



GOVERNMENT AND GAMING SYNERGIES

How gaming design can inform public perception of government agencies' mission and objectives

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1775 Tysons Boulevard, Suite 500
McLean, VA 22102
www.mcbrideconsulting.net

Introduction

Historically, it has proven difficult for many public agencies and government institutions to connect with the public in ways that are informative and provide widespread awareness for the services they provide. Part of that challenge stems from government's failing to articulate their activities in a publicly accessible way, but also from the ability of the public to internalize their functions. A 2020 study conducted by MIT professor Charles Angelucci found only 64% of voters are aware of the most important news story: "It seems whole segments of society are just not getting the news. And it's despite the fact that they spend hours consuming it."¹ To preclude a deepening gulf in awareness of government processes and endeavors, new and innovative approaches should be explored. For a government that aspires to do good and believes they are promoting positive programs, it is vital to connect with and showcase their work to the people they serve.

The Gaming Industry has grown dynamically over the past few decades, and elements of game design found on multiple platforms can be an effective and cost-efficient method to deliver informative content to greater and more diverse audiences. Applying elements of game design to public agencies and government institutions offers a 21st century opportunity to connect with citizens, increase understanding, and build public trust in new and exciting ways.

The Inaccessibility of Government

There is a general lack of engagement and trust in the American government among the public. From the mudslinging during elections to Congressional gridlock, Americans have become disengaged from the policies and officials that they vote for every few years. A survey conducted in 2021 by the Advanced Studies in Culture Foundation found that 1 in 3 Americans do not trust the government or the media.² Despite the public shortcomings of the executive and legislative branches, there are many government agencies that do their job well and improve our daily lives. One might then reasonably wonder - how can citizens distrust the government they simultaneously view as operating efficiently? In large part, this phenomenon is due to the lack of effective education on what these agencies do and how they operate.

¹ <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/voters-knowledge-political-news-varies-widely-study-shows>

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/03/15/why-americans-growing-distrust-civic-institutions-warning-column/4668616001/>

Government agencies often struggle to communicate and connect with their citizens. That divide inhibits the government from properly educating the public regarding their functionalities. One reason for this is that government work is often seen as tedious or perfunctory; and while the inner workings and intricacies of a government agency are not the most glamorous of subjects, it does not denote an absence of opportunities to bridge the perceived divide.

With the vast resources at their disposal, it is incumbent on the Federal government to find a more effective way to educate and inform the public. An effective tactic would seek to deal with the endemic redundancies and tedium by creating a more engaging way of delivering information.

The Federal government, of course, is not alone in confronting this issue. State and local governments and even large corporations face similar issues connecting with their target audiences. Engaging and thoughtful outreach about what the institution does for the people they serve can build trust and garner widespread support in both the public and private sectors. This need is particularly important in government, as the institution entrusted with addressing the most personal and practical elements of the citizenry they serve.

One creative solution to making government more palatable and impactful for the average citizen is gamifying the efforts of government agencies to educate the public.

Gaming and Gamification

What comes to mind when you think about gaming? Twenty years ago, it may have been a group of children huddled around a television, going on about who was in first place as their parents struggled to get them to the dinner table. Today, our perception of what gaming is has shifted to encapsulate a larger, more diverse audience, along with a wider acceptance of what a “game” really is. As gaming technology has progressed, one no longer needs to be tethered to a television to play. Anyone with a smartphone has access to thousands of free mobile games that are only a short download away. This wider access to gaming has diversified its users. Statista estimates that in 2020, 46% of gamers were female, following a slow and steady rise to almost equal their male counterparts over the last 10 years.³ When it comes to age, only 60% of “gamers” are under 35, leaving 40% of the gaming pool to their more seasoned participants.

While there will always be kids huddled around a television playing games like Mario Kart or the Legend of Zelda, this technology and diverse base means that working professionals are playing games regularly with the same vigor as younger populations. But the gaming industry is more influential than providing a way for people of all ages and genders to pass some time. It has transformed into a \$250 billion dollar juggernaut that drives technological innovation, cultural conversation, and diverse storytelling.

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/232383/gender-split-of-us-computer-and-video-gamers/>

Over the next ten years, the size of the industry is expected to grow up to 50% as more people discuss, watch, and play games. So how has this industry become so successful and influential in daily life? Games satisfy many of our deep-rooted social and psychological needs. By using points and badges to track achievements and progress, games make users feel competent and successful. They speak to the benefit of incremental progress to reach a much larger goal.

Games also satisfy the need for autonomy. The gamer is positioned to enact strategies and make decisions that dictate future outcomes. Unlike our broader social experiences that often entail events beyond our control, games put the gamer in the driver's seat, both figuratively and literally.

Critically, games also provide an escape from the mundanity and redundancy of many social and professional experiences. Even if only for a few minutes on a commute, games afford a temporary reprieve from the stresses of work, school, or inevitable personal challenges.

Fundamentally, games offer a simple and linear experience to satiate our need for validation and feel a sense of control in our lives. These social and psychological needs, paired with the intuitive and autonomous escapism gaming confers, make it a potentially powerful tool for teaching, as the same challenges hamper existing education outlets.⁴ What better way to push through the tediousness often associated with learning than with systems that have broad appeal, add entertainment to our experiences, and provide a simple and accessible way to learn? When done correctly, participants of gaming may not even know or mind that they are partaking in something educational.

