Developing public-sector initiatives that engage people — whether they are public employees or residents — involves even more than radically changing the traditional government experience. It also requires turning the boring into the interesting.

Gamification can accomplish just that. Games are fun — the rules are well defined, the process is engaging and the payoffs are immediate. For this reason, governments have begun transforming community involvement, like participating in a community improvement project, commenting on a piece of legislation or even just visiting a city website, into a game. In doing so, they have encouraged residents to participate in activities with social value, while simultaneously improving people’s relationship with government — a difficult task to accomplish.

Gamification is essentially one type of nudge: an initiative informed by psychology that changes the context in which people make decisions in order to influence their behavior. Through gamification, government transforms the activity itself to make it more appealing to residents.

Here are a few ways gamification can improve your city’s operations:

**Nudging residents toward healthy behavior.**
As with other types of nudges, gamification has great potential to encourage residents to partake in healthier behaviors. For example, Santiago, Chile, has gamified its campaign against childhood obesity in order to get more people eating healthily and exercising. As a part of the Bloomberg Mayors Challenge in 2016, the city has developed a neighborhood-level competition in which teams of 10- to 12-year-olds in local schools compete to earn prizes like a class trip to a pool or new playground equipment. Each team earns points toward those prizes through healthy behaviors. And, beyond engaging local children, the community hopes to get parents involved as well by encouraging them to do activities with their children and pick healthy food options to help their kids earn points.

**Promoting civic engagement.**

Civic participation is particularly tricky to galvanize, as many feel that their individual voice cannot make a difference. However, gamification can change this by assigning a direct value to each instance of citizen activity.

The city of Salem, Mass., launched a game called “What’s The Point” to encourage local participation in neighborhood revitalization plans. Developed by Emerson College’s Engagement Game Lab, the game sought resident ideas for neighborhood improvements and rewarded posts with virtual coins. Users could pledge these coins toward causes in their community, and the top three causes won real money. Residents felt that each of their contributions could at the very least benefit these causes, and as a result the city was able to gather valuable feedback.

**Bringing departments together.**

Hawaii has used gamification for a less obvious reason: as a means of unifying often-siloed departments. Hawaii gamified its online services, enabling users to create one profile in order to access services from every department. The new site provides users with badges that show how much time, paper and mileage they have saved by completing government transactions digitally, and includes a community board that allows residents to compete against the aggregate savings of others. When someone finishes paperwork for one department, the site then prompts them to go to another in order to maximize savings, improving digital access across government.

Beyond improving resident engagement, gamification makes experiences with government more personal and appealing, a critical step in establishing a committed community. At the end of the day, all work and no play makes City Hall a dull place.

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