

Could gamification make better citizens of us all?

Maddyness interviewed Seun Oshinaike about taking on the obesity epidemic in the most enjoyable way possible. Born out of the Borough of Barking and Dagenham, his program Street Tag is rapidly accumulating users all around the UK.

Gamification is 'the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts'. A recent report suggests the industry was worth circa £6B in 2019, a number that will continue to grow as more organisations, governments and individuals come to understand competition in the context of human behavioural architecture.

Seun Oshinaike is a big proponent of the concept. Research indicating high obesity levels nearby where he lives in Barking and Dagenham inspired him to create an app - Street Tag - with the vision of one day "getting every family everywhere physically active". Users of Street Tag earn points every time they do some kind of physical activity, thus climbing up a leaderboard of friends and family and sometimes even winning prizes.

"The idea is that you walk within a 40 metre radius of the tags that appear on the screen of the app. Once you're within that radius, you collect the points assigned to those tags, and the more points you collect you get to climb up your community leaderboard," says Seun.

There's a 'power hour', whereby if you commit to exercising 24 hours in advance and fulfill your commitment you earn triple points. There are extra

points on a Saturday, to encourage people to spend their weekends in green spaces rather than in front of the TV. There are even 'virtual assets', which you can purchase and earn 'dividend points' from much like you would in a game of Monopoly.

Street Tag turns your street into a "virtual playground". "Older people get to do the things you would typically expect teenagers to do. It's comfortable and fun for the older generation. And for young people, it's just so natural for them."

Seun has seen firsthand both the increase in exercise within his local community in Dagenham, and the impact it has had on mental and physical health – for young and old, families and friends alike. "In the team who are currently leading, there are two people that are 60+, and three who are in their 50s. It's an older team but they've won the community leaderboard about four times in a row," he says, emphasising the accessibility of the program.

"One of the users had some health challenges not so long ago, and one of the recommendations from her GP was that she should try and get more regular exercise. Having a team on Street Tag was, I know, really helpful for her in terms of getting the motivation to consistently go and do an hour or half an hour of exercise daily."

For Seun, Street Tag has had impact beyond improving individual health. It's got people talking to each other – "On Saturdays with special tags, people recognise that other families are doing Street Tag. Everyone giggles and waves, and asks "Are you guys playing Street Tag?", so conversation gets started" – and it's cutting carbon emissions as people opt to walk to school or work instead of driving.

The central model – making arduous tasks competitive and communal – could, Seun feels, signify a revolution in the way local government works to promote good citizenship in general. Street Tag is currently working with councils from Kingston to Basildon, and has started incentivising its users to do more than

just go for a run.

“In one of the locations [we work in] in Oxfordshire, they realised that not a lot of people were using the local library, so wanted a way to attract more residents to come to the library and borrow books. So we created a QR code tag and placed it at reception. We did an announcement to the community and said ‘there’s a 500 point tag when you borrow books at the library’. Guess what started to happen?”

“Everyone thought, we can get lots of points a couple of times a week by borrowing books and taking our kids to borrow books. So suddenly people started to go to the library and earned points for doing so. Hundreds of people were doing that consistently every month.”

Public and private sector collaboration geared around the premise of gamification is crucial, Seun reckons, not just for tackling obesity – but for other issues like literacy and litter picking. A new utility called ‘Tag Broadcast’ has just been introduced to allow Street Tag users to alert local authorities to fly tipping and overflowing bins. They earn points for sharing or up-voting correct information, and the council is given 48 hours to rectify the problem. Capturing a video of yourself picking up someone else’s litter, or simply putting your own crisp packet in the bin, will earn you points as well.

“So it goes from physical activity to community participation. Who knows? Down the line, it would be nice if, say, you have a certain number of ‘participation points’ in the community, can you get 5 or 10% of your council tax, for example?”

“We’re trying to incentivise that kind of behaviour, whereby people are encouraged to do the right thing, and earn points and are acknowledged and recognised for their participation, as part of that experience.”

Discover Street Tag

