Gamification: A Strategy Guide

How to improve employee learning engagement, retention, achievement, and outcomes by gamifying elements of your learning and design experience.

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A long time ago, in a corporate realm far, far away...

...corporate learning was in chaos. Unengaged employees were left trapped in windowless training rooms battling boredom for hours on end. Giant training manuals holding all the secrets of the realm gathered dust on bookshelves. Skills became obsolete, knowledge was forgotten, and performance suffered. The prophets of learning wrung their hands in despair, unable to defend against the forces of learning disinterest.

But all was not lost. A new, powerful learning approach would soon appear. It was called gamification, and when harnessed with the right technology, it would become an effective tactic for enabling joyful learner engagement across the land.

And corporate learning would be forever changed...

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Everyone loves a game. Today, nearly 70% of Americans play video games.[1] This familiarity with and love of gaming are now extending to the enterprise as businesses are looking to gamification (the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts) to boost employee engagement. As a result, the global gamification market is expected to reach USD 19.39 billion by 2023, with a compound annual growth rate of 44.06% between 2018 and 2023.[2] Gamification makes corporate learning more effective by allowing learners to safely rehearse and practice skills. It also appeals to our human nature and our natural desire to compete, collaborate, socialize, show mastery, and express ourselves. Studies show companies that use gamification have achieved collaboration increases of up to 55%, which directly translates into better customer service and annualized benefits in the millions of dollars. Companies using gamification also realized a 24% higher employee attendance rate and dramatically accelerated training rates.[3]

But here's the thing: We're learning professionals, not game designers. So where do we start? And to whom do we turn for gaming advice and expertise?

The good news is introducing gamified elements into your course design doesn't mean you have to create an entire game from scratch. It just means incorporating aspects of games we all enjoy. And that's a much easier and more incremental task.

This strategy guide is designed to help you begin your gamification journey. Its purpose is to give you the information, tools, and wisdom you'll need to start introducing gamified elements into your learning and design experience.

[1]https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/how-many-people-play-games-in-the-u-s-1202936332/
[2]https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/gamification-market
[3]https://trainingmag.com/4-ways-calculate-employment-engagement-roi

Create a compelling story

Within the corporate realm there stands a shining palace that nearly touches the sky. It's called The Workplace. And inside the palace, people scurry through the halls rushing to meetings, to meet deadlines, to lunch, or to catch the train home for the day—anything but learning. Our hero, Desiree T. Learn, feels out of place and sad. Hidden away in a small office, two doors down from the mailroom and a galaxy away from the CEO's office, she longs for change...

MEETING 3

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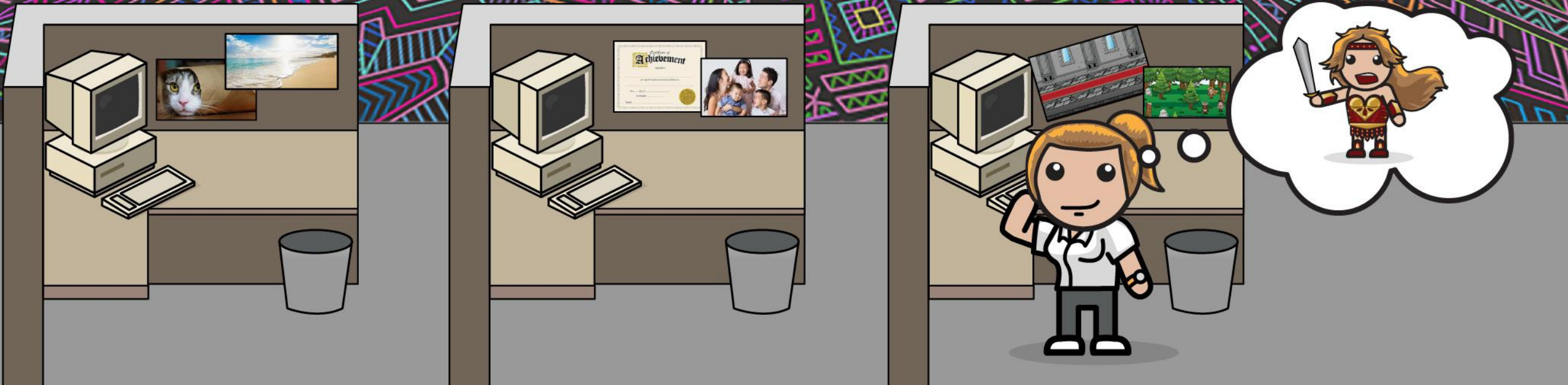
As humans, stories govern our lives and form the basis of much of our communication with others. A lot of the learning we do over our lives comes through stories that are told to us. Stories often incorporate a protagonist (a relatable character), an antagonist (the challenge the character faces), and a plot (a sequence of events).

