



Forest Data to Insights and Experiences Using Gamification

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Keywords: digitalization, remote sensing, sensors, location-based games, decision making

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, games have become an increasingly common aspect of contemporary culture, including new uses beyond leisure activities. Games are generally considered to provide cognitive, emotional, social, and motivational benefits (Ryan et al., 2006; Granic et al., 2014). As such, transforming different systems, services, and activities to resemble games has become a common practice in design, commonly known as gamification (Koivisto and Hamari, 2019). The aim with gamification is to give rise to similar experiences that games do. There are growing and promising empirical results across various fields on how gamification has been found to engage people in a variety of situations, including education, personal health management, democratic participation, and sustainable consumption, among others (Koivisto and Hamari, 2019). However, there remains opportunity to tap into the potential of these developments in terms of observing and understanding forest ecosystems, planning their use, and to facilitate engagement with nature (Figure 1).

There is currently a proliferation of digital data. New and novel means for making sense and informed use of these data is required. We propose that gamification can bring a human element to dealing with this digital data proliferation and associated collection and processing opportunities, including miniaturization of sensors, development of computational methods, and an increased level of automatization. Considering the *status quo* in which digital data is available from air- and spaceborne sensors observing forests and the Earth's surface on a daily basis (Achard and Hansen, 2016). Forest machinery is used for collecting geolocated data concurrent with sensors observing the operational activities (Hauglin et al., 2017; Noordermeer et al., 2021). Respectively, due to miniaturization of the sensors, consumer-grade devices, such as smartphones can be equipped with laser scanning sensors or applications capable of varied forest observations (e.g., Vastaranta et al., 2015). At the office or when mobile, geographic information systems are used to simulate and then visualize alternative forest development scenarios and support operational and strategic decision making regarding forest resources.

In this context, the concept of gamification provides a vehicle for digital change in the forest sector and has created opportunities to replicate real forest environments to support and inform decision making and for environmental engagement. However, as the digital technology and computational methodologies have developed rapidly, the human-technology interfaces have not kept up with the required technical understanding and needs for investment (Sirgy and Lee, 2018). Decision makers and data analysts have difficulties in dealing with large amounts of forest data, the multidimensional aspects of the data to be considered, and subsequently how to address a given problem. It has been identified that in many tasks, such as in forest harvesting, the technology integrated with the task is not used to engage or inform the operators' work on site.

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Gilad Ravid,
Ben-Gurion University of the
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Reviewed by:

Jakub Swacha,
University of Szczecin, Poland

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Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
People and Forests,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Forests and Global
Change

Received: 21 October 2021

Accepted: 20 March 2022

Published: 15 April 2022

Citation:

Vastaranta M, Wulder MA, Hamari J,
Hyyppä J and Junttila S (2022) Forest
Data to Insights and Experiences
Using Gamification.
Front. For. Glob. Change 5:799346.
doi: 10.3389/ffgc.2022.799346



FIGURE 1 | In an office setting, gamification approaches can be specifically used for interpreting multidimensional forest data and to present it in a way which makes it possible to engage workers or analysts in a gameful way.

Via gamification, real time data for on-board sensors can be combined with static data layers on topography, planned block boundaries, and the like, to provide insights, support or playfulness to the skilled operator. Beyond the noted increased integration of gamification to enhance the forest operations work environment, there are also opportunities to use it to enhance forest-related leisure activities. In this communication, we present our views, that are based on the existing scientific knowledge, on how gamification could support forest related work activities including forest surveys, forest operations, foraging, forest data interpretation and decision making as well as leisure and recreational activities.

LOCATION-BASED GAMING AS A WAY OF SUPPORTING FOREST SURVEYING, OPERATIONS AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Forests are commonly used for geocaching, one of the earliest location-based games that continues to be a popular pastime (O'Hara, 2008). In location-based gaming it is typical that there are rules that govern and guide the player's actions and movements, as well as the game's response to them (Leorke, 2018). We argue that this core principle and these types of game mechanics can be applied to forest surveys and operations as well as recreational activities. Emerging technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), wearables (including motion tracking technology, haptic gloves and biometric sensors

for example), and extended reality technologies can be used to gamify forest environments by augmenting the physical landscapes with virtual interventions (Buruk et al., 2019). Augmented reality (AR) is the key technology that is used to engage players by bringing game elements such as challenge, strategy, aesthetics, story and rewards to the forest environment. All of these can be implemented using smartphone applications or other virtual reality (VR) devices, such as specific VR headsets.

