

# **6 REASONS WHY GAME-BASED LEARNING MIGHT BE THE “NEXT BIG THING” IN YOUR TALENT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**



**Game On**  **Learning**

**Bryan Austin**

Chief Game Changer  
GameOn!Learning

## A Letter from the Author



Dear friends and colleagues:

This is an exciting time for corporate learning. We have so many education options from which to choose to help develop our most important asset – our people.

Many of our libraries include virtual instructor-led programs, online courses, blended learning options, and more. As I talk with organizational development professionals, they share a common challenge with me.

The focus on volume has negatively impacted program adoption, completion, and effectiveness. Organizations ask themselves:  
“If we implement it will they come, will they complete it, and will they apply it?”

Realizing the *full* potential of online learning will be a combination of several current and emerging resources – like simulations and mobile learning - added to your overall learning strategy. This white paper discusses one of these emerging resources that has captured my imagination over the last year: **Game-Based Learning**.

Read on to learn more about this innovative resource and how it can help you create excitement for your learning programs, significantly increase course completion, and more effectively imbed skills employees can apply immediately.

Best Regards,

**Bryan**

Bryan L. Austin

Chief Game Changer

**Game On**  Learning

bryan@gameonlearning.com

(888) 725-GAME

[www.gameonlearning.com](http://www.gameonlearning.com)

P.S. Please contact me with feedback on this whitepaper or to share your experiences. I'd love to hear from you!

## Quick Table of Contents

<b>THE CURRENT “OFTEN UNAPPRECIATED” STATE OF LEARNING ONLINE .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>GAME-BASED LEARNING – IS THIS THE NEXT GENERATION OF ELEARNING? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>THE HUMONGOUS POTENTIAL OF GAME-BASED LEARNING .....</b>	<b>3</b>
REASON #1: THE ULTIMATE LEVEL OF LEARNER ENGAGEMENT.....	4
REASON #2: EXTRAORDINARILY HIGH COURSE COMPLETION RATES.....	4
REASON #3: EFFECTIVENESS AND RELEVANCY IN BUILDING SKILLS.....	5
REASON #4: THE “BUZZ” .....	5
REASON #5: NEAR-UNIVERSAL POSITIVE LEARNER FEEDBACK AND WILLINGNESS TO RECOMMEND.....	6
REASON #6: LONGER RESIDUAL PROFICIENCY RETENTION .....	7
<b>WHAT ELSE SHOULD YOU KNOW ABOUT GAME-BASED LEARNING?.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>“OK, YOU’VE GOT ME THINKING – NOW WHAT?” .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....</b>	<b>9</b>

## The Current “Often Unappreciated” State of Learning Online

How far we have come! From diskette-based PC courses to the sophisticated elearning and blended learning solutions of today, it’s been a fun journey. Most of us never imagined the sheer volume of online learning options and content that would be available to our organizations today, or the power of the development tools available to create even more of it.

To some extent, the focus on volume has created challenges around program adoption, completion, and effectiveness. Organizations ask themselves: “If we implement it will they come, will they complete it, and will they apply it?” For many organizations, completion rates are embarrassingly low. Employees often don’t see the benefits of the course to be in line with the time required to complete it.

Geez, delivering learning online was supposed to be so easy, and so cost effective! It was supposed to provide so much flexibility for our employees! To fire them up! To enable them! Often, instead of realizing the huge potential of online learning, we end up with a huge investment in content and infrastructure without much performance improvement to show for it.

How far we have come – *but how far we still have to go!*

If there was an easy answer to this dilemma (a “silver bullet” if you will), it would already be in place in each of our organizations. The fact is, realizing the *full* potential of online learning will be a combination of several current and emerging resources added to your overall learning strategy. Learning portals, simulations, mobile learning and virtual Instructor-led Training (vILT) are but a few emerging resources you are probably either considering or currently implementing.

In this white paper you will learn about Game-Based Learning and why it just might be “the next big thing” in elearning.





