

FITNESS





# The importance of gamification in fitness

by Ashley Mateo

Find out why introducing gaming elements into your workout is fundamental.

Sure, you know all the physical and mental benefits of exercise—but all the knowledge in the world sometimes isn't enough to get you to roll out your yoga mat or pick up a weight. But what if working out felt less like a chore and more like a game?

This isn't about turning your Nintendo or Wii into a fitness machine, or strapping on futuristic VR goggles and risking tripping over your furniture while burning a few calories. Rather, it's about **introducing gaming elements**—such as point systems, virtual trophies, and leaderboards—that can make daily exercise seem like less of a grind. It can take months to see the physical payoffs from exercise; en route, exercisers are now chasing digital badges and trophies and animations.

**Gamification** in health and fitness apps actually does increase physical activity, according to a meta-analysis published in 2022 in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. Using points, levels, rewards, leaderboards, narratives, and teams increased daily step count and overall physical activity. Even better: Integrating those features into mobile apps and wearable devices makes physical activity more fun and arouses the desire to participate and be active in communities, a 2023 study in the *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* determined.

There are few things at play here. For starters, it feels good to be rewarded. People who received immediate, frequent rewards for completing small tasks reported **more interest and more enjoyment in their work** compared with people who received delayed rewards only given out at the end of a long project, according to a 2018 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. (This study was about workplace behaviors, but it makes just as much sense in the gym).

That's why **motivational cues** were deemed to be the most helpful features in wearables in a 2020 study in the journal *Digital Health*. Psychological techniques associated with behavior change—like social support, rewards, badges, notifications or prompts, and providing feedback—can actually lead to changes in physical activity. No wonder the most common gaming elements you'll find in fitness apps include points, leaderboards, unlockable content, levels, badges, and challenges/quests, according to a 2023 systematic review published in *Internet Interventions*.



Plus, everyone knows that **fitness is better with friends**. People who worked out with friends (or a spouse or co-worker) said they enjoyed the exercise more than those who worked out alone in a 2013 study out of the University of Southern California, and those who exercised with someone they thought was better than them worked out up to 200 percent harder and longer than others, according to a 2012 study in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

Exercise is also contagious (in a good way), even when you're not physically working out with someone else. After analyzing five years of daily running patterns of more than one million people who logged their runs digitally in a global social network of runners, researchers found that on the same day, on average, an additional kilometer run by friends can inspire someone to **run an additional three-tenths of a kilometer**, and an additional ten minutes run by friends can inspire someone to **run three minutes longer**.

Finally, adding **an element of competition** to exercise (even via an avatar) improves performance. In a 2020 study presented at the *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, cyclists were able to surpass the effort of an avatar they thought was working an effort equivalent to their personal best—even though the avatar was actually set to work two percent harder than the cyclists' personal best.

That kind of competition and motivation is built into the **Technogym App**. Using the Challenges feature, you can compete directly against friends and other users from across the world. New challenges are released every month. For the duration of each one, you can check the "Leaderboard" box to see your exact position in the ranking in real time, and, at the end, you'll be rewarded with Badges, AKA personal trophies, according to your overall performance (If you'd rather just compete against yourself, that's also an option).

A little rivalry could give you the boost you need—as long as you're using gamified apps reciprocally and to give support and encouragement to other athletes, a January 2020 study published in the journal *Information Technology & People* found. But, be careful: If you're using them for social recognition (i.e. to receive praise and public endorsement) you're more likely to develop an obsessive passion for exercise and suffer higher stress levels.

Of course, a digital trophy can't replace the feeling of earning a medal after running across a finish line. But when you're just trying to get yourself out of bed for an early ride or run or squeeze in a quick at-home strength session between Zoom meetings, knowing that you're part of a larger community – and that you'll get the satisfaction of adding a new reward to your virtual shelf – might just **be the gentle nudge you need to keep moving towards your goals**.