ONLINE CL@SSROOM

IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

JUNE 2015 VOLUME 15, NUMBER 6

Gamifying an Online Course: It's Not a Class, It's a Story

By Robert Prince

A few years ago I was struck by a question: What makes students so motivated to engage in "work" doing tasks in video games, yet at the same time so regularly unmotivated to do work in class that could actually benefit them and their careers? That's when I discovered the concept of gamification—the process of applying the motivational techniques used in video games to courses. What are video games doing so right that I wasn't doing in my classes? It turned out to be quite a few things. I decided to try implementing games as part of a major revision to my Journalism 101: Media & Culture online course with the help of instructional designers Owen Guthrie, Jennifer Moss, and Dan LaSota from the University of Alaska Fairbanks E-Learning department.

Story

A great video game has a story behind it that is engaging and makes you sympathize with the characters. So what kind of story can you create about a Media & Culture course designed to educate students on the mass media and build their media literacy skills? Well, for a good story we need conflict. We need protagonists fighting for a good cause and antagonists trying to stop them. In the world of journalism today, one of the most pervasive conflicts is of newspapers struggling to survive. Many papers have been absorbed by larger corporations more interested in turning profits than in turning out solid reporting. So I decided the story behind the class would be that my students were interns at a newspaper that was struggling to stay privately owned rather than go public and have to start answering to stockholders. I created an elaborate history behind the family that owned the paper in an effort to make the students sympathize with the characters and want to save the paper. How would they save the paper? By collectively gathering enough "views" to save it.

It was important to me that the class website look like a real online portal for a newspaper.

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Using Twitter, HootCourse, and Other Backchannels to Engage Online Students

By Julia Vandermolen, PhD

Social media tools are rapidly changing the learning environment. The biggest change is that we can now capture the "backchannel" of a class—the conversation going on between audience members. It was once the whispers in the audience, but now it can be captured electronically.

A student's desire to participate in the backchannel is increased if he or she has a sense of community within the channel, which is most easily built through social interactions and shared experiences. Tools such as Twitter and TodaysMeet can provide a new and engaging way for students to connect and collaborate outside of the discussion board.

Using tools such as Twitter, HootCourse, TodaysMeet, Tricider, Padlet, and Linoit (lino) to engage students can have a number of benefits. Students are able to collaborate independent of time and place, and gain feedback on and insight into the backchannel process. When using a backchannel students

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ONLINE CL@SSROOM
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Online Classroom (ISSN 1546-2625) is published monthly by Magna Publications Inc., 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Phone 800-433-0499; Fax: 608-246-3597. Email: support@magnapubs.com. Website: www.magnapubs.com. One-year subscription: $197 (Multiple print subscriptions and Group Online Subscriptions are available. Call Customer Service at 800-433-0499.) Photocopying or other reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to Online Classroom, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704.

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In other words, if they all did well on their homework, the paper would be saved.

Points

One of the more amusing revelations I had in this process was in how I handled points in my classes. In a normal class, my students start out with an "A" the first day of class, and that grade goes down if any of their assignments are below A-level work. It's the complete opposite in video games. I've never seen a game in which you start out essentially having won the game and the more you play, the more you lose. You always start a video game with zero points, and you're motivated to play more so you can build that number up higher and higher to impress your friends and/or gain skills or other perks. So I started the students at zero points and referred to points as views. If they did great work, more people would read it online, they'd get more views, and their grade would go up.

Website

A successful video game creates what we call a "suspension of disbelief" within its players. This means that the story is convincing enough that the player feels it could be true. In regard to my class, it was important to me that the class website look like a real online portal for a newspaper, or the students would not buy the backstory at all. So we came up with a Wordpress design that was fairly convincing. I wrote up some fake stories to populate the site, and the students' work would eventually fill it in with plenty of material. This worked well with one exception. We still had to rely on the Blackboard side of the course for quizzes, tests, and posting grades, and that crushed any hopes I had for suspending my students' disbelief. We made up an excuse for Blackboard, telling the students it was our "Human Resources" portal, but there was no covering it up. Until Blackboard is customizable like Wordpress or Wordpress is reasonably capable of doing the job of Blackboard, this element of the class will wreak havoc on my efforts to suspend disbelief.

