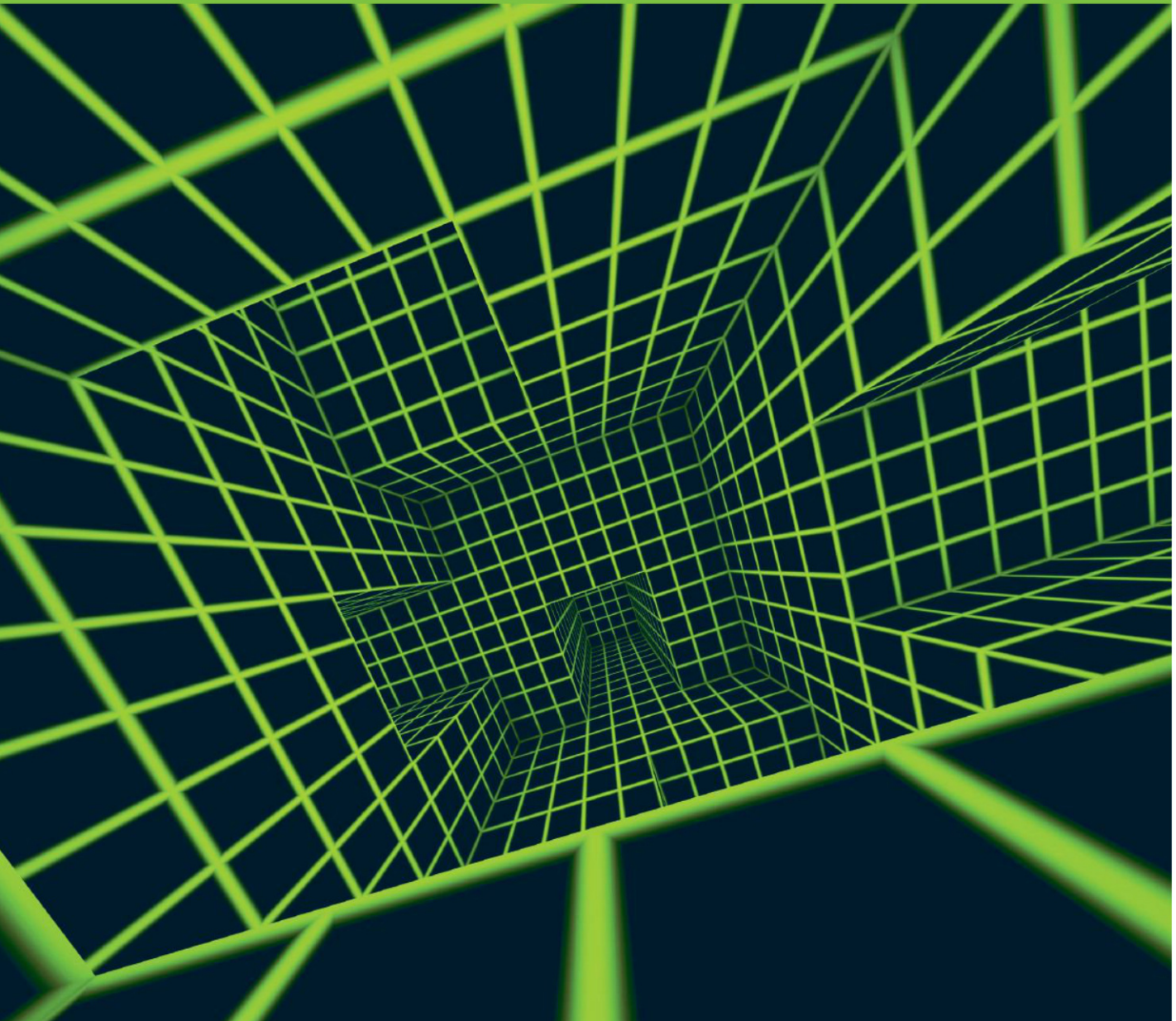


SPECIAL SECTION

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TRENDS+TECHNOLOGIES+CASE STUDIES





GAME GAIN

Games and simulations are anything but child's play for astute trainers. The evolution of gamification and multiplayer online games is ramping up organizational interest and learner engagement. **By Margery Weinstein**

When you think of “games,” do you still think of idle pastimes? Most trainers have heard of the use of serious games and simulations to instruct employees, but many are still unaware of the potential of this medium.

