

# IS LARP THE ANSWER TO THE GAMIFICATION OF EVENTS AND EDUCATION? A CASE STUDY OF THE ONGOING IMPLEMENTATION OF QUESTS AND COINS TO THE CORE OF THE FESTIVAL

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to shift the discussion regarding gamification further from its use in terms of gaining profit or customers with the PBL gamification triad (points, badges and leaderboards) approach to the more "gamey" place. It describes ongoing attempts to improve the gamified system on a community event hosted by the university. We identified two core aspects of this system that are supposed to balance each other out: quests as playful methods of gaining currency (coins) and motivation to collect them (prize), with a goal to design a gamified system that is awarding in more thoughtful way. Our main goal is to apply a similar system into the university environment and use it as a way to achieve better engagement of the students in education in general, but also in non curricular activities that take place in the campus.

**Keywords:** coins, game studies, gamification, LARP, motivation

## 1 The festival background

In spite of delay due to socialist era, the popularity of cons in our country is persistent and currently growing. These conventions usually take place in the main city and though they are mostly profiled for the more or less same target group of young people interested in fantasy and sci-fi, they differ slightly. Some are more focused on anime and manga, mythology and fantasy, or gaming culture.

UniCon is the example of the latest. Its mainly focused on gaming experience; the idea to create another festival, although first of this kind in this particular city, comes from a will to re-create concept of LAN parties (gatherings of people playing the same game at once, connected by Local Area Network, hence the LAN abbreviation). Gaming experience is therefore supposed to be the core of the festival itself.

Given festival takes place in a smaller city that is characteristic (among other things) for its three universities and it is relatively unique in some ways that are important to mention.

First of all, the name of the event originates in its background; UniCon is a festival produced entirely by one university, specially by one faculty. It is organized mostly by a small group of faculty members, and its entire staff consists of students only. This year, it was run almost entirely by only one PhD student with help of one teacher/founder and few students representing individual sections (such as esports, cosplay section, retro gaming).

Being a student festival, UniCon carries some aspects worth of observation. Since the main reason why this event even exist is to provide some sort of practice for the students, UniCon serves as a training tool, combined with its another main purpose; to create space that concentrates gamers in a more traditional meaning of that word; not only players of digital games, but cosplayers, fans, hobbyist and enthusiasts, everyone that takes some interest in gaming culture. It also aims to show this subculture to the "outsiders", parents, other students and university staff. Such an event may even serve as an effective means of promoting the faculty and university (Černá et al, 2015).

That being said, the festival is tightly connected to faculty itself not only personally, but also by the idea of containing this

gaming-friendly space not only for the duration of the event, that lasts only one weekend in a year (not including preparations that take a much longer). As we have outlined above, the main purpose of this paper is to present a case study conducted during the 2020 UniCon. The data was recorded by the UniCon mobile application, which was used by participants throughout the festival to collect "coins" (i.e. to engage in various activities in order to obtain them) and thus win various prizes. This rather experimental method is based on participant observation conducted during the festival. The given qualitative (ethnographic) research method allows us to observe various communication phenomena, as well as people (in our case the festival participants) and their interactions (Trampota, Vojtěchovská, 2010). According to Sedláková (2014), participant observation offers us a rare opportunity to uncover people's values, social practices and true behaviour patterns. The participant observation is complemented by a brief analysis of data recorded by the festival's mobile application. We believe that some of these results and observations related to them may help us to better understand how education-related gamification works and which benefits it might offer us if applied creatively.

## 2 Festival currency as a form of coin collecting – first half of the model

We incline that this festival doesn't come from a drive to raise profitability of the festival, however its background is partially financial. So initiative may differ, but we believe that in the sake of the wished outcome (in the form of playful experience), what matters is the input. We do not want "the simplest, fastest route to getting customer sign-off and billing for services" (Bogost, 2015).

### 2.1 Theoretical background

In early years of gamification (after its widespread adoption around 2010) "marketing and consultancy sectors have been promoting gamification as a potential source of revenue" (Fuchs et al, 2014) and marketing sector has actually been using gamification even before coining the term – for example in form of advergames or guerilla marketing (Mago, 2015) which are ways that still be used in the making of the event.

