Game Academy

Using evaluation to evidence the transferable skills of gamers

Game Academy

Started in 2019, Game Academy is a new tech venture set on using the power of video games to improve the skills of the workforce of tomorrow. Through funding from the CareerTech Challenge, Game Academy has developed and launched a new online platform for gamers to acquire and transfer employability skills to develop their careers and gain work.

Game Academy aimed to draw on expertise, networks and knowledge within the video game community to support gamers to develop employability skills, align their strengths and talents to work opportunities, consider alternative career routes and be motivated to seek employment, further study or a change in career.

A key feature of the platform is an **embedded diagnostic assessment of learners' motivation and core skills, based on their gaming profile and preferences**. Learners are given a series of motivational 'challenges' and self-discovery 'quests' that link back to the diagnostic assessment. Challenges and quests are focused on 21st century skills, such as decision-making, creativity, goal-setting and introspection, and help users to understand what they are good at and to identify potential future career options.

Other key aspects of the platform include:

• A community forum with a 700-strong community of gamers

• A series of streams on Twitch, the live streaming service

• Talks from senior industry professionals in technology, the creative industries and Armed Forces, who are also gamers and act as professional role models

• A database of jobs and education opportunities

• A series of 'Expansion Packs', that offer employability support featuring personalised career advice supported by a team of professional careers advisors

Evaluation findings and lessons learned

The evaluation identified a number of positive outcomes for learners, who reported that the blend of semi-automated and semi-live experiences increased their skills, confidence and motivation to seek employment, further study or progress within their careers. Learners also found the sense of gaming camaraderie within the community forum and learning within a community of shared gaming interest to be important in supporting confidence and encouraging their skills development. Learners also

responded positively to the focus on individual learning throughout the challenges and game quests, and found the diagnostic assessments useful in understanding the types of skills they had developed and their value for the labour market.

The CareerTech Challenge has given Game Academy the opportunity to gain further experience of conducting evaluations and they will continue to measure social and emotional outcomes. In particular, they now know that it is possible to measure softer outcomes (such as motivation or confidence), the benefits of doing so and how to do it. They can see the benefits of an iterative and structured 'test and learn' approach, which enables developers to understand aspects of a programme or product that need improving. The experience has also shown Game Academy the importance of investing time in evaluation in order to generate robust and useful results.

Game Academy intends to embed various aspects of the evaluation process into their work. They have continued to use (simplified versions of) the research tools, in order to generate further insights as the programme develops. They emphasise the importance of consistency, and that continuing to use the same tools will enable robust future comparisons. The evaluation has enabled Game Academy to understand the factors that influence learner outcomes, and this knowledge will continue to be

used in course development. They will also continue to use their theory of change, and are intending to examine the inputs identified in it, to complement the current focus on outputs and outcomes. Finally, Game Academy is already referring to the evaluation and findings when they talk to investors, partners and stakeholders; they consider this to be a real benefit, and will continue to use it in the future.

"Now we use it when we speak to investors, to partners … they are surprised how clear we are on what we measure, how we measure it etc."

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Learner case study: Tom

Tom is in his 40s and lives in Yorkshire. He works as an administrative assistant but was furloughed at the beginning of the first lockdown. Tom enjoys playing a variety of games, such as Minecraft, Open World, Exploration and story-based games. Tom was studying for a Level 2 qualification at college and is looking for another job. Although he has talked to careers advisors at college, he has not found them to be particularly helpful.

He found Game Academy on Google as he was searching for some materials for his studies. After joining the programme platform, he found that the material was easy to understand and use, with 'no technical terms' and 'exactly what I need after doing 3 to 5 hours of college work.' Tom has found the programme to be very enjoyable, and considers the main value of it to be the information on different jobs that he could apply for, and realising that there was a demand for his expertise. He has also valued the lines of support and network, whose users share his love of gaming. It opened opportunities to talk about work, his feelings and future goals with other gamers in the same situation.

After participating in the programme, Tom has enrolled on a number of courses. It has also given him the confidence to search for a wider range of jobs, based on the conversations with other learners on the platform.

