

## What Gamification Tells Us about Web Communication

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The games that have become a staple on Facebook provide lessons on how to make websites and Internet marketing more successful. We highlight these points that gamers have accomplished: Provide ideological agreement, Create a community, Provide a sense of control or autonomy, Create a way for people to communicate with each other, Recognize gender differences, Provide rewards, and Convince people to commit.

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In *Loyalty 3.0*, author Rajat Paharia (2013) contends that marketing is entering a new stage, which he describes as one driven by the consumers. In this new consumer age, the consumer is in charge of when and how he or she engages with marketers. Most of the consumer-driven marketing occurs on social media or through Twitter on a smart phone or tablet computer. Research conducted by Silverpop (2013) contends that less than 20 per cent of marketers have developed campaigns that effectively reach consumers when consumers are driving the marketing experience. In its analysis, Silverpop states:

Buyers seek the information they want online, on the Web and in social channels, as well as in that persistent nondigital venue commonly known as the real world. Today's buyers are demanding. They expect sellers to know where they've been, what they've seen, what they've accepted or rejected — whether that behavior happened on their tablet, via their smartphone, or at the local branch office. Frankly, today's marketers are struggling to keep up (3).

A consumer-driven marketing effort requires what Paharia calls "gamification" (4). Gamification, as Paharia details in his book, is more than playing games. Gamification is about providing people an entertaining, interactive way of interacting with your brand. The data collected during interactions provides information on how the marketer can continue to engage consumers in an on-going relationship. Both Paharia's company Bunchball ([bunchball.com](http://bunchball.com)) and Silverpop ([silverpop.com](http://silverpop.com)) offer to help companies create a gamification marketing approach for external or external audiences.

Two Facebook style community games, Farm Town and Farmville, have attracted millions of people to gamification platforms. A critical analysis of these two games, which are similar to dozens of other games available on Facebook and other platforms, provides insight into how successful, and perhaps unsuccessful, gamification marketing works.

Farm Town, a game played by 5.6 million people according to its Facebook link, and similar games, such as Farmville, offers many insights into the nature of social network marketing through the Internet. Paharia was part of the initial development of Facebook. The games suggest what

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works with Internet users and why it works. People can play the games for free, but enticing them, sometimes almost requiring them, to spend real money on game playing can be lucrative. With 5.6 million people playing Farm Town, an average U.S. dollar purchase of \$10 per Farm Town player would have raised \$56 million for Slashkey ([slashkey.com/](http://slashkey.com/)), the developers. Zynga, one of the biggest social game developers, earned \$321 million in the first quarter of 2012 (Zynga Beats Estimates, Boosted by OMGPOP Purchase). These games have hit a responsive chord with people on the Internet, something which would make web communicators and businesses more effective and their efforts more lucrative.

### **How the Games Are Played**

A player begins at Level 1 and can advance up hundreds of levels, a number that increases periodically to set new targets for advanced players. An avid player will have more than 30 friends and an equal number of buddies. In a farm game, players grow crops, ranging from grapes to corn, and trees, oranges to persimmons. Each farm can include hundreds of chickens, turkeys, goats, cows, llamas, horses, pet dogs, and geese. An experienced Farm Town player will operate more than 50 factories, which turn the products raised on farms into items sold at stores owned by the player. Most players earn one billion coins, or whatever is the basic unit of currency used, to purchase more farms, more crops, more factories, or more stores. The games also require game dollars, which can be used to buy equipment and more factories that make the game most profitable or easier to play. Game dollars are slowly earned by playing or players can speed up the process by using real money to purchase more game dollars.

The game begins with the player at Level 1 with one farm and enough money to plow and harvest nine fields. The harvest is sold at the marketplace for a profit and so the player can expand the farm. The player can also earn money by picking crops on the farms of other people. Each time a farmer plows or plants, the farmer receives experience points (XPs). This includes plowing other people's farms. A farmer jumps to the next level by earning XPs. Long time farmers have earned more than a million experience points.