Since then, its understanding has significantly shifted and we have a privilege to prefer these changes, as in this gaming convention we are able to prioritize playful experience before economic endorsement as a main goal of a gamified system.

That is partially the reason why this game of ours does not lead to "danger to fall into a trap that leads to a conflicting situation between selling and creating valuable experiences." (Hamari, Huotari, 2012) This is mostly an intentional decision that we made over the years; even when "hunt for coins" (our game is yet to receive proper name) is a significant part of the festival, it is not a crucial part of the promotion or producing revenues. Guests get to choose whether they are the participants of the game within the festival, regular guests, or coin collectors – "agents who can choose whether they are playing or using a gamified application" (Foxman, 2020).

Gamification as we use it is probably best described by Ruud Koorevaar's statement: "Gamification entails the use of elements of games to alter and add to our daily landscape of activities by engaging us in non-game contexts" (2012), with the difference that our landscape of activities is not happening daily and we try to make the context as "gamey" as possible.

### 2.2 Development and current state

Implementing gaming elements onto this event is an ongoing process, so happenings in the past years are quite important for understanding of its current form.

As said before, UniCon is a small event organised by people who do their work voluntarily. It even takes place in a school building and the number of visitors, although its growing, is limited by the space and staff capacity of the current place used. It doesn't have an ambition to become one of the prominently large events, but that also means that financially, it is limited partially to school funding and to occasional sponsor gifts.

First year, when the event was mostly about esport tournaments (which is still a huge part of the festival), one (and only) sponsor of the event was willing to provide donation under the condition of using it to buy a few luxurious prizes. So a fancy gaming computer was bought as a prize, among other things, but there was not enough of them to reward all the winners in all the categories; so a new system was designed, in which these prizes were winnable in the final lottery. Lottery tickets were accordingly distributed among visitors and contestants in tournaments; winners got more of them, guests only one. These lottery tickets meant only a chance to win; the more effort you put in, the bigger chance you got.

This system was obviously very flawed; winning the prestigious prizes depended more or less on randomness. It could have happened that even the biggest prize would have been won by a random visitor, who spent half an hour at the event. Although that did not (fortunately) happen, it was clear that this model needed to be changed.

And it was. Next year, this model was temporarily abandoned (prize pools consisted of cash only) but on the third year of the festival, we adopted a new model; similarly, people (visitors as well as tournament players) were supposed to collect currency, but this time, currency was not a chance to win (represented by lottery tickets), but so-called unicoin, made-up currency in form of small gold-ish beads with small U on them. Instead of lottery, prizes were sold at an auction. Meanwhile, esport tournaments developed to more prestigious events with its own sponsors and disattached from this game of coins. Hunt for unicoin became separate.

Winnable prizes serve as a motivation, but also as a tool to "reconcile the tension points between the norms of the real world and those of the virtual world", (Kim, Werbach, 2016) although this tension materializes more in other gamifications fields (for example, when virtual coins are partly used as a substitute for actual pay for employee's work – that being an ethical dilemma in gamification forced upon workers).

### 2.3 Proved model

Auction in this model is a very appropriate tool to serve as a distributor of these prizes. It eliminates the risk of disappointing people who were given unwanted reward for their effort (since even with pricey objects such as gaming equipment, there is a possibility that the winner already possesses it; and selling prize at the bazaars is a truly undesired outcome). Auction in this form is also a great way to indulge individuality of peoples wishes; it lets them decide the attractiveness and value of presented items and even though they are on a display during the festival, there is still room for suspense left, since items are sorted randomly (that is, of course, not the case in serious auctions).

For most of the items, there is no clear link to their actual value (in euros for example). How much does a Witcher puzzle cost? And how much would you pay for it?