## Game-Based Learning – is this the next generation of elearning?

What exactly is Game-Based Learning? Many of us are seeing the term increasingly used in the industry. You may also have seen the term “gamification”, a concept that can be applied to a variety of things as diverse as online customer experience, training, or application design for CRM systems. For the purposes of this white paper, I will use the term Game-Based Learning to mean a learning experience that is structured around the concept of a competitive game.

These learning experiences have been around for more than a decade in a classroom workshop setting, where learners are divided into teams and learn by competing against each other in a game or sophisticated simulation, such as running a business or climbing a mountain.

Game-Based Learning has more recently begun to appear in online learning, as an online **video game** that can be completed individually or as a group. Some organizations also intersperse a virtual instructor throughout the game to relate the learning more relevantly to their organization’s needs.

The best Game-Based Learning provides the learner with the ability to learn and practice skills as they play the game and compete against their peers through various scoring algorithms. Game-Based Learning simulators allow the learner to not only learn concepts and skills, but to put them into practice as part of the game, receiving continuous and personalized feedback as they progress through the game.



## The Humongous Potential of Game-Based Learning

Why is Game-Based Learning so exciting? Because it has the potential to make huge strides in solving one of the most persistent historic challenges of online learning: that employees don’t complete the courses because they don’t find them engaging, relevant, or worth their time.

In speaking with organizations using Game-Based Learning, there seem to be several key positive trends in their results thus far. These organizations, almost without exception, are finding that Game-Based Learning is helping them realize the decades-long potential of elearning specifically, and online learning generally. I call these recurring positives the **6 Reasons to Consider Game-Based Learning as one of the “Next Big Things” in Your Workforce Development Strategy.**

Let’s dive in with Reason #1.

## Reason #1: The Ultimate Level of Learner Engagement

There are very few of you reading this white paper that cannot recall taking an elearning course where you quickly sunk into a pattern of:

1. read a screen, click on next
2. read a screen, click on next
3. read a screen, click on next
4. read a screen, click on next
5. read a screen, click on next
6. answer a knowledge check test item
7. read a screen, click on next
8. read a screen, click on next... and so on.



You get the idea. My favorite quote from the **ASTD conference** in Denver was from a presenter from Avaya: *"The best that can be said about most elearning is that it gives you the sensation of a coma without the worry and inconvenience."* Harsh, but funny!

Well-constructed Game-Based Learning is quite different from the traditional elearning user experience in that **learners spend over 90% of their time in the course playing the game**, as opposed to "read a screen, click on next". The game concept plus the competition with other players (who are often colleagues in their own organization) serve as a very compelling "hook" to engage them with the online course.

A risk with GBL can be a game concept that is too hard to learn, which can be off-putting to learners at the beginning of the game. The best GBL courses keep the orientation to the game easy to assimilate, as well as providing tutorials at the beginning. It also helps to have virtual mentors, tutors and tools that guide learners to the right behaviors, so they get into the spirit of competition and can perform well in the game.

If learners are hooked by an engaging GBL course experience, almost certainly Reason #2 will follow.

## Reason #2: Extraordinarily High Course Completion Rates

I spent quite a few years working for vendors whose solutions included large libraries of elearning courses. These libraries offered great **potential** for cost effective access to online learning and were not difficult to cost justify up front, as the *cost per course* per potential employee trained was just a few cents to a few dollars.

The problem was that sometimes after a year or two, utilization of that wonderful library, especially when measured by course *completions*, was very low. As in: the percentage of the

licensed workforce who had completed even one (1) course was **below 15%**. Ouch! I hope this disappointing result doesn't hit too close to home for your organization, but it has for many others.

Over the last two years, a European Game-Based Learning course developer has trained over 30,000 learners, and has provided me with reports showing that **over 90%** of the learners who started the Game-Based Learning course completed it. That's several times higher than the traditional elearning library statistic noted above, and is a particularly compelling statistic for such a large number of individuals taking their Game-Based Learning courses.



