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Serious games and gamification are all the buzz in our industry. But do we understand what they do for our training needs? The use of serious games can change behaviors and ultimately relieve pain points within an organization.

WHAT IS A SERIOUS GAME?

The term “serious game” refers to a structured and established game designed for educational or training purposes. These games are created with challenges that allow for direct or indirect learning to take place in a fun environment, usually online or through some type of computer platform.

The use of serious games is exponentially increasing in the corporate training space as young, Internet-savvy people enter the workforce in industries such as defense, education, scientific exploration, health care, emergency management, city planning, engineering, religion and politics.
CAN WE LEARN FROM SERIOUS GAMES?

Today, we are faced with a new type of learner – the millennial – who is accustomed to instant feedback, instant gratification and fast-paced critical thinking games.

You may wonder if learning takes place in video games. But if you asked a youth who plays the Call of Duty games what the best equipment load is for large terrain maps, he or she could easily answer this question and explain the advantages, tactics and theory behind the game as well as how to conquer opponents with the game’s tools. This player is undoubtedly learning. He or she must demonstrate critical thinking in order to overcome challenges and advance through the game.

However, most corporate training departments are not trying to teach their audience which weapons work best in fictional combat situations. Our challenge in professional training is to find a way to harness this proven absorption of knowledge from video games and use it to achieve corporate learning goals.

WHY SERIOUS GAMES?

Let’s be honest; training is often boring in your employees’ eyes, and they may secretly not want to do it. Your employees won’t tell you if your training is subpar, because you’re the boss, and they don’t want to rock the boat. However, they will talk with each other about how bad the training was or how boring it may have been.

Your goal is to create a learning experience that is fun and simultaneously provides your learners, directly or indirectly, with the ability to overcome challenges in their line of work. Creating a serious game can help them change their behavior to align with your corporation’s business goals.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The first and most important step is to assess your audience. The needs and preferences of an audience are often vastly different from those of the project champion and/or training department. Failing to recognize these differences when creating a serious game can lead to detrimental oversights.

Therefore, it is critical to research your target audience to determine what they like and dislike. If you build a first-person shooter game and then discover that the audience dislikes that genre, you’ve built something in which they have no interest in participating, which sets you up for failure from the start. You must know your audience on a deep level in order to understand what drives their interest and curiosity. Always build or theme a game around the majority interest to capture learners’ attention and draw them in.

IF IT’S LIKE REAL LIFE, IT’S A SIMULATION

One metric we often forget is FUN. The primary purpose of designing a serious game instead of an e-learning experience is to make training fun and engaging.

A serious game does not have to mimic real life at all. In fact, if you choose to mimic real life, then you’re not making a serious game; you’re making a simulation. Simply giving users points for doing something within a 3D environment is forcing learners to simulate their work. Serious games, on the other hand, utilize game mechanics to foster a fun environment for learners.

WHAT CONTENT IS BEST?

Often, clients ask our team, “What content is best for our serious game?” The quick answer is, “There is no direct and correct answer.” You must weigh the game mechanics being used as well as the interests of your learners when deciding what content to include in your serious game.

It is important to ensure that learners can begin easily and then face increasingly difficult challenges as the game progresses. As a child, you started playing T-ball, not fast-pitch baseball. You were allowed to practice at your own level. Then, you slowly progressed to harder challenges. The “best content” is content shaped into this format. Allow learners to begin the game with less challenging content and then gain momentum at a pace comfortable to their learning style.

PRESENTING INFORMATION – DON’T DO IT!

Modern video games almost never give players all the information up front. Doing so would overwhelm them. Instead, they introduce elements and concepts in a tiered manner. Games give players opportunities to practice and focus on the most important aspects of the game before moving on to
a new skill or strategy. Then, after players have had time to build and refine their skill sets, the game provides them with unique challenges to assess their abilities.

Using this video game method allows learners to freely explore and extrapolate the content they need to overcome the game’s challenges. Allow learners to fail and discover information on their own. A user experience built around fun and discovery is far more powerful than one that bombards learners with a daunting amount of information. Be sure you allow learners to pull the data they need and learn by discovery rather than by forcing a presentation upon them.

**SCOREBOARD FAILS**

Do you remember going to the pinball or video game arcade when you were a child? I did, quite often, and I have some great memories of arcades. However, there was one aspect I disliked: I knew my measly two dollars would never get me on the top 10 scoreboards. If I’d had a bookbag full of coins, I probably still would not have reached the top 10 of any of game. Aiming for an impossible goal left me feeling down about myself.

A scoreboard is usually designed to show the top 10 achieving people. But in corporate training, we’re not attempting to change the behavior of the top achievers. Instead, we must encourage and congratulate the even lowest achievers for progressing and advancing.

**HOW SHOULD WE KEEP SCORE?**

Scoreboards can still be very effective to build competition within the organization. Rather than showing the top 10 players, design the scoreboard to show each learner the five people ahead of and the five people behind him or her. This strategy will keep the “middle of the road” learners engaged and encouraged by giving them attainable goals and instant feedback on where they stand within a particular skill level.

**A RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT**

Developing serious games takes much longer to plan, develop and test than an e-learning or even a gamified experience. Companies must understand the complexity in developing large-scale systems that provide feedback to the learners in a unique, nonlinear progression.

Creating serious games with parallel branching and scenario-based paths requires significantly more time for design and development than a straightforward eLearning module with four multiple-choice options. Therefore, a greater investment of time and money is required to build a serious game rather than a linear presentation.

But trust me: The investment is worth it. Correctly built serious games lead to a much higher retention of learning and alleviate pain points within an organization. Follow these best practices to ensure your serious game is a success.

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**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

The use of serious games is increasing in the corporate training space as young, Internet-savvy people enter the workforce. Serious games can change behaviors and lead to a much higher retention of learning, but building a serious game takes a large amount of time and money. Follow these best practices when developing your next serious game:

- Research your target audience to determine what they like and dislike.
- Utilize game mechanics to create a fun and engaging environment for learners.
- Allow learners to begin the game with less challenging content and then gain momentum at a pace comfortable to their learning style.
- Introduce elements and concepts in a tiered manner.
- Encourage and congratulate all players for progressing and advancing.
- Design the scoreboard to show each learner the five people ahead of and the five people behind him or her to increase engagement.