"After joining Game Academy, I enrolled into learning. I've taken a few courses on LinkedIn Learning. Also I learned how to edit videos. Proper transition between cuts and effects. Learning self-taught, YouTube, online courses. After [participating]… I obtained my BTEC Level 2 in Business Administration. I also liked to learn how to utilise gaming to build upon the drivers and skills that the quests mention."

Evaluation journey

Prior to this project, Game Academy's project lead had some previous experience of qualitative and quantitative research and of the evaluation of start-up companies. However, without the support and funding available through the CareerTech Challenge, Game Academy would not have conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the platform.

The theory of change developed as part of Game Academy's evaluation of the platform (see Figure 1 on page 06) is based on gamers' familiarity with the functions and experience of gaming platforms. **It considers the online platform as a key mediator for change, leading to a range of improvements in attitudes, behaviours and skills**. In the longer term, it identifies the successful transition of learners into suitable jobs and an increased alignment of gaming and skills development as potential impacts.

The key aims of the evaluation were to:

- Assess the effectiveness of learning, by playing video games to develop learners' confidence and employability skills through a multi-modal online platform.

- Understand which elements of Game Academy's online platform worked effectively.

Table 1 summarises the methods used in the evaluation.

"Without Nesta's support and funding we wouldn't have done such a comprehensive evaluation… I was happy that there was an opportunity, there was a need but also that there was a space for it."
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Capacity building support

Game Academy found the capacity building support provided by the CareerTech Challenge to be of substantial benefit in facilitating their evaluation. The role of the evaluation manager was considered to be particularly useful, by providing a specific individual who knew the details of the project and evaluation and could give support as required. The Evaluation Toolkit was also considered to be a valuable resource, as it enabled Game Academy to pick and choose identified outcomes measures rather than being expected to identify and research these themselves.

"The Evaluation Toolkit worked very well because we had a set of tools ready and we could just pick the existing ones, so we didn't need to do all this research ourselves."

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Table 1: Game Academy evaluation methods

Process evaluation

15 semi-structured learner interviews conducted during product development (May and October) and after launch of the platform (January).

Development of 3 learner case studies

Outcome evaluation

Pre and post surveys completed by 30 learners. Questions included demographics, job characteristics and outcomes measures from the toolkit.

Analysis of management information from 608 learners across five project phases. Data included sign up and completion rate and website analytics.

Figure 1: Game Academy Theory of Change

Rationale → Activities → Outputs → Impact

Rationale

Problem

• Adults do the work they don't like or they don't see where they can progress;

• They are not motivated to take a step forward and disengaged from current educational and career advice solutions;

• They don't realise what skills they have, what skills they need to progress at work

Rationale

As the nature of work is changing (automation, globalisation) people need to adapt, gain digital and soft skills to find jobs in the future and realise their potential

Aims

Understand the effectiveness of video games as a media to engage people with learning and implement a solution that grows their confidence and employability skills

Activities

User activity

• Diagnostic tool, first manual, progressively automated

• Curriculum to enable learners to become more employable featuring video games, currently on decision-making

• Directory of Opportunities (future education, apprenticeships, projects, work, games). Gamers are matched with relevant opportunities based on their life objectives, current status and gaming profile.

GA work streams

• User research and feedback

• Product design & development

• Data & Tech

• Recruitment & Team management

• Community & engagement

• Partnerships

• Strategy, Legal & Operations

Outputs

October 1st

• 50 completed gaming profile

• Good progress towards 100 learners onboarded.

December 20th

• Good progress toward 300 learners onboarded and actively progressing towards 15 hours of learning , with progress towards 50 learners completed

March

• 700 Diagnostics completed

• Good progress towards 600 active learners onboarded

• 120 learner competitions

Impact

Direct

• Our users become the most fulfilled they can be

• Our users are able to successfully transition into jobs that make the most of their skills and potential

• Increased demand for online assessment and learning using video games

Indirect

• Game developers make more skills-rich games

• Employers recognise gamers as harbour of talent

• Employers have increased awareness about the benefits of gaming on people's soft skills

• Increased awareness and recognition within the education sector/at policy level of benefits/effectiveness of gaming as a route to further education and employment