters offer little reward and then the player moves on to a new area. Since the monsters in an area continually reappear on the map, the player can grind through an area simply by hunting and killing the same monster types again and again until he or she has gained enough experience to move on.

As the player moves up from level to level, this grind becomes more time-consuming and tedious, as each level requires more points to achieve than the last level. What keeps the players going is the promise of new abilities, continuing the storyline and new areas of the world to explore. This grinding process is shown in Figure 1.



Figure : The grind of a traditional MMORPG

In recent years, MMORPGs have added in Achievements and/or Badges to this equation of virtual rewards. Achievements are specific tasks that may or may not also give the player other rewards in the game and badges are public displays of accomplishments.

Sometimes to earn an achievement or badge, the player has to go against the normal paths to get points, which creates new experiences for the player to have with the same game.

This system came into existence because many MMORPGs charge a monthly fee for users to play the game. Because of this, the designers of these games need to game. Traditional digital role-playing games have a similar structure where players move from area to area, but this is designed to come to an end as the narrative comes to an end. With the MMORPG structure, the designers need the players to continue paying each month, so the main narrative storyline continues. While players are working through current content, designers are creating additional content to keep players engaged.

The Grind of Gamification

Many gamification systems have been developed around traditional MMORPG concepts, so much so that Nicholson coined the term BLAP for gamification focused on Badges, Levels and Leaderboards, Achievements, and Points³. Users perform actions determined by the designer to earn points and badges. These points may be used to rank players on a leaderboard and may also be converted to levels. Badges are used as public indicators of accomplishments. This is shown in Figure 2.



Figure : The grind of a BLAP gamification system

But what about the new powers and skills granted by an MMORPG? In theory, this is where the real-world setting for the gamification is involved. The user makes purchases, does chores, gains knowledge, or does whatever activity is worth points in the system, and in doing so, changes himself or herself or the world in some way. The organization sponsoring the gamification may also benefit, and in many applications of gamification

created by corporations or for “citizen science” projects, the organization is the primary beneficiary.

There is a part of the MMORPG model that is missing in many gamification structures, which is the concept of moving to a new area. Without this element, players grow weary of a grind with no end in sight. Some gamification systems create new areas by providing different types of content. For example, *Code Academy* is a gamified system where users can learn how to program; after users grind in one area, they can then move into a different area and learn more complex tasks. *FoldIt* is a citizen science project where users first explore puzzles and end up developing new protein sequences to meet specific needs; the best sequences are synthesized, which has led to real-world advances in scientific research⁴.

Some gamification systems are developed as short-term system to teach a specific skill or promote a specific product or event. If the goal of the gamification is short-term, then a BLAP system can function appropriately to guide users to a short-term goal. But if the goal of the gamification is long-term change, a basic reward-based system will not be enough to create long-term change.

There are several problems with using a basic reward-based system for long-term change. Once a user becomes accustomed to receiving a reward for an activity, the intrinsic motivation to perform that activity is replaced with an extrinsic motivation. This means that the gamification system will have to be run forever to keep the user engaged⁵. In addition, users will grow weary of one reward level and will expect the reward to change or increase over time to keep their interest. If the goal is to move users into the real-world setting without a continued reliance on the gamification system, then something has to be changed from the traditional BLAP-based system to engage users in a different way.

The Endgame of MMORPGs

There is a point with MMORPGs where a player reaches the end of the grind. This usually happens when the player has reached the highest level that the game designers have planned for. The player can continue to fight monsters and take on quests, but the experience points gained are now meaningless. This creates a design challenge – how does a designer keep players interested when the grind that they have been engaged with for months or years has come to an end? This concept is known as the “endgame,” and represents a different way that the player now engages with the game.

In some ways, this can be quite the existential challenge for a player. The player has come to the game every day to earn more points and levels in order to defeat bigger

monsters to that they can earn more points and levels. Then, with a final “Ding,” the player’s primary way of tracking accomplishments is over. Some players want to settle back into the comfort of the grind, so start a new character; many MMORPGS have different races, factions, and character classes, each with different stories to explore, so this is a valid path of exploration. Many of the games allow players the ability to pass money, items, or other benefits on to their new characters so that the early stages of the game are not as challenging as they were the first time.