Games vary, but the premises are similar. Making money is easy because only a basic skill level is required to make a profit. The harder the person works at the game and the more time invested in playing, the more game coins a player will earn. A person willing to invest real cash in the game can literally buy an edge over those players who do not purchase the shortcuts. Rewards are easily assigned to players, who are encouraged to share their accomplishments with all of their friends. Their gaming friends also gain rewards by interacting with the Facebook news feed; meanwhile, friends who do not play are inundated on Facebook with the accomplishments of the game players. Presumably, some of the Facebook friends will be induced to play also by the news feed prompts. Farm Town rewards community and penalizes isolation.

### **Who Plays**

The Facebook and social media games take a different approach to gaming than the old standards, such as Game Boy or Play Station. In the past, electronic gaming has been geared towards very specific target groups. Children and adolescent/young adult males have traditionally been the sole focus of the gaming industry, but efforts to reach out to more diverse group have been prolific in recent years. Two of the top gaming companies, Nintendo and Microsoft, have tried to diversify their consumer base by modifying their current equipment (*Telegraph*, 2009; Marketing Charts, 2010). While these attempts have been somewhat successful for homes that already possess a gaming console (usually due to children), the expense of purchasing an entire gaming system along with the required extra equipment can discourage potential customers. In contrast, online games like Farmville

provide a gaming experience to middle aged women, among other groups, that offers an opportunity for low commitment, low investment gaming experimentation.

### **Ideological Agreement**

According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957; Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999), people are much more likely to accept a new idea or be persuaded to accept a new position if the new idea or persuasion is consistent with their existing ideological positions. Many of the social media games, especially Farm Town and Farmville, create ideological agreement through the process of hegemony.

Gramsci argues that individuals are incorporated into a culture through a process he calls hegemony (Gramsci 2007, 64-65). Individuals are taught the norms of the social structure. Acculturated individuals so accept the social structure that they do not question the mechanisms of the social order, accepting the arbitrary decisions made by the culture and accepted by the masses as common sense. When most of the people accept these social structures, they also find their place within the economic and political structure of the social order. In effect, the masses accept the power assigned to the wealthy and owners of the means of obtaining wealth. In a consumer culture, the masses trade power over production for the wealth to obtain a lifestyle they desire. Put simply, someone earning \$100 for the company will accept the company's profit if the worker's income is enough to afford a big screen television.

The role of the mass media is to teach the consumers of the media the values and systems of the hegemonic order. Meaning is produced when a "natural unity" of "reality, representations, and ideology" is formed, explains Fiske (1987, 6). "Semiotics or cultural criticism deconstructs this unity and exposes its 'naturalness' as highly ideological construct." By constructing meaning for the audience, television shows, radio, films, and now digital systems of communication naturalize the hegemonic order. The middle class lifestyle is glorified and presented as the standard that anyone willing to work can achieve. On television, no one is shown earning a living, just living a high lifestyle.

By its very nature, Facebook is a statement of that lifestyle. First, it requires a computer to access Facebook or a smart phone or similar device. Second, the person using Facebook is paying someone an access fee to use their wireless or wired channels of communication, which connect their devices to all of the other people with devices. Third, people require free time to access Facebook, plus that much more time to play Farm Town or one of the other games. The process of playing one of the farm-style games teaches people the method of making money in a capitalistic structure. In the game the natural outcome of investment and hard work is profit. Profit can be maximized by buying more land, purchasing factories, and adding outlets. At least one college course has students play Farmville to learn the basics of capitalism (Krom, 2012). Only those players who do not "work" at the game will not profit. The game presents profit as the natural result of being a capitalist. Here we borrow the concept of "common sense" (Fiske 1987, 14; Gramsci 2000, 244). Profit is the natural result of being a capitalist in the game. Since capitalism is present in the real world, a connection is drawn between the common sense of the game and of the real world.

