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Gamification of the Martial Arts

LEVERAGING MODERN GAMING STRATEGIES TO
MAXIMIZE YOUR SCHOOL'S CURRICULUM

Andries Pruijm | April 2021

Gamification of Personal Interactions

In another recent MAIA Elite seminar, Mr. Roland Osborne mentioned how he had updated his school's curriculum to create new Sparring Games or Martial Arts Games in order to provide more entertainment to the students, or as he put it, a better student experience. Mr. Osborn qualified these new curriculum strategies as Gamification of his course material.

Gamification is a new paradigm where business and educational institutions (for examples) are changing the way they engage their customers and/or students. It tries to move away from the mundane and in some cases, Gamification of certain tasks simply tries to make jobs more enjoyable.

My personal interest of Gamification began through my research of major corporations using gamification in their business marketing strategies Rewards, Challenges, even the use of a Donut ring to track your savings ... primarily to increase customer loyalty. Research also showed that Educational Institutions were looking at Gamification in order to make the student experience more enticing, which to me was where I felt that Martial Arts schools could benefit from this new paradigm.

In short, "Gamification" is the use of game elements in non-gaming systems to improve user experience and user engagement, loyalty and fun. It attempts to harness the motivational power of games in order to promote participation, persistence and achievements. In other words, Gamification is the using of game design on business and educational strategies.

Gamification is also based on our existing Reward system prevalent in todays' society. Examples include Grades in our schools, Rank in Military, promotion/salary in Business. This reward type improvement system is called Operant Conditioning and is a method of learning (pedagogy) through the use of Rewards and Punishments. It is now starting to be leveraged extensively with more and more games being introduced into our modern teaching methods rather than the old way of rote memorization of facts and figures.

It was determined that if you initiate a Rewards System (Gamification) into your curriculum then the Rewards must continue in order that the Learner keeps involved *unless* the end result of the training provides some real-world value that supersedes the Reward based system. An example of this is Martial Arts where once the ability to protect one's self provides real world value over and above the satisfaction of obtaining Rank (i.e.: Rewards).

In order to provide some context to the possible inclusion of Gamification techniques in a Martial Arts school, we reached out to 3 separate Martial Artists, each with a different perspective on how best to leverage this new educational strategy.

We talked with Sensei Tina Parker who, together with her son Troy Parker own the mid-size Martial Arts school known as Safeguard Martial Arts. While they maintain a healthy Teen and Adult program, the majority of the school's students can be classified as Children's Programs. Safeguard Martial Arts has been in business for over 20 years and has recently won local Small Business of the Year honors.

We also reached out to Sensei John Lowrie; a 6th degree Goju-Ryu stylist who operates a community-based Karate school known as SunGod Karate. SunGod Karate has been run out a municipal/county recreation center for over 25 years, with each session having a regular waiting list due to its popularity. The school is fully focused on children under the age of 14 and has successfully taught a traditional style to thousands of kids over the years.

Finally, we were honored to have Sensei Jackson Rudolph provide his insights. As a 50+ time World Champion Sport Karate Weapons Master (and Historian), a Leading Martial Arts and Curriculum Consultant as well as having conducted hundreds of seminars all around the world, Sensei Rudolph has witnessed the evolution of Martial Arts instruction and has a modern perspective on training techniques.

We will intersperse these three long time instructors' comments throughout this article as we dive into how Gamification is starting to integrate itself into our Educational and Business strategies.

Instructors' Requirements of Gamification.

When a Martial Arts School Owner makes the decision to incorporate Gamification strategies into their curriculum, they are looking to develop the student's internal motivation rather than simply trying to entertain. It is important to ensure there is an internal motivation within the student as this is the portion of Gamification that allows the student to have fun while being in an engaging learning environment.

Tina Parker: (As to SMA's Gamification strategy) We use gamification strategies in most TOTS classes relative to challenges that need a mentally visual concept like the Alligator Run (designed to enhance balance and sure footedness), and the blocker chop where students have obstacles to get through with the rhythmic drop of the blockers at various points that they have to strategically avoid to complete the exercise. Such activities create a personal challenge, which leads to the concept of goal setting as they get older.

