Let’s play! – Gamification and IT Service Management

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The term ‘Gamification’ is hot and it’s everywhere. It’s on a rapid migration path from the realms of Consumer Marketing (where it is now pervasive) to that of the IT enterprise. Its Marketing roots means that it brings with it some misconceptions and a bit of a tarnished reputation, but don’t dismiss Gamification yet. It’s worth cutting through the hype and confusion in order to gain an understanding of how Gamification and Gaming in general can offer value to the IT enterprise.

Gamification is not just about playing ‘games’ or collecting ‘points’ - in fact it is just one aspect of ‘gaming dynamics’ that can be used for benefit for any IT enterprise looking to become more human-centered and increase levels of engagement. Others examples of this are Simulations and Serious Games.

Let’s gain some understanding then consider practical ways in which each can be applied.

Gamification for good

Gamification is about applying game elements (the ‘DNA’ of games) to non-game activities. It’s about making ‘normal’, day-to-day activities more compelling. Gamification leverages ‘game mechanics’ such as points, levels, badges, rewards, characters, stories and achievements alongside game design to increase human interest and ultimately drive engagement.

What’s new, you might think. There has always been a competitive culture across certain streams of IT, manifesting itself in the form of metrics, scoring and reporting.

Gamification is fundamentally different in that it exploits our most basic instincts. Humans want to interact with other humans, challenge themselves and be recognized. This is called intrinsic motivation. Gamification creates a shift left from the more commonly accepted extrinsic motivational factors that people typically respond to (for example, pay and promotion) to these more basic, intrinsic factors.

Gamification also helps quench the insatiable thirst we have for anything ‘social’. As the power of people rises above that of process or technology, Gamification fuels the Social
Enterprise by offering human-centered collaboration, even if it isn’t face-to-face. Through community interaction, Gamification can provide that shared feeling of taking part in a ‘common experience’.

So where can it be used? From a practical perspective, Gamification can be applied to any activity in which people are engaged, and can help drive desired behaviours within the context of the activity. From an IT Service Management (ITSM) perspective, such activities are wide-ranging and can include operations, communications and education-based tasks.

**The service desk** - A current hot spot for ITSM Gamification, there are some vendors already offering solutions in this area around their Service Desk tools. Don’t let the software be your master though - jump on the wagon to create kudos using game mechanics such as points, leader-boards, individual recognition and more. Be careful the application of gaming mechanics does not trivialise the good work being done in this area though - it’s vital to align the dynamics with appropriate metrics and reward.

**Process effectiveness** - Every process can be gamified for good. For example - use scoring, feedback loops and rewards to encourage the use and submission of Knowledge Management articles. Or use points cumulating in charitable donations to drive population of a configuration management database (CMDB) within Service Asset and Configuration Management. Or quality scoring and countdowns on submissions of requests for change (RFC’s) within Change Management. Or communal discovery and crowdsourcing to support Problem Management. There are literally hundreds of gaming mechanics that can be applied to process-based Gamification – the challenge is to be creative and think beyond the badges.

**Problematic projects or processes** - Don’t even think about it. I repeat, do not put lipstick on the pig. Gamification will not improve behaviours around projects, processes or activities which are currently problematic in any way. Address the problem, don’t dress the problem.

**Change/transformation** - The majority of issues encountered during any significant transformation initiative are reported as ’people centric’ - for example, resistance to change, poor communication, lack of alignment, conflict of interest and more. Gamification can help overcome issues such as these by driving engagement and commitment. Try using some innovative communications and livening them up with viral mechanics. Leverage mass communication to create shared understanding and provide ’epic meaning’. Or create a mobile app to communicate programme news. The opportunities here are endless.
**Innovation/idea management** - Gamification mechanics can be used to encourage people to submit ideas and innovations. Create a platform (portal or mobile application) for open dialogue, idea generation and collaboration across the IT community. Leverage game mechanics such as rewards, buzz, virtual currency and leaderboards to engage. The UK Department of Work and Pensions did this, creating an application called ‘Idea Street’. Quickly embraced, this gamified app has generated multiple innovation proposals which are expected to save the UK government over £20 million by 2015.

**Governance and compliance** - Need to demonstrate Governance and Compliance? There’s an app for that. Build a mobile app that contains mandatory content with a gamified wrapper. Use game mechanics such as storytelling, character representation and visual achievement to bring the content to life and engage people to undertake requisite compliance reading and testing. Yes, believe it or not, compliance can actually be fun.

