Should we play? Gamification in assessment and selection

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In 2011 the word ‘gamification’ first made an appearance in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The OED defines it as ‘the application of typical elements of game playing (e.g. point scoring, competition with others, rules of play) to other areas of activity, typically as an online marketing technique to encourage engagement with a product or service’. Many organisations have been going to great lengths to maximise the potential of this concept and ‘gamify’ their processes, from marketing, to innovation and HR. This article explores the potential value of gamification in assessment and selection, and considers what it adds to our toolkit as practitioners.

What is Gamification?

Depending on where you look, the definition of gamification varies. The OED definition above emphasises the use of the technique as a marketing tool. Gartner (one of the thought and market leaders around the gamification trend) define it as: ‘the use of game mechanics and experience design to digitally engage and motivate people to achieve their goals’ (Burke, 2014, p.6), with an emphasis here on a digital, rather than traditional, games medium.

Jane McGonigal, games designer, and writer of the book Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world, defines games in terms of four ‘traits’: a goal; rules; a feedback system; and voluntary participation (2011). Common to all these definitions is the concept of intrinsic motivation; harnessing the ‘flow’ state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) created by a game to motivate an individual to achieve a goal. It is this goal orientation that is key when considering gamification in a business context – a ‘gamified’ solution should result in the alignment between an individual’s goals and the objectives of the organisation.

Gamification and assessment for selection

The consideration of individual and organisational goals provides a useful starting point when evaluating the potential value of gamification in assessment. Identifying these goals, and where they intersect or align, helps define what Gartner call the ‘gamification scope’, a key stage in the design process. A proposed generic model for selection is shown in Figure 1 overleaf.
Figure 1 shows that the shared goals in this context relate firstly to the maximisation of an individual’s ‘fit’ (with both the job and organisation), and secondly to the insight provided into a Participant’s strengths and weaknesses. This, therefore, prompts two questions:
1. whether a gamified approach can achieve these objectives, and;
2. whether this represents an improvement on ‘traditional’ (i.e. non-gamified) assessment methods.

It is important to state that whilst gamification has its most obvious application in the context of online assessment, the principles are not limited to digital methods. For example, feedback mechanisms can be built into Assessment or Development Centres in the context of unfolding crisis exercises so that Participants can directly see the impact of their actions or decisions.

**Employer branding, and maximising person-job and person-organisation fit**

With its origins in consumer marketing, gamification lends itself very directly to promoting employer branding and enhancing candidate attraction. In competitive recruitment market places (e.g. graduate recruitment), this benefit cannot be understated. With 31 million gamers in the UK alone (McGonigal, 2011), gamified approaches, either in pre-selection or as part of assessment, may serve to encourage people to apply to an organisation who would not normally consider it.

Whilst a game might engage, does it assist with an assessment of ‘fit’ between an individual, a role, and an organisation? A game could be fun and engaging, but irrelevant and gimmicky, communicating little about the organisation aside from the general
impression of innovation or entertainment created by the game. Therefore, a gaming approach that creates a realistic sense of a role and organisation is where greater value lies, immersing the Participant in the issues and challenges within the environment in which they might be working. MyMarriott Hotel™ (Marriott, 2011) and L’Oreal’s Reveal (The Guardian, 2010) game show how this can be done; both place the participant within a simulated realistic work environment, assessing them in this context.

Whilst the branding benefits of games are clear, there is a clear skew towards millennials (i.e. those reaching young adulthood in the early 2000s) in relation to video game usage (ESA, 2014). It is, therefore, important to consider whether such branding approaches work for the full range of potential applicant groups, and whether they may in fact have a negative impact on your employer brand amongst particular sections of target applicants, for example, older applicants.

**Gamification and assessment reliability and validity**

The key question from a psychological design perspective is whether gaming principles can actually improve the accuracy of assessment. It is highly likely that such processes will result in increased expense to an organisation over traditional selection techniques. In light of this, branding aside, can gamification enhance assessment in terms of reliability and validity? Some suggestions as to how this might be the case are provided below.

1. **Using within-game feedback to improve the assessment of competencies/constructs**

   It has been stated that serious games used for selection do not/cannot provide live feedback (e.g. CEB, 2014). However, if we broaden this definition from specific feedback on the accuracy or appropriateness of a given response to feedback in terms of a ‘response’ from the game, this mechanism may actually offer one of the major benefits of gamification for assessment. Specifically, having such a system within a game allows for a scenario to unfold, for the participant to see the impact of his/her actions, and learn from this. Whilst learning can be assessed through self-report measures, a gamified approach would allow for the ‘live’ assessment of this construct. This learning can be positioned in the context of other skills and competencies, such as interpersonal interactions, where the response received from an individual within the game is shaped by the actions of the participant. Similarly, a business scenario could unfold, where the participant is given an indication of the implications of his/her decision making, allowing for the assessment of learning and judgement.

   Whilst the assessment of learning is an exciting avenue that can be explored in gamified solutions, the challenge from a design perspective is the extra work involved in creating branching simulations with pathways of cause and effect, as opposed to a more linear test. Whilst this approach is likely to be more engaging, it must also be balanced against the reduction in standardisation that will be a necessary consequence.

2. **Increased reliability through longer assessments**

   A key challenge in assessment (and particularly early stage sifting of applicants) is constraints on the duration of the assessment, and the consequent implications for reliability and validity. In a sifting context, typically such assessments are constrained to around 30 minutes or less, with the rationale being that Participants will be unwilling to spend any longer than this completing an assessment. However, longer durations allow for the presentation of additional stimuli, typically resulting in more
reliable assessments of given constructs. The participant engagement that can be created through game principles may provide an opportunity for assessments of longer durations than is normally acceptable to Participants. Gamified assessments could, therefore, enable more reliable assessments of different constructs.

3. **Greater immersion resulting in reduced impact of socially desirable responding**
   One of the consequences of an effective game is the creation of what Csikszentmihalyi defined as ‘flow’ (1990). ‘Flow’ is the idea that a Participant becomes immersed in the game to the point where they lose a sense of time, due to the perfect balance between ability and challenge. Additionally, stimuli within a gamified assessment may be less transparent, as it is presented in a richer context. These two factors may result in lower levels of socially desirable responding than is the case for non-gamified assessments: Participants may be more immersed in the game, less conscious of the assessment component, and consequently more likely to present an authentic (or valid) representation of themselves.

**Conclusions**
Gamification as a concept is something that test developers and assessment practitioners need to take seriously. With many organisations looking to apply gamified approaches to their internal processes, the demand for the integration of these solutions into recruitment and selection is likely to increase. A clear appreciation of the strengths and limitations of this concept is required; we need to understand what these approaches allow us to do over and above more traditional methods, and where they might represent a threat. When deciding on the appropriateness of a gamified solution, it is critical to consider what it is trying to achieve and how the solution can be designed to maximise the shared goals of the Participant and the recruiting organisation.

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