

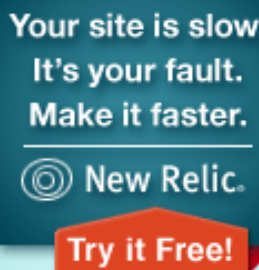
How Fun is Your Website?

Oct 1 2010 by [Jason Gross](#) |  [9 Comments](#) |  [Stumble](#) |  [Bookmark](#)




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The secret to success for a website these days is really no secret at all. Websites that really bring home the bacon are the ones driven by loyal visitors who frequent the site on a regular basis. [Building a community](#) like this often takes a lot of time and loads of [great content](#).

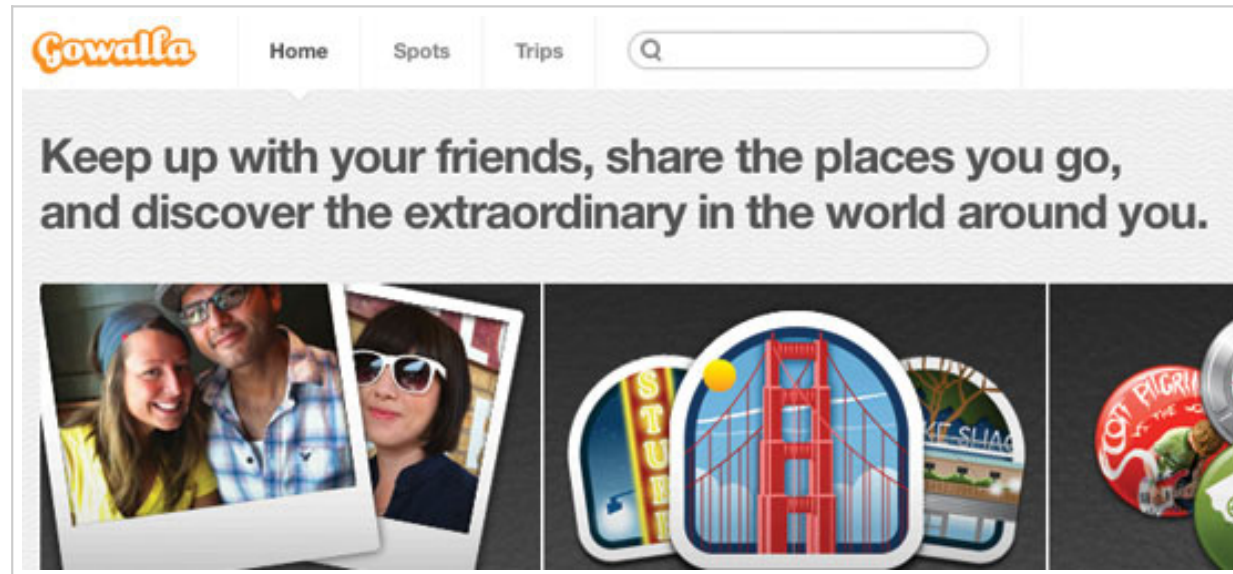
But is there a way to shortcut the tried and true methods of great material and great marketing?

What if a website were fun to play?

Games and gaming are two terms that are quickly finding themselves a new meaning on the web. What used to be associated with an acne-prone teenager alone in a windowless basement is being transformed into a socially hip hobby. The age range for gaming is expanding, and the activities that include gaming features are shifting as well.

Games in general are nothing new. For centuries, we have been enjoying sports, card games, and board games. In the past few decades, the evolution of video games has spawned the modern "casual game." On the web, these games include online Flash games, [mobile apps](#), and most recently, social networking and community-oriented websites.

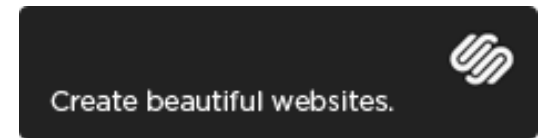
Gaming, most recently, has entered the social media space, in incarnations such as [Foursquare](#) and [Gowalla](#), as well as Facebook applications such as FarmVille, with great success. While the likes of location-aware social networking services like Foursquare and Gowalla may not seem like much of a game at first — don't be fooled. Checking into your favorite locations in order to earn rewards such as points or badges is a solid game element.



Is gaming something that can be incorporated into a website in order to draw in a wider audience? And more importantly, can game mechanics keep our users coming back?