In learning, a story (narrative) can make a boring task fun or help build an emotional connection with the scenario or subject matter. In an online learning platform, stories can be imparted through a home page and the content itself. They can also be worked into feedback mechanisms, reward mechanisms, and trigger badges.

Tip: Five examples of narratives in learning

1. Overall narrative throughout the course (gamified learning)
2. Case studies that exemplify positive and negative outcomes
3. Personalized messages
4. Framing to contextualize material
5. Stories from leaders, colleagues

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Course design considerations

- Each week, or in each module, provide learners with a balance of content and activities. The more learners practice, the more they learn.
- Game-based learning can be used as pre- or post-content or to replace all content.
- Have your instructors create activities so learners must participate in their learning through small activities, repeatedly.

**Tip: How to incorporate stories into gamified learning**

- Build story narrative into natural transition points of learning—for instance, at the beginning of a module or activity—and allow it to unfold as the learning progresses.
- Consider the types of narratives (such as a fairy tale) that hold power over all of us. How can they be applied?

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Your learner, the hero

Inside the palace training room, Desiree T. Learn and her allies struggle with subject matter. The coffee pot is dry, and the learning is as stale as the last doughnut left on the platter. As the instructor drones on, our hero is faced with a moment of indecision. Should she stand up for change or resign herself to traditional ways...