Another way the games continue to engage players is by replacing one grind for another. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, once players hit the level cap, they begin to focus their grind for specific items. These items may complement their playstyle or may be upgrades to things they already have. Many of these rare items will be dropped at random from a specific monster, so some players will then fight the same monster again and again until they get the item. There are activities that can be done once per day that give awards of various currency, so players at their level cap will find the game can become one of doing the same set of things every day in order to build up their character.

There are two main reasons players want to build up their characters – to engage in battles with other players or to engage in the most challenging endgame content. Many MMORPGs allow players to battle with other players during the grind to level cap and some of them will allow players to raise in levels just as effectively through player vs. player activities as they do if they engage with the main storyline of the game. But once players reach the top level, they must then improve their items if they wish to be competitive with other players at the highest level in the game.

Another path is to engage with endgame content. This content is designed for small or large groups of players to have to work together in order to overcome significant challenges. Many times, these challenges introduce new types of obstacles and risks that the players did not face during the grind to the level cap. Games with a long history like *World of Warcraft* that have raised the level cap over the years still have these older endgame challenges that players can take on as they work through the storylines, so players can choose to engage in these team-based challenges well before reaching the level cap.

Many players participate in all of these elements – player vs. player, team-based challenges, and grinding through the levels as they move toward the endgame. Well-designed MMORPGs allow players to choose their path throughout the game, and then funnel players together for shared endgame experiences. Poorly-designed MMORPGs do not have different storylines or well-developed endgame content and end up losing players once they work through the primary storyline.

One important aspect of MMORPGs that brings players back that the designers can not control is the social aspect. Some players play MMORPGs with friends from the outside world; the game can serve as an activity that people can share with friends from around the world or across the street. In this way, playing the game with others turns it into a chat room with something to do. Another social aspect is engaging with others that the player has met only in the game world. Many MMORPGs use the concept of guilds that provide players the opportunity to meet a subset of other players. These guilds may schedule activities and expect players to perform a specific role when working together to take on challenges in the game.

In this way, the MMORPG forms a community of practice. A community of practice is a “group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly ⁶.” By their design, MMORPGs are cloaked in mystery; many aspects of the game are not explained to the player through rules. Instead, the players must work together to figure out the different subsystems in the game, and players communicate through chat within the game and on forums outside the game attempting to figure out how the game works. Guilds form subcommunities who work together to attempt to figure out how to work through the game’s challenging endgame content. A player who is immersed in an MMORPG community is more likely to return and engage with others than a player who is working through the game by himself or herself.

Each MMORPG is working to create alternatives to the grind and endgame model. *Eve Online* does not use levels; but rather is based upon skill development, so players can always continue to work to develop their character. *Guild Wars 2* provides a continuing chain of special events, and allows players to join any group working on an event, so players can always be involved in something different instead of repeating the same task. Tabletop RPGs do not have this issue with grinding because a game master’s task is keeping the adventure new for each play session; this concept is challenging for a game with millions of players, but will serve to provide players with an alternative to grinding.

The Endgame of Gamification

What is the endgame of gamification? The endgame of an MMORPG occurs when the user is no longer involved with the grind, and instead, moves into other ways to engage with the game. If the goal of gamification is to engage a user in a non-game setting, then the endgame of gamification is the process by which the user is moved from the gamification reward-based grind into the non-game setting. Without a planned endgame, the users are trapped within an ongoing grind forever⁷.

Looking at different alternatives to the grind in MMORPGs can provide gamification designers with different paths to keep users engaged with their gamification system. Before players tire of earning the basic points in the gamification system, designers need to provide players with other ways to engage with the real-world setting. For a robust gamification system, the designers should provide players with a wide variety of activities to choose from instead of creating linear paths to follow.⁸

The different design concepts used by MMORPGs for endgame content are useful in thinking about different ways of creating post-reward gamification activities that can move people from the reward-based grind into deeper engagement with the real world.

Creating a different Grind – The easiest design to move players out of one grind is to give them another grind. This starts the cycle again and can keep people engaged for a longer period of time, but the same problem will come up once they reach the end of or tire of the new grind. Theoretically, once the user has worked through the first grind, they have some knowledge and expertise that can be tapped in order to make the next grind more transparent in connecting it with the real-world situation. The user may be more ready to take on information and grind more directly toward the real-world benefit than they were at the beginning. In addition, as the user understands more about the real-world setting, he or she can be given more meaningful choices about the goals of the new grind.

