What FarmVille Can Teach Us about Social Gamification (Dec 14)

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“There’s much to be learned from the gaming giant’s rise to revenue. Social creatures to their core, players seek out achievement when interacting with a game-like module. Adding the ability to share, collaborate, and (let’s face it) brag about mastery creates a whole new experience. If social media is already a learner’s ‘happy place,’ training should be less PowerPoint and more Words with Friends.”

The rise of social gaming giant Zynga is something startup dreams are made of: Going from a small, 27-person company bringing in a respectable $5 million, Zynga skyrocketed in 2009, raking in $209 million in revenue in just one year. And the game most responsible for the overnight success? FarmVille.

You probably received the invites from people you’d barely spoken to in the last 10 years via social networking. After all, by the end of 2009, a whopping 20 percent of all Facebook users were using their free time to harvest imaginary crops and annoy their friends with requests. FarmVille spawned a number of other social games by Zynga and its competitors, including the mega-popular Candy Crush Saga by King in 2012. In its heyday, Zynga brought in $332 million in revenue before its stock tanked in 2012 (but that’s a story for another day).

Now, why are we talking about a practically-defunct farming game that was popular with middle-aged women in 2009? While Zynga might be an economic lesson for startups, it’s also a lesson in the allure of social gaming for eLearning pros. From Candy Crush to FarmVille, Words With Friends, and Bubble Witch, social games hold a certain appeal for playing.

Whether it’s sharing achievements with friends, working with others to beat a level, or competing against other players, social gaming offers the ability to essentially crowdsource gameplay. Zynga was able to—even if only for a short time—capitalize on players’ social need to share, compete, and support others through what might seem like an inconsequential game.

If L&D pros could harness the power of social gaming in their current efforts, the results could be of pretty epic proportions. By picking and choosing the most effective components of typical social gaming applications, gamification becomes much more than using games to teach: instead, it’s using games to drive users to interact, engage, and better absorb material—no farming necessary.

The gamification of eLearning

Gamification as an eLearning topic is old news. We already know that utilizing game-like components within modules can help users test knowledge and assess their progress. They might answer a few test
questions, complete a simulation, or even participate in a trivia challenge to ramp up user engagement. Awesome.

And for the most part, gamification does what it sets out to do: increase motivation and break up modules with periods of interaction. But while game-like components can stop your learners from simply clicking through, gamification has certain limitations that could keep it from reaching its full potential as a learning tool.

First, gamification is highly isolating. Without the ability to share scores and compete against other players, the motivation to achieve is pretty low for learners. Unless game scores are going to be saved and used as a barometer for literacy, there’s little motivation to actually perform and perform well while experiencing game components within a module.

What’s more, unless built into the module, there’s really no way to track results gleaned from gamification. And even if there were, is there any incentive to score higher if no one else is going to see or assess the results? Probably not.

Gamification, when done on an individual, intrinsic level, is flat. You can hope that your learner wants to perform to improve herself and gain knowledge, but it’s not always the case, nor is it always realistic. By tapping into the social needs of your learner à la FarmVille and other social gaming, you create a three-dimensional experience that goes deeper and reaches farther than previous gamification efforts.

**Taking a page from FarmVille**

While opinions may vary on what exactly made FarmVille such an overnight success, here’s a hunch: It was the first game to introduce social networking as the main facet of play. Sure, other games offered a social aspect (think World of Warcraft) but required separate sites, add-ons, and ultimately a group of strangers.

Games built to play in conjunction with social networking, however, are friendlier than your average online gaming platform. They utilize a site players already use. They offer gameplay with family members and friends. They allow automatic and simple sharing tools to earn levels and announce achievements to the masses, prompting even more game play.

And perhaps that’s where social gaming really got it right: The addition of badges and achievements to help keep players glued to the game. By offering recognition when players reach certain levels and complete tasks, the games no longer rely on intrinsic motivation (“I want to complete this module because it’ll make me a better employee.”) but extrinsic results (“If I finish this level, I’ll move to the top of the leaderboard and earn a reward.”) Perhaps it’s a simplified version of how players are motivated by badges, but it’s simplified and true.

Social gaming, first and foremost, allows players to make the games a community experience. It then turns time and effort into a tangible achievement through the use of badges. Badges essentially become micro-credentials—a currency by which learners trade in on their time, knowledge, and energy. Social games like Mafia Wars and Candy Crush are a variation on the same theme: Instead of just playing because a game is enjoyable, players focus on achievements, badges, leveling up, and beating their colleagues.

**Don’t hate the player…**

We know that humans are social animals. Unfortunately, your gamification may not have caught up to that philosophy, forcing learners to isolate themselves in the name of accessible modules. But just because you strive for convenience and accessibility doesn’t mean your module can’t also be social in nature. By tapping into the human need for competition, support, being part of a group or team, and the ability to apply knowledge, badges and social sharing create the ideal environment in which learners are completely engaged.
Social sharing caters to those who prefer to learn on their own time, but still require the added motivation of collaboration. Consider the ways in which badges and social tools can bring your gamification efforts to life:

- **Competition.** Igniting the fire of competition is a tried-and-true method of motivation for most (if not all) learners. The ability to share scores or check leaderboards online lets your learners know exactly where they stand, pushing them to achieve more.

- **Tangible achievement.** Some learners need more than just the satisfaction of a job well done to motivate action. Awarding badges for completion and mastery could make all the difference.

- **Group sharing and collaboration.** Imagine a learner gets stuck on a specific quiz question. She might give up and disengage from the module, but imagine if she had the capacity to use tokens or points toward asking a group of co-learners for their input. Social tools make collaboration simpler, creating a symbiotic relationship between the learner who needs help and the learner who wants to demonstrate his knowledge base.

- **Litmus testing for knowledge.** Social gaming is the ultimate litmus test for where each learner falls in the pack. Sizing up proficiency against other coworkers helps each learner understand his or her strengths and weaknesses in correlation to colleagues and other “players.”

- **Feedback looping.** Don’t forget that social gaming also offers benefits for leadership and management. Scores, leaderboards, and badges are simple ways for management to see real-time feedback in the form of proficiency and engagement. Issuing feedback and pointers then become more effective and personalized, based on a learner’s actual performance.

In short, social gaming works because it taps into players’ human nature. The drive to be the best, paired with the need to work as a team become the main motivators for logging in, experiencing modules, and gaining the achievement and badges necessary to unlock new levels or level up to other material and information. What could be simpler?

**Game changers**

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that the idea of adding badges and sharing tools to your existing modules is completely out of your price range: Thanks to open-source code currently being used for mobile apps, the availability is there: It’s up to you to harness that power for your organization’s needs. It’s likely that what could make the biggest difference in terms of learner motivation is already well within your grasp.

Tracking and recognizing learners via badges creates an interesting conversation, particularly surrounding typical credentials and education. While course badges probably won’t completely replace traditional post-secondary achievement, recognizing those badges as real training and education could be fairly disruptive to the L&D scene. By making it possible for learners to display and utilize their badges as credentials, you further incentivize their participation while offering recognition for a job well done.

Zynga’s heyday might be past, but there’s much to be learned from the gaming giant’s rise to revenue. Social creatures to their core, players seek out achievement when interacting with a game-like module. Adding the ability to share, collaborate, and (let’s face it) brag about mastery creates a whole new experience. If social media is already a learner’s “happy place,” training should be less PowerPoint and more Words with Friends.