Running through Greek myths, great works of literature, and movie classics like The Wizard of Oz or Star Wars, the Hero's Journey (so named by [American mythological researcher Joseph Campbell in 1949](#)) describes the common patterns and elements that shape story structures in all cultures.
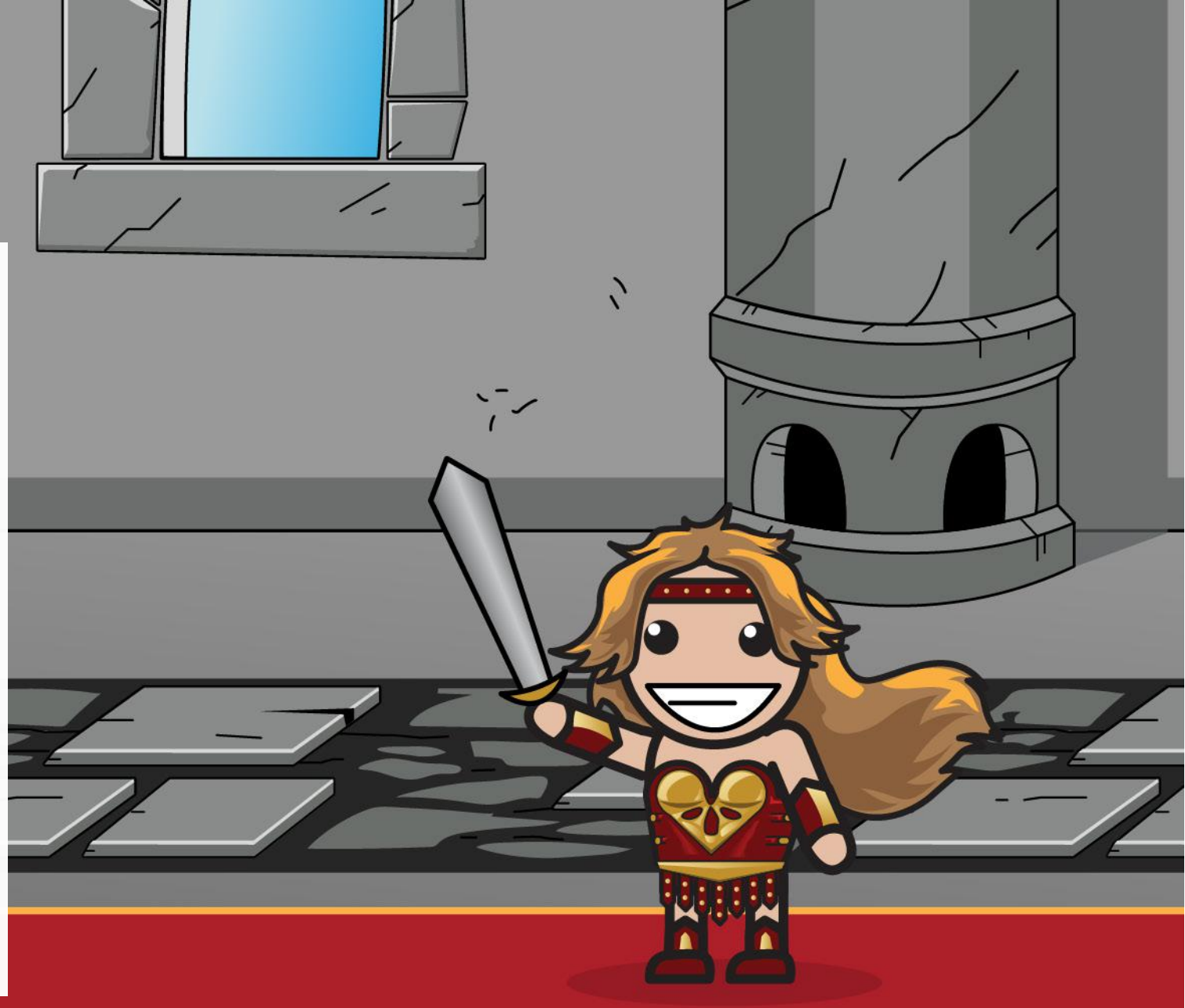
Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

1 The Ordinary World — The hero exists in an ordinary world but possesses some characteristic that makes him/her feel out of place.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

2

The Call to Adventure — There is a discovery or danger that calls the hero out of the ordinary world to begin his/her quest. The new world the hero enters is extraordinary and filled with adventure.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

3   Meeting with the Mentor — The hero meets a mentor who gives him/her something he/she desperately needs.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

4 Crossing of the Threshold — The hero crosses over from the ordinary world to embark upon the learning quest.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

5

Tests, Allies, Enemies — The hero encounters a series of tests and challenges. These can be part of your [formative assessment](#) strategy and include small interactive activities, bite-sized learning, and games. The hero will encounter allies and enemies and will learn who can and cannot be trusted.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

6

Approach to the Inmost Cave and the Ordeal — The inmost cave represents the ultimate test for our hero. It may be a physical location or a point of inner conflict. At this point our hero must face a physical test or inner ordeal that is the high point of the story and represents life or death for the hero.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

7

The Reward — The hero passes the ultimate test and is rewarded through transformation or a prize. In your learning design, this can be done using badges or personalized messages.

Basic elements of the Hero's Journey

8

The Final Climax and the Return — The climax is when the hero faces the ultimate battle and when the enemy is defeated, and the hero returns home to the ordinary world forever changed. Certificate issued! On to the next lesson and journey!

Tip: Six ways to incorporate the Hero's Journey into gamified learning

1. Instead of listing learning objectives, start your next training experience with a challenge or goal.
2. Make it personal by delivering the right learning to the right learners at the right time.
3. Deliver small, incremental "doses" of content over a longer time frame to boost learner retention.
4. Have an overall narrative arc that includes the calls to action, as well as small-module calls to action that are miniaturized versions of the Hero's Journey.
5. Incorporate lots of small formative assessments that can be games/activities within the story.
6. Start to replace your old content with activities revolving around the story.