The success offered by the games naturalized the real world capitalistic structure by teaching people the methods, the means, and the language of the world economic systems. Here Gramsci's concept of hegemony applies. Players excelling at the games are learning the meanings and accepting the hegemonic structure of world capitalism. We would argue that players are being acculturated by the game to become part of the masses in the world capitalistic structure. Players better understand the virtues of those who own the means of production; they too can be "players" in real world capitalism if they are willing to accept their roles. With the worldwide reach of Facebook, hegemonic capitalism is being taught to millions who never took a course in economics. And, true to

capitalistic rewards and punishments, the developers of the games are generating huge revenues.

By naturalizing the ideological concepts of capitalism through game playing, Slashkey and Zynga are acculturating people into the dominant ideology of the real world through a virtual experience. That ideological connection between the real world and virtual reality creates a latitude of acceptance (Sherif, C., Sherif, M., & Nebergall, R., 1965) for the players that mutually reinforces virtual and real world ideology. If virtual marketers can create ideological agreement up front with potential customers, then they will have an increased likelihood of having a latitude of acceptance when the purchasing process begins.

### **Community and Belonging**

Players are rewarded for hiring the labor of others to work their farms. The games “pay” for the labor of others by giving them a percentage of the crop/product and paying them game coins for their labor. However, these payments do not come out of the profits of the farmer. Rather, the farmer receives more coins for hiring someone to help. Plus, the farmer is saved the time and effort of plowing or harvesting a farm. Farmers can maximize time and effort by hiring each other to harvest crops. Mutually exploiting the labor of others benefits all involved in the transaction, particularly when avid players meet through work relationships become buddies or neighbors.

Symbolic Interaction Theory explains that these social interactions bind people together. As Ben-Sira (1976) explains, social interactions create a link among people when one person gains gratification from helping others achieve their goals. What these games do so well is create a shared experience among players. People who have never met each other face-to-face become members of the same commune. This collective keeps people playing because they feel indebted to each other.

Psychographics, to some extent the precursors to gaming theory, comes into play at this point. Psychographic considerations (Weinstein, 1993; Sarli & Baharun, 2011) explain the demographics of Farm Town and Farmville. More women play online games through the social networking platform than men. Approximately 250 million people use Facebook to play social games, or roughly 20 percent of all Facebook users. (Summers, 2013). In fact, the average social gamer is a 43-year-old female; 55 percent of all social gamers are women, according to research conducted by Information Services Group (Axon, 2010). The average social gamer plays at least six social games and over half of these gamers began playing simply to help a friend, reinforcing the idea that Facebook games are popular and successful due to the networking factor.

Farmville et al. appeal to an older demographic in part because social games are more convenient and easier to play for short periods of time and because these games are largely free, although 28 percent of gamers have spent real world money in order to purchase in game currency or as a method to increase playing level (Axon, 2010). Social games are also appealing to older users because they do not involve sophisticated equipment or graphic violence. For the nearly half of American social gamers over 50 years of age, research indicates that gaming for senior citizens can be used as a way to counter depression and improve mental health (Ingram, 2010). Many females in the senior citizen demographic enjoy playing these Facebook games to help “bridge the technology gap” that stands between them, their children and their grandchildren. Additionally, some mothers use gaming as a way to bond with or influence their children, while others tend to view social gaming as a guilty pleasure. Facebook games are an easily accessible way to break away from the daily hassles of life for many users (Diele, 2012). Women who dominate the social gaming demographic were found to mostly play with real-life friends, a finding that again places emphasis on why Facebook games and the networking involved in playing them is so vital. Forty-one percent of female social gamers work full-time, less than half of them have earned a college degree and

roughly one-third of them earn less than \$35,000 per year (Ingram, 2010).

Probably one of the most appealing things to players, especially women, about Farmville and games of the same breed, is the digitalized creative outlet it provides. Players can personalize their game space without having to invest anything but screen time. The game caters to these desires by providing products in the virtual store that have no real use in the game other than aesthetic appeal and also by allowing players customize their product's appearance through different style and color options. Player's farms can also be rearranged at the click of a mouse as many times as desired. These aspects make Farmville a perfect game for those who wish to express their creativity, but do not have the time or resources to do so outside of the virtual world. Meanwhile, they are managing a sophisticated capitalistic structure, something few have done in their real lives.