Of course, besides the fact that these items are not something that people buy regularly, which means that they lack the ability to estimate their price, there is also an individual approach to "buying" them as we mentioned before. That increases the importance of another question; it is not only about putting a price tag on stuff, but it's also about how much you are willing to pay. It brings out a fictive value / real value ratio, and the relation of the two also changes with various facts. For example, one of the aspect that affects the amount of (fictional) money people want to spend on particular item is the time passed; when

they are given a choice of either leave with coins that cannot be used anywhere else, or to spend them on one of the last prize presented, they of course choose to spend them (and eventually to spend all of them).

That is actually the reason why having an experienced/good broker at your auction is the key for your guests' will to spend money; timing and order of the sold items is an important aspect and it has some rules (no two same items in a row and so on).

The auction is (so far) an ideal solution, but we are also registering some undesirable aspects that it brings. For example, at high prices, it can be unpopular for sponsors who obviously do not want their prizes to be auctioned for a few coins. The same problem arises when there are two items of similar value from competing brands in the auction. For example, if we were to bid PS and Xbox, it would not be desirable for one to be auctioned significantly more expensive than the other. As we have explained, this also depends on several conditions and may not be informative, but it is understandable that sponsors are reluctant to see such a result.

### 2.4 Coins unspent

During the making of this festival, there was even an idea of this virtual money, these unicoin, to have a form of chocolate coins – candy money. In that case coins not spent could have been taken and eaten and even people that did not participate in the final auction would actually get some pleasure out of them.

That brings us to another part of what it means to use virtual money in coin collecting game. When the game is voluntary and it ends with giving out gifts through auction at the end of the festival, what happens to coins given to the people who are not staying that long? Or with coins within a larger group of friends? Coins of course circulated on their own.

It is the same debate about individual value; coins are much more valuable for the people who are collecting them determinedly. Transfer of these coins from one person to another should not be prohibited, since it is a regular part of the game. Every year, this kind of behaviour occurs; a group of friends combine their coins onto one person, therefore have a better chance to bid on bigger items, some players are convincing leaving guests (therefore visitors that are not staying to the end) to yield their unspent coins in their favor and so on.

Guests staying to the end, and therefore spending more time at the festival, is one of the wished outcomes of this additional content, but that is, naturally, not going to happen to everyone. This currency flow is permitted – even if forbidden, there would be really no way to control it when using physical coins as in previous years. This year, these physical coins, beads, were replaced with digital currency in the app created specially for UniCon, so making coins not transferable between players was possible, but we choose not to, so it created some sort of free market, where players may use their creativity to gain extra coins.

### 3 LARPing your way through the festival – second half of the model

LARP, live action role playing, is one of the ways to slightly shift the way of looking at gamification. Gaming conventions – such as UniCon – are obviously an easier subject to test this approach (and as explained below, appropriate trial when trying gamification in higher education). As we explained, a partial reason for this additional element in the festival is the effort to motivate guests and to better distribute prizes from sponsors and to provide playful experience on more than one level.

In this case, one of the students designed and wrote a short cyberpunk themed backstory about training for uprising that quests/players needed to undergo while collecting coins for the quests (or training on various stages; they needed to score in a shooting game, "prove physical strength" in Just Dance or other

games). These quests were given to them by various NPCs, special staff members in costumes, that were positioned on various places around the campus.

The marketing-oriented questionnaire that we have at our disposal (conducted by the faculty's student as part of her future bachelor's thesis, that is yet to be published) shows that this game is really only added value at the festival, and that it is not one of the motivations why visitors come to it. It was not heavily advertised and besides gifts given by sponsors (and school), it was not a costly part of the festival as a result of the decision not to hire a company for it (as we were considering), but to leave this part to a student who was interested in it. He convinced his friends (mainly) from the community of cosplayers and other students to play the role of NPCs for a ticket to the festival. The application, which recorded the entry of quests and the movement of coins at the same time as the "payments" at the final auction, was also developed by one of the students.

Thus this game did not have to meet any financial expectations. In addition to what has been said – its role to make the course of the festival more special for those who decide to do so and to serve as a training tool – we also wanted to use the quests to better involve the festival partners and inconspicuously bring the visitors' attention to them. That is something that we would like to test in a future in a restructured way; ideally, such involvement should be reminiscent of in game advertising, in which players interact with brands – in our case, visitors to partner organizations.

