Using videogames or gamified applications to promote learning has been a popular goal for many educators and researchers. To develop effective and appealing games and applications, we need in-depth understanding of game design and gamification techniques. This research is an empirical study looking into gaming experience — gamers’ motivation, gaming strategies, gamers’ likes and dislikes of two commercial games (Animal Crossing and Farmville). The research also tried to explore how gamification techniques were implemented and how effective the techniques worked in the two games.

This is a qualitative case study. Data on game structures and gaming experience were collected based on Appelman (2007)’s Experiential Model Framework (EMF) and through methods of observation, interviews and stimulated recalls (Carspecken, 2007). Data analysis used some basic techniques of Carspecken’s Hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis method of critical ethnography (Carspecken 1996).

The findings found out that gamers had different motivations playing the games, which resulted in different efforts and strategies in the gaming process. The study also found out that a proper balance among structural elements, engaging content, and adequate functionality and interaction made a big difference in determining how well the gamers enjoyed the gaming experience and how long they played the game. The implication for us is that implementing the gamification techniques properly is important. To design effective instructional games or gamified applications, instructional designers will need to know how to use the different gamification techniques to harness its power for the learning purposes.