Websites that appeal to specific demographic groups—and a marketer would have to be selling a widely used product like potato chips not too—ought to be creating opportunities for their target audience to interact together and to share common tasks on the web site. If the experience is mutually rewarding, those social interactions will carry over into loyalty and support for the web site and the brand.

### **Locus of Control**

The ultimate promise to the consumer is that a person gains control of life and the future. People can become billionaires in Farm Town; they can own land; they can build mansions and castles on that land with swimming pools and fast cars parked on well-maintained lawns and roads. The player can become virtually wealthy, particularly if they are willing to invest a small amount of real world wealth into their virtual reality. That small amount of real world investment then creates millions of dollars for the producers of the games. Virtual reality makes everyone feel wealthy, successful, and popular.

People have a strong psychological need for a sense of locus of control, i.e., a sense that they have control over their future. (Rotter, 1975). A complex world economic structure undermines a sense of well-being among even the wealthiest people in the world (Snyder, 2013; The Economist, 2013). But, in virtual reality, there are no debts to pay, randomized market forces, or bank failures. At least in the game world the player has locus of control. Or, in the words of Paharia (2013), people want to play games that give them a sense of autonomy, that they are “in control of their own lives” (24).

Virtual consumers, like game players, are looking for locus of control. The games give locus of control by giving the players individual freedom and creativity to create their own world. This illusion of power is similar to the attraction of pornography. As several scholars note (Mulvey, 1988; Williams, 1999; Reichert & Lambiase, 2006), pornography allows the user to gain control over the sexualized bodies of the performers. Those who use pornography gain the illusion of access and control over what they desire. In a similar way, game players achieve the illusion of economic power by obtaining what they desire. Web marketers that only sell products may not achieve repeat customers. Websites that provide a sense of locus of control are going to keep people coming back.

### **The New Economic Model**

The traditional mass media model for making money required a limited number of media outlets appealing to mass audiences. The heyday for this was probably around 1965 when 60 per cent of the American public was watching either the NBC television network (*Bonanza*) or CBS (*Ed Sullivan*) on Sunday night at 7 p.m. (<http://www.classicvhits.com/tvratings/1965.htm>). First cable television split the television audience into smaller and smaller pieces and then home computers offered people more entertainment options. The economic model of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is built on appealing

to a small group of loyal followers/consumers (Goodman, Rolph, & Goodman, 2011). "Our personal accountants will track our entertainment and our purchases to decide what we want next," they write. "Then they will place that product into our entertainment choices" (41). In this new economic model, Facebook games have accomplished some goals that many businesses would love to accomplish in their Internet presences.

Facebook games, so far, have not incorporated advertising or product placement into the games. Rather, people directly pay for gaming when they purchase game dollars with real dollars. People play according to their schedule, and not when a network decides to offer them a show they want to watch. The gaming is social or individual, depending on the preference of the player. In short, the gamer is in charge, which increases locus of control; they belong to communities, but these are communities without social obligations once the game is exited. The games are consistent with the values and ideology of the consumer, which means the gamer fights or plays for the cause the gamer believes in. The gamer picks the level of sex, violence, and language that is acceptable to the individual. The gamer has self-selected what mass collection of people the gamer wants to share the experience with.

Web marketers can employ target audience psychographics to draw people to a web site, but they have the opportunity to create a community of loyal web users that will return again and again. The customers become self-marketers and they bring and create a community of other self-marketers. Then the web site developers just need to keep those customers happily playing on the web site. Almost every marketing dollar is spent on people who are already loyal customers.