### 3.1 Interpretation of numbers

What seems to be more problematic is that we have yet to find a practical way to verify qualities of implementation of game elements in this particular way. When dealing with gamification in product marketing, brand loyalty or in similar fields, success or failure is possible to describe in revenues, sales, employee productivity, or other measurable index.

When treating gamification as a tool to just better the experience of the person, we have few possibilities; we can ask them in a focus group, question form, making annual reports of how many people "finished" the game until the very end, but none of these methods seem to be appropriate.

However, we will not abandon every academic approach to this issue; instead, we plan to focus more on the few things that we are able to measure. As said before, our mission on this festival is to bring the audience to a world that we like and find relevant and to test various ways how to accomplish that. We can observe behaviour of the festival visitors and use them as a form of research group and now we are developing schemes on how to use available and observable facts as indicators of some sort.

2020 was the first year we used mobile app as a platform for taking track of the in-game events. This year was more appropriate for this "innovation" than another, since the festival was cyberpunk-themed, but we plan to use it next year. It is valuable as an option to keep track of how long guests are staying and even when the number of people participating in these quests are relatively small in comparison to the number of all attendants.

This year we can interpret the data obtained from the app, which helps us determine the attractiveness of individual quests. In some cases, this can be easily estimated by monitoring, and such an estimate can later be verified in the data from the application. For example, the quest "Masking", in lore explained as receiving the mask needed to fight evil corporation, was actually letting two girls to paint your face cyberpunk-style, and we could already notice at the festival that it was quite popular, seeing how many guests walked around the place with a cables and hardware painted on their face.

Anyway, these data we gathered showed us that this game was played by one tenth of the total number of people at the festival throughout the weekend (around sixty participants of this game

to six hundred people). It may seem like a rather disappointing number, but we need to take into consideration that in that pool of that 600 people, there is a lot of people that were not the target group in the first place (staff and festival crew that was prohibited to play in order this game to be fair, gamers at a esports tournaments that did not have time for it, people from guest list such as university personnel and sponsors and so on). After subduction of these sections, the final ratio (of people who were participating in this LARP and those who were not) increases to about 1:4. That is an appropriate result and we do not consider it a failure. Fact is, that just about half of them "finished" the game and participated in the final auction.

However, we plan to better and polish happenings at UniCon and try to attract more people into this game; we do have some educated guesses on how to do so, as explained in the next subchapter.

Although the festival is organised by university, it is attractive for younger audiences as well (as expected) but the data tells us that this LARP was played by both kids and adults and that seems like a proper representation of what the festival consists of.

### 3.2 Flawed parts and improvement plans

This game for sure differs from "real" LARPs which use to connect groups of people that are dedicated to play, but that is an acceptable part of putting up this model at a game convention.

In this hunt for coins, sometimes it became more obvious that main motivations are the coins itself/or the process of collecting than the quests alone. It somewhat creates inconsistency in the whole idea of this game as a form of LARP, but it is understandable as well, since a huge part of the quests was to "make" people try out various attractions and "discover" locations of the festival. If we aim to build an atmosphere that provides a playful experience, the game itself needs to balance out more trivial motivation that prizes are, but we do understand the limits of game design in this particular circumstances.

We do have some ideas for changes. For example, the matter of people losing motivation in the game and not staying until the end could be partially resolved by creating fractions.

Already this year, we entertained the idea of creating teams in which players would join. In this testing phase, we came up with several ideas to make such a system more reliable and attractive. For example, the creation of two or three fractions, i.e. teams, should create a better structured environment for creating in-festival connections.

For example, it should motivate people who do not want to participate in the festival throughout its duration, but may also want to participate in the game anyway. We would test whether being part of something more complex than just the player himself would be a relevant factor in the players' behaviour. We would allow better flow of currency in between players in one fraction, give them some in-game benefits and so on.

