

GAMIFY YOUR BUSINESS

What Entrepreneurs Can Learn from RPG Game Mechanics

Based on a conversation with Paul Pape of Gamify Business
Unscripted Small Business Podcast · hosted by Jeremy Rivera

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The Origin Story

Paul Pape didn't theorize his way to a gamified consulting framework. He improvised one in a room with a CEO who couldn't engage with traditional business concepts — but happened to love gaming.

Paul was doing back-to-back consulting sessions with this client, trying every conventional framework he had. Nothing landed. The CEO was a passionate gamer, so Paul went home and came back the next day with a different idea: instead of playing a wizard or a warrior, the client would play their own role in the business. Instead of dragons and ghouls, the monsters would be the actual obstacles the company faced — cash flow gaps, unfocused marketing, hiring decisions.

They played for four hours. When it was over, the CEO looked up and said something Paul has never forgotten:

“Is this what business is? Because if it is, I think I finally understand it — and it seems fun.”

— CEO client, first Gamify Business session

That was the light-bulb moment. Paul realized he'd found a way to make the work that entrepreneurs systematically avoid feel like something people actually want to do.

Why Games Work for Business

Paul's underlying insight is straightforward: every game has rules and parameters you have to work within to succeed. Business is no different. The problem is that nobody defines the rules. An MBA gives you frameworks — but then you're on your own, making it up as you go, like a DM running a campaign. Paul comes in and sets the parameters, customized to each client's actual business. He runs the campaign as game master until the client has their footing — then hands it back.

Who This Works For

One of the most common objections Paul encounters is the assumption that RPG consulting is only for tech founders or creative agencies — not for roofers, fence installers, or HVAC techs.

His answer: it depends entirely on where you're stuck. The fence-building part? You've got that. The business part — marketing, staying focused, not branching out in too many directions — that's where the campaign comes in. He uses quest structures with built-in rewards for manual labor teams specifically: short-term quests with group rewards tied to performance, so the repetitive work stays fresh.

The Neurospicy Framework

Paul divides all clients into two categories: linear thinkers and cloud thinkers. Neurotypicals are largely linear — they can follow a process from A to Z. His neurospicy clients (ADHD, ADD, autism spectrum — he has ADD himself, and his son has ADHD) are cloud thinkers:

“A, B, G, Squirrel, Clouds, Graph — you know the thing.”

— Paul Pape

Regular business plans don't hold cloud thinkers. So Paul's books and programs are built with variability baked in — sometimes fill in a blank, sometimes draw circles, sometimes roll dice. Always something different. He also runs a business personality quiz at gamifybusiness.com/quiz that places clients into one of six categories.

His claim: he can tell you almost everything he needs to know about someone — how they'll respond to challenges, what kind of support they need, how they process feedback — just from which category they land in.

Stop Trying to Please Everybody

When asked what small business owners should stop doing immediately, Paul's answer was immediate and unambiguous:

“Stop trying to please everybody. Stop it. Knock it off. As soon as you try to appeal to everyone, you gray yourself out.”

— Paul Pape

The mechanism is worth understanding. When you sense that your passion-driven content isn't converting fast enough, the natural instinct is to broaden — to add more topics, serve more audiences, try more channels. Each individual decision seems reasonable. The cumulative effect is that you stop being recognizable. You become noise.

Social media has trained this reflex. The platform metrics reward reach and virality, which creates a constant pull toward the median — toward whatever feels likely to resonate with the largest possible audience. Paul's argument is that this pull is exactly wrong:

The people who become super fans — the ones who share your work, refer their friends, and pay full price without negotiating — appear when you go deep, not broad. They find you because what you make feels like it was made specifically for them. That feeling disappears the moment you start trying to appeal to everyone.

The SEO Parallel

This maps cleanly onto topical authority strategy in SEO. The more you try to rank for everything, the less authority you carry for anything. Topical depth — tight clusters of content serving a specific audience — outperforms broad coverage at scale. The riches really are in the niches, in both Paul's consulting framework and in search.

Ride the Dragon of Passion

Paul's first handhold for any struggling small business — the one concrete thing to grab onto before anything else — comes in the form of an analogy he calls the Dragon of Passion.

“Fame and fortune are two dragons that are very fast. The only way to really catch them is to strip away everything that you are — to become as fast as them. So by the time you catch them, you're no longer who you were. What I tell people is: ride the dragon of passion. Find the thing you were really passionate about in the first place and just hang on to that. Because everything branches off of that. And then the dragons of fame and fortune follow behind you.”

— Paul Pape

The practical version of this: when Paul comes into a struggling business and reviews their content and marketing, he almost always finds the same thing. They've grayed out. The original thread — the thing that made them interesting, the specific problem they were passionate about solving — has been buried under a pile of off-brand content accumulated in the search for faster traction.

His prescription is not to add more. It's to strip back. Find the original thread and follow it again. The audiences that matter will recognize it.

Authority Machine vs. Customer Machine

One of the most candid moments in the conversation was when Paul talked about his own biggest pain point — not a client's, but his own.

“I've built an authority machine and not a getting-customers machine. And that's some honest tea from a guy who's in the machine right now.”

— Paul Pape

After 18 months of podcasts, TED talks, speaking events, and consistent content output, Paul has built real authority in his niche. He still hasn't solved the customer acquisition problem. The two things look related — and in the long run, they are — but they don't run on the same clock and they don't produce results through the same mechanisms.