### Reason #3: Effectiveness and Relevancy in Building Skills

An essential component in valuing any learning program is how effective it is in developing the skills it is designed to impart. **Knowledge acquisition** is not hard to measure. **Skill acquisition** by each learner is much harder to assess, for a variety of reasons. But rather than delving into an academic dissertation on how to measure *skill* acquisition, let's focus on a much simpler premise to consider:

*How effective, for example, can a 2-day negotiation skills course be if the vast majority of the training time is spent on knowledge-based lecture rather than negotiation skills practice? And how complex and realistic can the skills practice scenarios really be in that setting? Finally, how individualized and targeted is the feedback and guidance on each learner's practice in each scenario?*

For skills-based learning, internalizing complex new behaviors to improve performance requires **hours** of practice in a safe environment, with real-world scenarios and personalized learner feedback. Game-Based Learning often provides this.

If the above-referenced 2-day negotiation course were implemented in a Game-Based Learning format, and learners spent 2-3 hours per week over 4 to 6 weeks to complete the game, each learner would spend **at least 90% of their learning time** applying, practicing and internalizing those skills. And doing so in increasingly complex practice scenarios. With ongoing, frequent and highly-targeted feedback.

If the average total learning time was 12 hours in this Game-Based Learning example, that would mean over **10 hours** of negotiation practice by the end of the game, creating a much higher likelihood of not only increased competence in the trained skills, but a higher level of confidence in using them on the job.

### Reason #4: The "Buzz"

Isn't it wonderful to get great positive "buzz" from a new learning program you roll out? Truly, it's part of what we live for in our profession. Let's face it, having positive word-of-mouth make its way around your organization from those taking a course they really find interesting is a kick!

Game-Based Learning often produces this positive buzz. Part of it is the fun of playing the game. Part of it is the competition with colleagues. Word certainly travels fast in a competitive sales force, a customer service department, or a group of first-level managers.

- ♦ *"Can't wait to take another of these courses!"*
- ♦ *"I had so much fun and I learned so much!"*
- ♦ *"The best training course I've seen!"*
- ♦ *"This game has been extremely beneficial for me, both in terms of theory and practice, and it was fun as well. I really enjoyed the process. I want to thank my HR team for having given me this opportunity."*
- ♦ *"I've finished the course, what a shame! I didn't want it to end."*

Positive buzz for a great learning program can also have a **wonderful** effect on the perception of you and your team by the organization. Let's take these good vibes to the next level with Reason #5, which relates to some of the metrics you almost certainly track as part of your workforce development program.

### Reason #5: Near-Universal Positive Learner Feedback and Willingness to Recommend

Level 1 measurement data on well-designed Game-Based Learning is very encouraging across the board. The European Game-Based Learning course developer I referred to earlier in this white paper has documented the following Level 1 data from over **30,000** learners who completed their courses:

- ♦ Average overall course evaluation, to date: **9.4 out of 10.**
- ♦ Average overall assessment of educational value: **9.2 out of 10.**
- ♦ Percentage answering "Yes" to "I find it applicable to real life": **98%.**
- ♦ Percentage answering "Yes" to "I will recommend this course": **99%.**



Most organization comparing these metrics to their most well-received courses have shared with me that these are as high, or higher, than their best programs.

It is impressive to me that these metrics are so high given the very large sample size of learners trained.



### Reason #6: Longer Residual Proficiency Retention

The first 5 reasons I have shared to consider Game-Based Learning as one of the “Next Big Things” in your employee development strategy have indicated that if your employees start a Game-Based Learning course, they are highly likely to complete it, and also to be very enthusiastic about the experience.

Based on my experience in corporate learning, I’m excited about the strong likelihood that learners will not only better internalize the acquired skills (Reason #3), but be more likely to apply those skills back on the job and to retain those acquired skills. I base this on the following strengths of Game-Based Learning:

