How to Leverage Insights From Games and Gamification – the Road Ahead

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The period between Christmas and New Year traditionally offers us a moment of pause, to be together and to reflect. Furthermore, hopefully also to have joy, share in laughter, and to have some fun! In many households, games are played. Around the table, on the sports field, and, of course, online. Moreover, that is important, as in daily life, operational pressures, deadlines, and the treadmill of work all too often crowd out reflection. Structured reflection is, we argue, essential at times, as we all face significant challenges in our working lives. Challenges include workforce shortages, uncertainty about how to address digital transformations, climate-related health risks, and persistent global inequities. However, there is some good news: increasingly, people are aware that insights from games, gamification, and nudging theories may translate into real-life applications. By engaging in enjoyable reflection, we can learn to address problems in our complex work-related systems (Deterding et al., 2011; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Indeed, reflection can help us all, including researchers and healthcare professionals,

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make better sense of the past year and prepare for the challenges ahead. Reflecting on this, what are our lessons learned?

How to Reflect on the Past Year in Healthcare

Reflection on one's own practice, and on joint performance in healthcare, is most effective when it is both experiential and social. For that, workers need to be -and feel-psychologically safe. Games and serious play interactions can significantly foster a safety culture. By introducing narratives, roles, and bounded "magic circles," gameplay may allow healthcare workers not only to step back from day-to-day pressures and enjoy the interaction, but also to truly re-examine systemic challenges from a different vantage point. Board games, simulations, scenario-based games, virtual reality scenarios, escape rooms, and other methods of gameplay can all be used. It helps us revisit key past events, such as responses to crises, the implementation of new technologies, and policy shifts, and to be better equipped to face the future.

Core game mechanics—enabling feedback loops, sandbox scenarios, iterative processes, and failure tolerance—align well with reflective practice. In contrast to linear reporting or traditional debriefings, games encourage exploration of alternative strategies and "what-if" thinking -without having to face real-world consequences. This is particularly helpful for those working in complex adaptive systems, such as healthcare, where outcomes often emerge from complex and multifaceted interactions rather than from single decisions. Games that mirror real-world uncertainty and complexity are more likely to resonate with healthcare professionals and support deeper learning (van Gaalen et al., 2020). When using games or gameplay in healthcare, it is important to ensure that the chosen format accounts for inclusivity, power dynamics, and professional identity to avoid trivializing serious healthcare challenges or excluding certain groups (Gentry et al., 2019). Especially at the end of the year, when appreciation of social connection is likely to be higher in the workplace, playful reflection truly helps and fosters a shared sense of teamwork and adaptability to challenges across professional hierarchies and disciplines.

Applying 'Lessons Learned' to the Year Ahead – a Gentle Nudge!

As time passes, and this article is likely to be published in 2026, with your editors still in 2025, we feel we need to take up this challenge. To meet the aforementioned global challenges, problems can only be 'solved' if we demonstrate greater adaptability, prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration, and sustain positive change in joint behavior across systems and situations. Nevertheless, how to do that? Nudging, a behavioral science concept focusing on the adaptive design of decision environments, may be the key. Nudging, when done well, presents a "choice architecture" that guides us toward better decisions in life without coercion. Nudging is highly effective, as it may gently steer human and animal behavior without restricting the sense of autonomy. When

combined with game-informed approaches to signal and explore situations, nudges can further embed the insights gained, encourage collaboration, and support long-term engagement. We thus encourage our readers, often engaged in research, to form research teams that conduct "reflection sprints" using game mechanics to reassess their priorities or assumptions periodically. Funding bodies and institutions would benefit from incorporating playful simulations into their strategic planning to explore the downstream effects of policy or technological choices. At the system level, gamified dashboards and scenario tools can help researchers visualize complex data and unintended consequences, fostering more responsible innovation.

Looking ahead, it is crucial to recognize that the value of these approaches lies not in their mere novelty but in their intentional design, grounded in theory and evidence. And fun is the most elevated form of research, if we may cite Einstein. All play is associated with intense thought activity and rapid intellectual growth, and he highest form of research is essentially play.

The festive season provides an opportunity to play. However, also a symbolic reset point to experiment with such methods, to evaluate their impact, to reflect on, and refine them for sustained use in the upcoming year. Hence, we hope we nudged you a bit with this editorial, to play more often, also 'off season!'.

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