

Sim City: Marketing Edition – where metrics meet reflection

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Abstract

This reflective piece considers how simulation-based assessments enhance engagement in the MA Marketing Management programme (formerly MA Strategic Marketing). Marketing simulations provide real-time feedback and encourage strategic experimentation, creating an immersive learning experience. Drawing on *SimCity*, where players balance resources, priorities and long-term strategy, the marketing simulation adapts similar mechanics to a business context. Framed within gamification and serious games, this approach has transformed classroom dynamics and helped bridge theory and practice.

Keywords: marketing simulation game, simulation-based assessment, competition vs collaboration, gamification

Introduction

Much like *SimCity*, where players balance competing priorities and manage countless moving parts, a marketing simulation game requires students to coordinate pricing, product development and communications in equally dynamic ways. Its power lies in borrowing directly from game design: structured rules, competitive dynamics and instant feedback loops that actively shape how students make decisions. This, as Sailer *et al.*, (2017) describe, is the essence of gamification.

I see marketing simulation games as part of a bigger conversation in educational theory. *Gamification* reminds us of the motivational power of goals, rewards and feedback; *game-based learning* takes this further, treating play itself as a space for knowledge-building (Gee, 2007). *Serious games* add yet another layer, embedding explicit educational aims into the fabric of gameplay (Michael and Chen, 2006). For me, situating the marketing simulation in this way makes its value much clearer. It's not just about mimicking business environments – it's about using the rules, structures and challenges of a game to push students toward reflection, experimentation and deeper understanding.

The simulation works best when it feels authentic. In this case, our students worked in teams to manage virtual firms in a competitive e-commerce environment. Over several decision-making rounds, they set budgets, designed campaigns and adapted to shifting market conditions, with their performance immediately measured against such indicators as market share, brand awareness, revenue and sales. Students were thus able to respond in the moment by refining strategies, taking calculated risks and persisting in spite of setbacks – behaviours that, in my view, are central to developing persistence and long-term learning (Hamari *et al.*, 2016). The real power of these gamified elements is the energy they inject into

the classroom: they sustain immersion, encourage experimentation and motivate students to engage more deeply.

Challenges

Marketing simulation games have been embedded in the MA Marketing Management programme for more than a decade. However, from 2019 to 2023, I came to the view that the assessment of students' performance in them could be much improved. The focus was almost entirely on reflective outputs which certainly encouraged introspection and critical thinking – tasks I valued for the way they prompted students to analyse their own learning – but, as these assessments didn't account for actual in-game performance, students sometimes treated the simulation as secondary. Too often, they would construct articulate reflections about their experience without fully committing to the simulation itself. For some, it became a backdrop rather than a genuine opportunity to test strategies and take risks.

I saw this most clearly when students realised their performance in the simulation had no direct impact on grades. Some became passive, focusing on polished reflections rather than experimenting in the game – missing the real value of simulation as a space to try, fail and adapt. Even when students engaged, challenges remained. Teams sometimes pursued scores at the expense of critical thinking (Nicholson, 2015), while the freedom to make autonomous decisions could overwhelm less confident learners. Competitive features such as rankings motivated many but also caused stress or disengagement for others (Bai and Hew, 2025). Added to this, group dynamics – unequal participation, dominant voices or conflict – and the fast pace of decision rounds often encouraged reactive choices rather than thoughtful, strategic reflection.

Over time, I've concluded that the real success of simulation games depends less on their novelty and more on how carefully they are designed and supported. The very features that make them exciting – autonomy, competition, immediacy – can easily work against learning if they aren't scaffolded. For me, the key is ensuring that the game mechanics, the assessment structure and the reflective opportunities work together so that the focus stays on learning rather than just scoring.