John Lowrie: When thinking about about gamification strategies I realized that I have used this concept for many years although likely didn't call it that back then. My first wife is a Special Education teacher by training and in the early years of my school she was quite helpful when I was having difficulty keeping kids motivated.

Jackson Rudolph: I introduce games in my seminars to help give the students a better experience and create lasting memories. It is natural for the more experienced student to give some helpful pointers to the beginner thus a great method of giving advanced students some entry-level instructing experience. Bbecause my instructor would frequently create challenges to make class more interesting gameplay became a natural part of my teaching strategies.

So, while the concept of Gamification can be thought of something that came naturally when teaching Martial Arts to children, there are actually many academic studies into the various components that make up Gamification. It is up to the School Owner to determine which elements to leverage for their particular curriculum.

Questions that School Owners must ask when implementing a new Gamification influenced curriculum change. Only after responding to these questions should the implementation of gamification elements be considered. These questions help the Instructor determine the possible weak points in the learning activities, and correct them where possible.

Behavior

- Does the class activity provide the student with opportunities for further experimentation, exploration and personal creative expression?
- Is the activity effective in conveying the technique as well as being fun?
- Are students engaged to achieve something great, awesome and bigger than themselves within a specified time?

Progression

- Is your Ranking criteria a good representation of the student’s progress?
- Does your Ranking reflect the student's progress on learning, thinking and creating skills?

Feedback

- Is there a recognition of achievement (such as Student of the class or invitation to Black Belt Club)?
- Is there an adequate number of details regarding the curriculum provided to the students at each level of achievement?

Below is a list of the most relevant Gamification components, which should be carefully scrutinized by the School Owner before implementing into their curriculum.

Major concepts of gamification include variations of gaming strategies	
Play	allowing the participant, the freedom to explore within boundaries.
Exposition	creating stories for participants with real-world setting and allowing them to create their own storylines.
Information	providing participants with real time information to learn more about the real-world context.
Engagement	encouraging participants to discover and learn from others interested in the real-world setting.
Autonomy	This is where the User/Player does not need any assistance to complete the gamification objectives



Competency	Being able to complete the objectives of the game with confidence.
Relatedness	having some type of personal connection with the strategies and values espoused by the gamified platform.
Reflection	assisting participants in finding other interests and past experiences that can deepen engagement and learning.

Measuring Gamification Effectiveness

There is still some resistance about implementing Gamification strategies into various business and educational institutions due to the lack of concrete measurable results. There are many traditional methods of measuring learning successes but how much does Gamification truly contribute to any learning or business success is still debatable.

On the other hand, while many academics try to determine the concrete measurable value of implementing Gamification into your educational strategies (i.e.: your curriculum), the basic premise of using gamification is to make the task more fun!! Trying to justify it by attempting to codify certain results takes away the ‘fun factor’ that is the underlying principle of gamification.

Jackson Rudolph: Gamification provides an escape from the typical rigidity of martial arts classes. It still serves a purpose to create relationships within a school, make classes more enjoyable, and overall increase retention. Most people would be surprised how much adults enjoy some gameplay, children always have fun with it, but it is often the adults who get the most competitive. Even traditional styles like Shotokan, Judo [etc.] can implement games without escaping tradition by choosing games that focus on the execution of techniques.

Top Three Recommended Gamification Strategies

After completing our research and discussions with some school owners and consultants, we felt the following three Gamification Components are probably the most relevant to the way we presently teach Martial Arts especially to children.

Team work

The value of camaraderie cannot be understated and developing a team atmosphere is one of the best tenets of Gamification. While ‘Gaming’ can produce strong individualism (in wanting to win the game), it has been shown that most of the best results in all Gamification challenges are in a group setting.