Two Different Modes

Brand building works like compound interest. You're depositing trust, relevance, and recognition over a long time horizon. The payoff is real but delayed, and it's difficult to attribute directly to any single piece of content. Lead generation works more like advertising: specific actions produce measurable responses in a shorter timeframe.

The mistake — one Paul made and openly acknowledges — is treating one as a substitute for the other. Building authority is not a lead generation strategy. It's the foundation that makes lead generation cheaper and more effective over time. But if you need clients now, the authority machine alone won't deliver them.

The Meta toggle analogy is useful here: you can optimize for engagement (building the audience, building the brand) or for conversions (getting the booked call, closing the deal). Both are legitimate objectives. They require different creative, different targeting, and different measurement. Treating them as the same spend is how you end up with great authority and an empty pipeline.

Scale Is the Enemy of Creativity

When asked directly whether scale is the enemy of creativity, Paul gave a characteristically direct answer: yes.

His reasoning: when you're small, you have your hand in everything, or at minimum direct oversight. As you scale, you hire people to manage people to oversee people. The founder's signal — the values, the voice, the specific way of doing things that made the business worth building — gets progressively more attenuated as it passes through layers of management. The person in the boardroom is so far removed from what's happening on the floor that they effectively run a different company.

The Rule of 100

Paul's framework for sustainable small business success cuts against the scale imperative directly:

“You don't need a million purchasers right now. A hundred makes you successful. A hundred consistent people buying from you will make you successful to a point of comfort.”

— Paul Pape

The mom-and-pop shop analogy is clarifying. A thousand people walking through the door on a single viral day would destroy a small business — there's no infrastructure to absorb it. But 100 loyal customers, day after day, year after year? That's a business that can run for 80 years. Paul's verdict: if you want to be a millionaire, scale away — but you'll lose your soul in the process. If you want to be happy and successful, a hundred people is enough.

The Starving Artist Myth

Paul has a TEDx talk in development on a topic that sits at the heart of why creative entrepreneurs chronically undervalue their work: the myth of the starving artist.

The origin story may surprise you. The starving artist myth wasn't born from observation — it was invented by a group of wealthy bohemian poets in 19th-century Paris who romanticized poverty they were never actually in danger of experiencing. They could play at being poor because they could always go home.

The narrative took hold through art — most notably the opera *La Bohème*, which eventually became *Rent* — and codified the idea that artists not only accept poverty, but embrace it as proof of their authenticity. Making money, in this mythology, means selling out.

Paul's rebuttal is historical:

“Before all of this happened, before the industrial revolution, artists were making bank. Mozart had a \$175,000-a-year career in today's terms. Picasso was a multi-multi-millionaire. They had patrons, they had the church supporting them.”

— Paul Pape

The industrial revolution changed the economics of creativity by introducing brokers who told artists: generate ideas or starve. The myth was useful to those brokers. It kept creatives compliant and underpriced. Paul's goal is to dismantle it — to give the creative entrepreneurs he works with permission to charge what their work is actually worth.

Quit Selling Your Sh--

Paul's two books are titled *Quit Selling Your Sh--* and *The Bard's Guide to Storycraft*. Together, they make a single argument about how creative businesses should market themselves.

The first book's thesis: product-first selling kills creative businesses. When you lead with the product — the service, the price, the features — you remove the person from the equation. And for creative entrepreneurs, the person is the product. The moment you start selling the thing instead of yourself, you become interchangeable with every other provider of that thing.

Show the Messy Middle

Paul's prescription for authenticity in marketing isn't performing authenticity — it's actually showing the parts of the work that social media trains people to hide.

“Show the messy middle. Show that you can screw up, but you can recover from it. Show that not everything is beautiful. The reality is you're seeing 2% of someone's 100% life. There's 98% of screwing up in there.”

— Paul Pape

The second book, *The Bard's Guide to Storycraft*, extends this into the marketing argument: if you tell a convincing enough story about who you are and what you're doing, you don't even have to pitch the product. Budweiser Clydesdales don't sell beer — they sell horses and puppy dogs. The Taco Bell Chihuahua has nothing to do with tacos. The Coca-Cola polar bears don't sell cola. They all sell stories, and we know exactly what the product is.

Key Takeaways

Six ideas from this conversation worth carrying into your business today:

→ **Business IS a game — with rules nobody defines.**

The same rules and parameters that make games winnable apply to business. The difference is a game master who helps you understand the campaign you're in.

→ **Gray yourself out, and you lose.**

Trying to appeal to everyone dilutes your message, repels the ideal customer, and abandons the thing that made you interesting in the first place. Niche down. Find your super fans.

→ **Ride the dragon of passion.**

Fame and fortune are fast dragons you can't catch by chasing them. The path is holding onto what made you passionate, building from there, and letting everything else follow.

→ **Authority machines aren't customer machines.**

Brand building and lead generation run on different clocks. Both are necessary. Confusing one for the other is expensive. Allocate intentionally to both.

→ **Show the messy middle.**

Social media trains us to show only perfection. What grounds a brand — what makes it feel real — is the 98% of screwing up that most people hide. Tell the story. Sell yourself.

→ **The Rule of 100.**

You don't need a million customers to build a successful business. A hundred consistent buyers can deliver comfort, sustainability, and a business that lasts decades. Scale is a choice, not a requirement.

Connect with Paul Pape at gamifybusiness.com · Take the business personality quiz: gamifybusiness.com/quiz
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