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Games-based compliance training: Engaging learners with interactive experiences

by Nic McMahon

Compliance initiatives, including anti-corruption, privacy policies, and codes of conduct, are emerging more rapidly than ever throughout the world. Added to this challenge is the increasing need to train global workforces on laws such as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the U.K. Bribery Act and many others. Changing perceptions and, sometimes, habits is essential to protect clients or the company from an even inadvertent violation or safety hazard. However, the majority of compliance training falls far short of learners’ expectations and is typically described as dull, boring, and un-engaging. As a result, compliance learning often fails to generate the visibility and adoption that the company hopes for, leaving managers frustrated. The boring click-through content problem is exacerbated by the continued pressure on learners’ time, as well as the increasing mix of Gen Y learners entering the global workforce.

However, help might not be too far away! Introducing gaming elements to compliance training, such as simulating challenges and risk scenarios facing the global organization today, is increasing adoption and engagement of learners by driving a more active understanding and practice of compliance programs. For example, in a competitive, computerized board game that VIA created for HP called “Around the World” learners were tested on their compliance knowledge in order to get stamps on their passport and advance to the next level.

At first glance, the concept of compliance training being a “game” can put many prospective organizations off, but like many aspects of life—perhaps most notably learning how to fly planes around the country—games can go a long way to allow people to not only listen to, but also learn and interact with, important business-critical concepts in a safe and engaging environment. Luckily for us all, there is not an airline in the world that doesn’t put their pilots in at least 100 hours of flight simulation before allowing them to take us on our next business trip.
Why does gaming work so well with compliance learning?
In the 21st Century, gaming has taken over living rooms across nearly every developed country on the planet. With its integration of art forms from writing and character creation, to design and computer animation, it’s no wonder that nearly two-thirds of Americans play video games according to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA).1

Did you know?
- The average gamer is 30 years old and has been playing for 13 years, according to ESA.
- 68% of gamers are 18 years of age or older, according to ESA.
- 36% of gamers play games on their smartphone, and 25% play games on their wireless device, according to ESA.
- 70% of what you learn is through social and informal learning.2
- Games can add as much as a 108% improvement in retention.3

For the past 10 years, gaming has also integrated itself into corporate training programs. It is becoming a great trend in business to utilize this albeit recreational exploration to advance employee knowledge and increase learning retention at unimaginable rates. By repurposing existing material into this new and compelling media, companies can engage employees through active learning that uses multiple intelligences and reinforces appropriate behavior.

Traditional learning courses tend to be focused on completion and analytical data (“You scored 63%, please retake lesson 2.”). They direct the learner with lots of text and information, creating a linear relationship between learner and content. On the other hand, game-based learning is very interactive and graphical. With a focus on motivational incentive rewards, the learner actually impacts game outcomes and direction, and learns through applying the information. Learning has never been so much fun.

Improving recall and promoting the application of new knowledge
Games are challenging, interesting, and engaging—plus, they work. People have been using games for generations to teach concepts, skills, and knowledge. Think Yahtzee and math, Scrabble and spelling, Mastermind and strategy, Clue and problem solving. The list goes on and on.

Research supports the theory that gaming improves retention, problem solving, and critical thinking skills, because they are multisensory—kinesthetic, visual, and auditory. According to Brain Rules by John Medina:
- Hear a piece of information and three days later, you’ll remember 10% of it.
- See a piece of information and three days later, you’ll remember 35% of it.
- Hear and see it, and three days later, you’ll remember 65% of it.
Games tell a story and stories stick with us. A good story allows the player to become emotionally invested—choices are presented, decisions are acted upon, and mistakes are made, allowing the player to learn by doing.

Games also incorporate goals and rewards, along with risks and consequences. Humans are competitive when challenged. We love to win. The brain was built for survival and the promise of reward creates motivation to try harder.

Although these inherent traits will keep learners engaged for a while, games also need to be “replayable” because repetition equals retention. For example, arcade action games like Tetris, Space Invaders, Angry Birds, etc. teach by repeating an action over and over, which is building skill level in a way that is more enjoyable and effective than a simple quiz.

What goes into designing engaging and effective learning?

Organizations need to define their distinctive cultural attributes, high-risk factors, and the roles unique to their company. Learning from the perspective of one’s role in the organization helps to ensure that the information is relevant and interesting to that person, thereby increasing training results and empowering workers to make “better” decisions, (i.e., decisions that are more in line with their goals for the company).

For instance, Autodesk goes to Las Vegas every year. So, in keeping with their unique culture and theme, they decided to take their Code of Conduct and Compliance training to Las Vegas—or at least virtually. In this Vegas conference example, Elvis guides the learner through venues such as the exhibit hall, breakout sessions, and the casino floor. Each venue is positioned with role-specific content and real-world scenarios that reinforce organizational values and ethics, as well as educate learners about gift, entertainment, confidentiality policies, and more.

Different game options and their unique strengths

Finding the right balance of complexity to support the learning objectives is essential to determining which type of game to use. Some of the more common styles of games used for training are:

- **Game-show games**: Game-show style games are great for ensuring knowledge transfer. They use gaming as a replacement for testing learned knowledge. Familiar game mechanics remove some pressure and provide motivation through scores, rewards, medals, and leader boards, as well as immediate feedback on success.

