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Game Mechanics in Market Research



By Erin Leedy and Erica Ruyle, Market Strategies International

According to SCVNGR CEO Seth Priebatsch, we're leaving the decade of "social" and entering the decade of "games." We're certainly seeing this trend in the market research industry: games have been a hot topic of conversation at numerous research and marketing events this year. Discussion has focused on game mechanics—the application of which is sometimes called "gamification"—and how these ideas will influence, and even drive, interactive and web content in the 2010s.

There's healthy debate about whether game mechanics will impact online market research, and whether this would be for better or worse. Experimentation with digital incentives such as points and badges is almost inevitable in an industry where getting qualified respondents to "play" our research game is an increasing challenge. But, we're more excited about the potential for game mechanics to improve research participants' experiences in some key ways—possibly broadening the range of people who participate in research and improving the quality of the information we gather.

We see potential applications for several categories of game mechanics² in online market research:

- Using **digital incentives** to encourage and reward participation and to increase activity involvement or completion.
- Recognizing and increasing ("up-leveling") **participant status** to reward active participation and motivate participants to increase activity.
- Allowing for **group dynamics** within the online research activity to enrich learnings and enhance respondent experience and engagement—transforming individuals into a group whose members have a shared experience.
- Sharing **real-time info** with research participants, whether to aid in task completion or to reward participants.

About the Authors



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	Mechanic	Game Example	Research Example and Goal(s)
DIGITAL INCENTIVES	Achievement: The virtual representation of accomplishment.	Points, virtual currency or other digital rewards.	This mechanic is already being employed in MROCs via points or virtual currency. Points are awarded to increase respondent satisfaction with the task and to encourage engagement/task completion. This is a starting point for gamification and may be the only mechanic employed.
	Virtual Items: Digital prizes, rewards, objects found or earned within the course of a game.	Facebook gifts, Foursquare badges.	Beyond points, we might develop digital rewards or virtual objects to reward research participants for reaching a participation marker (e.g., completion of a survey, two days of involvement in a threaded discussion, etc.). We would award virtual items to increase participation level or to encourage longitudinal participation (e.g., involvement in a long-running panel).
PARTICIPANT STATUS	Status: The rank or level of a player. Players are often motivated by trying to reach a higher level or status.	Level 85 Paladin in World of Warcraft, SuperUser in Foursquare, a game leader board.	Within a market research panel or customer community, we could bestow higher status—or even “leader board” ranking—on those who participate at an above-average level. This status would be visible to all participants, with the intention of encouraging increased levels of participation, both by those with higher status (to keep the status level) and by those who have yet to attain higher status.
	Ownership: The act of controlling something, having it be “your” property.	Owning property in Monopoly or Life, holding Mayor title of a location in Foursquare.	This mechanic might be best employed within a customer community setting. Customers could vie for “Top Insider” or “Advisor of [company]” status; for companies with market cache, the title might hold some appeal and encourage an increase in participation.
GROUP DYNAMICS	Communal Discovery: An entire community is encouraged to work together to meet a challenge.	DARPA balloon challenge , Foldit crowdsourced puzzle game for protein research.	This game mechanic could help to innovate (or perhaps rejuvenate) online research, particularly on the qualitative side. We could encourage group collaboration in response to questions or posed problems, and push the level of individual engagement and group collaboration more towards what we’d see in in-person research sessions.
	Viral Game Mechanics: A game element that requires multiple people to play (or that can be played more effectively with multiple people).	Increased Farmville success if you invite friends, Groupon deals that unlock only when a minimum number of people purchase.	In the same way that some research efforts employ referral mechanisms, we could allow for—and even encourage—referrals in an online qualitative or quantitative research setting. Respondents would earn a higher incentive, whether real-world or virtual, for referring qualified participants. We’d need to proceed with caution here to guard against inadvertently encouraging unwanted or unethical behaviors on the respondent side.
REAL-TIME INFO	Real-Time Mechanics: Information shared as it’s available; uninhibited by delay.	Real-time score updates—both the player’s score and the competitors’ scores—cause instant reaction, whether positive (gratification) or negative (de-motivation).	If we are able to share some results immediately after question/task completion, this mechanic—though likely controversial for many sensitive research topics—may result in increased respondent satisfaction and enjoyment. Even the sharing of limited data may result in a positive experience for respondents, and would not put the security of critical research findings at risk.

Although we see promise in gamification, there are significant risks to consider when utilizing game mechanics within an online research setting:

- **Encouraging cheating and other unwanted behaviors.** Many of these mechanics might push respondents to cheat in order to increase the positive benefit they receive, whether to gather additional virtual items, boost their status in the research community or increase their actual monetary incentive, if one is given. As we experiment with game mechanics, we need to carefully study the positive and negative impacts on participation quality and frequency as well as the quality of the data collected.
- **Setting up a system that breeds more “professional” respondents.** There’s general agreement that professional respondents are an undesired byproduct of traditional monetary-based incentives. We do not yet know whether the adoption and use of game mechanics and game-related incentives will diminish or exacerbate this problem. Again, this is an area where we need to begin to conduct experiments and take a careful look at the outcomes before making a dramatic shift from traditional to digital and game-based incentives.

We believe that gamification offers a variety of interesting possibilities within a market research context and have started to test some early hypotheses. We shared our preliminary insights with the market research community at the ESOMAR Congress in Amsterdam on Monday when we presented “All Fun and Games? Myths and Realities of Respondent Engagement in Online Surveys,” by Theo Downes-Le Guin, Reg Baker, Joanne Mechling and Erica Ruyle.

Read *Research Magazine’s* [blog post](#) on the presentation.

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¹ http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/09/welcome_to_the_decade_of_games.html

² SCVNGR game mechanics playdeck, <http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/25/scvng-r-game-mechanics/>

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