I gamified my courses and I hate that…

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Abstract

Purpose – Gamification seems to solve all our problems in education. Students become engaged and motivated – they learn so much more than in the traditional system. Conducting lessons becomes a pleasure, an adventure, a catharsis! While checking attendance, participation, quizzes, tasks, assignments, projects, missions, and quests on a daily basis is a bliss. Unfortunately, that is not true. That is only a dream or part of the advertising campaign of yet another so-called professional or seasoned gamifier. Preparing, organising, and designing gamified courses are not a stroll in a park. Every teacher must forsake leisure and family time alike unless they have ample support from colleagues, administration, and IT department. The purpose of this paper is to present the author's approach to gamification and share some insight into the author's experience from designing gamified courses and workshops since 2009.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper concentrates on hands-on experience, mistakes, and solutions in order to approach a major issue: should we introduce gamification in education at all?

Findings – In reality, gamification can be the root of all evil if done too hastily, too cheerfully, and without prior understanding of students' needs, school facilities, and our own abilities. Gamifying a classroom (or a whole school) is a massive project which should be managed with all risks, weaknesses, and threats possible to imagine. That is why, it is advisable to know what to expect, what to fear, and what to avoid in order to choose the path of righteousness, to master the trade, and to reach everlasting glory. When discussing gamification in education, we must face reality, we need to understand what gamification can provide, but also what it can devour. Educational milieu is too sensitive and our students are too precious to apply unverified solutions without the adequate preparations.

Originality/value – The author offers a few answers to the question as well as a handful of suggestions towards the successful introduction of gamification in education.

Keywords Motivation, Education, Engagement, Gamification, Designing courses

Paper type Viewpoint

Gamification is everywhere. When listening to greatest enthusiasts you could think that the Beatles would sing today "All you need is gamification". You can find it in HR, in recruitment, in sales and marketing, in private and state schools, in kindergartens, and at universities. It becomes a bit more problematic when trying to find out what gamification really is, what it is supposed to do, and why it was introduced in the first place. Quite often the so-called specialists and propagators are simply sitting on the bandwagon doing what everybody else is doing, i.e. PBLs… But actually, points, badges, and leaderboards are the root of all evil in gamification. Games are not about PBLs. They are about actions (measured in points), about challenges and achievements (represented by badges), and about communities (stratified in leaderboards). Without delving into those whats and whys in respect to gamification in general, this paper focusses on gamification in education. The underlying questions remain as, "Should we introduce gamification in education?" or more precisely "How can we reach educational goals through gamification without losing teachers engagement?" To find the answers to those questions, first we need to consider what gamification is, and what it is not, what it should do for the student and for the teacher. Only then will we be able to see if gamification is only another fad or not.

What gamification is

We should make sure that when using the term "gamification" we are talking about the same thing. Gamification introduces the elements of games in non-entertainment environments in order to enhance engagement and motivation (Lee and Hammer, 2011). This is one of the most clear and brief definitions possible. Still, it needs some further clarification. There are many elements of games. If we follow Kevin Werbach's division, we should remember that there are game dynamics, mechanics, and components, which we can utilise in gamification (*Gamification*; *For the Win…*). All of those three are game elements of different levels, from general rules (dynamics), to more precise relations (mechanics), and finally specific solutions (components). When talking about gamification we can relate to some or to all of those elements.

Second, gamification should be considered as the usage of those elements in the non-entertainment milieu. So we do not introduce game elements to games, or to playful activities, because usually these are already entertaining enough. Everyone is already in the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) on their own accord. Gamification is introduced where motivation is lacking, where engagement is dwindling, and where flow belongs to the land of dreams. Somehow, education comes to mind even though learning should be considered an interesting activity on its own.

Finally, gamification has a reason. It is not introduced in order to make any activity more interesting. The fun factor is the path, not the goal. The reason behind gamification must be extremely clear. By raising motivation and engagement, by designing immersive experiences, we want to change the behaviour of participants. So in education, we crave for attentive students who ask questions, challenge ready-made answers, who do homework, but who do not stop at that. We desire students who become lifelong learners conscious of their achievements on the road to mastery – that is the empowerment we seek from gamification in education.

What gamification is not

Following the explanations of Arkadiusz Cybulski (2014), we could say that gamification is neither of the following:

- contest;
- loyalty programme;
- 3F exploitation (fun-friends-feedback); and
- game.

