

## Air Rage: Gamification Techniques for Managing Passenger Behavior

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### Abstract

*Air rage occurs under conditions of crowdedness and anonymity. Negative or inappropriate passenger behaviors are occasioned in the context of feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement. While negative crowd control techniques are necessary to impose limits on specific behaviors relating to security, they need to be applied in the context of a positive community oriented social environment for passengers. Based on gamification techniques used in business and education several crowd management techniques are explained that can be used to create a favorable psychological environment for passengers.*

**Keywords:** air rage; passenger behavior; gamification; positive crowd management; travel; community techniques;

### 1. Introduction

Air rage (or sky rage) refers to a passenger's explosive and unpredictable behavior occasioned by congested travel, unexpected delays, or negative interactions with other passengers and flight personnel. *Silent air rage* remains mental, emotional, and private when the person suppresses it and prevents it from showing publicly for various reasons (e.g., fear, embarrassment, or rational self control). *Explosive air rages* spill out into the public interactional sphere for all to witness the yelling, profanities, threats, obstinacy, complaining, and attacking of passengers and personnel verbally or physically.

Silent air rage is so common that travelers may be unaware that they have it. It is just part of the background stressed out feeling that goes along with the uncertainties and negative emotions of travel and transportation. This negative emotional background-below-the-surface maintains a simmering feeling of resentment that at unpredictable moments suddenly springs out as explosive air rage or passenger rage.

According to a review of recent changes in passenger environment (McGee, 2014a) airlines are pitting passengers against each other by toughening the passenger environment and creating less friendly and more competitive interactions. Another frequently mentioned issue is the space available for reclining seats. Data show that there has been a steady decrease in seat pitch from 1985 to 2014 (McGee, 2014b). These changes were put in place for economic reasons regardless of the additional psychological stress that they extract from travellers:

1. Reducing legroom and seat width on airplanes.
2. Imposing checked baggage fees that lead to jostling among passengers trying to avoid the extra fees and competing for limited space in overhead bins.
3. Eliminating in-flight meals causing passengers to bring brown bags with "smelly" food that others find nauseating.
4. Enforcing inconsistent policies on personal electronic devices leading to confusion and battles between passengers and crewmembers.
5. Overloading cabins leading to disagreements over boarding, seating, overhead bins, bumped passengers, as well as causing more delays and more canceled flights.

Each of these areas has been engineered by the airlines to produce a more competitive social environment in which passengers are given more restricted access to their essential survival needs for psychological sanity, namely, comfortable and clean seats, adequate food choices, baggage storage for all, friendly services, and timeliness.

The travelling environment has grown hostile to these critical passenger needs as shown by the list of recent changes listed above each of which functions to diminish the critical physical and emotional needs mentioned.

According to the FlightHealth.org web site “alcohol is not the main cause of air rage, with drunkenness only accounting for 25% of all incidents. Instead anxiety through delays, cramped conditions and restrictions such as banned smoking are the leading causes” (Flight Health, 2014). The National Institute of Mental Health (2006) reports that up to 16 million Americans may show intermittent explosive behavior (IED) according to a survey conducted by the National Comorbidity Survey Replication of 9,282 U.S. adults completed in 2003. In a study on customer service and consumer perception, Hunter (2006) concluded that “the airlines' refusal to recognize the issue of customer service has perpetuated an environment that has become dangerous and detrimental to the traveling public as well as to airline employees, which in turn has fueled a new phenomenon, now termed "air rage." Smart & Mann (2003) attribute air rage incidents to alcohol consumption by passengers and inadequate training of airline staff. Anglin et al. (2003) recommend reduced alcohol service as a primary prevention measure as well as reducing environmental stress due to lack of specificity regarding incident management and which organizations are to be involved. Morgan & Nickson (2001) identify a number of contributory factors of violence expressed against flight attendants calling for their enhanced training.