Set the Playing Field

How can a website incorporate a game for its users? The core mechanic of pretty much any game is completing a set of tasks in order to achieve a reward. A website already has half of this in place in that every site has a set of tasks that they would love their users to take. This is often called a **call to action**. What most websites are missing is the other half of the mechanic: a reward for the end user when they successfully take the call to action.



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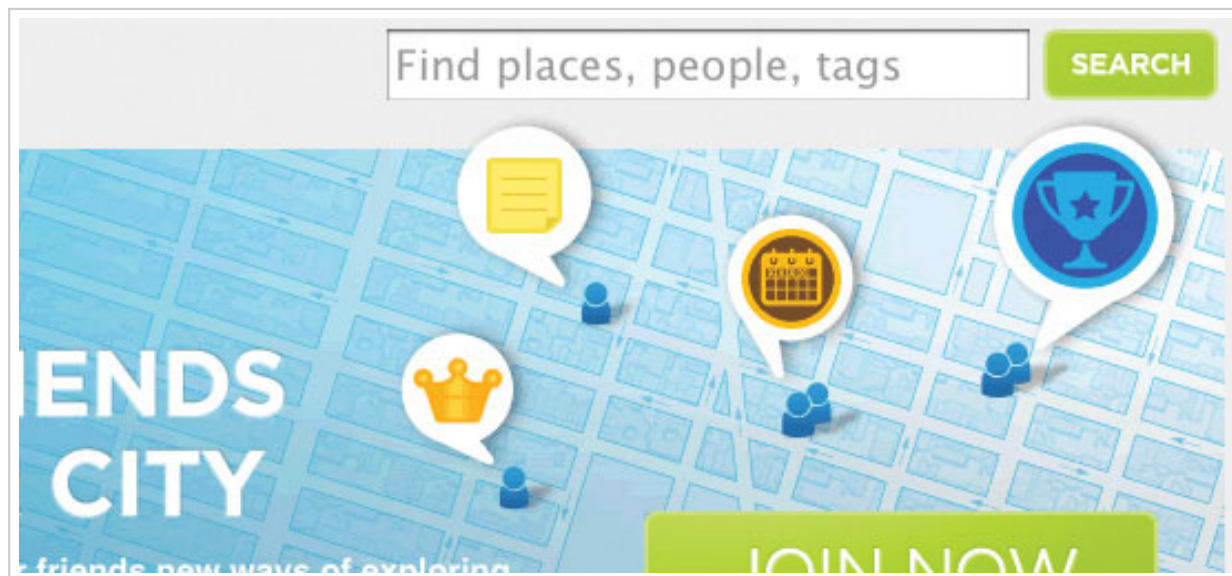
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[Foursquare](#), a location-based social networking web service, has introduced a great reward system for its users. The badges you earn for completing desirable tasks are fun for the consumer to collect, and easy for the producer to deliver. The badge system of Foursquare has shown us that there is a sweet spot for building this type of community. Badges give users the incentive to keep their statuses up to date.



The gaming element of the community must be fun and easy to participate in. But at the same time, it should avoid overshadowing the primary function of the system. In the case of Foursquare, badges are fun and easy to earn as a reward, but the core function of sharing your location with your friends remains in the forefront.

A Whole New Ballgame

It's important to consider what Foursquare and Gowalla are not. The elephant in the room is that both of these examples are apps. It really doesn't reflect the typical website (blogs and content-driven websites, [e-commerce sites](#), etc.). So how would this idea really translate to a community that lives and breathes entirely in the traditional web browser?

A standing example of a site with great game mechanics is [GiantBomb.com](#). Not too