Far from a distraction, well-designed training games and simulations offer learners an engaging way to learn new skill sets and practice in a safe environment. The compelling nature of the world learners are immersed in via games and simulations may make it more likely learning will stick. Not surprisingly, this relatively new medium is ever evolving. The newest trends promise an even more engaging learner experience.

GETTING INTO GAMIFICATION

“The most exciting development in serious games and simulations is the emergence of the concept of gamification,” says learning consultant Karl M. Kapp. “Gamification is the process of using game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems. This means that through the careful application of game elements such as feedback, storytelling, curiosity, cooperation, mystery, and the freedom to fail, ordinary content can be made more engaging. The idea is that instructional designers don’t need to develop a full-blown, full-fledged game or simulation. Instead, they can use key aspects of games to drive engagement, activity, and learning.”

That said, gamification poses challenges to trainers even as it offers unprecedented opportunities.

Designing courses requires greater thought about what learners find most stimulating. “It’s important to keep in mind that gamification doesn’t mean simply adding points, rewards, or tokens to the learning process,” Kapp explains. “Those are superficial game elements that don’t engage the players and provide false motivation. But other traditional game elements such as compelling narrative, multiple levels of feedback, interesting challenges, and authentic problem-solving can be integrated into the initial design process to create learning that is compelling and engaging without the huge cost or time factors typically associated with robust games or simulations.”

A key advantage of gamification is it doesn’t require an investment in new technology. “Gamification can be done at a reduced cost and within the same relative time frame as the development of traditional instruction,” Kapp points out. “Additionally, it doesn’t need to be focused only on online games or Internet-based or mobile applications. Gamification is a way of thinking about development of instruction and does not have to equal technology.”

MASTERING ONLINE, MULTIPLAYER SCENARIOS

The last year has seen a steady rise in the use of online multiplayer simulations, notes Bjorn Billhardt, CEO of Enspire Learning. “Whereas in past years, more than 90 percent of our simulations were played in the classroom, now close to 25 percent of our simulations are played online, with multiple teams competing in Webinar breakout rooms and with facilitators creating meaningful debriefs over the phone,” says Billhardt. The shift to online, multiplayer experiences has been a learning experience for course designers, as well as their learners. “Many lessons were learned on how to create these online experiences and make them work,” Billhardt says. “For example, you can play a simulation in the classroom for eight hours in one day, but when you play online, you have to break up the experience into smaller chunks. It’s also a challenge to create a meaningful experience over multiple weeks—people forget where they were in the simulation; you need at least two or three touch points a week to keep people engaged.”

Billhardt says these top trends in simulations can be seen in the simulation his company created for front-line managers. “The problem with traditional role-play exercises is that often they are not able to create

meaningful conversations,” he says. “As a result, classroom role-plays end up not being very precise. On the other hand, self-paced online alternatives such as branching video scenarios often suffer from a lack of realism and immediacy.” For that reason, the management simulation that Billhardt’s company created uses a new kind of online interactivity. “The idea we came up with,” Billhardt explains, “was to create a team-based online simulation where learners practice difficult management conversations with pre-recorded actors but in which they have real learning partners who choose the actor’s responses from a list of options. This way, there is a human coach directing the online role-play and giving feedback to the learner.”

Online team-based simulations allow for meaningful interaction of peers in a structured environment, says Billhardt. He says that this medium works better than many other online modalities. “I think games and simulations are growing up. There was a lot of hype and, quite frankly, a lot of failed experiments in using ‘serious games’ for learning. We experimented, for example, with ongoing learning communities where, instead of tending virtual FarmVille animals, you could play and learn over time. The problem with that approach, as we found out, is that people don’t like open-ended learning games. They want more structure,” he points out. “What I see succeeding more and more are approaches that use online simulations to create meaningful dialog and discussion among a peer group that hasn’t met (and may never meet) in person. With virtual communication tools coming of age, online team-based simulations will continue to gain traction.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

The use of games and simulations to train employees is becoming an established and respected training vehicle, says Matt Landes, serious games advocate and instructional designer at Google. He says there are many good signs that serious games and simulations have arrived. “Constance Steinkuehler of the White House Office of Science and Technology is openly driving games as an instrument of learning and change in a wide range of federal agencies and programs,” says Landes. “Game design and development is being taken seriously and is being funded by very large government, enterprise, and social organizations.”