- **Simulation-style games**: Simulations are good for challenging learners to practice skills in a realistic situation. They offer “safe” environments by replicating elements of the workplace and realistic character interaction to aid recall. They are learner led with a range of outcomes. By incorporating real-life incentives for staff, they focus on application of knowledge for learning reinforcement. In addition, they can be easily repurposed by updating content and reusing avatars and game mechanics.

- **Metaphor-based games**: Metaphor-based games are particularly effective when trying to focus on a specific aspect or behavior which requires making informed choices or integrating knowledge to certain situations, because they provide contextualization of issues or challenges. They offer an undeniable “fun factor” into learning for increased engagement by balancing information and game play. Metaphor-based games are also easily reusable. By simply changing out the content you can use the same game interface.

Localizing games for the global workforce

When going global with compliance training, it is essential to consider the cultural
differences that will impact the success of the program. Not all cultures play “Who wants to be a millionaire?” or “Jeopardy.” That’s why it’s important to understand the target audience’s preferred game play and to modify the game to fit their needs.

In order to localize game-based training elements, it is essential to neutralize the English content from the eLearning framework source files and build in support for translation right from the start. From a tactical perspective, when translating games across language and culture, it is helpful to externalize the content, use Unicode characters and suitable fonts, design screens for text expansion and text direction, allow users to type in their own alphabet, and ensure sorting and number formats are correct for the audience.

Animations should also be adaptable to target languages. Avoid graphics or icons that have specific definitions to the source language (English) or culture. There’s plenty of imagery and content that can work cross-culturally. For example, games based on an alien planet can be great for global programs because it tends to be a pure, unbiased environment. On the other hand, a giant US dollar sign on the chest of Captain Money may not send the right message to the Middle East.

Whenever possible, customize training content for the region—make new scenarios; write local, relevant dialog; or employ different (and perhaps more appropriate) game techniques. Maybe the audience doesn’t appreciate a heavy use of audio in its games, or prefers a simple interface rather than a highly interactive and complex one. Matching the tastes of the local audience leads to greater success.

For example, VIA worked with TRACE International to add interactive gaming components into their web-based global compliance training program. The components were designed to teach learners to recognize bribe requests and practice doing the right thing by following in the footsteps of a fictional character who had crossed the line. The goal was to make the right decisions in each scenario. A high score earned a certificate and also spared the fictional character from prosecution. The program was translated into 13 languages and thousands of global employees and third-party contractors learned the nuanced world of anti-bribery laws and how to recognize risky situations and avoid breaking the law.

Are games always a good idea?
No! It is important to be mindful of where games are integrated into the overall learning strategy. Also, be sure to consider your audience carefully. Are they global? Do they speak different languages? Are they all using the same technology? What are the demographic break downs? Lastly, think through the subject matter. Sensitive subject matter, like sexual harassment policies, may not be well suited for game-based learning.

Development and deployment costs
Systems and customer courseware can range in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. New technology and tools have made it much easier and more cost-effective to augment an existing compliance program or series with game-based learning. In fact, it’s now possible to implement game-based learning for as little as $10,000, or build a game template for as little as $25,000 that can be repurposed with content from programs. Of course, more elaborate game-learning platforms are available with team play, leader boards, and the like.

In addition, by keeping reusability and scalability in mind, games can be built as templates that can be repurposed by other managers or for different departments. Multiple questions can be added or removed and the game can be made longer or shorter depending on content. For example,
HP recently worked with VIA to develop a series of games that were designed so the assets would be easy to swap out, allowing several learning program managers from different departments at HP to try incorporating games. With very little risk, they could repurpose the templates to meet their specific needs. By developing a game once, leveraging the game template, and repurposing it across the organization, HP is delivering high-touch, high-fun learning at a low cost.

Because of the low cost of the revisions, game development is now an option available to all learning program managers at HP. The cost is approximately 20% less than developing a game from scratch.

**Measuring the success of a game-based learning program**

Game-based learning should be looked at as part of a complete compliance program. Just posting the games and expecting people to go play them is not enough. Project managers should be clear on how the game will support the compliance training initiatives and what role it will play, before embarking on development. By evaluating learning gaps in search of opportunities to grow knowledge, you can include ways to measure whether these learning objectives were met up front. These goals are different for every organization. Will you measure increased engagement and consumption, completion, retention, and/or a combination thereof? One great way to evaluate the success of your game-based learning tool is to offer it in conjunction with other compliance program elements and then follow it with an assessment.

As corporate compliance programs face increasing pressure to improve quality and engagement, game-based learning proves a powerful vehicle for augmenting programs. Compliance games allow employees to understand the connection between the learning experience and the real-world, enabling risk-free simulation of the consequences of their actions. It naturally contains elements that allow for immediate feedback, as well as measuring and tracking of user engagement, which makes game-based learning stand apart from the alternatives.

That said, not all games will be equally effective for all types of compliance learning. For example, Jeopardy-type games, often used in the classroom, are likely to be best for promoting the learning of verbal information (facts, statistics, etc.). Adventure games, which are story-driven fluid learning environments, are likely to be best for supporting theory testing and problem-solving. However, many games can incorporate all these benefits, blending strategy with action and role playing. There is a lot to consider when evaluating uses for games in your compliance training, and the right partner will help you review your options in a way that fits both your needs and your budget.

Nic McMahon (NMcmahon@viadelivers.com) is EVP Global Solutions with VIA in Portland, OR.