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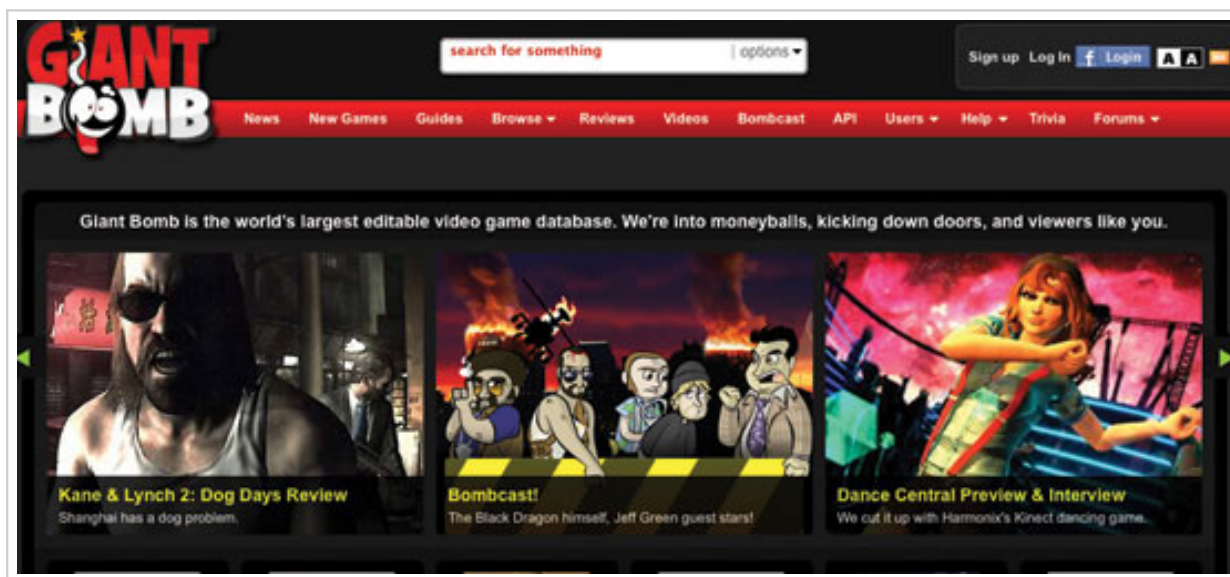
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surprisingly, Giant Bomb is a site dedicated to video games, and so game mechanics on the site only makes sense. Still, the popularity of the site stands as a testament to the methods they have used to encourage user involvement.



Basically, the site is a giant wiki for video games, sharing every bit of information you could possibly want to know about your favorite video game, from how many different appearances Mario has made since his introduction, to full fledged game reviews. All of this content is created and maintained by a user base that is rewarded for their contributions through a point and level system. The top contributors are praised and displayed throughout the site.

The result is a content-rich website with a very loyal community. The contest for the top spot on the leader board drives users to include more information about the games they play and love, all to oust their friends as the king of Giant Bomb content creation — in gaming lingo, to be "l33t."

Can I Play Too?

With game mechanics becoming the buzzword of the year, and seeing it succeed in mobile apps and websites such as GiantBomb.com, [Stack Overflow](#), [Concept Feedback](#)

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and the like, makes you wonder if a game system on your website is a good idea. The reality is that it may not.

Much like any trend to sweep over the web, the idea of implementing game mechanics into a website may not be ideal for everyone. Many sites on the web already have a great system of their own in place for retaining visitors; for a lot of them, the reward their users get by contributing to the site is more natural.

For example, many [design blogs](#) will always have an active user base because their readers value the ability to contribute to the community. Comments provide an option to get your name out there, have a link back to your personal site, or help build a professional network. So the incentive to discuss the topic at hand and enrich a particular post's value is already there. Having a badge system or a "top commenters" list may increase activity further, but would that incentivize better commenting or would it just compel people to comment just to get a badge? Wouldn't the latter be the wrong motivation to comment on a post? In this scenario, unless there are counter mechanics in place such as the ability to down vote comments that are clearly for attaining a badge (which in itself can open up a can of worms), having a game system might make the core feature worse, with comments written solely to achieve a badge, and not to contribute to the discussion.

However, some industries could see a boost of community activity by setting up a reward system for their site visitors. For example, restaurants value customer reviews and feedback, but don't always have a way to give back. Foursquare gives owners the option to provide discounts or special offers to their loyal customers who frequently visit their location. The same system of rewards could be established for customers that contribute more than their friends to the restaurant in terms of online reviews and social feedback.

It's all Fun and Games...

...until someone loses an eye, right? Are game mechanics a good way of building up considerable traffic on your website? Certainly, the first concern of many will be that introducing users to a game on your website will take away from the content or core goals itself. A huge problem we could be creating here is users blindly using a site and

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posting meaningless content just to gain rank or reward. Not only could we be creating more work on the administration end of the site, but also, it might produce unwanted effects.