Nevertheless, there are still challenges facing

instructional designers who want to use serious games and simulations to train employees. Landes notes a few:

- Finding games that map on a 1:1 basis to relevant learning and performance objectives.
- Evaluation metrics, including validating that game play demonstrates (at a minimum) Kirkpatrick Level 2 competence and/or supplants a traditional quiz or other Level 2 evaluation tools.
- Determining how to blend in other modalities without killing the fun (i.e., when you add other traditional learning formats, the learning/change agenda becomes more overt and the danger of “chocolate-covered broccoli” is imminent.

Luckily, Landes says, there are solutions that can be implemented to stay on track. “Decision-makers should not get talked into pricey prototypes they can’t launch and should not work with design firms that are not experienced game designers—they are not the same thing,” he says. “A Web development firm that specializes in marketing can’t pivot to become a game designer at market prices, and it may not be able to get

you a launchable game.” Instead, Landes recommends “an experienced team of three-plus game developers with the game designer/developers maintaining veto rights on the game concept, design, and fun factor.”

Serious gaming and simulations will become more refined, with gaming applications available on more learning management systems. “I believe you will see more self-quantification. Some will be user/learner driven and others will be more top down. Examples include identified and anonymous quantification of velocity, volume, quality, etc.,” he says. “I believe you will see a leveling off of excitement about leader boards, static point schemas, and standard achievements such as badges. Organizations will begin to encounter some of the limitations and challenges around these game mechanics. Some will become disenchanting. Others will shift to more contextualized competition and more sophisticated point economies and achievement structures. Ultimately, many/most LMSs will begin to integrate basic game mechanics as an optional feature—if they have not already.” 

UPPING YOUR SALES GAME

By Giles House, VP, Marketing, Callidus Cloud

Gamification is permeating nearly all aspects of the business landscape. It’s become a powerful behavior incentivization tool that makes for an engaging environment in which to encourage employee performance, enhance training processes, and leverage successful participants to foster peer-to-peer mentorship opportunities.

We have been convinced of the power of gamification to revolutionize the sales business for a while now. Recognizing the opportunity gamification brings to increasing sales productivity, we recently launched MySalesGame, a cross-application gamified experience that ties together our sales and marketing suite across multiple applications, including marketing automation, quotes and proposals, sales coaching, sales enablement, commissions management, and learning management.

MySalesGame drives sales performance by tapping into the natural competitive instinct among participants. Powered by Badgeville, The Behavior Platform, MySalesGame drives increased efficiency across all sales channels by publishing peer performance on key sales and other objectives, such as training course completion, in real time. It also provides social currency redeemable for tangible rewards, such as cash and gift cards.

Money is a strong behavior motivator, but at some point

money actually stops motivating further actions. Reputation across a peer community can be motivating, and in many cases, drive behavior more efficiently than financial rewards. Gamification technology such as Badgeville is enabling us to provide a more powerful, visual, and visceral incentive for people to gauge their performance and keep up with or stay ahead of the competition.

For many, being recognized as a leader or role model by their peers is a primary motivator. MySalesGame taps into this notion by showcasing or highlighting the steps successful individuals have taken to achieve their status. This not only provides an ego boost for top performers but also provides a clear path to improvement that helps others make incremental progress toward their own success. For example, learners can complete a course and take a test; those who score high marks earn points toward status badges or tangible rewards, which encourages participation and retention. “Advertising” their newly acquired knowledge to the team again provides that clear path to success that others may emulate.

Gamification can be a powerful change management tool to help drive and manage behavior. Making it as fun, quirky, or serious as your corporate culture allows and breaking big-picture goals into manageable chunks—or gamified missions—makes goal setting and achievement less daunting compared to subjecting employees to yet another un-engaging training program.