An Advisory Circular by the US Federal Aviation Administration (2006) defines four threat levels to help crewmembers identify their responsibility in reporting incidents and what the appropriate response ought to be:

Level 1: Disruptive behavior suspicious or threatening, non-violent, verbal harassment, inebriation

Level 2: Physically abusive behavior pushing, hitting, kicking, grabbing, tripping, inappropriate touching

Level 3: Life threatening behavior weapon displayed or used, terrorist threats, sabotage of aircraft system, choking, eye gouging, threats of hijacking

Level 4: Attempted or actual breach of the flight deck suicidal hijackers, mentally disturbed individuals, goal-oriented hijackers

It is clear that passengers are strongly affected by the various definitions and policies established for reasons of security, economics, and crowd control. This article presents psychological reasons that ought to form part of the constituencies that regulate and manage passenger services.

## **2. What the Airlines Could Do**

The following are examples that illustrate the psychological dimensions relating to passenger comfort and needs to which airlines can contribute in order to reverse the directionality of stress and hostility in airline travel.

### **1) Provide Continuous Information Updates**

Providing a continuous stream of accurate updated information convinces passengers that the airlines care about their stress. As an example, every five minutes an update can be issued. This should be provided in a variety of formats and media: electric board, signs, announcements, and face-to-face explanations. One can also use a *Take-a-Number* system for seat arrangement. This reduces passenger's anxiety about seating, and avoids long lines at boarding.

One can put up a *Flip Sign* in the immediate boarding area for *Count Down to Actual Boarding*. This is more accurate than what the electronic signs indicate and helps calm passengers as they wait.

In general officials are to give elaborated explanations that cover the consequences and implications of the delay or lack of service as expected. They are to demonstrate sympathy and compassion by showing that they are recognizing passengers' distressed emotions and are willing to do something about it: e.g., offering compensation, awards, raffles, entertainment, food, etc.

### **2) Elevate the Importance of the Traveler's Comfort**

Show that you care about the comfort of passengers in the waiting room or on board. Apologize if you can't provide decent seating. Make up for it by giving something else in return so the traveler doesn't feel cheated or neglected.

### **3) Manage the Lines More Practically**

People should not stand in line when they can sit and wait. People shouldn't have to compete physically with each other for a seat by staking out and holding on to the place where they stand.

Do not make people start forming a line until you're actually ready to board them, and call only a few at a time. Current practices promote a travel culture of people standing in long lines and dragging their belongings. Passengers accept this as a necessity but also feel it as dehumanizing. A more compassionate line management approach needs to evolve.

#### **4) Follow Community-Building Principles**

The intent is to create a social group out of the collection of anonymous people in the waiting room or on the airplane. Encourage discussion among the waiting people. Form a support group out of them so they can assist each other and give each other help, ideas, support. Use techniques similar to the popular social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter when bringing strangers together through shared interest in a topic or concern.

#### **5) More and Better Security in Waiting Rooms**

Travelers are fatigued and stressed. They need to be able to take a nap without worrying that their bags are going to be stolen or that someone obnoxious will disturb them.

### **3. What the Passengers Could Do**

#### **1) Bring Things with you for your Comfort**

Examples include: warm clothes, change of clothes, small pillow, blanket, reading material, audio books, snacks, games, etc. Being warm and occupied or entertained are necessities for travel comfort and psychological safety.

#### **2) Form a Mini-Support Group**

Make a connection with one or more fellow travellers. Share and consult with each other on whatever problems are encountered. Nearly everyone is used to depend on others. Few individuals are alone. Yet when sitting in a boarding area or airplane it is a norm not to rely on anyone and not to discuss travel concerns that are shared. You can form a mini-support group by engaging in discussion travellers who appear open for communication and then maintaining that contact over the minutes or hours that slowly go by.

#### **3) Come Prepared with the Right Attitude and Coping Tricks**

Reflect on the difference between rage and resolve. Rage and explosive anger or resentment are irrational mental states that prevent you from getting the right attention. Try hard to inhibit the show of rage that you feel inside. Compel yourself to adopt instead the strategies of resolve. You are not giving anything up. You're just using logic and order to get attention and the appropriate reaction you want.