Levels

Another characteristic of a great video game is that it allows you rise through levels as you play and gain certain powers and abilities with each new level. One of the benefits of the newsroom story I was creating was that I could use the jobs in the paper as levels for the students. As they gained more points in the class by doing the coursework, they would level up and acquire titles like copy editor, news editor, and finally editor in chief. Each time they reached an established milestone of points, they'd get a letter from the newspaper's executive assistant congratulating them and explaining the benefits of their new position. One of the fun parts of putting this class together was trying to think of perks that would feel like real rewards to students but wouldn't always be just extra credit or getting out of work. Some of the perks we came up with

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Ensuring Student Success in Online Courses

By Poonam Kumar and Marilyn Skrocki

Students like online classes due to their flexibility and convenience. But not all students do well in these courses; the statistics indicate that online classes have a much higher dropout rate compared to traditional face-to-face classes. The attrition rates in online courses tend to be 10 to 20 percent higher than in face-to-face classes. While there are some personal factors that could influence a student's decision to drop out, many of the factors are related to institutional and course level support—and these barriers can be addressed with thoughtful planning and implementation. Institutional level factors like technical support, academic support, advising, and availability of resources can support student success in online courses. At the course level, there are many simple strategies and techniques that instructors can use to support students' success in their online classes.

Course organization and layout

Many students drop out of online courses because they feel overwhelmed and sometimes frustrated with the amount of information presented to them and the way it is presented. Learners can experience "cognitive overload" if the information presented to them is not logically organized and the course design is not easy to follow. In such cases, learners will end up spending a lot of mental energy just trying to figure out how the course is organized and how to find information, and may end up feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. The design and layout of the course can minimize this frustration and help students focus on the content rather than on navigation issues.

- Provide a simple and consistent layout and navigation for the course. Use the same layout for each module (for example, overview, objectives, readings, viewings, assignments etc.; differentiate between required and recommended reading), as too much variation could overwhelm students.
- For variety, present some information via the visual channel and some information via the verbal channel.
- Explain and show the structure and layout of the course by making a "course tour" video.

Provide a simple and consistent layout and navigation for the course.

Clearly communicate expectations

Many students report feeling lost and confused in online learning environments. Due to lack of face-to-face contact, sometimes students are unclear on the expectations or need reassurance that they understand the expectations.

- Instructors need to provide detailed and very explicit instructions about the course format, assignments, expectations, grading criteria, etc.
- Provide a "Frequently Asked Questions" section with a list of questions that students may have about the course.
- Provide rubrics and sample assignments. Creating a short video tutorial explaining the rubric and assignment would give students a very concrete idea of the expectations.
- A quiz tool can be utilized to ensure comprehension of course responsibilities as outlined in the syllabus. Students are allowed multiple attempts to take the quiz under low pressure, which ensures confidence when utilizing the quiz tool function.

Prepare students

Many times students enroll in online courses without a realistic understanding of what it takes to be a successful learner in an online environment. Online learning environments are better suited for students who are self-disciplined, motivated, and know how to manage their time. An orientation to online learning and tips on how to succeed in online courses can better prepare students for online courses.

The student orientation should include discussions of:

- Technical skills
- Understanding of online/hybrid learning environments
- Study skills
- Workload management
- Communication
- Resources, including technical help and other campus resources
- Welcoming and personal introductory video of the instructor in a nonacademic role
- A library of resources on issues affecting online instruction, such as time management, computer accessibility, willingness to reach out with questions, etc.

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were getting to choose your own group partners and submitting a story for the front page of the online paper. As a little experiment, I gave students who made the editor-in-chief level the opportunity to give out 1,000 points of extra credit (equivalent to 1 percent of their final grade) to any one of their classmates or to divide it up among several students. I was interested to see how knowing your classmate might eventually have extra credit points to hand out would affect group dynamics in the course.

Execution

This gamified class was a major revision of the original course, which was essentially an online correspondence course I had inherited from another faculty member. Students interact much more than they did before, and their assignments are much more interesting to read. I haven't yet tallied the official numbers, but I feel student success in completing the course has improved.

Creating your own gamified course

My first step was finding a conflict within my field to set as the basis for my class story. What are the conflicts in the field you're teaching? If your field doesn't have any issues people are battling over, then I'd love to visit the planet you live on. Then consider the levels your students might progress through, and try to make them cool enough to be worth striving for. Finally, consider what rewards you can offer for achieving these levels. That can be a fun and creative process, and polling your current students for ideas isn't a bad start.