I have personally been on a number of Grading Panels where I witness extreme commitment to the team from those who were getting their Black belts together. They all had similar attitudes that if one of them failed then they all failed. These groups of talented young adults would work together for months before the grading and the team commitment is what I felt was the major factor in their successes!

Tina Parker: *Social distancing over the last year has made gamification more challenging as we always have to be conscious of students maintaining appropriate social distancing by not being closer than 6 feet apart. This in a lot of ways stops the camaraderie that closer connection brings. We will undoubtedly be able to include more game-based drills again when we don't have the restrictions currently placed upon us.*

Jackson Rudolph: *Gamification could encourage or discourage teamwork depending upon how the instructor uses it. If all the games are based solely on rewards and leaderboards, that is going to create a lot of unhealthy individual competition. The best way is to design most of your games such that teamwork is essential! For example use two large teams working together to create combinations that will compete against one another. After 5 or so minutes, each team performs their combination and a winner is determined the losing team suffering a petty punishment like 10 push-ups (nothing that would upset anyone, but still gives the winners a sense of achievement)*

Competition/ Challenging Tasks

We must remember that it was when the numerous Karate Clubs in Japan started to have inter-school tournaments that the popularity of Karate started to take off. So, while competition can sometimes be viewed in a negative light, especially in today's hyper competitive world, in Martial Arts, which is the learning of defending one's self against an opponent, competition is necessary even if only on a small scale (e.g.: Dojo/School Only Tournaments). We need to believe that what we are learning is going to be effective if confronted by an adversary of some kind.

Nevertheless, even when setting up competitive challenges (or tasks) within your curriculum, you can off-set the competitive stress by having teams compete against each other. It provides the students with something to strive for but with the knowledge they have friends and/or teammates who will help. This allows for an exciting game type of competition and the fun each team will have putting their routine together, will ensure there are no losers at the end of the day!

Tina Parker: *In our junior programming, we tend to use more competitive aspects of gamification to encourage and engage - examples: group kata where as soon as a mistake is made (i.e.:teamwork), they sit down (i.e.: feedback) and the next group tries to beat their goal by getting farther through the kata, and timing trials to complete weaponry before the buzzer goes off (i.e.: targets/goals).*

Jackson Rudolph: *This is also seen in the competitive arena where making martial arts a sport whether it be jiu-jitsu competitions, Olympic Tae Kwon Do, or sport karate tournaments, is gamification on a large scale. This "macro-gamification" of martial arts have been proven time and time again to increase retention and student satisfaction.*

Reflection/Feedback

Reflection is the part of Gamification design where the “player” tries to find meaning in their participation within the game. The participants determine if the effort was worth it and for the most part this reflection is usually better in a group setting. In Martial Arts, this is where we are regularly contemplating the “path” we are on and how this makes us a better person than we were before participating.

When developing your curriculum to include Gamification, the perspective should be long term and not just something to disguise repetition or to allow your students a ‘break’ from traditional training. There are many stages in Martial Arts career and using reflection of one’s effort is something we have always strived to achieve in our training.

Gamification of reflection simply tries to have the student focus on their achievements on a regular basis, whether it be after a Challenge/Task of some kind, the awarding of Rank or simply acknowledging the years of effort that has made you the person you are today.

Jackson Rudolph: Challenging tasks and reflection, are perfect for advanced students. Many curriculums do not challenge Black Belts often enough therefore by intentionally using challenging tasks to enrich the Black Belt curriculum thus allowing opportunities for self-reflection which in turn will allow these advanced students to push them beyond the rank of Black Belt.

Conclusion

Most martial Arts School Owners have known about or have unknowingly leveraged Gamification principles especially if they have extensive Children’s programs. When considering how fast paced our society is these days, it is evident that the attention span of most have decreased to where providing an entertainment factor into your curriculum is a must!