Gaming has captured the attention of the public, with users willing to spend endless time on these platforms. The fun, challenging, and stimulating qualities it offers are a perfect contrast to what comes to mind when people hear the word “government.” To reverse the knowledge-gap regarding what the government does and the limited interest exploring what many perceive as a tedious and bureaucratic institution, imagine if the government leveraged gaming to educate the public.

Implementation Strategy

Gamifying government is a great way to blend learning with entertainment to make it more accessible to a wide spectrum of people. Integrating the elements of games that are enjoyable can create an effective medium to educate the general public about government processes. Encouraging learning through earning badges, leveling-up, or leaderboards invokes the same emotion as completing a game, while also providing incremental learning milestones.⁵

⁴ Sailer, M., Ulrich Hence, J., Mayr, S., & Mandl, H. (2017, April). How gamification motivates: An experimental study of the effects of specific game design elements on psychological need satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 69, 371-380. Retrieved from ScienceDirect: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S074756321630855X>

⁵ Ibid.



The government can use games to engage both their own workforce and the public. For government employees, extensive training is prevalent throughout every department and agency. This training is typically completed swiftly at the outset of an employee’s tenure, to provide quick onboarding. It is also done on an annual basis as a refresher, often at the very last minute, and is seen as a superfluous requirement and not as an opportunity to learn. By using badges, leaderboards, and more engaging training designs, employees would be more inclined to participate in trainings and their associated knowledge tests.⁶ Both the competitive and collaborative gaming elements also afford opportunities for employees to work with coworkers to complete interactive trainings.

And fortunately for governments, gaming is not limited to training. There are other significant applications that could be implemented.

Disaster Awareness and Preparedness:

Preparing the public for disasters is a vital part of a number of agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). FEMA could deploy a game taking someone through a disaster to ensure they are prepared should they ever be in that scenario. The scenario itself, be it a natural disaster or pandemic, raises the stakes allowing the gamer to buy in and care about their result. Using leaderboards, badges, and other gamification tools, helpful information could be passed on to the public that will allow them to operate more efficiently if faced with these difficult situations. Adding a feature on the mobile application that includes live government updates and links to online resources would also aid in the struggle against disinformation in language and terminology that are explained as part of the game.

⁶ King, N. (2020, May 27). *6 Gamification Trends that will Transform Training in 2020 & Beyond*. Retrieved from Chaos Theory Games: <https://www.chaostheorygames.com/blog/6-gamification-trends-that-will-transform-training-in-2020-beyond>

Understanding Government Procedures:

As discussed, the public does not often understand the full scope of the roles and responsibilities of most government agencies. One clear example is the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), where passengers in a rush are consistently mired by security procedures. The TSA could create an app where you could play as an agent to reinforce what items are or are not allowed on planes. This game could be hectic and timed, showing the real struggle that TSA agents have to efficiently and safely screen passengers. When one of these gamers approaches a TSA check for their next trip, they will be more prepared for the screening, and may be just a little more patient. As games become more prevalent in society, it is only a matter of time before they become a widely utilized medium to convey information.

Precedent

One of the attractive aspects of gamification's implementation is the versatility and range of possible options in achieving specific institutional objectives. Examples in both the public and private sectors of leveraging games to promote productivity or outcomes already exist.⁷

DuoLingo, as an example, employs a number of game elements applied to their language development offerings, including a mobile platform for greater accessibility, badges and tokens to track progress, and competitive ranking to compare your achievements against friends and the broader community. Other methods, such as the one employed by Forest (by ShaoKhan Pi) increase productivity by rewarding users with points for not constantly looking at their phones.⁸ Government examples, such as ANC Explorer—a location-based, geo-cache style interactive map application that guides visitors to monuments and memorials throughout Arlington National Cemetery—exist but have not yet become prevalent in the 21st century.

Utilizing the elements of game design on a mobile platform offers many benefits to organizations, particularly to government agencies that seek to educate the public, make practices more accessible, and increase connectivity with the citizens to whom they provide goods and services.

Conclusion

Government agencies, large companies, and other large institutions have suffered persistent misperceptions and general lack of awareness about their practices that have extended over the past few decades. Over that same period, the gaming industry has matured to the point where it can deliver informative, entertaining content to a huge audience at significant savings compared to traditional outreach methods. With the prevalence and ease-of-access to mobile apps in the modern era, the introduction of elements of game design into government outreach efforts can be a powerful tool in shaping public perceptions of what they do and how they seek to serve inaccessible or underserved communities.

⁷ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/gamification-inspiring-social-impact-maggie-miller/>

⁸ King, N. (2021, July 20). *Gamify for Impact: How to Use Gamification to Motivate Action*. Retrieved from Chaos Theory Games: <https://www.chaostheorygames.com/blog/gamify-for-social-impact-how-to-use-gamification-to-motivate-action>

Contact Information

Lonnie McBride, CEO

Lonnie.mcbride@mcbrideconsulting.net

571-213-6533

Alexander Zeller, Senior Consultant

Alexander.Zeller@mcbrideconsulting.net

503-867-1448

Nathan Grossman, Consultant

Nathan.Grossman@mcbrideconsulting.net

607-765-2722

Ryan Borowski, Consultant

Ryan.Borowski@mcbrideconsulting.net

706-573-9487

Hillel Gross, Manager

Hillel.gross@mcbrideconsulting.net

516-761-3179