It is as simple as that and as difficult as that. In games, hence in gamification, we can use competition. We can create situations in which players have to challenge each other. But there are many non-violent, cooperative games. By the same token, gamified solutions and courses can be completely devoid of contests represented usually in PBLs. i.e., points, badges, and leaderboards. Next, loyalty programmes are based on collecting points by spending money in order to collect more points to buy more products… This vicious circle was created by marketers in order to draw consumers to shops, to keep them, and to exploit them. But gamification is supposed to make the world a better place (McGonigal, 2011). We want to change habits so that learners learn more, and participants participate more. In other words, we do not want to create a social network in which the only goal is collecting information on our client/student/gamer/user in order to exploit him or her even more. And finally, gamification is not a game. It seems to be simple to add a game to a product, and to gamify the whole package, but the game is an additive, not an essential element. Gamification means 'using game elements' not games. Gamification is best when it concentrates on dynamics and mechanics, when it uses scarce components but orchestrates them magnificently. A game can be a cherry on a cake, but definitely it does not go any deeper than the icing.

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One more remark. Gamification does not equal games, educational games, serious games, simulations, games for change, etc. They all can function together or alongside, but gamification is not any of those just like those games are not gamification. Probably there is a growing need to introduce serious games, simulations, and project-based learning in education (Van Eck, 2015), and they would work magnificently with gamification, but they are separate entities.

What gamification should do for students

Actually, the first thing to claim is that gamification should be invisible (Sulaitis, 2016). The mechanics of the new structure should be hidden so that students take everything for granted or suspend their disbelief. They may see the storyline, they may have fun, but the true grit should remain unnoticed, working in the background, and making the whole fun factor and challenges work smoothly towards the primary goal, i.e. enhance motivation to learn. The fun factor is the path, and new habits and achievements are the goal. Gamification should help in reaching them by "playing" on students' needs. According to Yu-kai Chou (Octalysis – complete Gamification framework, 2015) there are eight main motivations or drives which can be used in gamification to support student engagement:

(1) "Epic meaning and calling is the core drive where a player believes that he is doing something greater than himself or he was 'chosen' to do something" (http:// yukaichou.com/gamification-examples/octalysis-complete-gamification-framework/ #more-2275).

(2) "Development and accomplishment is the internal drive of making progress, developing skills, and eventually overcoming challenges".

(3) "Empowerment of creativity and feedback is when users are engaged [in] a creative process where they have to repeatedly figure things out and try different combinations. People not only need ways to express their creativity, but they need to be able to see the results of their creativity, receive feedback, and respond in turn".

(4) Social influence and relatedness incorporate "all the social elements that drive people, including: mentorship, acceptance, social responses, companionship, as well as competition and envy".

(5) "When a player feels ownership, she innately wants to make what she owns better and own even more".

(6) Unpredictability and curiosity "is a harmless drive of wanting to find out what will happen next".

(7) Scarcity and impatience "is the drive of wanting something because you can't have it".

(8) Loss and avoidance "is based upon the avoidance of something negative happening".

Whether we follow Octalysis or any other paradigm, it will stress that first we need to know how to push the buttons of our participants. We need to know what makes them tick, what makes them do the things they do, and what stops them from doing what we want them to do. Gamification should allow teachers and educators to design courses and individual tasks in a way to make students engaged, to keep students in the flow. In this manner students will become motivated to repeat those actions as they are felt to be profitable rather than imposed. We create a loop in which students learn because they feel pleasure, and they repeat activities which in due course become habitual (Duhigg, 2012). So to put it bluntly, students become immersed in the educational environment and they want to remain in the state of constant bliss.

What gamification should do for teachers

If gamification could create attentive students instantly, then there would be nothing else the teachers would require. However, the world is not so perfect. Not all students are so responsive, and there are different types of personalities answering to different motivations (cf. Yu-kai Chou's core drives). This means that what teachers need, is a plethora of correlated solutions which can engage as many students as possible in as short time as feasible. But this is the goal, and the tricky part is the path. As any teacher knows the path is ten months long each year… Year after year. So the survival on the path to mastery for students becomes the ultimate goal for teachers. Yes, it does sound like a vicious circle.

Gamification is supposed to allow teachers, educators, course designers, headmasters, etc. to prepare curriculum, syllabi, modules, courses, or even individual tasks in an engaging form thanks to elements borrowed from games. By looking at the list provided by Yu-kai Chou or Werbach, it should become relatively easy to invent ways of connecting tests, homework, and quizzes. Or it can help to see that cooperation and competition can be implemented in projects or short classroom tasks. Students can create their own avatars, develop their own individualised skill trees, resort to repair mechanics, and so on, just like in a game. Teachers do not even need to know all elements as many tools (Octalysis; GameOn; PlayGen; Siadkowski, *Grywalizacja. Zrób to sam. Poradnik*) explain choices and limit the number of necessary components.