The quest (or call to action)

Our hero is faced with a major dilemma. Her new boss, Cryptilla the Antiquated, has condemned Desiree T. Learn and her colleagues to yet another week of incarceration in the palace's windowless training room. Surrounded by Cryptilla's henchmen, Desiree T. Learn decides to take action and usher in a new age of learning for the sake of her coworkers and The Workplace. What will Cryptilla do? Can Desiree T. Learn save the day?

Gamification engages people on a [personal level, which can be more powerful than transactional learning.](#) It significantly improves the learning experience by:

- Promoting friendly competition.
- Imparting a sense of achievement in learners.
- Engaging learners to achieve the desired behavioral change.
- Motivating learners to advance through the course and act, thereby influencing their behavior.

Gamification also offers a more [personalized learning](#) experience by allowing learners to follow their own "call to action" through participation in a quest.

Course design considerations

- Use case studies to bring discussions to life.
- Use video case studies and responses to speed up demonstration.
- Leverage interactive diagrams and graphics in which learners can click on the image to reveal information or use a multiple-choice question.

### Tip: How to use gamification to personalize the learning experience

- Empower learners by allowing them to choose their learning path. This means getting away from linear course designs.
- Incorporate a series of small quests in which skills can be incrementally learned and repeated. This is where bite-sized learning can have a significant impact.
- Provide learners with options—a choice between different projects and activities. Differentiated content and assessment strategies provide a sense of freedom and exploration for learners.
- Use simulations in which learners can live out real-world experiences in a safe environment.

Unlocking different worlds within the learning experience

But before Desiree T. Learn can act, "The Great Merger" happens, an event that shakes the palace to its core and plunges our hero and her allies into a world of confusion. Chaos reigns as a new order is established. Our hero is bewildered. There are new leaders. There are new rules. New foes and allies. There is also new opportunity. Desiree T. Learn discovers another kind of learning called gamification. Our hero crosses the threshold and bravely leaps into the new world, ready to take on Cryptilla and her forces with newly acquired skills.
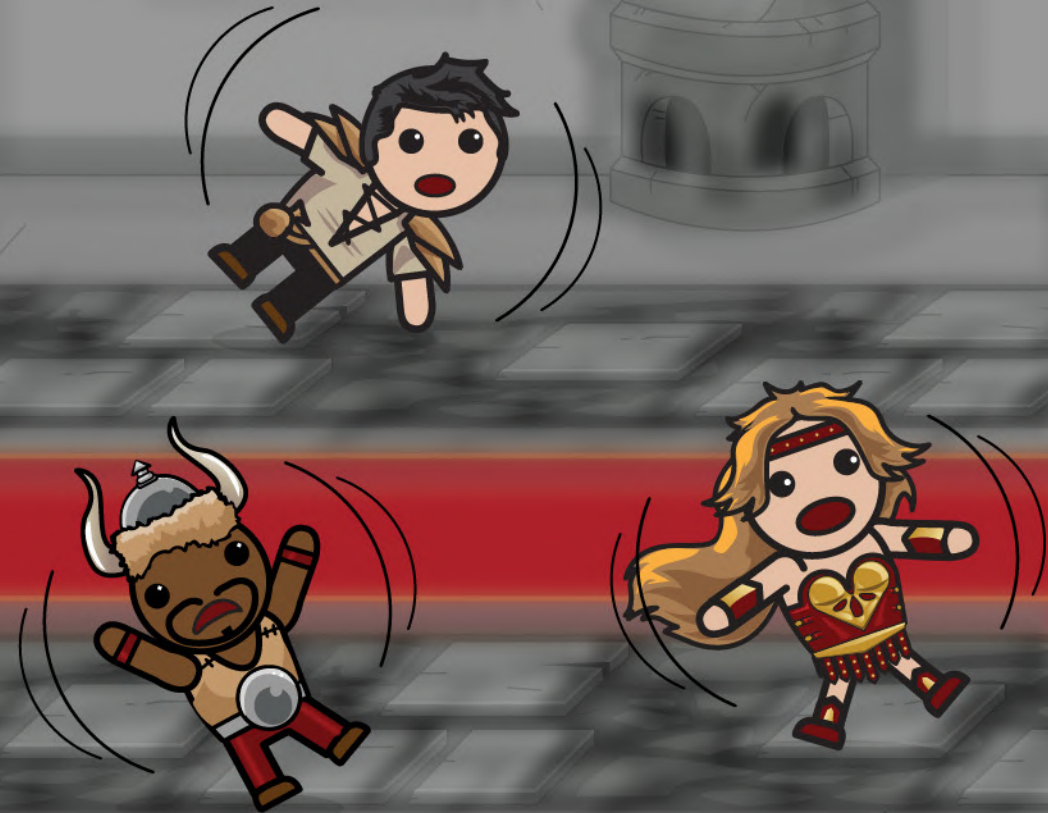
Just as a gamer levels up between worlds and unlocks new challenges, gamification can be used to guide learners through levels of proficiency. The key for instructional designers is to create a balance between challenge and skills so learning is not so hard that a learner becomes frustrated and quits—or too easy, which can result in apathy or lack of engagement.

