Get in the Game!

Fitness facilities are discovering the value of gamification.

Fitness facilities compete to offer cutting-edge movement trends, but what about cutting-edge technology? The fitness world is becoming ever more virtual, and incoming clients are looking for more than a fun indoor cycling class or a cool cardio machine; they want to play a game!

Put away your star charts, whiteboards and free T-shirts, however. These members are looking for games that require fit tech wearables, smartphones or tablets; that have an augmented-reality storyline; and that pay off with both recognition and a mix of virtual and real-world prizes. Gamification is a booming industry. If you want to set yourself apart, toss out the treadmill brochures and invest in a gaming experience.

What Is Gamification?

Anytime you turn something into a game, you've gamified it. In Stockholm, a rarely used set of stairs next to an escalator was transformed into a piano keyboard, and each "key" struck a note when stepped on. The result was that 66% of people chose to use the stairs instead of the escalator, as opposed to just 25% before (Cooper 2015). The moral of the story: People like to play and have fun.

Although gamification is coming of age, games have been used as motivation for thousands of years. What has changed is technology. Video games pro-

vide an escape from the real world, and game designers have begun to ask this question: What if the real world and the game world merged? In fact, it's already happening; just think of apps such as Pokémon Go (a location-based augmented-reality game) and the dizzying variety of high-tech wearables now available.

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hood lawns during your daily run, filling a chest with "gold coins" by mastering math facts, or jumping to the top of the leaderboard when you up-sell a customer at work. All of these examples are available to consumers or are programs that large corporations use to motivate employees—and they're getting results.

In her book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, author Jane McGonigal,

PhD, explains that people become hooked on video games because they deliver the optimistic engagement and emotional rewards that people crave. McGonigal, formerly a game designer, notes that game-testing labs have transformed into psychological institutes, and designers have become "happiness engineers" who create games that deliver the perfect mix of pleasure and challenge. Fitness professionals can also become happiness engineers by blending a little forethought and creativity into their programming.

family members, co-workers and myself," Seedman says. "I do periodic weekday and weekend step-based challenges."

In a sense, Seedman is creating a virtual world of fitness success for his clients, and he is able to use the feedback to motivate and enliven the entire process. He offers two challenges, one he calls the "weekend warrior" and another he calls the "workweek hustle." He sends his clients an invitation to join, and with a quick tap of their tracker they're off and running. "Once enrolled, they can view each contestant's step count," says

large goals are broken into manageable chunks, and there's a feeling of balance between striving and success. They monitor health behavior changes as well as results in a quantifiable way, which keeps them on track and loyal to the facility. In Vancouver, British Columbia, Krista Popowych, 2014 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year and Keiser[3] global director of group education, uses technology to engage and inspire participants in her indoor cycling classes. "The metrics displayed on the bike's computer help riders to self-motivate and meet or even surpass their previous goals," says Popowych. "At the end of the workout, I remind attendees to review their data and use the information as a new baseline for subsequent classes."

Popowych says that gamifying her rides brings a whole new element to the experience, both for her and for her participants. "One of my favorite screens on the Keiser leaderboard is 'team mode,'" she says. "The computer puts the riders into four teams, and I lead the class through different competitions. I provide the parameters and set the timeframe (e.g., a 3-minute hill climb or a 5-minute time trial). By mixing up the drills, I give each group a fair opportunity to come out on top. I've also used projection systems where the riders are avatars on a screen. Participants love to see themselves riding in the peloton and see which riders are pushing ahead and taking the lead 'for the team.'"

Popowych's example supports the notion that a good game increases rather than stymies socialization. People are more likely to show up to their workouts if they're held accountable. However, it's important not to understate the fun factor! Jennifer Coccia, director at Asphalt Green's Battery Park City campus in New York knows firsthand how taking the leap and investing in a high-tech gamification program can motivate people in ways they didn't know were possible, all while having a blast. When Coccia was director of fitness at Asphalt

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Gamification and Fitness

Gamification not only motivates people but also serves as a kind of "bypass" for behavior modification. When people start a fitness regimen, their goals aren't necessarily attainable right away. One workout won't make people lose weight or gain strength, and one workout won't increase endurance or decrease blood pressure. All of those results take time and consistency (Prostrollo 2016).

When you gamify exercise, the points awarded or bonuses earned are immediate, and exercisers feel a quantifiable sense of accomplishment on day one. When players are given virtual rewards, their brains light up with dopamine (McGonigal 2011). People are motivated to re-create that feel-good hit. We like to work hard, but we also need that pat on the back.