On top of that, there are numerous gamified learning management systems (LMS), e.g., Classcraft or gamification-ready LMS like Moodle. As in education teachers need to monitor and supervise the education process, they are required to give students grades and feedback. This can be (partially) done through LMS or even Google Apps (Sobociński and Mochocki, 2014), which on top of simple PBLs can also handle graphical representations of achievements, avatars, calendars, can manage ad hoc teams, translate grades into life, mana, experience, or action points. So both the individual elements and their arrangement can be provided at the initial stage as well as throughout the whole process of education. In short, what gamification can provide is the extremely efficient utilisation of LMS when combined with game elements.

What it really means to prepare a gamified course

Unfortunately, there still is no other way to prepare a well gamified course, but to be an experienced teacher, course designer, psychologist, gamer and game enthusiast, programmer, reader, writer, accountant, etc. It is virtually impossible for a teacher to pick up the Octalysis and build a course out of it. Same rules follow all other tools and solutions provided in analogue and digital versions. The pleasantly looking "GameOn! Toolkit," based on business canvas, is as inviting as it is annoying. On one hand it presents numerous mechanics, while on the other it neglects personal traits and drives. "PlayGen" deals with those much better, but then it limits the number of choices, and completely neglects story building. "Invent your own narrative" is not a very helpful advice… And those two tools are actually well designed!

In the end, gamifying courses takes practice, time, and learning on your own mistakes. Unfortunately, again, the testing process takes at least one or two terms, which means that you are stuck with bad choices, or you need to change the rules of the game in the middle of the game. This is never seen well by participants even if the final result corrects the initial flaws. In addition, when there is no support from other teachers, you need to design everything on your own, as there is no brainstorming, no external perspective, no additional expertise.

What it really means to run a gamified course

Work, work, work. Managing a complex system requires constant vigilance and unfathomable amount of daily and weekly feedback to prepare. All of that must be done on top of "normal" preparations, teaching, and checking homework. For example, using LMS requires everyday updates as students demand instant feedback. They rightfully do so as

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LMS is capable of providing constant feedback, and playing games taught them that systems may deliver any information desired in forms of various statistics, points, badges, leaderboards, etc. However, from the teachers' perspective, it necessitates learning the LMS ropes, and each system is different even though general rules are similar. Knowing Moodle will help when dealing with Classcraft, but still there are many new features which teachers must master – they are Game Masters now.

Some of the most respected elements allowing immersion are the narrative, avatars, the physical and visual representation of everything that is going on in the gamified course. This necessitates preparing PowerPoint presentations and/or posters and/or news boards, etc. They can be fully digital or analogue, but again, someone needs to prepare those. Every single day, the teacher is the someone.

What do we really need in future

We need appreciation and recognition. Organising and running a decent gamified course takes much more time than preparing "normal" lessons. The worst case scenario will see teachers devoting two to three times more hours to their courses than before. What we need, ideally, is being rewarded for this additional value. This should not be equalised, though, with higher remuneration, but rather with fewer teaching hours and/or smaller student-to-teacher ratio. Teacher assistants would help a lot. The whole workload and burden of conducting gamified lessons, which require so much more expertise, cannot be calculated as for a "normal" course.

Second, the support. The best results are achieved by teams gamifying a group of (interrelated) courses or whole schools. Without a team, all work falls on an individual, but also noticing and correcting mistakes again has to be done by the same sorry teacher abandoned by colleagues and the system. This will not stand. Teachers will avoid gamification if the stakes are so high. The other part of the support equation is the IT department. Teachers must be users, not designers, of LMS, of instantaneous feedback system, of course webpages, etc. Managing all those takes time and knowledge which teachers do not have or do not need to have. All in all, taking care of those takes teachers away from their primary job, from teaching!

Third, we need to open a discussion and reach some conclusions on rewriting curriculum and syllabi. Adhering to strict "traditional" frames while applying flexible "new" strategies will only make things worse. We need to re-train teachers and re-adjust headmasters… Otherwise, we will keep on brushing education with gamification and games, rather than introducing (and testing) it comprehensively and professionally with specific and achievable goals in mind. Gamification will work only when introduced professionally and when supervised. But that is true about every previous evolution of education.