#### **4) Have Alternate Scenarios Worked Out**

Go over in your mind what happens in the case that you don't arrive when expected. This is not a disaster but you have to take additional steps such as calling people who have arranged to pick you up, calling hotel reservations, changing continuation flights, etc. Being prepared in this way reduces emotional stress from uncertainty.

### **4. Gamification Approaches to Managing Passengers**

There is increasing evidence that crowdedness becomes an occasion for some people to express violent rage against others present, whether they are directly responsible for the situation or not (Schopler & Stockdale, 1977; Vine, 1981). Road rage incidents have grown about 12 per cent per year in the past decade. As already discussed, airlines and authorities are continuing to be concerned about disruptive or dangerous passenger behavior in airplanes and at airports. The issue may be viewed as a problem in crowd management techniques in restricted spaces.

In general there are two approaches available in crowd control and crowd management, one negative, the other positive. Both are essential, and where only one is used, there is less effectiveness. Negative crowd control is what security personnel are now trained for. It is based on a standardized law enforcement protocol of security under threat, namely, "*Know that if you do this or that, you will be arrested. Know that we are watching you.*" When this type of public control system is in place, it needs to be supplemented with positive crowd management techniques, or else people resist the regulations, and a certain percent can be predicted to openly rebel by creating a "scene" and engaging in aggressive, hostile, and sometimes explosive or violent behavior called "rage." Principles of gamification that have been used successfully in business (Werbach & Hunter, 2012) and in instruction (Kapp, 2012; Nahl & James, 2013) could be applied to travelers in restricted spaces.

Here is a description of four types of gamification activities that can easily be set up by airline personnel:

- Live Demography
- Shared Feedback Form
- Flying Partner Agreement
- Flight Alumni Activities

#### 4.1 Live Demography

While passengers are waiting to board, or when already in the cabin, an airline official or other leader announces the start of the activity of “live demography”. The leader asks the group a series of questions to which people can raise their hand:

- How many here are going home?
- How many are going someplace else?
- How many people here have children traveling with them?
- How many people here have never been on an airplane?
- How many people here have other people waiting for them?
- How many people haven't had a decent meal in more than 24 hours?
- How many people here feel that this has been their worst trip of the year?
- Etc.

With each question the leader would quickly count and announce the number of hands. After doing this for a few minutes the entire group will have released some frustration and will feel better because people are no longer an anonymous mass and they've had an occasion to react to each other and to get to trust each other more. The live demography activity breaks the ice of feeling isolated and uncomfortable. It allows people to feel the social dynamic energy of the group. It dissipates anonymity, alienation and disenfranchisement. It softens resentment and reduces helplessness.

#### 4.2 Shared Feedback form

An airline official or other authorized person distributes a *Shared Feedback Form* explaining that it needs to be filled out by two people together. The official should encourage strangers sitting next to each other to fill it out together. This can be done while waiting or in the air, as needed and depending on circumstances. One individual enters the ratings after discussing each item with the other individual and the two agreeing on a compromise answer.

By doing this activity strangers not only become known to each other, thus releasing some of the stress of feeling isolated. Their reactions and emotions to annoying or scary events can be discussed together as a legitimate part of answering the *Shared Feedback Form*. Here is a short example of a shared form:

1. How stressful has your travel been so far?

(somewhat) \_\_\_\_\_ (quite)  
                   1      2      3      4      5

Person A: \_\_\_\_\_ Person B: \_\_\_\_\_ Average: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How hopeful are you that you will arrive safely at your final destination?

(somewhat) \_\_\_\_\_ (quite)  
                   1      2      3      4      5

Person A: \_\_\_\_\_ Person B: \_\_\_\_\_ Average: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Name three things that have been upsetting in your travel so far?

Person A: \_\_\_\_\_

Person B: \_\_\_\_\_

The intent in creating items of the shared feedback form is to allow each traveller to express one's feelings about the travel conditions. Doing it on a shared form is a way of each becoming aware of the other's feeling and thinking, especially as this encourages further dialog. Knowing that the other experiences a similar challenge is felt as relieving (e.g., “I'm glad I'm not the only one feeling that way”).

