Chapter 14

Quests and Achievements in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how the quest structure and achievement systems so prevalent in popular video games can help teachers and directors reform their pedagogy. The idea is to give teachers new ways to guide and motivate students, investing them more fully in the course and encouraging them to deeply explore the subject matter. The chapter provides theoretical support for this model as well as practical advice on its implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Instructors who teach first-year university courses often complain that their students are fundamentally unprepared for college. Citing poor study skills and an overall lack of engagement, they claim that students are more concerned with achieving points than mastering the content of the courses. These frustrations frequently surface on the discussion forums of The Chronicle of Higher Education’s website. In threads titled “Am I a grinch or really unfair?”, “Extra Credit?”, and “Grade Grubbing Hall of Fame,” instructors provide pages of anecdotal evidence that portrays contemporary students as under qualified, uninspired, and unmotivated. As a chronicle.com user (2009) asked in a recent forum poll: “It seems as if the current generation expects a high grade for doing the absolute minimum effort. And after encountering the tiniest obstacle, they just quit. Why is this?”

First-year students, for their part, often complain that university instructors have unrealistic expectations. Required to take introductory-level courses that do not appear relevant to their intended majors, they question the usefulness of first-year courses, as well as the ability of instructors to teach the material. Students frequently turn to sites like Ratemyprofessors.com to express these misgivings. Given the opportunity to anonymously evaluate professors, they post comments that are as viru-
lent and as frustrated as those that appear on the chronicle.com forums.

Yet despite the tone of this discourse on the part of both instructors and students, there is little concrete evidence to support the assertion that university students are fundamentally unprepared or that university instructors are incompetent. One can argue, in fact, that the opposite is true. Most students are already proficient in a number of academic and non_academic modes of discourse by the time they enter the university. They not only know how to read, write, and conduct research, but often employ these skills socially through e_mail, text_messaging, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace. Similarly, most instructors are intimately familiar with the forms of academic discourse that are privileged by their universities. They know how to teach students and how to evaluate their performances based on a number of explicit and implicit criteria.

The difficulty, in this sense, does not lie in the aptitude of students or instructors, but in achieving a sense of what Kenneth Burke (1950 / 1969) describes as “identification” or “consubstantiality” (p. 20): “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (p. 22). This task is primarily the responsibility of instructors. Given the authority to choose the material of the course and to evaluate students, instructors must find a common ground that allows them to introduce the forms of discourse that the university demands in such a way that does not alienate students, but builds on the disparate knowledge and skills that they bring to the classroom.

In order to do so, however, instructors must contend with the fact that first-year university courses are rarely structured in a way that promotes learning and communication. One of the chief sources of income for contemporary universities, these courses are often singled out by administrators searching for ways to modernize their faculty and course offerings, while simultaneously slashing budgets and increasing class sizes. While such policies do increase university revenues, they also increase the sense of division between students and instructors. Education, as a result, does appear not as a cooperative endeavor, but as many of the posts on Ratemyprofessors. com and on the forums of chronicle.com suggest, a matter of “us” versus “them.”

The question, then, is how can instructors, working in this precipitous climate, make college courses more fulfilling for students? How can they make their classes more engaging without compromising outcomes or responsible assessment? As James Paul Gee suggests in his 2003 work What Computer Games Can Teach us about Learning and Literacy, one intriguing possibility lies in incorporate design principles from popular computer games. This is particularly the case with MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role_Playing Games) such as World of Warcraft. Highly symbolic spaces that require players to compose themselves through a complex process of reading and writing (Moberly 2008), many MMORPGs present players with challenges that are similar to those faced by instructors of first_year composition: how to introduce new players to the complexities of a gaming environment that might otherwise seem overwhelming, and how to encourage them to prosper within the constraints of these environments.

In this chapter, the authors embark on a quest for better pedagogy, showing how instructors can adapt the quest and achievement systems of popular MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft into their classes. Social constructivist in orientation, this chapter not only offers a theoretical understanding of the role that quests and achievements play in contemporary MMORPGs, but uses this understanding to explain how similar structures can serve as a scaffold that helps students master the types of performance that are privileged by contemporary academic discourses communi-