In a bigger picture, we are hoping to create some sense of community, so called *communitas*. We can take inspiration in existing successful projects, that "demonstrate the growing importance of having more fun with strangers and of using games to build our own capacity for community participation." (McGonigal, 2011)

We also consider this, because we believe that it is one of the ways to pull guests "deeper" into this play. Since this is a small university event, there are no strict lines between staff and guests (which is the reason why the total count of people may be inaccurate for calculating success rate of the game), and we aim to continue to erase these boundaries in order to bring these players into the game in this way as well. Therefore, we want to give fractions, in addition to advantages, also certain positions of function.

Even when UniCon lasts for two days, there are some playful things that we would like to test. One of them is putting in work another element of gamification triad; leaderboards. Leaderboards are not very applicable in the current system "every man for himself" but could be tested along with the fractions. If we could manage to create a competitive environment, where teams would actually try to compete, these leaderboards could help it; maybe even in the form of hanging the flag of the team currently on top.

This year we tried it in a mild form. Out of a few people from the staff, i.e. students helping with the festival, we created a guild of security guards. They got weapons (NERF guns), guarded the prices for the auction, helped out in individual sections, had free drinks at the festival bar, and if they found someone without a bracelet (i.e. someone who bought only a time-limited ticket and his time expired) who wanted to go to the festival. but to remain, they should have given him the opportunity to join them. Then the person who bought the cheapest ticket would have the opportunity not just to stay at the festival, but be a part of it.

These guards were a small version of what this game was to convey at the festival: the group of people who play, help with small tasks that need to be done and have certain advantages for that. In fact, this is something that we would like to accomplish in education as well.

#### 4 Using this experience in gamified education

We want to apply this experience in higher education. In the academic year 2021/2022 we want to test it on just one school subject.

The main idea is not to use game elements directly for improvement of learning, but rather for a system of motivation to engage in various activities, create a competitive environment, present several opportunities that the school already provides, create new ones and also connect individuals with joint mindsets.

What we have described as expectations and means in the faction system at UniCon is basically what we are trying to create at school; only with some minor changes. Just as at the festival, we want students to spend more time at school and do it voluntarily, or almost voluntarily which basically means to nudge them into behaviour that we find beneficial for their education and/or faculty goals – not just one particular game used to meet the wanted goal; "not a single activity but a set of relevant activities and systematic processes" (Kim et al, 2018).

That does not necessarily mean school activities exclusively. It could include attending seminars outside of school, thematic screenings that we plan to organise at cinema in the school basement, expositions, talks or take part in something more creative or research-orientated. That means we want to give them enough to choose from, but at the same time push them into things they have yet to discover.

This is based on our experiments tried on our convention, but also on theoretic and practical research that was already done by scholars.

Just like at the festival, where the "guards" helped us with minor tasks, so at school we have assignments that are not crucial for the existence of the faculty, but are more of an additional character. As a games-oriented study, we take interests in many parts of the gaming culture and many of them are possible subjects for research, study, digitalisation or even collecting. Our goal is to help students navigate these possibilities and help them find out what they are interested in.

We have prepared methods on how to "make" them do additional tasks that are not mandatory but have value for our students. For example, we can recommend them a youtube channel from which they could benefit from (maybe videos on

game theory or insight work on game design and ethics such as ExtraCredit) but we can do it in a different way; maybe one of the tasks could be to make video subtitles or to proofread existing ones.

Practically, it will have the form of a game, but with two currencies. The first will be expressed in the form of experience levels; some of the ones that will be offered will require a certain amount to be performed. Our subjects have ECTS grading scale, so in order for a student to pass at all, they must obtain a "pass" to the next level, which means there will be a certain minimum number of quests / tasks that the student must complete. The higher they get, the better his mark. These levels, or passes, are an expression of the student's activity or effort and determine the final mark on the subject.

The second currency will be, as at the festival, coins, which will serve as a reward. For them, students will be able to "buy" prizes with a real live equivalent value that is rewarding but also not counterproductive; for example, tickets to a game event, participation in certified courses, or even some equipment.

We see this reward as a form of motivational scholarship; students in our subject field are not usually receivers of that, so this is the form which would be for them maybe more alluring or approachable.

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