Of course, one last factor must be taken into consideration and that is the perception that the Instructor is implementing ‘time wasting games’ simply to entertain so the kids will come back to the next class. Each Gamification principle used must be solidly focused on the particular Martial Art technique within the curriculum, otherwise the class becomes nothing more than a ‘baby-sitting’ business. In addition, if you are trying to implement Gamification in Adult classes, there had better be major consideration to the component or principle leveraged (i.e.: team work or competition) otherwise the Adult students may not feel the instructors is taking them or their training seriously.

John Lowrie: In Martial Arts the goals are to develop strength, endurance, muscular development, speed, reaction time, etc. It’s possible to do boring repetitive tasks that can improve each of these items but it becomes more fun and the students more eager to participate and spend more time if you can disguise the training as a game provided, of course, that there is a specific goal or skill to be developed.



martial arts professional services

Jackson Rudolph: *While the Gamification concept is new to the Martial Arts curriculum, having a term for this approach will help educate more instructors about it and in turn make martial arts classes more enjoyable for students around the world. Instructors can avoid time-wasting games by ensuring that there is always a martial arts technique or principle that remains the focal point of the game. Most games should be speed challenges or consistency games that are clearly focused on the performance of a technique or combination. When games are obviously centered upon the technique at hand, it keeps them from becoming time-wasting games.*

Gamification is both an old and a new concept. We as Martial Arts instructors have always strived to make our classes informative, yet entertaining. We must realize that our Industry is dependent on “disposable income”, which means we need to add an element of entertainment in our classes to reduce the mundane and give the student a reason to get off the couch and train!

Gamification is simply a way to add exciting teaching elements to your curriculum and something every instructor needs to be aware of. In fact, in some cases, especially with those that may have difficulty in learning your program, Gamification techniques can assist these students in picking up the techniques faster than anticipated.

Jackson Rudolph: *Introduction of Gamification into typical learning, using gameplay such as speed challenges or intensity battles to make classes and curricular learning more enjoyable. Gamification provides another method by which some students may have the metaphorical light bulb go off and finally understand that concept or technique and this is why games that promote teamwork and collaboration are important, because they will organically create friendships in your school that will keep students coming back.*

And in the end, isn't that why we do this. The family friendly environment that is created by well-established Martial Arts school provides benefits far exceeding any financial gains you as a business owner can garner. Using Gamification techniques simply allows the School Owner an additional “arrow in their quiver” in ensuring the viability of their business and the happiness of their Students!

Sidebar:

Gamification vs. Serious Games.

There is a separate area of gamification where the designer of the game tries to get the player/participant to accomplish more than just educational or business-related outcomes. This niche area of gamification is dependent on the analysis skills of the player/participant. As these games have less emphasis on “fun” as they deal with complex world issues, they are considered “Serious Games.

Serious Games are platforms that use Gamification techniques to resolve Real Life Problems, whether it be medical or environmental or even demographic issues. Serious Games are more simulation than standard games whereas Gamification maintains a “fun factor” and may not be an actual game.

Serious Games need not be fun but can provide similar satisfaction as a normal (non-serious) game. An Aircraft Simulator teaching Users how to fly is an example of a Serious Game. Others include having the User attempt to solve some of the world’s issues like creating a simulated society which is not dependent on Oil/Fossil Fuels. These Serious Games teach a life skill or develop a life style that is usually educational in the end.

Even in the Martial Arts world, we use Serious Games to an extent, although we probably wouldn’t think of these activities as games. One is obvious, which is when we teach a specific type of class, such as Self-Defense or even a Bully Prevention Class. While we may use Gamification techniques within the class (e.g.: role playing, real life challenges, location scenarios, even feedback), there is no real “fun factor” as with normal classes due to the ‘seriousness’ of the purpose of the class (e.g.: rape prevention).

Another serious game we practice on the Martial Art business side is when we start teaching our Instructors and Staff on how to handle issues that arise when dealing with disgruntled Parents or Students. Most of these sessions will have participants act out various troubling scenarios (i.e.: Role Playing) in order to teach them how to de-escalate the situation and then discuss the results (i.e.: feedback). Most times these gamification principles do not include making the mundane more enjoyable as it is a serious situation which requires a serious solution.