Course design considerations

- Structure your course like a game so it begins easy, provides a lot of direction and support, and gradually offers more learner control.
- Keep learners engaged by pushing just beyond what you assume to be their current skillset.
- Don't just create an activity that assesses one competency or objective. This gets boring quickly for the learner and the designer. Consider how all the material can be scaffolded to make your games harder and harder.

Tip: How to upskill someone

- Start out lessons and activities with a small set of learning outcomes/competencies and gradually build up.
- Scaffold (logically sequence)[6] material so learners start with the basics and move to ever-more-demanding challenges. As their skills increase, they will need to be challenged more to continue growing.

Rewarding learning: Certificates, badges, and leaderboards

Desiree T. Learn must spring quickly into action to bring gamification to life in The Workplace. She enters The Great Tournament of Learning. On the field of battle, she faces Cryptilla, who is armed with textbooks, dusty old manuals, and several hours' worth of PowerPoint slides. Using her newfound gamified learning skills, Desiree T. Learn fiercely battles Cryptilla's antiquated ways for the good of The Workplace, and to win over the hearts and minds of those in the palace. Thanks to Desiree T. Learn's gamification powers, she defeats Cryptilla, tossing aside the old ways to introduce her colleagues to a more engaging way to learn, and is rewarded with the corporate realm's badge of courage.

Leaderboard

1.		Desiree T. Learn	100pts
2.		Cryptilla	99pts
3.		Rogue	80pts
4.		Barbarian	70pts
5.		Dark Knight	30pts
6.		Sea Dragon	-50pts

Reward systems in gamified learning can take the form of certificates, badges, awards, announcements, or even emails. Leaderboards and badges can represent progress, milestones achieved, or the completion of tasks. There should be varying levels of difficulty involved in achieving different badges and rewards, and they can be revoked if the learner fails to continue to progress. Badges can also be considered as micro-credentials to identify individual learner skillsets, gaps, and professional development opportunities.

What motivates people to learn?

- **Performance Approach** — The learner is interested in demonstrating improvement and outperforming others.
- **Mastery Approach** — The learner is interested in learning and is intrinsically motivated.
- **Performance Avoidance** — The learner does not want to be viewed as an underachiever.
- **Mastery Avoidance** — The learner is striving to avoid performing worse than one's expectations.[7]

Types of badges

When working out your badging schedule, consider the different types of behaviors you want to reward. We can reward learners for a variety of reasons. Here are some different types of reward criteria to consider:

Measurement vs. completion

- **Measurement achievements** are given to learners for completing a task to a certain degree. Performance is measured against another learner's performance, the learner's own performance, or some standard set by course designers.[8]

- **Completion achievements** do not tell the learner how well they've performed the task; instead, they are offered an award once a task is completed.