### 4.3 Designated Flying Partner Agreement

This activity can follow the *Shared Feedback Form* and is especially helpful if the two travelers are getting along comfortably, or see each other as a potential resource for support. This form helps the two make the "*designated flying partner*" relationship their next step. It lists the various ways they can share thoughts, support each other's emotions, and look after one another for the duration of that flight. It helps if they can sit next to each other on the plane but this is not a necessity since there are other ways of interacting.

Person A: My designated flying partner for this trip is: \_\_\_\_\_

Person B: My designated flying partner for this trip is: \_\_\_\_\_

### 4.4 Flight Alumni Activities

The airline official designates the flight by Name (not just flight number--e.g., Flight 345 Feather Sky) and informs all travelers that they are *Alumni* of that unique historical flight in which these particular individuals were brought together by fate and experience together the conditions of the flight, their comfort, hopes, fears, and memories. Everyone receives a flight symbol to keep (button, diploma, gifts, shirt, flag, toy, etc.) as a memorial of the event. People can also hand in a form to indicate their interest in an annual Virtual Reunion on the Internet.

Some types of gamification activities for passengers may already be in place. An example is a prize that's announced for the winner of a contest to guess the exact arrival time, or the half way mark, etc. Other social group activities that promote mutual support and sympathy include a raffle, singing, and oral quizzes.

Create *Happenings* while people are waiting in the boarding area: A raffle; Hula dancing; Clown walking around; Take Photo sessions; Quiz Board, etc. This distracts passengers from their troubles and fears, keeps them entertained, makes them feel pampered and hence more cooperative.

## 5. Positive Community Management Principles

Principle A: Crowdedness can be turned into a community resource.

The external imposition of enforced regulations, called negative crowd control techniques, cannot eliminate resistance, sabotage, and rebellion when the social climate is marked by cynicism and alienation, which prevent positive feelings and mutual contact. When people are crowded together and forced into close quarters for hours, they can be led to the right type of positive interactions that can release community-building forces. Under these social forces, individuals change the way they react emotionally and how they evaluate the situation.

The very condition of being crowded together makes these community-building forces available, similarly to what happens in a natural disaster that unites a town or nation and motivates it to rebuild. Managed collective activities can help release these community-building forces when they create a joint and collective group focus, so that all individuals who are present are focusing jointly on the same item. Size and diversity add to this bonding effect, turning crowdedness into an advantage, rather than a burden.

Principle B: Community-building forces in a crowd can be released through managed group activities.

Positive crowd management techniques are humane and compassionate. They are designed to create a social climate that relieves stress and suspicion in a climate of cynicism and alienation. People are able to handle an unexpected negative experience when the social environment is perceived as favorable or friendly to them. Managed community activities can be viewed as a user-friendly bonus that releases positive feelings of hope and security. These feelings can be expected to transfer to the authorities or airlines, promoting respect and loyalty.

Principle C: Collective decision-making is emotionally more intelligent.

As the saying goes, two heads are better than one. When left alone in a crowd, the individual becomes vulnerable to standardized imaginings. These are culturally acquired norms of expressing dissatisfaction (e.g., "*They're taking advantage of me.*" or "*I'm a wimp if I let them get away with it.*" or "*If they hurt me, I'm going to hurt them.*" etc.). When people in a crowd turn to one another and share a focus, the solutions they come up with are superior and tend to avoid some of the pitfalls an individual when alone can fall into.

*Principle D: Expressing rage in public places is a learned "culture tantrum" or norm.*

From generational upbringing such as observing parents and TV characters behave without civility or suspending the normal rules of civility. "Normal" in the sense of what we usually and normally do.

Another way of saying this: We give ourselves permission to suspend the normal rules of civility. When that happens, rage behavior is being practiced in two forms:

- as a generalized social philosophy of cynicism
- as a personal sense of alienation by being dis-entitled in some way.

Principle E: Anonymity is anti-social and interferes with community-building forces.