**Training and education** - Gamification is the perfect accompaniment to Training. Take eLearning for example. Much of the eLearning on the ITSM market is dry, boring, facts based and quite frankly no better than death by powerpoint. By using simple game mechanics such as stories, feedback loops and characters, eLearning results will significantly improve. Research has shown that using ‘animated pedagogical agents’ (or characters to you and me) during eLearning to provide instruction and instant feedback to learners can generate a 30% improvement in test results and a 14% increase in knowledge retention*. By creating the perception of social interaction, outcomes improve, and the learner gains more enjoyment from the actual learning process.

**Tell stories** - In any communication, tell a story. This goes back to satisfying our ‘basic instincts’. The human brain naturally prefers to absorb information in the form of narrative. Think about closing legal arguments in court - the most convincing statements are always those that are given in the form of narrative. Stories win hearts and minds. When creating communications, embed facts to be learned into the context of stories and use stories that are related to the context of the desired behavioural outcomes.

So that’s a quick guide to ITSM Gamification. Now let’s really play.

**Serious games**
Serious games use the more traditional gamecraft techniques and technologies (for example video game technology, 3D immersion, Kinect, augmented reality) around serious and often complex concepts such as technology, business, education, environmental or social issues. The primary purpose of serious games is not entertainment, but a potentially serious benefit or outcome.
The realm of gamecraft often receives criticism for the violent or addictive nature of many of its recreational games - however there is much more to serious gamecraft than just 'shoot-em ups'. These include strategy games such as World of Warcraft and community/social games such as Farmville. Central to success in games such as these are skills such as problem solving, reasoning, leadership, data gathering and resource management, all highly relevant to the enterprise. Serious Games offer a unique opportunity to grasp an exciting new medium to teach these skills using a virtual, scalable approach, ideal for communicating to large or geographically dispersed groups.

From an ITSM perspective, the options are endless. Serious Games can use gamecraft techniques and technologies to 'bring to life' potentially complex IT concepts such as cloud, virtualisation, transformation, Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) and more, for the purposes of awareness, orientation, education and marketing. The virtual nature of serious games can provide an exciting way to communicate content, perform training, model infrastructures, visualise processes and much more.

Expect significant ‘pull’ around this - people want to play. With the rise of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) and the advent of the era of apps, expectations are high around how people interact with their chosen technology. The prosumer is alive and well. Added to this the increasing numbers of Millennials and Gen Y’s in the workplace and what you have is the recipe for a growing demand for serious games.

Our final exploration of gaming for the enterprise takes us into full blown immersion with Simulations.

The best way to truly understand the value of IT best practice is to experience it. Simulations are a high-impact, energetic way to accelerate understanding, involvement, and acceptance of IT-related best practices.

ITSM Simulations offer face-to-face experiences for small groups of participants which are delivered over a number of ‘rounds’. Immersive software and gaming dynamics combine to mirror interactions between IT and the business, from both a strategic and operational perspective. Participants progress through the rounds, increasing operational maturity and gaining a holistic understanding of quality service management as they go.

Simulations transform learning into an engaging, fun and highly memorable shared experience. Unpredictability, interaction and realism are game elements that draw on participants emotions and competitiveness to ultimately create high levels of engagement. Simulations can drive significant value across a number of IT enterprise scenarios including:
- To gain executive/CXO buy-in or commitment to service improvement initiatives
- To add practical value (and bring context to) traditional training, such as ITIL Foundation.
- As a replacement to traditional ITIL or ITSM-based training
- To create shared understanding/commitment around IT change initiatives - helping to drive transformation and cultural change
- By tools and services vendors to help position their technologies and offerings in context.

Research has shown that Simulations build more confidence for on-the-job application of learned knowledge than classroom instruction. In fact - 20% higher confidence levels. Retention of procedural knowledge was also 14% higher than in classroom instruction**. Not only is retention superior, but the dynamic nature of simulations allow organisations to accelerate understanding of the benefits of IT best practices to large audiences and fast. The most effective Simulations are based around authentic scenarios to which people can relate to and totally immerse themselves in. Although tempting to consider games with high hypothetical content more interesting, this can be a mistake. If participants cannot see how the learning applies to them then overall retention will be lower. Context is king.

**Game on**
The reality is that the IT enterprise is the ultimate candidate for Gamification and Gaming. We have the tools and technologies readily available at our fingertips to build incredibly immersive, human-centered IT-related interactions, but we don’t. We continue to present to the world a perception of an IT that is stunningly boring and an IT population that is increasingly disengaged.

Gamification and gaming offers people what business should but doesn’t: recognition, transparency, immediate feedback and engagement. Possibly even fun. It’s an attractive proposition - can you afford to ignore it?

