Gamification is broadly defined as the application of gaming mechanics in nongame contexts (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2013). Although the term first appeared in 2008, it did not receive wide recognition until late 2010 (Deterding et al., 2013; Kapp, 2014) when it first appeared on Google trends (Google, 2014). Just one year later, Gartner predicted that over 70% of Global 2000 organizations would use gamification for at least one process by 2014 (Gartner, 2011). Although we aren’t sure if this prediction has been realized, the evidence that gamification is rapidly gaining traction is undeniable. Not only was it recently added to the latest edition of the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Merriam-Webster.com, 2014), it was also listed as #5 on SIOP’s very own Top-10 Workplace Trends for 2014 (Munson, 2013).

Moreover, a brief perusal of commonly trafficked websites provides a plethora of gamification examples. LinkedIn utilizes a number of gaming elements including progress bars and endorsements. The more recently popular FitBit technology and its associated application display a dashboard with badges, points, and leaderboard rankings. Even our very own my.SIOP has recently added a number of gamification elements (we’ll share more on that below).

So what exactly is gamification, and how can I-O psychologists leverage it to improve organizational functioning? In this column, we review emerging work on gamification and highlight opportunities for research and practice.
Differentiating Gamification

Gamification is distinct from other similar concepts such as serious games and simulations. One major difference lies in the time cycle on which each operates. Games and simulations typically involve a definitive beginning and end. Game players and simulation users are typically aware that they are involved in a game or simulation. Each include an inherent outcome—a win/lose scenario or the completion of a task or set of tasks to end the session. In contrast, although gamified contexts include various elements that are common to games and simulations, they are typically intended to promote long-term engagement and provide less defined user paths with no clear beginning or end state. In gamification instead of developing a full game, gaming elements are layered over an existing program or context in order to amplify users’ motivation to engage within that context (Kapp, 2014).

Although conceptualizations of gamification abound, common among them is the idea that gamification impacts user engagement through a number of psychological mechanisms including intrinsic motivation, goal setting, and competition. Thus, we, as I-O psychologists, are in a unique position to study those mechanisms and apply them in the workplace. Common elements that are typically “borrowed” from traditional games and applied in nongame contexts include levels, badges, points, progress bars, leader boards, and virtual goods. Each serves to motivate users by providing feedback, recognition, status, and the potential for competition among users (Muntean, 2011).

Gamification in Training

Learning contexts represent a natural application of gamification, as motivation and engagement are pivotal for positive learning outcomes. Indeed, gamification has been highly touted as a mechanism for making learning fun and increasing learner motivation and accountability (e.g., Huckabee & Bissette, 2014). Moreover, the increasing use of e-learning within training and development initiatives makes the addition of gaming elements to learning contexts convenient and feasible. Gaming elements can be used to encourage participation and interaction in a virtual training session by awarding points or badges to learners when they interact with each other or the instructor. Levels, points, or badges can also be awarded to individuals as they complete learning modules or sessions. Similarly, leader boards can be used to motivate course completion by displaying other learners’ progress throughout a training initiative.

A small, but nontrivial, percentage of organizations have begun incorporating gamification into their learning and development initiatives. Recent research con-
ducted at Training Industry, Inc. provides evidence for the increasing use of gamification in training, with the use of gamification in sales training growing from ~8% of organizations in 2012 to ~18% of organizations in 2013. Further, this research points to positive affective and utility reactions to the use of gamification in these contexts (Taylor, 2014). More evidence comes from case examples of gamification that emphasize improvements in performance, learning outcomes, and motivation. For example, Kapp (2014) describes how Pep Boys realized a 45% reduction in safety incidents and claims following the introduction of gamification into their training program.

Research, although sparse, provides some positive evidence as well, indicating that gamification within educational settings can, but does not always, lead to increased motivation and positive learning outcomes (e.g., Domínguez, Saenz-de-Navarrete, de-Marcos, Fernández-Sanz, Pagés, & Martínez-Herráiz, 2013; Rouse, 2013). But while gamification in learning initiatives has, arguably, received the greatest attention within the research literature, this line of inquiry remains an emerging topic with numerous unresolved questions.