Conclusion

After designing and conducting gamified courses since 2009, I can say that I gamified my courses and I hate that… I hate that I had to do most of the work on my own. I hate that my friends were left on their own. I hate that there was not enough IT support. I hate that I had to abandon some fantastic ideas coming from my students, because I had no time to implement them in the system. I hate the fact that after gamifying the whole department my fellow teachers and I spend hours and hours on putting data in spreadsheets, creating graphs, managing grades, and badges, etc. We spent a mind boggling amount of time on doing everything around the most exciting and prolific studies we have ever developed – Gamedec: Game Studies and Design. I hate the fact that in workshops and discussions, I need to discourage teachers from fully fled gamification, unless they are IT specialists or have a full cooperation of their colleagues and administration.

Despite all that, I still gamify my courses, but I have learnt to do it in a micro scale. I try to consciously add cooperation here, and competition there. I create simple narratives (Phonetica, Verbal Proxemics, riˈæk.tər), which can be accompanied by meaningful tasks and multiple paths to mastery designed for different learners. I try to resort to obvious, tactile and visual representations of the path, points, challenges, etc. So if you ask me what is the future of gamification in education, I will say it is either full institutional support or simplicity. Or both. There is also the third path, student engagement. Teachers can co-design courses and co-run them with their learners! After all, at the end of the day, who is the biggest specialist in current technologies? Who has got all gizmos and gadgets? Who gets engaged and immersed? Students do, so let us take advantage of their expertise, and they will love it! Yu-kai Chou's Octalysis would approve.

A second conclusion… We are at the top of the hill. Everyone is excited and everyone wants to be seen at the summit. This means that many solutions have not been tested properly, that many gamified offers have little or nothing to do with gamification, and should be branded as exploitation. We still need to go through the purgatory (Gartner hype cycles quoted by Cybulski, Figure 1), to see all the sins and vices of gamification. Only then will gamification be properly studied, analysed, developed and introduced with the aim of making the world a better place (McGonigal, 2011).

A third conclusion… Let us all play games! Video games, role-playing games, and table-top games. Let us incorporate digital-games based learning, simulations, and serious games (Van Eck, 2015) in the curriculum! Let students modify those games and create their own little wonders. Let us read interactive fiction. The more we enjoy games on daily basis, the more we are used to learning through failure, revision, and successful repetition. Positive attitude towards games and gamification in "normal" life will eventually open the doors to games and gamification in education. A well-designed system keeps you engaged and appreciates your failures and advances – that is the desired feature stressed by gamification in education. So let us play more games at home and at schools, and then gamification – using game elements, not games! – will become much more obvious and effective.
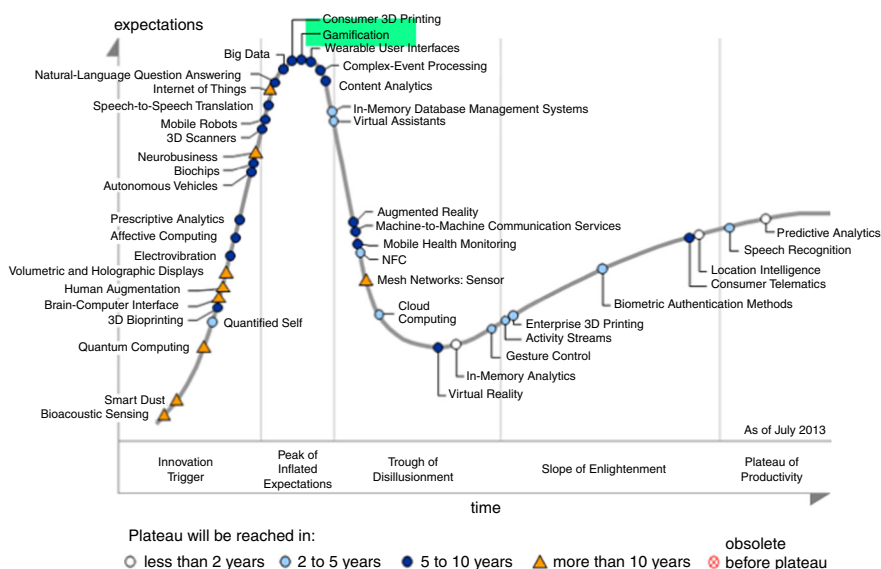

Figure 1.
Gartner hype cycles

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