Expected vs. unexpected

- Performing a certain number of tasks for a reward vs. a reward occurring randomly (surprise).[9] Tip: Surprise badges are always welcome, while the expected ones tend to lose value over time.

Competitive vs. cooperative

- **Cooperative learning** happens in environments where learners work in groups or teams, structuring learning so that learners help one another in the learning process and develop social connections along the way.

- **Competitive learning** places learners or teams of learners into competitive scenarios to draw out the human desire to play to win, and to cultivate leadership, decision-making, trust-building, and communication skills.

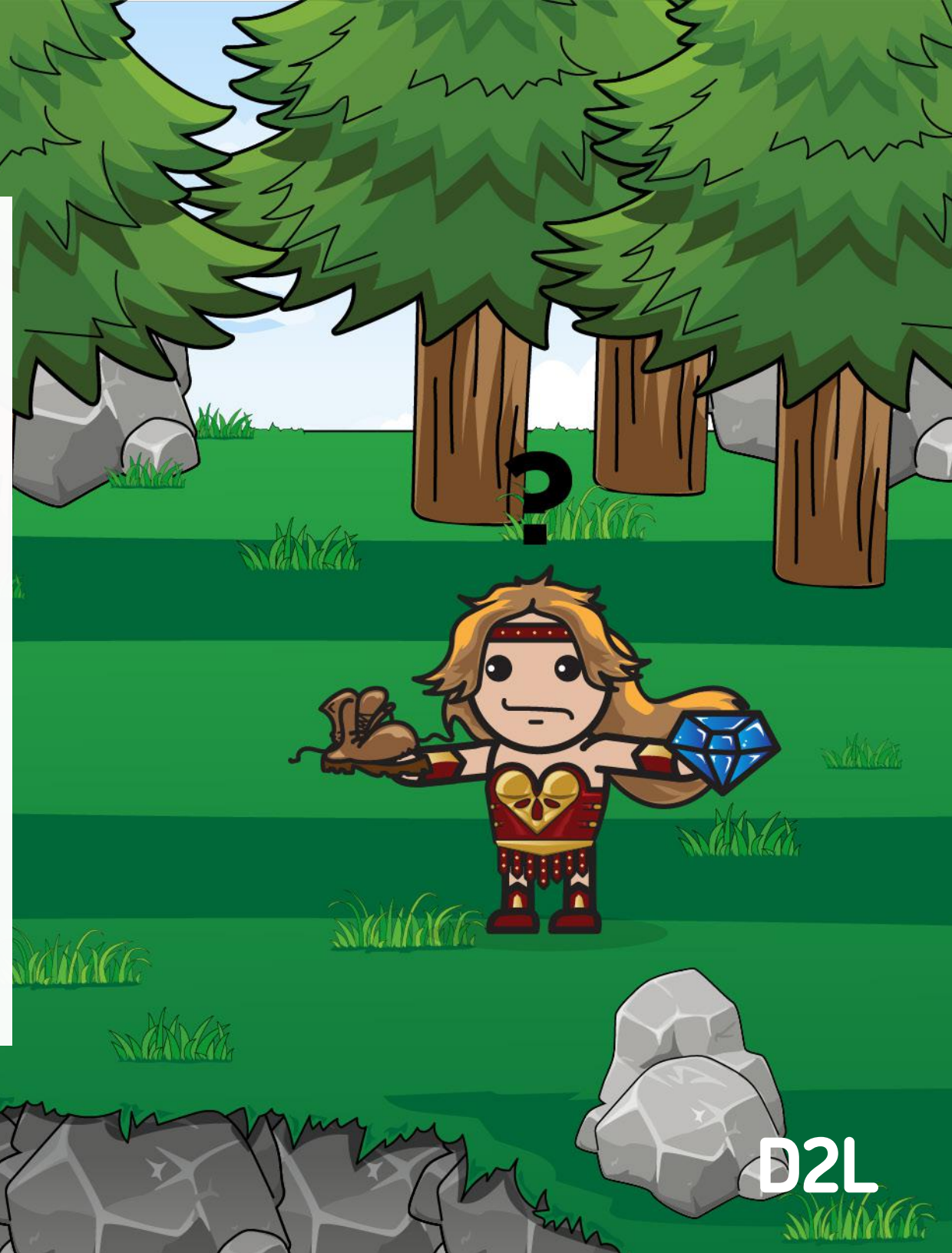**Incremental vs. meta**

- Competencies are often formed through the accumulation of smaller skills. Each skill acquired can be its own badge, and/or you can have "meta" badges that are only achieved by acquiring a collection of smaller skillsets.

