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Part of the human story is that people like to be challenged; they also like to have fun and to succeed. Since ancient times, these fundamental human traits have been expressed through games and play. But how far can games take us?

What is gamification?

Every parent knows that “making a game out of it” can motivate a child to do something he or she would otherwise not want to do – sometimes. While we do not necessarily need that type of motivation as we age, it is obvious that gameplay continues into adulthood, and usually these games are designed with a deeper purpose than getting us to eat our vegetables. The internet, social media and other technologies provide vehicles for developing and broadcasting these games to a wide audience, with extensive individual creative input to the process. This application of gameplay mechanics for non-game applications is commonly known as *gamification*, and putting this new tool into practice may itself be the operationalization of

game theory in instances where games involve strategic behaviour by the players.

But our interest in games certainly goes beyond the virtual world, and we sometimes play games when we do not even realize we are doing so. With these games, the ultimate outcome may differ from what originally motivated the player. “[Hypermiling](#)”, the practice of increasing a car's gas mileage by making skillful changes in driving habits, or Toyota Prius drivers “[gaming](#)” their gas mileage are such examples. In these cases, individuals are essentially playing games, motivated by the concept of saving money on gasoline, but the larger societal success comes from reduced emissions and environmental benefits. Recently, a smartphone application was developed by [Toronto's University Health Network](#) that facilitates tracking of blood glucose testing and rewards diabetic teens with iTunes store credits every time they do so. Similarly, an initiative by [Volkswagen](#) is designed to change

individual behaviour through engaging in various fun activities. As a profit-driven organization, Volkswagen has a principal goal to stimulate purchases of their vehicles. However, initiatives that encourage people to take the stairs rather than escalators, to monitor their health, to recycle or to drive the speed limit have wider benefits for society in terms of health or environmental benefits.

How might games play a role in public policy? Several examples indicate the benefits for our communities but what about for government activities?

be found from around the globe using gaming in public policy initiatives, frequently driven by public education goals. Many of these games are targeted at young people, such as the [Race Against Global Poverty](#) game from the UK government or games and learning activities from the [United States](#). This latter site is divided by student grade levels, providing progressive learning opportunities in regular school subjects, but extends as well to educating about aspects of government.

Others are more appropriate for somewhat older participants, such as [Cyber-Budget](#), a game from the government of France designed to foster a greater knowledge of the government budget process in a practical fashion. Similar budget games exist for the states of [Massachusetts](#), [Minnesota and Utah](#), and [New York City](#). Another game targeted at citizens of voting age is sponsored by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, known as the [Activism Game](#), and is intended to help individuals identify and learn about balancing public policy issues and priorities.

These are just a few examples of games created in the public interest. Web sites such as [Social Impact Games](#) or [Persuasive Games](#) present numerous more where the activity of partaking in a game serves a secondary purpose, be it the transfer of knowledge, expression of preferences or raising awareness of issues.

While new opportunities may exist, this does not mean that Canada should lose sight of the value of traditional policy levers. In fact a cautious



Is there a place for games in public policy?

How might games play a role in public policy? The examples above indicate how the benefits of games may translate to society, but what about government activities? Numerous examples can

approach may be warranted; a recent report on behaviour change by the [British House of Lords](#) highlighted this sentiment. In the report, they recommend that civil servants responsible for policy making have a clear understanding of the significance of changing public behaviour, and how non-regulatory measures are often not likely to be effective when used in isolation from traditional instruments. An important message for any regulatory body may therefore be to engage in fundamental applied research to understand the potential for these non-regulatory interventions, but maintain a grasp on more traditional approaches as well.

Where does this take us?

Regulations, and other policy levers, have generally been effective vehicles for government to attempt to influence public behaviour. Under the current realities of limited budgets for spending, limited taxation ability, a general interest in reducing public burden and greater public demand for transparency, games may present an additional avenue for inducing behaviour change.

Government of Canada experience in learning or civic engagement games seems to be limited, although some examples exist such as some activities found on websites of the [Prime Minister](#), [Citizenship and Immigration Canada](#) and the [Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission](#). However a central location, such as a kids.gc.ca site, does not seem to exist. There may be an opportunity to develop a site similar to the one sponsored by the US Government.

Clearly, opportunities exist for government to engage with the public in ways that have previously not been fully considered. These new

avenues, combined with a firm grasp on established mechanisms, will help government ensure that the levers in the public policy toolkit are able to best meet the needs of Canadians in addressing policy questions.

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PH4-106/2011E-PDF
978-1-100-19796-8

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