**Gamification in Selection**

The potential for gamification to increase participant engagement and motivation makes it an attractive feature for selection contexts, as well. There are several areas where gamification can enhance the selection process, including recruitment and assessment processes. Employee referral systems award employees points for everything from selecting an avatar to sharing a job posting (Ordioni, 2013). Job seekers can be encouraged to investigate openings with points awarded for completing a form or watching a realistic job preview video on a company’s website.

However, applying gamification to selection assessments presents some unique challenges. In a learning context an employee may be allowed (or even required) to complete a training session multiple times to achieve a minimal score. Once the session is complete they may be rewarded with points or a badge. When gamification is applied in a fitness initiative, employees may receive feedback on their relative standing in comparison with other employees. However, in an assessment application the goal is to measure a skill or characteristic rather than to train or motivate, thus repeated exposure to content or feedback may not be desirable. In addition, the long-term, open path approach common in gamification may be counterproductive in selection settings where candidates must complete all of the required material in a timely manner to meet the organization’s applicant-flow needs. These differences between selection and other HR applications limit the degree to which previous research on
Gamification training tools can be applied to selection tools, creating a need for targeted research on the gamification of assessments.

Content gamification (i.e., content is altered to be more game like; Kapp, 2014) may be a promising avenue for this purpose. For example, assessments have been created that include simulations, interactive or branching media-based SJTs, or problem solving games. Although this approach can provide numerous data points, our understanding on how to best utilize these data is still developing. As game elements are added to assessments, the test developer is well advised to start small, focusing assessment in specific and controllable aspects of a game (Handler, 2014).

Gamification in Other Contexts

Gaming elements can be applied in other workplace contexts as well. For example, they have been used to increase performance motivation in both sales and customer service contexts to drive revenue and customer satisfaction (Bunchball, Inc., 2012). Other uses include health incentive programs, employee engagement campaigns, and company specific employee knowledge repositories. Some of the most commonly recognized examples of gamification can be found on social networking sites. My.SIOP provides an excellent example; the portal encourages users to subscribe to various forums and contribute their thoughts and ideas by linking badges and points to these activities. We spoke to Zachary Horn, SIOP’s Electronic Communications Committee Chair, about the site, and he told us that in building these elements into the community, the committee first sought to identify goals that SIOP members hope to accomplish through participating in the portal (e.g., expanding their network, sharing ideas, etc.). They then linked each of these goals to specific gaming elements in order to provide tangible signals of accomplishment.

Future Research and Guidelines

While research is needed to provide evidence-based recommendations for the introduction of gamification into workplace initiatives, there is no shortage of guidelines for their use. For example, Huckabee and Bissette (2014) emphasize the importance of aligning game elements with business goals. Others recommend thinking of gamification as an unfolding process based on a long-term strategy rather than a short-term initiative (Bunchball, Inc., 2012). Huckabee and Bissette (2014) also stress that games must be challenging in order to be motivating; however, creating a challenging experience could be problematic in a learning and development context, where facilitation of learning is a central goal. They recommend striking a balance between challenging learners and making learning materials as accessible as possible.
Other promising avenues for investigation include the parceling of individual gaming elements’ effects as well as the determination of their combined influence on business outcomes. Although some work has focused on perceptions of various elements (Hsu, Chang, & Lee, 2013), more research is needed to move beyond affective reactions to investigate the relationships between various gaming elements and more distal business outcomes. Finally, the potential for generational preferences for and against gamification have been the subject of a great deal of speculation (e.g., Kapp, 2014); research substantiating or refuting these hypotheses is certainly needed.

Thus, gamification represents an emerging trend that promises to spark research and application within the workplace. As a field, I-O psychology has a tremendous opportunity to lead the discussion around gamification and shape its use within organizations.

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