Like any technology, the idea of game mechanics in your website is that it should be like a tool. No tool is inherently good or evil when left to its own devices; only the holder of said tool can determine its fate. The key to incorporating games in your website depends on the tasks you're encouraging your users to participate in. Much like a video game itself, each environment has a unique audience that requires personalized tasks relevant to them in order for the system to be executed with perfection.

For example, if a local theater for live entertainment wanted to reward its regular patrons, they could provide free swag, tickets or other incentives to any user that attended a certain number of shows and posted reviews on their website. The customers who posted the most reviews and attended the most shows would get prizes that are more significant. They also get the prestige of being the top participant.

A Great Double Play

The potential benefits of a gaming system extend beyond the site statistics produced by a loyal and highly engaged community. With the advent of social media also came with it a change in the way businesses connect with their customers. Networks such as Twitter, Foursquare, and Facebook have given business owners the ability to have personal interaction with more customers. They also have a bigger potential to expand their customer base by tapping into their existing customers' network of friends. Owners and operators who have taken advantage of this technology have been praised for it and a new standard is being formed.

The result is a community of business patrons or site visitors that have come to expect that warm fuzzy feeling when they get a nice pat on the back from the people up top.

Getting personal feedback from the people who run the site you visit often is a great

feeling, and now that this feeling is so obtainable, it will soon be what is expected.

Allowing your community to participate in a friendly game against each other to prove who is the best member is a great way to discover the individuals in your community who are active and engaged. For site owners, this is a great way to see whom they should be reaching out to for help, alpha testing, feedback, feature selection, and suggestions for improvement because they are the people who are compelled to make "their" website better.

The Last Play on Games

Games have always been a great social activity and they can encourage the development of a strong and loyal community. The ability to partake in a game with someone builds the bonds that spark sports rivalries, professional camaraderie and heated debates. The internet should be no exception to the results that traditional games have brought to physical communities and what video games have brought to digital worlds.

If levels, rewards and leader boards can strengthen the loyalty of your community, then perhaps it's time for your website to be more fun to play.

Game Over. It's Your Turn

What is your take on game mechanics? Have you had an experience where a game has made your web community stronger? Can you think of any great examples where game mechanics could improve a company's online environment?

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About the Author



Jason Gross is a freelance web designer focused on creating clean and user friendly websites. Jason currently lives in Indiana and can be found on Twitter as [@JasonAGross](#) or on the web at [his personal blog](#) and portfolio.

9 Comments



ArleyM

October 1st, 2010

Great thoughts. Conversely I always am mystified at how some sites couldn't be further from fun. Bank sites for instance are always as miserable to use as they could possibly be – too big and too hard to navigate.

Fun; in games as in sites, can sometimes mean just making you feel like you're really good at them.



DesignMango

October 1st, 2010

Very interesting article. thanks for sharing



Sarah Jones

October 1st, 2010

Keeping a Gaming option on the home page for attracting visitors and to make them bookmark your site or to visit your site regularly is a very good idea. Providing Free games for some time, will be awesome.



Alex

October 1st, 2010

Somehow Steam's achievement system makes playing games more fun, which proves your point. I'm thinking about an article on my blog about that.



Luke

October 4th, 2010

Great article thanks, @Alex you should go for it! :-)



Sharleen Sy, Strategic Synergy

October 7th, 2010

Thank you for the article!

One thing to also note is that Game Mechanics work best when they tap into a players motivations and personality type. What one person finds fun and engaging, another may not. I have an example chart on my Gamification blog that illustrates how a mapping might work, associating motivations to various game mechanics to encourage a particular user behavior:

<http://stratsynergy.wordpress.com/gamification-design/>

Thanks!
Sharleen.



ewii

October 19th, 2010

Do realy games are the only fun?



Bekki



November 19th, 2010

As you have clearly stated, adding gaming to a site can introduce a huge level of interactivity and communication that wasn't possible before. However, ArleyM's final comments got me thinking.

Personally, I quite like gaming and do find gaining achievements quite a buzz, but I get seriously embarrassed and rather put off when those badges or awards are shared with a wider audience as I'm not the best gamer or participator around.

So, as much as it's nice to be good at something, when you end up comparing your rewards with those of your friends and they come up short, it can feel like you've got "fail" in big red, possibly flashing, letters written across your forehead.



Edson Santoro

April 15th, 2011

Very good article! Love it!

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