What I can tell you about gamifying a course is that you should do it for yourself, first and foremost. It's a great deal more work to come up with a story for your course and implement these nontraditional elements. But at the same time, it's a much more satisfying and interesting way to teach. Most students have grown accustomed to the educational status quo. When you try to change that to teach more effectively, you can meet with ambivalence or straight-up resistance. In the end, however, this class represents me and my commitment to education, and I want it to reflect my desire to innovate and experiment rather than just tread down the same old well-worn path.

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Chunk the content and scaffold instruction

Sometimes the workload and reading requirements in online courses may seem daunting to students, especially if they don't have very good time management and prioritization skills. Chunking and organizing the content meaningfully into modules/units not only makes it easy for students to understand and remember the concepts but also makes it more manageable for them. By doing this, the instructor can present complex concepts/ideas as "bite-size information" so students can understand, apply, and retain the information. By incorporating assessments and feedback with every learning module, instructors have the opportunity to scaffold students' learning.

- Divide big assignments or projects into smaller milestones to help students manage the workload, and provide feedback at each step.
- Provide review sessions or instructional videos where you notice gaps in learning to clarify concepts.

Humanize the course

Students report that one of the main reasons they drop out of online courses or programs is because they feel lonely and isolated. Learning is a social activity; we learn through interactions and discussions with others. In the absence of face-to-face contact, online learning can be an isolating experience if there are no opportunities to interact with others in the course. Humanize the online experience through personal interactions and stories and add the human touch to it.

- Set a warm, welcoming tone right in the beginning of the course to connect with students
- Do ice-breaking activities to create a community of learners; ask students to share personal profiles,

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Evaluating Open Education Resources

By Eileen Horn and Kristine Pierick

Background

Open educational resources (OERs) are often cost-free learning materials that can be included in online courses. OERs are abundantly available and can help solidify concepts and enhance learning for students. But this abundance can be a benefit or a drawback. You may find many resources on a given topic, but not all may be high quality. In this sea of resources, how do you decide which ones are worth including and which ones are not?

We were tasked with developing courses that relied primarily on OERs in order to eliminate or reduce textbook fees. In doing so, we created a checklist of characteristics to look for when evaluating OERs for potential inclusion in a course. We drew inspiration from Quality Matters™, the MERLOT© peer review process, and personal experience in the instructional design field.

Checklist

The evaluation stage is where you sift through the resources you have found to determine which ones fit the needs of the course. We've found that having the criteria laid out in an easily accessible format can help make the evaluation process much more efficient. The Learning Resource Evaluation Checklist is divided into three categories: Quality and Relevance of Content, Accessibility and Ease of Use, and Interaction. Each of these categories has criteria that will help you determine whether a learning resource is high enough in quality to use in your course.

The first category is Quality and Relevance of Content. This section is where you analyze the resource to make sure that it is accurate, aligns with the content being presented, is good quality, and is cited appropriately. The criteria in this section help pare down the number of resources to those that are accurate and current and cover the correct level of detail for the course.

Quality and Relevance of Content
Is the material accurate?
Is the material current and relevant?
Is the content considered core within the discipline?
Does the material have sufficient breadth or depth?
Does the material align with the competency level?
Does the material clarify complex concepts?
Are the formats (writing, audio, visuals) used of high quality?
Are the resources and materials referenced in the content appropriately cited?

Learning Resource Evaluation Checklist: Quality and Relevance of Content section

The second category is Accessibility and Ease of Use. This portion of the checklist focuses on ensuring that the learning resources meet accessibility standards, that the layout of resources is consistent and visually distinct, and that the materials are easy to use and presented in a familiar and attractive way. Some resources are very simple, such as motion graphics. Others can be very complex, such as simulations or websites. In either case you want to think about how intuitive it is to use the resource. Does it contain adequate instructions, or will you have to create them for your students? You should also consider any technical requirements when thinking about ease of use. Does the resource require special plug-ins or programs to work? If so, this will diminish the ease of use considerably. Students are increasingly using tablets and other mobile devices as the primary way of accessing their course materials, and these devices may have compatibility issues with respect to OERs. For example, in the case of iPad users, Flash-based resources will be inaccessible.

Accessibility and Ease of Use
Does the material meet accessibility standards (see pag 11: http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED527714.pdf)?
A resource cannot be used unless it meets the standards or has been modified to do so.
Are the labels, buttons, menus, text, and general layout of the interface consistent and visually distinct?
Are the materials easy to use?
Does the material present information in ways that are familiar or understandable?
Is the material presented in an attractive manner?