Competition can be a motivating factor. Justin Seedman, ACE-certified health coach, personal trainer and behavior change specialist in Pembroke Pines, Florida, uses Fitbit[3] activity trackers to hold his clients accountable. "I have people compete against other clients, their

Seedman. "This in turn increases the competition level. There's also an option to taunt and cheer on each contestant. I talk to clients about the value of being part of these challenges. As an incentive/reward, I use public recognition, client of the month awards, gift cards and even certificates for complimentary sessions that clients can give out to their friends, family and/or co-workers."
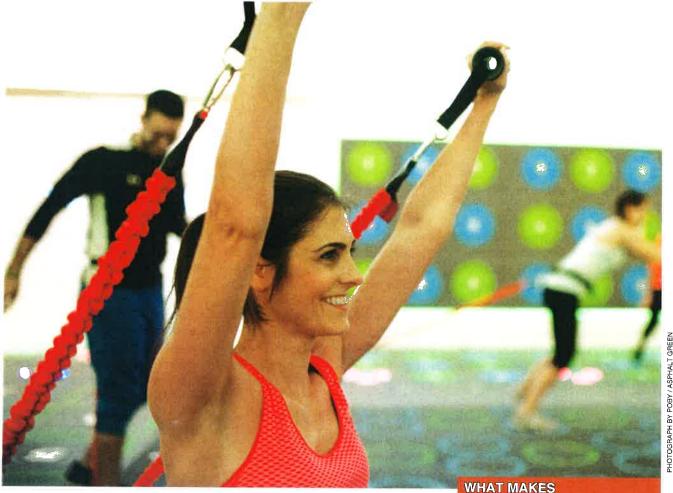
Being Inside a Game

Many gamers value playing over winning. Think of Tetris: Some people consider it the greatest game of all time, but it is also unwinnable (McGonigal 2011). The game simply gets harder and harder the further you progress, until eventually you lose; it continually challenges you to the edge of your abilities. If a game is truly engaging, gamers have no desire to win, as winning signifies the end. True gamers would rather keep playing than end the game.

In a fitness facility, this is ideal. One goal leads to the next, the metrics are constantly in flux, exercisers feel a sense of accomplishment as their

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Green's Upper East Side location, she launched AG6™, a 45-minute, high-intensity, circuit-based class that uses Pavigym's PRAMA technology, a high-tech, immersive workout that puts participants into an arcade experience. AG6 gamifies high-intensity interval training with electronic targets that push participants past their limits.

The PRAMA system provides a fully interactive workout space, with pressure-sensitive walls and floors (targets) that respond to touch. Participants interact with the spatial floor references, which serve as focus points for moves that train endurance, strength, balance, speed, agility and reaction time. One

circuit might include hockey lunges and medicine ball throws, for example, all in time with targets that light up on the floors and walls. Thanks to integrated music and automatically timed work and rest periods, instructors are able to focus on the workout and be coaches rather than demonstrators.

An entire room, which was previously set aside for gymnastics, is now dedicated to AG6. According to Coccia, the facility's managers wanted to use the space for a program that would appeal to athletes, kids, older adults and "regular people." "It was a great investment," she says. "You can compete against others or yourself. The metrics make a difference in adherence and motivation. If I wanted to, I could set up a three-way competition—or simply test my own reaction time. The time goes by quickly, and both our staff and our members love it."

Gamification Makes a Real Difference

Talking about gamifying fitness is one thing, but does it actually work? Yes! Seedman recounts one of many success stories. "When I first met James, a

WHAT MAKES A GOOD GAME?

When dreaming up your preferred style of gamification, consider that all good games have four major components, explained below. Apply these elements to your own needs. For example, use gamification to motivate and train front-desk staff, to reward instructors for subbing classes, to decrease absenteeism by giving attendance points or to transform your sales department into a fantasy football league. Your imagination is the limit! For a successful gamification process, follow these steps:

1. Provide a goal. Goals give a sense of purpose to playing.
2. Have clear rules. Rules limit what players are allowed to do and challenge them to be creative or strategic in reaching the goal.
3. Create a feedback system. Feedback lets players know how close they are to achieving their goal, and it motivates them to continue.
4. Make participation voluntary. Opting to play makes the game safe and pleasurable.

Source: McGonigal 2011.

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49-year-old man with a sedentary job, he was doing 45–60 minutes of structured exercise twice a week," Seedman says. "However, in between those periods he wasn't active at all. He already had a wearable active tracker that his wife had purchased to help him become more active, but it alone wasn't motivating James to take more steps. This changed when he became a part of our weekly challenges. When he connected to other people on a leaderboard, his competitive side came out. He was determined to reach the top, and he did just that."

Behavior modification is at the heart of all successful fitness and wellness programs. Fitness technology—and, more specifically, gamification—is a useful tool for helping clients and members make healthy choices while they're on a fun, inspirational path to adherence. Regardless of the technology used and the games provided, Popowych points out, it's still important for the instructor to be fully present. "Technology alone can't make a great class," she says. "But technology with an engaged and inspiring leader certainly can!" ■

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