### Rewards

Rewards are the key to keeping people loyal. All of the rewards in the Facebook games are virtual ones: points, coins, game achievement. In the real world, the rewards offered by a web site must be what people desire. Bunchball, a corporation specializing in helping companies develop employee incentive plans, indicates that rewards are a key component to gaming satisfaction. Bunchball (2012) identifies these rewards:

- *Instant Feedback.* People need positive reinforcement each step of the way. Farm Town, for example, has a rather sophisticated method of providing reinforcement for each step of the process of plowing, planting, growing, and harvesting crops.
- *Transparency.* Game players want to know where they are in terms of what they have achieved and what will be required to achieve the next level. Each successful step in Farm Town shows coins being racked up and experience points added.
- *Goal setting.* What is the next step to take and what is the ultimate goal of the game? The farm games make it easy for people to figure out how much further they have to go to reach the next level. Achieving a new level then brings additional rewards not available at a previous level.
- *Badges.* These are assigned to players so that others recognize specific achievement of the individuals. Many games give people ribbons every 10 times they successfully plant or harvest a crop. Badges make it apparent to other employees or other consumers that you achieved a high level of success.
- *Leveling up.* The level the person achieves is an indication of long term commitment and consistent achievement. Farm Town shows the level of all neighbors. Expertise is readily apparent. A web site should open up new avenues of entertainment and interaction as people return to the website.
- *Instruction.* No one wants to read a manual. The way to play the game needs to be apparent from the beginning. Facebook games have easy-to-understand, function palettes. A sickle indicates harvest and a hoe indicates plowing.

- *Competition.* People need to be challenged to improve; competition induces people to move up the hierarchy. Most Facebook games make it readily apparent where the player is relative to other neighbors. The hierarchy is visually present.
- *Teams.* People like sharing their work experiences with others. Conversely, many people do not perform well in a sense of isolation. Teams require people to be on line at the same time, to be able to interact in real time, and to share resources. These are obstacles that Facebook games have not successfully overcome.

Without doubt, rewards are crucial to growing repeat traffic to online sites and among the most difficult to achieve for a marketer. How many companies now offer customers the chance to earn a gift card for filling out a survey? And, how many times will a person fill out a survey without receiving a gift card? Only the angry may be motivated enough to go to a website for a survey unless every visit brings an instant reward.

Lack of rewards may also explain why Facebook game use declines with time (Associated Press, 2013). Bunchball points out that there must be some kind of end game. Farming at level 300 on Facebook is pretty much like farming at level 400. If the player is not bringing something to the game, such as friendship with other players, why keep playing? One of the most difficult problems the game creators face is keeping people happy playing the game. Paharia advocates collecting data from early stages of Gamification so that new stages can be developed that will keep consumers interested (68).

Competition from marketers offering new rewards or new games can be a big problem. Farm Town and Farmville were easily the most popular games at one point in time. However, the success of Slashkey and Zynga encouraged these companies to create even more games as well as encouraging new developers to offer new games (Marketing Vox, 2011). Now, the field may be oversaturated with games. Zynga has seen its fortunes—monetarily and in terms of the number players—decline (Streitfeld and Wortham, 2012).

### **Commitment**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Communication (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984) predicts that people who invest time and personal commitment in an activity are likely to continue an activity. In terms of Facebook games, people who have played for a week are likely to play a second week; people who have played a year are likely to continue to play unless their personal circumstances change due to other things becoming more important. However, once people no longer find their rewards rewarding and decide to quit playing the game, bringing them back may be even more difficult than attracting them the first time.

Drawing people to a website once or people who try a product once have not invested much in that first effort in terms of personal commitment. However, if marketers can offer rewards that keep people coming back, then those people will likely remain committed to the product.

### **Conclusions**

The early success of the Facebook games offers some valuable lessons to companies trying to use the web successfully as a marketing tool. No doubt there are web marketers who would be happy to have customers drop by once and never return. Those marketers who want people to keep returning have to have game—literally and figuratively. Customers need a website where they can meet people with shared interests. People need to interact together, play together, and hopefully form teams. Rewards need to be quickly achieved and grow in value to the player for on-going visits.

Silverpop and Bunchball, which was founded on the Paharia's concepts of gamification,

argue that the marketing field is forever changed. Customers are moving towards purchasing decisions based on more than product characteristics. They are identifying themselves with products that bring them together with others like themselves with whom they interact on an ongoing basis.

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