Chapter 10
Gamification of the Classroom: Potential, Pitfalls, and Practices

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ABSTRACT

Students need the classroom in order to educate in a way in which they can relate, and grow bored when that does not happen. Gamification employs game mechanics, techniques, and theory in areas that traditionally are not set up to function like a game, and many instructors and administrators at the university level are eager to use gamification to encourage students to learn. However, gamification is not a generic fix to the problems found in the classroom. Instructors should gain insight on how successful games work, and gamify specific classroom functions to retain the deep learning required for subject mastery. The author employs the method of heterotopian rhetorical criticism and the methodology of autoethnography to analyze World of Warcraft and re-imagine experiences in the game through critical communication pedagogy to enact change in the traditional college classroom. A general definition emerged: Gamification must consist of high-choice, low-risk engagements in a clearly structured environment.

INTRODUCTION

Instructors find a gap between what they experienced in school in the mid to late 20th century and the experiences of students entering college in after 2012. This generation, born in the 1990s and known as the Games Generation (Prensky, 2001), Generation Me, or Generation Y, interacts so differently with the world than the generations that came before. According to the Beloit College, the class of 2016 has “always lived in cyberspace, addicted to a new generation of ‘electronic narcotics’” (“The Mindset List,” 2012, List number 2). Yes, these children might seem lucky, however in the United States, this influx of almost universal access to technology has marked this generation in a way the previous generations must work to understand. The technology that has always been available to the Games Generation continues to change the way humans think about the world. It is clear that if this technology has changed our lives as adults, it has almost rewired this younger generation to think differently than previous generations.

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This change becomes apparent when viewing the classroom. Students now learn differently than students did even a generation ago. The problem is instructors use “...yesterday’s education for tomorrow’s [students]. Where is the programming, the genomics, the bioethics, the nanotech—the stuff of their time? It’s not there. Not even once a week on Fridays” (Prensky, 2005, p. 62). Teachers of all levels of education risk losing the interest of students when the choice of curriculum falls short of student need (Cohen, 2011; Frymier & Shulman, 1994). Educators must start looking at how students learn, and why learning occurs. I employed the method of heterotopian rhetorical criticism and of autoethnography to analyze World of Warcraft and re-imagine experiences in the game through critical communication pedagogy to enact change in the traditional college classroom

**Potential**

Gamification is a strategy that employs game mechanics, techniques, and theory in areas that traditionally do not function like a game. The word can be traced back as early as 2004 (“Gamification,” n.d.), but the concept goes back further. The boy scouts, sports, and military branches use forms of gamification, in which a person can gain a “level” or rank when successfully completing enough tasks (Geuter, 2012). Digital ranking takes shape in gamified applications (apps) like Foursquare, in which a “player” is able to earn points, badges, and “mayorships” of businesses, homes, and other points of interest by letting friends and companies know that they are “checked in”. Apps like Chorewars and EpicWin help encourage people to finish daily and tedious chores (Lee & Hammer, 2011). These applications, by being simple, pervasive, and easy to use, improve mundane tasks, making them enjoyable. Applications like these serve as mini games that people can easily play anywhere.

Games are generally simple concepts that follow simple sets of rules that regulate game play. Those rules guide players to correct behavior through feedback of either success or failure. “A well-built game is, in essence, a series of short-term feedback loops, delivering assessment in small, frequent doses” (Corbett, 2010, para. 15). Unlike most institutional learning systems, “games associate learning with fun and allow for trial and error” (Cohen, 2011, p. 17). Games work because players do not fear failure. Even death is just a minor setback in the course of a game. In games, failure presents an opportunity for improvement/adjustment to player behavior. Players can make multiple attempts at a quest, fight or engagement, with low risk to the fun or motivation of the player. This low-risk failure changes learning from a short-term to a long-term endeavor in which mastery, not scores, is the end result. By adopting a gamified mindset, learning returns to its historical function, allowing students to learn through low-risk fun, which increases participation (Lui, Alexandrova, & Nakajima, 2011). The participation increases in subtle ways as the general population becomes more enthralled with all things gamified.

**Games Are Work**

Gamification is so rich in possibilities because gamers of all skill levels happily work hard and rely on internal motivation to complete game-like tasks. Gamers are willing to work, as long as this work challenges them in some way, because, “in a game, players (learners) will endure frustration and challenges that in other situations would cause them to give up” (Ladley, 2011, p. 3). This challenging play/work is more fun and healthier for people than entertainment (Why we play games, 2004), because while watching TV can be relaxing, watching large amounts stops being fun and quickly drains happiness and stamina. To best understand the hard, yet satisfying, play/work found in games, it breaks down in the following
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