[8]http://karlkapp.com/measurement-vs-completion-achievements-in-gamification/
[9]https://gamification21.wordpress.com/learning-content-3/15-reward-structures/

6 key considerations when incorporating reward systems

1. Make sure your reward systems translate to the real world. For instance, Cisco used gaming strategies to enhance its virtual global sales meeting. Call center company LiveOps used timely performance feedback as part of a larger gamification initiative to reduce call time by 15% and improve sales between 8 and 12%.[10]

2. Allow for learners to build proficiency at a reasonable pace so they can master content.[11]

3. Add certification/skills paths and recommended next actions into the metadata for all badges.

4. Encourage healthy competition. Rewards are often more valued when they are "won."[12]

5. Names are important: Nobody wants a "newbie" badge. "Fundamentals" course badges get better acceptance when they are named "Foundations."[13]

6. Mix up the balance between cooperative and competitive badges. You want to promote a range of behaviors. In today's corporate world, collaboration, communication, and teamwork are all essential skills that should be promoted as much as competitive spirit is.

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[10]https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/deloitte-review/issue-11/the-engagement-economy-how-gamification-is-reshaping-businesses.html
[11]http://www.incentivemag.com/Strategy/Non-Sales/How-to-Introduce-Gamification-Into-Employee-Incentive-Programs/
[12]Ibid [13] https://trainingmag.com/trgmag-article/badge-benefits

Gamified learning in action: Two examples

Gay Lea Foods

Gay Lea foods, a large Canadian dairy cooperative, was on a mission to accelerate the development of its elected directors and delegates. It sought an engaging way of empowering them to enhance their skills, so it built a series of interactive courses designed to make learning as fun and intuitive as possible. The series featured a fictional dairy cooperative called Dombridge Dairy Farmers that was populated with avatars representing dairy executives and board members. Interacting with the avatars allows Gay Lea Foods' learners to experience a realistic simulation of the actual scenarios they could experience in their particular roles.