Solutions

The revalidation of the programme in 2023 felt like a natural moment to pause and rethink how we were using the simulation marketing game. For me, it was an opportunity to confront some of the frustrations I had observed. I wanted to create a more balanced assessment strategy, one that recognised both the value of reflective thinking and the importance of how students actually performed in the game. My hope was that this would make the learning experience feel more authentic and encourage students to take the simulation as a space for experimentation and applied decision-making.

I believed that if students could see their decisions directly shaping outcomes, they would be more motivated to analyse, adapt and refine their strategies. It was therefore vital to incorporate measurable performance metrics. Research supports this view, showing that clear

indicators and feedback loops may sustain motivation and deepen learning (Hamari *et al.*, 2016). Still, I worried about the risks. Good scores do not always mean good understanding and students can sometimes ‘game the system’ in ways that prioritise points over concepts (Nicholson, 2015).

Our solution was a hybrid assessment model. Simulation performance makes up a smaller share of the module grade, assessed through teams’ ability to set and achieve marketing objectives across multiple decision rounds. The greater part is derived from a reflective report, in which students explain their choices, analyse challenges and connect practice to theory. I have found this balance motivates deeper engagement, promotes ownership of learning and captures both action and reflection – qualities central to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

This blended approach has been transformative. It captures not only what students achieve within the game but also how they make sense of those achievements. I’ve found that it motivates students to engage more deeply, take greater ownership of their learning and balance practice with theory. In many ways, it feels closer to what experiential learning should be: a cycle of doing, reflecting and refining that develops both competence and confidence (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Competition vs. collaboration: finding the right balance in gamified learning

Competition, when carefully designed, may serve as a powerful motivator in education. I watched student teams manage virtual companies and make strategic decisions across several rounds. After each round, the platform generated performance tables showing teams their own rank on selected metrics such as market share, brand awareness, revenue and profitability. Each team could view only their own ranking, without seeing how other groups were placed.

What struck me most was how this structure sparked a different but equally powerful kind of motivation. Many teams set their own goals to improve their rank from one round to the next, echoing what Nicholson (2015) calls ‘meaningful gamification’, where progress is measured by self-improvement rather than external comparison. I recall moments when students celebrated even small improvements in their performance. I could see them experimenting – adjusting prices, redesigning products or testing campaign tactics – to explore how different choices shaped outcomes. The ranking system, in this sense, became less about competition with others and more about persistence, experimentation and reflective adjustment, qualities at the heart of professional marketing practice (Vallerand *et al.*, 2019).

Yet these experiences also reminded me of the risks. Even private rankings sometimes triggered anxiety or led students to prioritise short-term score gains over deeper strategic thinking, while others disengaged when their rank stagnated. This confirmed what the gamification literature cautions: while performance metrics can motivate, they may also, if not carefully supported, narrow focus to scores at the expense of conceptual learning (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In response, I became more deliberate in structuring the activity – embedding competition within collaborative teams, providing support after each round and placing greater weight on reflective assessment. For me, this balance was crucial: the simulation was never

about chasing rank alone, but about cultivating experimentation, iteration and strategic reflection.

Conclusion

The comparison to *SimCity* is more than a metaphor. It captures the layered, iterative nature of strategic learning. Marketing simulation games encourage students to move beyond short-term results, balancing experimentation with reflection on the sustainability of their decisions. When framed as serious games, their value lies less in 'winning' than in how effectively learners engage in reflective, theory-driven play. A balanced assessment model – combining measurable outcomes with structured reflection – ensures that simulations are not reduced to score optimisation, but instead encourage strategic thinking, collaboration and deeper conceptual understanding.

This approach is not confined to marketing education. The integration of performance-based metrics and reflective analysis could be applied across disciplines such as business, healthcare, engineering or the social sciences and at different levels of study. Moreover, the design offers flexibility for inclusivity: team-based decision-making, scaffolded reflection and adaptable assessment criteria may support diverse learning needs and promote equitable participation among both international and home students. With thoughtful design, simulation games may therefore become powerful tools for engagement and critical learning across a wide range of educational contexts.

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