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# Mayor or patron? The difference between a badge and a meaningful story

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**Abstract**

"Life is a game". This is the claim of a number of novel services to help people to overcome common motivational problems. This notion of turning life into a game was recently called *gamification*. This paper discusses the typically employed strategies to motivate people to change their behaviour and attitudes. Based on this, we advocate an experiential, more intrinsic approach to *gamification*, which focuses on the provision of meaning rather than rewards.

**Keywords**

gamification, behaviour change, user experience, persuasive technologies, user experience design

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**General Terms**

Design

**Introduction**

We all have much to do. Some activities are meaningful and pleasurable; others are monotonous and mind-numbing. The latter need an extra-portion of motivation. Luckily, there are a growing number of novel digi-

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tal services, which offer help with getting "things done," that is, overcoming motivational problems. For example, *EpicWin* claims that "one hero emerges, who can vanquish any task." "Make being organised as much fun as gaming with EpicWin the to-do list app with an RPG setting" [6]. And *Foursquare* announces: "earn points and unlock badges for discovering new things" (see figure 1) [7]. These services present "life as a game" [10]. They reward the fulfilment of tasks or the discovery of new places with virtual points, badges or levelled-up characters. This was recently called *gamification*. Note, however, that the idea of using elements borrowed from video games for the design of "serious" software to improve user experience (UX) and user engagement is not new [e.g., 8]. An early example is Dennis Chao's *PSDoom*, [4], which used the first-person shooter *Doom* as way to "gamify" the administrator's task of managing and "killing" processes. Already at the end of the 90ties of the last century, Jack Carroll and John Thomas [3] suggested to use game-like interfaces for real-world process-control to overcome vigilance breakdowns. The novelty of *gamification* is thus certainly not *gamification* itself, but the *gamification* of the personal, everyday-life.

The most basic contribution of *gamification* systems is logging and monitoring, which results in an automatically kept diary of activities (e.g. where did I eat, where did I buy my coffee etc.). Diaries are good for re-experiencing and reflecting past events (see [14] for an example in the domain of interactive products). However, even a detailed record of what we did does not necessarily change how we act. A diary provides a *basis* for insight and change, but does not actively induce it. *Gamification* wants to overcome this. However, according systems largely rely on primitive reward

mechanisms, like points, badges, or level-ups. We find that approach rather limited – a relic from the era of behaviourism, a reissue of Token Economies and Learning Machines. In contrast, we argue for an experience-oriented approach, which focuses on creating new stories of the things we need to do, to transform the tedious into a meaningful experience.



Figure 1: www.foursquare.com

### Being a mayor or a patron? Rewarded by experiences

An example of a task allotted by *Foursquare* to its users is to revisit a restaurant or pub and become a loyal customer and finally the "mayor" of this place. The mayor is the customer with the most days checked into a venue over the last 60 days. Actually, being a regular or a "patron" of a pub is certainly not a novel notion. But there seems to be a difference in being a *Foursquare* "mayor" of a place or a "patron" of a favourite pub. A patron is a loyal customer. S/he knows the employees or is on first-name with the host. The patron's

motivation to go to her/his favourite pub is the good experiences s/he could have. It is intrinsic [5]. The reward for going there lies in the activity itself. In contrast, becoming a "mayor" of a place can be solely driven by the wish to get the according badge, which then can be converted into products (e.g. a free coffee at *Foursquare*). Note, that while in both cases people will finally show up in a particular place and will eventually spend money, there might be a big difference between being there because of an intrinsic interest in the people, the place, the atmosphere or being there because of a badge. Of course we acknowledge that a "mayor" of a pub meets other people, likes the place or is a well-known person there, but *Foursquare* does not enable, optimize or even enhance a good pub experience. It simply lures its user to a place to get a badge, and that's it – it is purely extrinsic [5]. In other words, *gamification* systems like *Foursquare* might increase the likelihood of a particular behaviour, but do not improve its experience. There are other examples of *gamification*, which are more intrinsic, like *Akoha* cards [1], *Boom Boom* Cards [2] or *Tiny Task* [13]. *Tiny Task* is a set of key fobs labelled with tasks: a combination of activities for others (e.g. "work for charity") and for oneself (e.g. "flowers for you"). *Akoha* and *Boom Boom* stimulate users to commit acts of kindness. They focus on social interaction and altruistic behaviour (e.g., buying a stranger a cup of coffee). Although *Akoha* provides points for a task done, the offered tasks foster and shape new experiences, provide new stories to be told.

Of course *EpicWin's* or *Foursquare's* offer (badges, level-up for characters) are not always linked to rewards in the real world. In that sense they are symbolic and one may argue that they simply fulfil the intrinsic

psychological need of collecting and saving. This need is about ownership, which is a strong motive and motivation to act [11]. However, compared to the multifaceted possibilities for need fulfilment in a pub one *really* likes, enjoyment from ownership appears rather limited. It doesn't tell stories of good conversations and stimulating relationships.

But even if the objective would be changing behaviour only, *gamification* seems to be predominantly suited to increase the likelihood of vacuum cleaning or putting out the rubbish. But think of tasks, which typically involve self-improvement, such as resource-saving, social relationships, or self-control. These tasks are composed of many single successes as well as the occasional relapse. What is needed is a way to integrate single successes into a meaningful whole – a requirement, which is much better met by meaningful experiences than single rewards. In sum, we argue that "the objective is not only to demonstrate and maximize change in overt behavior, but [...] to make change a worthwhile experience." [9].

## Conclusion

*Gamification* helps people to visualize and remember tasks and goals, they might otherwise lose track of [12]. While this is always a good start for self-reflection and change, it is only half the story. The other half is about actually implementing new behaviour, overcoming routines and seemingly bad habits. So far, systems mainly offer rewards given that a particular behaviour is shown, reminiscing of last century's operant conditioning through Token Economies. Nowadays, psychology suggests a more complex picture. Novel behaviour needs to be meaningful. It must be tied to psychological needs, such as relatedness or stimulation, and be

shaped into a meaningful story. This argues against simple extrinsic rewards, but calls for systems, which suggest activities and set goals derived from an overarching goal, such as being happier or being more social. This is what *gamification* should aim at.

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