Learning Resource Evaluation Checklist: Accessibility and Ease of Use section

The final category is Interaction. The purpose of this category is to evaluate whether the resource provides opportunities for student input and feedback. A resource that allows students to interact with the content in a meaningful way can be a nice change of pace and an effective way for students to learn the practical application of a concept that would be more difficult to learn by merely reading or watching. For example, imagine that you've found two resources covering the same content with a similar level of detail. One is a simple narrated lecture, and the other is a narrated lecture that has questions interspersed throughout. There is a blend of objective and open-ended

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questions that students answer as they move through the material, receiving preprogrammed feedback along the way. This feedback, while not customized, allows a student to gauge his or her understanding and application of the concepts in a risk-free environment.

Interaction
Does the module offer opportunities for student input and feedback?

Learning Resource Evaluation Checklist: Interaction section

For evaluating each of the criteria in the checklist, evaluation columns are available to help keep track of your impressions of the resource. Using these evaluation columns makes the comparison process between resources easier, helping expedite your decision-making process.

Quality and Relevance of Content	Not at all	Mostly	Completely	N/A
Is the material accurate?				
Is the material current and relevant?				
Is the content considered core within the discipline?				

Learning Resource Evaluation Checklist: Evaluation columns

In creating the Learning Resource Checklist, our goal was to create a tool that will help you more effectively use OERs in your courses. There can be a lot of learning resources to sort through, and a tool to help you evaluate those will contribute to developing an engaging and meaningful course.

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need to be more succinct and thus demonstrate their knowledge in short snippets (usually in 140 characters or less). This differs from a discussion board where a student can ramble on about a topic or question presented by the instructor or a peer.

Backchannels also provide benefits to faculty, including the opportunity to gain current information on the status of learning; the possibility for immediate, direct feedback; and finally, the chance to get an impression of the learning climate.

Twitter has been used as a method to prompt formative questioning and thoughts presented to students either during a lecture or during a discussion. In one study, Twitter was used as a backchannel to engage students and to prompt them to compose a short sentence during a course lecture. Twitter can also act as an audience response system to collect comments and dialogue pertaining to the content presented in a lecture.

TodaysMeet is the easiest and quickest way to start using backchannels, as it is fast and easy to set up and it does not require an account. Once you start your backchannel, you get a simple URL (no long sets of numbers or letters) or QR code that can be shared with your students. Transcripts of the discussion can be downloaded for reference later. TodaysMeet asks for "Nicknames," so set rules with your students as to what names they need to enter.

Padlet and lino are the two online sticky note Web-based tools that make use of walls. Walls can be set up so that students can use them without logins or passwords, making them easy to infuse into lessons. Padlet is good option if students are doing a virtual book talk. Or if students have questions that require a little outside research, other students can post answers, images, or even videos. The alternative to Padlet is lino, which provides students with different-colored sticky notes to post questions if you do not require the discussion to stay in chronological order. Instructors can ask students to provide tips or quick informational snippets.

A backchannel creates a global opportunity to blend an environment where students and educators can communicate through multiple modalities. A backchannel allows for deeper thought to develop over time, and for students to engage in authentic learning across the curriculum. Finally, through the use of a backchannel learning is no longer confined to just a virtual discussion board, blog, or wiki, or even one course day.

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Student Publishing as Assessment

By John Orlando

While online learning has transformed how instruction is delivered, it has had less of an impact on assessment methods. Most online courses still use traditional assessments such as papers and exams. But the digital revolution opens a myriad of ways to assess student learning beyond the traditional methods, and student publications in the form of e-magazines constitute one of the more exciting possibilities.

An e-magazine is simply an online version of a print magazine. Instead of producing a research paper in a traditional college format, students can be assigned to produce an e-magazine that teaches others about the topic. Instead of a narrow analysis written for the instructor in academic prose, students provide a variety of articles on different aspects of the topic, written for a less technical audience and illustrated with imagery or even videos. Students make this magazine public on the Internet for others to review or offer feedback on.

There are a number of benefits of e-magazines. First, we tend to put more care into something that is public rather than seen by just one other person. A student who knows that minimal effort will get an adequate grade has no incentive to work beyond that. But when the work is made public, the student is more likely to put in greater time researching the topic and developing the articles, thus likely learning more.

Second, studies have found that students tend to take more intellectual risks when they know that their work will be viewed publicly (Foster, 2015). This can be seen in individual blogs over group discussions. Students take more ownership of the product, and thus will put more of themselves into it.