Nike+ uses this model. When users start, they are just collecting points as they do activities. As they get into the gamification system, they are given a chance to set their own fitness goals and grind toward those goals. The overall points are still being counted in the background, but they are less important than the goals that the user set for himself or herself.

One way to do this is to value new experiences and new activities; if the designers can develop enough new experiences and create mini-grinds around each, then users will have a much lower chance to get burnt out. *SuperBetter* does this by presenting a continuous stream of new challenges in front of each player, and ties in information about why these challenges matter. By creating moments of information and reflection, the designers raise the chance that the player will find their own connection to the real world context.

Creating Larger Challenges – Another approach to creating the gamification endgame is to present users with larger-scale challenges that they will need to either tap significant expertise or work with others to accomplish. If these larger-scale challenges are more

directly tied into the needs of the real world, then this can serve as a segue to move players from a focus on a gamification system to a focus on the real world.

The aforementioned *FoldIt* does exactly this. Users grind through challenges and puzzles in a game-like setting, but as they do so, they are gaining the knowledge and expertise needed to then engage with real research problems with unknown answers. The result is that the researchers have training and motivated research partners who are engaged in real-world problem solving.

In the book, *Creating the Mutliplayer Classroom*, Sheldon has used a similar model in his gamification of the classroom. Throughout the class, the students grind through challenges and quests. After the students acquire knowledge and skills, the class has to come together to work against a “Boss Fight,” which is a greater challenge that requires cooperation. This works to bring students out of the daily grind and into larger challenges that can be more meaningful.

Creating Competition between Users – Another route is to let the users create their own challenges for each other. In many games, after players have spent many hours working through challenges and improving their characters, they are eager to see how their characters stack up against those controlled by other players. In a gamification system, the designer could create competitive challenges where users work alone or with others to compete over real-world goals.

FoldIt's design does exactly this; while users are given real world challenges, only the most promising proteins created by users are synthesized and tested. It is important to note that this level of competition is only tapped once users have become confident with the tools. If users are put into a competitive space too early and are quickly crushed, it can be a disincentive to continue. This is one of the problems with leaderboards; while they can motivate those at the top, they can demotivate those at the bottom.

Another scenario where this model makes sense is where there is already competition, such as a sales force in a company. When participants are already used to competition and rewards, adding a game layer to help track more nuances of the competition can enhance the existing structures.

Making Gamification Meaningful

The larger concept that all of these ideas play into is that of meaningful gamification. The concept of meaningful gamification is that it focuses on using game design elements to help users find a meaningful connection to the real-world setting. It reduces the

emphasis on or avoids rewards, and instead, focuses on the non-reward based aspects of game design.⁹

Nicholson has proposed a RECIPE for meaningful gamification¹⁰, where the letters of the word RECIPE spell out different ways of using game design elements to build meaning:

- *Reflection* – creating situations where users reflect to discover personal connections with the real-world setting
- *Exposition* – using narrative and user-created stories to create deeper connections to the real-world setting
- *Choice* – allowing the user to select paths and develop goals within the real-world setting that are more meaningful to him or her
- *Information* – providing the user with information about the connections between the gamification activities and the real-world setting
- *Play* – creating a safe space and set of boundaries where the user can choose how he or she wishes to engage with different gamification activities in the real-world setting
- *Engagement* – using the gamification system to connect users to a community of practice that surrounds the real-world setting

By thinking about the endgame of the gamification, designers can then create reward-based systems designed to bring players into more meaningful connections. By doing this, it raises the chance that the user will find a connection into the real-world setting and will no longer require the gamification system for engagement. The gamification system can be developed as a short-term activity, as shown in figure 3, and the result is that users will be making differences in the real world because they want to instead of just trying to earn one more point.

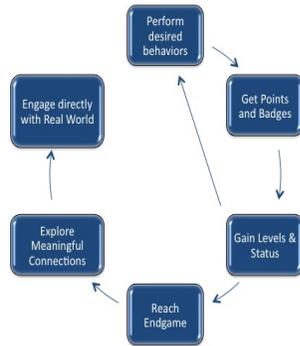


Figure : Bringing together BLAP and Meaningful Gamification

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