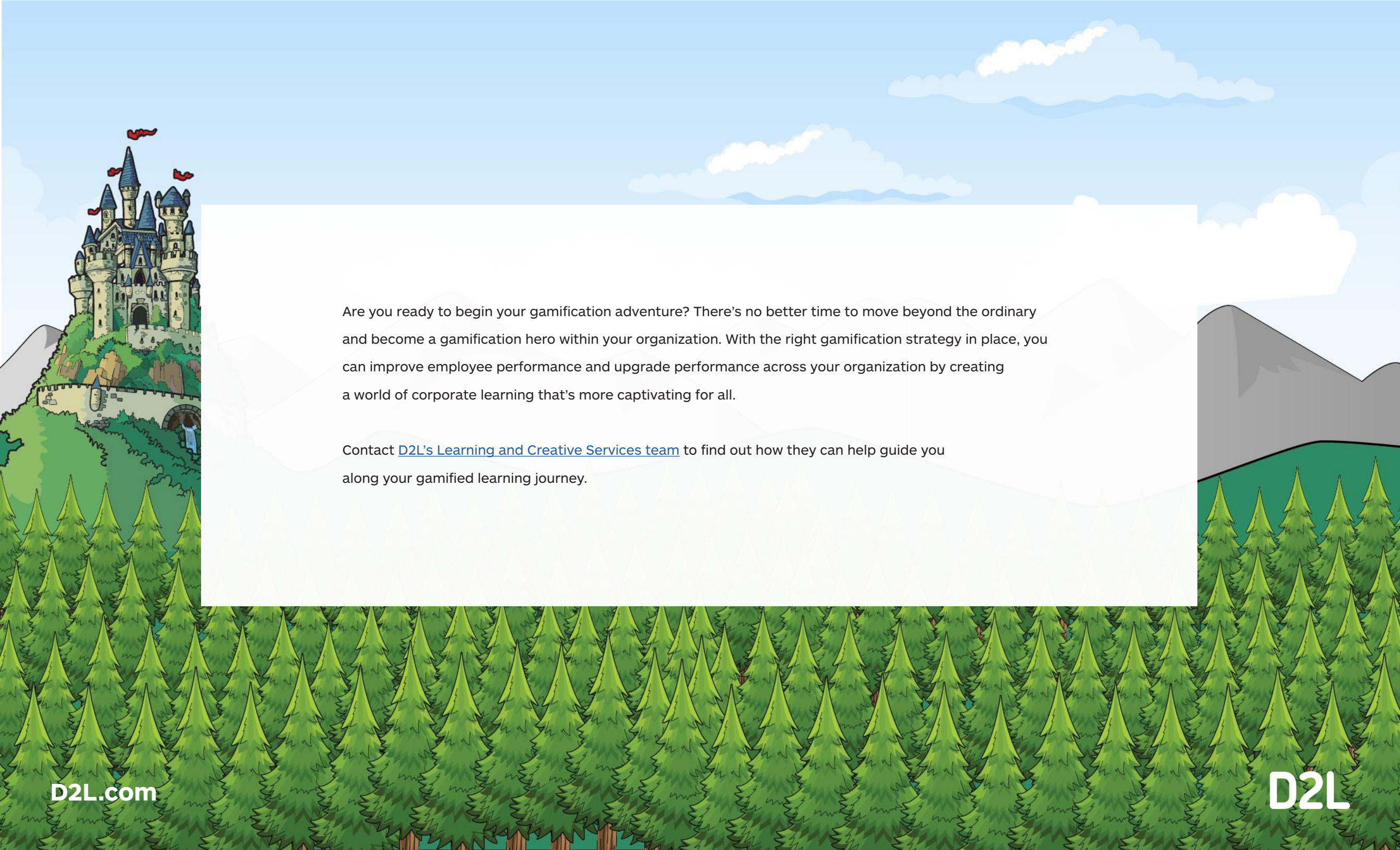**Read the case study to learn more ›**

Kaplan Financial

UK-based professional education company Kaplan Financial (part of U.S.-based Kaplan Inc.) specializes in helping accountancy and tax students achieve high-stakes qualifications (the make-or-break kind), servicing both large and small employers, major accountancy firms, and individual learners. Its ongoing challenge is improving upon how it helps its learners achieve exam success. That led the organization to implement a gamified learning platform for one of its clients. The platform combined a points-based leaderboard and a badging system to award academic performance, mobilize learner motivation, and encourage behaviors well-suited to achieving exam success. As the platform gained traction among learners, Kaplan soon discovered that it had potentially unlocked a hidden level of measurement outside of performance—progress. So it decided to take its gamification platform to the next level with a modern learning platform.

Read the blog to learn more ›

Let's write your gamification adventure story... together

Desiree T. Learn is victorious on the field of learning. With Cryptilla defeated and her antiquated learning tools banished to the paper shredder, gamification wins the day. Our hero's coworkers are released from the windowless training room and are finally having fun with learning again. The Workplace celebrates. Resolved to continue being a champion of engaging learning, Desiree T. Learn begins the long journey back to her workspace. There is still work to be done, and it's getting close to 5 o'clock...

Are you ready to begin your gamification adventure? There's no better time to move beyond the ordinary and become a gamification hero within your organization. With the right gamification strategy in place, you can improve employee performance and upgrade performance across your organization by creating a world of corporate learning that's more captivating for all.

Contact D2L's Learning and Creative Services team to find out how they can help guide you along your gamified learning journey.

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About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes learning experiences better. The company's cloud-based platform is easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, organizations can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that organizations can take action in real-time to keep learners on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore.

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