Third, digital literacy has been identified as a critical work skill students will need in the near future (Niemi, 2014). Students will need the ability to find, understand, and create digital artifacts, yet they are still being asked to produce traditional academic papers for college. In developing the publication, they will need to consider what makes the topic interesting and how to communicate that interest to a broad audience in a persuasive format. Thus the exercise helps prepare them for communication in today's world.

Digital literacy has been identified as a critical work skill students will need in the near future.

Assignment options

The instructor will need to decide whether to require each student to produce his or her own magazine, or instead create a single class-wide magazine that is produced monthly. A class-wide magazine on a regular publication schedule would better mimic a real magazine. In this case, the class can be divided into groups, with each assigned to a month. The instructor can then require the group to produce an issue related to the topics covered in the course that month. This would encourage all class members to look at each issue, which will extend readership beyond what might be found with individual magazines. Plus, an ongoing class magazine could become known by people outside the course.

The instructor will also need to decide how much to scaffold the magazine for the students. A nice feature of e-magazine software is that you can choose from a wide variety of very attractive templates. The instructor might pick a template, define the topics that must be covered in each part, and then have the students replace the template fields with their content. This would be preferable if the instructor wants to track the students' work into particular channels. Alternatively, the instructor can give the students the freedom to choose their own templates, with only general requirements about what must be in the outcome.

A digital magazine requires the instructor to develop assessment metrics related to the digital format, which is new territory for most, but guidance can be found in the four literacies that have been proposed to measure digital competence (Gallardo-Echenique, 2015). These literacies ensure that the exercise will produce skills that can be transferred to future endeavors.

Each literacy identifies a skill, and with it suggests an assessment criterion for that skill. The first is information literacy, which is the ability to find good information. The evaluation criterion is "What is the quality of the sources used to research the work?" The second is computer literacy, which is the technical skill of developing digital content. The criterion is "How well does the work demonstrate proficiency in use of common digital elements such as images, videos, etc.?" The third is media literacy, which is the ability to

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bios, stories, and other examples of personal information
- Offer a "live" orientation session through Skype or any other Web conferencing tool so students have the opportunity to interact with the instructor in real time
- Provide a discussion forum for non-course-related social interactions
- Encourage peer-to-peer support
- Incorporate group work
- Provide a personal response to students on their personal profile
- Encourage students to contact you when commenting on their assignments or discussion postings; a simple "as always, contact me with any questions" assists with comfort when seeking additional information

These simple strategies will help students succeed in your courses.

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develop visually appealing work. The criterion is "How attractive is the work?" The fourth is communication literacy, which is the ability to convey a message. The criterion is "How well does the work convey the author's message to the audience?" The instructor can then define different levels of proficiency within each criterion to create an assessment rubric.

Publishing options

E-magazines need not be restricted to the classroom. The format is ideal for student organizations. For instance, students in a civil engineering club can produce a monthly magazine on important developments within the profession, student projects, etc. A department could also publish a monthly e-magazine for students, alumni, and others with news about the department. Students could be the writers and editors, which will help connect them to faculty and bring them into discussions about topics within the field.

There are a number of publishing systems that make creating an e-magazine surprisingly easy. My favorite is Lucidpress (www.lucidpress.com). Lucidpress offers a number of professional-looking templates from which to choose. All you need to do is pick a template and then swap out the elements with your own content using cut and paste. This could be swapping out text for an article or inserting images, videos, and the like. You can also move content around, resize it, and modify background images, shapes, colors, and any other element by choosing from drop-down menus.

One nice thing about Lucidpress is that it allows for shared editing and commenting. All of the magazine contributors in a class, club, or department can be given editing access so that they can directly add features to the magazine until a decision is made to publish it. LucidPress also connects to your Drive account so that you can directly draw content from Drive into the work.

Like anything on the Web, Lucidpress uses a "freemium" pricing model that allows users to make an e-magazine for free with limited templates, or pay for more templates and features. The premium price is still fairly cheap, and probably worth it if you are making an ongoing publication. But if your institution has signed up for the free Google Apps for Education program (and it should), then the premium functions come free. If you would like to compare Lucidpress with other systems, consider Simplebooklet, Glossi, Joomag, Scribd, Zinepal, or Calameo.

I created the first few pages of a monthly e-newsletter for my department as an example (http://bit.ly/1Pp0YiT). It took me all of one hour to build. Consider what could be done when a person, or group of people, put some real thought into it.

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