

Gamification: It's in the Game

Written by Lukas K. Danner

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LUKAS K. DANNER, JUL 4 2016

Why should we, as teachers, care about gamifying our courses? The answer is student motivation. At first glance, gamification might seem childish and far removed from serious academic teaching to some, but in my experience it achieves the aim of bringing the material closer to the students, motivating them to read and complete assignments, and eventually increasing their grades. As higher education teachers who care about motivating our students to improve, we can benefit greatly from the gamification of course material.

To most educators, the concept of “gamification” is still a rather new one. A simple definition is that gamification is the use of the logic of games in the classroom. Gamification does not necessarily mean that an actual game is played in the classroom, but it certainly can. One example could be the inclusion of a map learning game at the beginning of an online course about international relations in a certain geographical area, such as East Asia or Latin America. This kind of game could help to familiarize the students with the countries, capital cities, and other important information that will inevitably come up in class readings and lectures.

However, gamification means so much more than just adding a game to your general routine of teaching a class. The most effective application is certainly in the online classroom, though it may also be used in a hybrid teaching experience where you are working with both an in-person class and an online environment, such as Blackboard, Moodle, or Coursesites (the last of which is free of charge, in the event that your university does not have a contract with a paid service provider). Here, I will focus on four other uses of the gamification concept in teaching international relations, especially in an online setting: (1) using the logic behind games itself, (2) gamifying by using the language of games, (3) creating a gamified course map, and (4) employing achievements and certificates as rewarding milestones.

First, the logic behind games as applied to the online classroom (or any class) is quite simple: A game gets harder the more and the longer you play it. Thus, in crafting your syllabus and the different modules/parts of your (online) class, from an introductory part to more advanced topics toward the end, there should be an incremental increase in both the parts (building on each other in a logical way to which the students can fully relate) and the degree of difficulty of topics (increasing with each module of the class).

Second, to amplify the application of the logic of games to your class, it is generally recommended to also use the language of games. For example, instead of calling the different parts of a class “modules,” you might call them “quests.” Instead of dividing the quests into “weeks,” you could divide them into “levels,” a term that is intimately associated with games by students. Assignments can be called “challenges,” “trials,” or other applicable game terms, and discussion posts could take place in a discussion “arena.” After all, doesn't “concept and reading challenge” sound much less threatening and more encouraging than “online test”?

Third, in addition to simply listing all the planned activities for your online class, you can also create a “course map” to tie it all together and give students a gamified overview of the class. This could be done using a simple board game visual with “start” and “finish” at beginning and end of the board game path. List the different topics in each week of the class (“levels”) as well the assignments (“challenges”) to be completed, and you will have a course map that will very simply convey the concept of gamification to your students (here is an example of a template for a more advanced, animated course map, though it can be kept much simpler if you prefer).

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Fourth, via adaptive release, it is possible to increase student motivation with the help of “achievements,” “certificates” or other such milestones in the online classroom. In order for such a rewarding notification to be released to an individual student, you can preset the parameters that need to have been met by the student. An example for such a parameter setting could be to have the rewarding notification released once the student completes all assignments (“challenges”) within a module (“quest”) and has logged into the course a certain number of times (an explanation for Blackboard adaptive release achievements can be found [here](#)). Though this approach might appear to be associated with extra credit, this does not have to be the case. Rather, the notification in itself will act as a sort of mental reward (i.e., positive reinforcement) to students and give them a sense of accomplishment after having successfully completed a part in your online class.

Naturally, you can choose the level of gamification that you would like to apply to your own course. Whether it is a little or a lot, in the interest of student motivation and inspiration, challenge yourself to your very own quest to gamify your course!

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