- ◆ the hours of active practice in the new skills as they play the game.
- ◆ the competitive aspect of the learning experience drives the learner to not only learn the skill but to apply it with the highest possible proficiency in the game. The higher the proficiency, the higher the learner’s score.
- ◆ the amount of specific, personalized feedback the learner receives throughout the game really helps them internalize even the fine points of each taught behavior. In well-crafted Game-Based Learning courses I have reviewed, I can’t see how traditional elearning, or even an instructor-led workshop, could duplicate this level of reinforcement and remediation.
- ◆ attitudinally, the positive experience of playing the game, competing to win the game, and the awards and recognition earned during the game keep the learner open to fine-tuning their skills. By the time the game is complete, each learner is already well down the path of internalizing their acquired and practiced skills. Just as importantly, each learner will have developed significant confidence in applying the new behaviors on the job.
- ◆ last but not least, the best GBL courses I have seen provide follow-on tips, tricks and tools for several weeks after the course to keep the optimal new behaviors in focus as the learner completes their ramp to competency. Some Game-Based Learning providers also provide communities of practice that the learner can access after training. Most of us realize the ongoing value of this post-training reinforcement.



In summary, although accurately measuring skill retention is very difficult to do from the vendor’s point of view, I believe there is a lot of evidence that Game-Based Learning will consistently produce great results in improving the performance of learners.

## What Else Should You Know About Game-Based Learning?

### Did you know?

- ◆ The average age of video game players is now 37
- ◆ 42% of video game players are female
- ◆ 25% of video game players are over 50 years old

(source: ESA 2011)

There is a very wide spectrum of training emerging under the Game-Based Learning, or gamification of learning, descriptor.

The main thing to know about well-developed Game-Based Learning is that it can be, and usually is, much more expensive and time consuming to develop than more traditional forms of elearning. Gamelearn, who develops the courses that Game On! Learning offers in the U.S. and Canada, spent about \$1,500,000 and 2 years to develop each of their Game-Based Learning courses.

This means that more robust online Game-based Learning, either acquired off-the-shelf or developed for your organization, will usually be more expensive up front than traditional elearning. That said, considering Game-Based Learning's extremely high completion rates, your cost per trained employee might be comparable, if not lower.

I tend to evaluate training from a **performance impact** point of view rather than the cost. Robust online Game-Based Learning's ability to provide superior skills transfer, especially compared to traditional elearning, is very likely to produce a significantly better ROI than most training delivery alternatives.

There is still much value in traditional elearning libraries, and I still believe in those solutions. Since it is likely to be several years until Game-Based Learning hits critical mass in terms of off-the-shelf offerings, there will continue to be a great fit for both in your learning content strategy.



### "OK, You've Got Me Thinking – Now What?"

Well, the "What" is certainly different for each organization. Like every other training decision, this one must be needs-driven and based on good understanding of Game-Based Learning and its applicability to a particular need.

You have already begun the educational process around Game-Based Learning by reading this white paper. I encourage you to learn more about this exciting tool for employee development.

To learn how Game On! Learning can assist you in evaluating Game-Based Learning as part of your overall workforce development strategy, please contact me. Or, if your needs are immediate, email us at [info@gameonlearning.com](mailto:info@gameonlearning.com) to let us know when it makes sense to pilot Game-Based Learning in your organization.

In any case, I look forward to seeing you and your organization **Get Your Game On!** ☺

## About the Author

Bryan Austin is the Founder and “Chief Game Changer” of Game On! Learning.

Throughout his 25-year career with leading organizations like SkillSoft and Kaplan, Bryan has dedicated himself to helping organizations develop high performing employees through innovative learning solutions. A hallmark of Bryan’s approach is his keen ability to think outside of the box and create engaging, skills-based learning experiences that accelerate employee growth and productivity.

The fusion of technology and learning has always captivated Bryan. His initial exposure to corporate learning and development came when his first employer, a systems software company, asked him to develop a technical training program for new Systems Engineers. He and his team rented a small college campus in northern California, set up a mainframe computer lab, and taught classroom sessions during the day and computer labs all night. Seeing the positive impact of the program first-hand ignited Bryan’s passion for the power of learning.

From there, Bryan went on to work for, and lead companies, that provide cutting-edge, technology-delivered learning solutions to medium, large, and global companies. For Bryan, it has been fascinating to be a part of the evolution of corporate learning and development. He has seen multi-media training evolve from audio/videotape/workbook packages, to PC and LAN-delivered training, to the sophisticated elearning solutions of today.