Strangers can be crowded together in small spaces yet not know what others are thinking or how they are interpreting the situation. This is because the norm is to refrain from communicating except in very limited ways. However, this norm does not apply when a recognized official person addresses the crowd. At that point social energy is released and several individuals suddenly wish to express publicly their opinion or need.

However, when the official leaves, the norm of enduring silently takes over again. This has unpredictable consequences because individuals are trapped in their suspicions, standardized imaginings, and attribution errors.

Instead of merely remaining unseen, or being present but not talking, airline officials have the opportunity of starting group activities that dissolve anonymity. Live Demography, described above, has that desired effect. Once begun, the official can depart for other duties and the group cohesion that was created will continue for some minutes afterwards.

### **6. Feeling Disentitled and Social Cynicism**

This stressful and disturbing attitude may come to the fore of one's attention and emotion when having to wait in a line that moves slower than what seems reasonable or takes longer than expected. Such is the exasperation that passengers experience when compelled to sit in an airplane on the ground that is inexplicably not moving. There are numerous such frustrating situations that travellers endure routinely including what officials call "small" matters such as expecting a window seat and not getting one, finding all overhead bins already taken, delays in departure, unavailability of adequate food, reclining seats that recline too much into the space of the seat behind, less than nicely friendly employees, and so on.

People in these types of exasperating situations see their expectations of normalcy and decency discarded and ignored by personnel and officials. *They feel they've been robbed of what they are entitled to and have been promised at the time they put up their money for the service.* An elevator that gets stuck, or is too crowded for comfort, or takes too long to come, etc.: these are the violations of one's expectations of normalcy that lead to a despondent sense of having been dis-entitled, which also brings the disturbing emotion of alienation from all around—personnel, officials, other travellers.

For travellers cynicism and disenfranchisement occur together along with the tension and stress underneath the surface appearances. The people whose social inhibition against violence has been weakened, experience this combination of cynicism and disenfranchisement as a legitimate opportunity for suspending the rules of civility to which they normally adhere.

These types of learned social problem behaviors can be more effectively managed through social forces of community rather than through individual counseling, which in any event cannot take care of hundreds of millions of travellers. Everyday road rage, desk rage, passenger rage, boat rage, and so on, occur as a learned form of expression allowable when one is subjected to particular situations and emotions as defined by the social norms and practices of the community.

There are two contrastive strategies available to travellers whenever they find themselves in stressful situations and being outwardly exasperated and inwardly furious. The most popular and less intelligent recourse people use is to complain to personnel, to insist on what they want, and to raise the voice in anger and act threatening. This is emotionally less intelligent because it contains within itself the mechanism of intensifying the frustration, stress, and fury for revenge when personnel and officials reject the traveller's complaints. Often this rejection is inevitable since the people who receive the complaint have no power or means to provide a solution. To continue banging at their door as if they can do something is therefore unintelligent.

Instead there is a second recourse that allows the traveller to calm down, to stop complaining to the wrong people, and yet not feel defeated. This strategy may still not succeed but then it may, while complaining to the wrong people cannot succeed. This involves taking steps in identifying what the personnel perspective is on the situation and what operational chain of command is in place.

The simplest instance is to insist on talking to a supervisor or manager. This is very different from complaining to whoever is behind a service counter or to a uniformed official passing by. But speaking to a supervisor may not work out either so one needs to postpone an immediate resolution to the problem. After this other tactics may be discovered for receiving redress from unjust treatment. This approach is emotionally intelligent because it allows the traveller to avoid excessive stress and built-in failure in situational complaints.

## 7. Conclusion

The misbehavior of passengers is partly caused by the conditions of crowdedness and competition for limited space and services. There is a widespread feeling among travellers of being disoriented and alienated. Airline officials tend to follow primarily negative crowd control techniques by which passengers are warned or punished for showing certain behaviors. While this may be necessary it ought to be supplemented by positive crowd management techniques that make use of gamification principles already found effective in business and education. Examples of such techniques are given and shown to be based on positive community-building management principles. These approaches use crowdedness as a community resource rather than a liability. Their effects are expected to reduce passenger anonymity, alienation, disorientation, and resentment.

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