From a work perspective, we think that the user experience can be made immersive by using wearable technology that is capable of providing AR experiences and collecting relevant forest data simultaneously. Opportunities arise as consumer-grade devices, such as smartphones, increasingly come with a number of embedded sensors that can be used to characterize forest environments while the worker is implementing required tasks in a gamified environment. For forest professionals, wearable technology can be used to make the work experience more engaging, but also to collect data from predefined locations. For example, personal laser scanning has been shown to be an emerging technology for characterizing forest environments while the user is walking around field sites (e.g., Chen et al., 2019). Terrestrial laser scanning (TLS) has been demonstrated to provide unique information at the forest stand level (Boucher et al., 2021), enabling the capture of larger than typical samples that in turn enable locally relevant model development. Extending from TLS to highly mobile backpack mounted units, TLS data can provide otherwise unavailable, non-destructive, measurements of tree structure and functional traits, toward improved management decisions (Hyyppä et al., 2020). As UAV's are increasingly used in forest applications including seedling stand assessments and biodiversity monitoring (Goodbody et al., 2017; Raparelli and Bajocco, 2019), emerging game trends such as drone racing can blur boundaries between typical surveying work and what people choose to do in their leisure time (e.g., Moon et al., 2019). In general, gamification does not change the way the forest observations are collected *per se*, but we posit it will change the way the worker is experiencing the tasks at hand. That is, an aim of gamification in a professional environment is to have the same high quality outcomes, but to allow for a different and more enjoyable path to getting there. In forest operations, screens and monitors of the forest machines can be augmented with gamified elements providing scoring based on site difficulty and tree selection for example. In the training of forest machine operators, simulators with gamified elements have been used successfully for years (Bots and van Daalen, 2007). Within the next few years, we expect to see this training element transfer into operations and make daily tasks for forest machine drivers more interesting by adding playful elements to an often isolated work environment. In a digitalized and automatized work environment that requires less human presence on-site, some monitoring tasks may benefit from game elements, such as points, badges and feedback from the level accomplishment that keep the operator engaged. In general, information needs of forest management planning or operational activities, such as forest harvesting, provide opportunities to develop and introduce new data collection and interaction opportunities from location-based gaming.

Moreover, game mechanics and elements implemented by simple personal, consumer-grade devices such as active wearables can be deployed to enhance the interactivity of activities such as foraging and hunting.

GAMIFICATION SUPPORTING FOREST DECISION MAKING AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

It has been shown previously that gamification can improve well being at work (Koivisto and Hamari, 2019; Hassan and Hamari, 2020), and we believe that it may also support complex decision making. Forest-related decision making is based on various data sources with varying spatial and temporal resolutions combined with multiple stakeholders and decision maker(s) values and expectations. Thus, data remains to be transformed and made more accessible to forest managers, operators, and educators, among other users (Rodrigues et al., 2019). A game engine is a software framework primarily designed for the development of video games and we think that these game engines can be also used for interpreting the forest data and to present it in a way which makes it possible to engage the decision maker and the data representing the forest.

With game engines, virtual realities can be created and advanced visualization techniques used that will most likely make complex data easier to understand. For instance, Virtanen et al. (2020) demonstrated how game engines can be extended to include tools for users to interactively visualize and interact with complex data, such as point cloud data. The demonstration and experiences obtained could be extended in the field of forest-related information work as the point clouds are increasingly used as an information source to represent forest environments. To support understanding of the future in addition to the current state of the environment, forest development scenarios can be visualized, built on game mechanics to engage users and implemented using game engines. This kind of concept has been used to support private investors in the field of finance and it has improved understanding of the concepts such as risk and uncertainty (Legaki et al., 2020). These are also the key concepts in forest-related decision making that can benefit from simulations and observations of differing possible outcomes.

It has also been shown that digital connections to forests have provided positive physiological and psychological responses (Yu et al., 2018), whereby positive effects on physiological and psychological health have been obtained from viewing nature-related pictures or movies. To examine the possibilities of the recent VR technology and the influence of forest and urban VR environments on restoration, Yu et al. (2018) conducted a controlled experiment using 30 volunteer participants. Compared to urban VR environments, an increased level of vigor and a decreased level of negative emotions (e.g., fatigue, tension, and depression) were observed in simulated forest environments. In this context, interactive digital environments can be used to engage humans to visit virtual green spaces from nursing homes,

between work meetings, or as a part of daily relaxation routines for obtaining health benefits.

DISCUSSION

There is a significant potential in combining detailed mapping, forest data, and emerging game and entertainment cultures to develop novel approaches for managing, understanding, and enjoying forests. With regards to location-based game contexts, in forest surveys workers are moving between sites which provides opportunities for AR and gamification to be used to guide movements and add motivation for planned tasks. There are significant social and societal benefits to more fully utilize the information available regarding our ecosystems in a more comprehensive manner (McCord et al., 2021). We think that location-based gameful interaction designed around forests will result in innovations in user engagement, data collection, and adaptation of end-user technologies for a forest ecosystem while creating new areas for technologies such as UAVs, wearables and extended reality.

Additional understanding of how gamification can be integrated into the forest sector, what cognitive and social effects they have, and how these effects consequently translate to ecological, economic, and cultural sustainability of forests are under investigation. We see gamification as a means to improve human well being by creating meaningful experiences and enhancing motivation. Gamification offers a vehicle, worthy of investigation, toward evolving business practices, transforming the nature of work tasks and promoting stress-reducing practices, and enjoyable learning activities. However, it should also be kept in mind that possible negative elements of gaming may also emerge (e.g., competition ahead of outcomes, addictive aspects). In addition, as we all have our own preferences and performance-levels, it is a challenge to gamify work environments in a fair way (Morschheuser and Hamari, 2019). Acknowledging the risks, we still foresee the possibilities in gamification to provide novel services and business initiatives based upon new forest experiences in physical and virtual worlds as well as improved work well being and recreational use of forests. Incorporating aspects of play and gamification to operational processes, similar to those indicated here regarding forests, are applicable across a range of fields that require complex decision making and use a diversity of data and knowledge factors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MV, MW, JHa, and JHy: original draft preparation, review, and editing. SJ: illustrations, review, and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING

This research has obtained funding from the Finnish Flagship Programme (Academy of Finland). Specific Grant Numbers are 337653, 337127, and 337656 and all of these grant numbers refer to Forest-Human-Machine Interplay Flagship of Science.

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