Chapter 2
Why Gamification Is Not the Solution for Everything

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ABSTRACT

Gamification is a very well-known design technique in software development that applies the principles of gaming to non-gaming contexts and environments to increase the user adaptation and engagement of applications. Examples of gamified applications can be seen across all kinds of software categories from health to finance, always with the same goal: provide a better experience to the end-user. This chapter reflects upon the user feedback of gamified applications, especially on health sector, and concludes that gamification is not a solution that can be successfully applied to every context. In the end, industry standard alternatives to gamification are analyzed in order to produce high quality non-gamified applications.

INTRODUCTION

Gamification is one of the most well known approaches used by IT companies to create and engage a committed user base for their products. It has been vastly used in software products such as web, mobile and desktop applications. It was also tested in all kinds of product categories, from health applications to personal finance managers. Gamification brings fun to software applications that are rather labeled as serious. By applying game-like logic and design elements to software applications that are not meant to be used as a game, software development companies are able to recreate the same sense of joy and challenge similar to what can be found for instance in video games. The ultimate goal is to keep the user engaged and interested in the continuous use of the product while facing repetitive or boring tasks as games. The successful accomplishment of each task or step gives the same kind of satisfaction as accomplishing with success a level or a challenge in a video game.

Since the appearance as industry standard, gamification has been tested and applied to all kinds of software categories. However the end-user reaction to gamified application is not unanimous. By reading the users' feedback on the main software marketplaces is easy to conclude that gamified applications are not always synonymous of a good user experience. For instance, the user feedback in one of the most

used personal finance manager applications ranges between "The best finances management app I've ever seen and used in my entire life! All the functionality I've been looking for, friendly and really nice looking user interface" and "Looks childish, fonts and UI are too rudimentary. Money is serious business, for God's sake!" (Google, 2020C). The same kind of mixed user reaction can be found in healthcare applications that promise to improve and extend the user life by offering a gamified interface to advice and motivate on the performance of healthy routines. "This app makes diabetes a 'fun' thing to manage. It's easy to use and helps me analyze how the food I eat affects my B.G. levels" and "A physical diary would be better in its display. Childish app. Uninstalling." are two real reviews of one of the most used mobile application that promises to track blood sugar and help users with diabetes as a fun experience (Google, 2020A).

These mixed reviews implicitly shows that gamification doesn't work for every application and for every use case. Sometimes trying to make a game-like blood sugar tracker - that has a serious impact on the user's physical health - can have the opposite expected effect. One of the most recurrent negative reactions to gamified health applications is how they often look clumsy, cartoonish and infantilize a serious matter that in an extreme scenario can mean life or death of the user. Some people tend to reject the use of game-like software that have a real impact on their lives because they don't get the serious user experience they expect on an application that deals with a real-life threatening situations. Others like how some applications transforms a hard reality into a game and help them going through some serious real life challenges.

The gamification of what used to be simple applications like a step counter, made possible for millions of people around the world to face physical activity as something fun and a challenge that they are willing to take as easily as if they were playing a video game. In fact, the market of fitness applications profited so much of gamification that health applications category is one of the most active categories in marketplaces and play stores around the world. It is also notorious the evolution of these gamified applications from simple mono-feature step counters applications to complete health and well-being software solutions that tracks every motion from physical activity to sleep quality, with direct benefits for the health of their users.

On the other side of the user spectrum, healthcare professionals that use e-health applications on their professional lives, expect to see high performance platforms delivering accurate data and insights. In extreme cases, like in an emergency room, these professionals need, first and foremost, fast and correct information. A fun experience while using these applications is not for sure on the top of priorities of these users. The interaction between the healthcare professionals and these software applications have a very real impact on the life of their patients, sometimes meaning life or death. Should such critical software applications be candidates for gamification? This hypothesis raises challenges and doubts both on software usability and ethics. Applying gamification on software used in critical scenarios is probably not an unanimous question as most of the times seriousness and fun are not a possible mix.

So what should be the IT industry response for the users that have an intrinsic distrust on software applications that transforms their real-life problems into video games? Is gamification the answer for all user experience problems? Can a gamified experience of an e-health application be at the same time serious and provide accurate answers to its users? What alternatives exist to gamification in the pursuit of new users and engagement of the existing ones? How to identify the users and the use cases before building a game-like e-health application and how to deliver the expected user experience?

In this chapter the author explores why gamification appears to be a good approach to be applied in almost every scenario, including healthcare and well-being applications, but raising at the same time the

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