

# Research into Practice. Windows and Mirrors in Gaming

Librarians do not hesitate to describe books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors into our own experiences and the experiences of others. We did so in last month's column. What some folks may not realize, is that gaming offers many of the same benefits. Gaming, whether integrated as game-based learning or gamification, helps students "inhabit perspectives different from their own...[games] encourage us to evaluate choices and consequences, and to question the system a game represents" (Bolz, Henriksen, and Mishra 2015, p. 6). Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of gaming is that it motivates students to engage in these other perspectives by having them collaborate in ways a simple group project may not.

Researchers have determined three ways student learning grows when they participate in group games: a) social cohesion, students strive for group success because they care about the members of the group; b) cognitive-developmental, students talk with each other, tackle challenges together, and engage in productive conversation; and c) cognitive-elaboration, where students learn from each other and build on each other's skills and abilities to expand their own knowledge (Slavin, Hurley, and Chamberlain 2003). These are great reasons for integrating gamification into your school library program, or your instructional partnerships with teachers!

When thinking about how to gamify your lesson or unit, or when partnering with a teacher who is gamifying his or her classroom, it's helpful to understand the difference between game-based learning and gamification. Game-based learning is simply "the use of games to enhance the learning experience" (Isaacs 2015). Examples include dice, card and board games, as well as digital games such as Kahoot and Quizlet.

Alternatively, gamification, which uses "game design elements and mechanics in activities that are not inherently game-based" (Pappas 2015), is much more advanced. Gamification requires creativity and must be planned well in advance because it involves turning nearly every aspect of classroom procedures and course content into a game. You begin by choosing an underlying theme or storyline, then plan for all the details of the game to connect to that theme. Students may take on the role of a specific character or have an avatar. Assignments, quizzes, worksheets, and tests may be referred to as quests or challenges and students might receive experience points or badges as they "level up," i.e. progress through the course content. The theme doesn't necessarily have to match the subject being taught. A science class can be created around a medieval theme. Students might start as peasants and as they complete assignments, they level up to squire, or knight.

Both gamification and game-based learning are used to motivate students and provide a unique way to learn content. Motivational factors include competition, engagement, and immediate rewards (Diamond). Competition can be against the game itself, a team, or yourself. Even though students may still take a quiz or write an essay, they're more engaged when it's in the context of earning points or playing a game—a non-traditional approach to learning. Rewards such as moving to the top of the leaderboard or being the first guild to complete all required tasks, are exciting and encourage many students eager to continue. Regardless of course content or grade level, gamification helps teach the value of perseverance and increases attention to the tasks at hand (Sheldon 2012).

What follows are suggestions for teachers and librarians who want to transform traditional coursework into a multiplayer game.

## *Use well-designed course content*

If the activities you want students to participate in are not valuable learning activities, it won't matter that these are gamified. Learning objectives for course content shouldn't change, and students must still be held accountable for learning the material.

## *Find balance between collaboration and competition*

Collaboration is a necessary skill in life and should, therefore, be included in gamification. Get to know students before grouping them and consider factors such as gender, academic ability, and student personalities. Competition between students or teams can be healthy in the right doses.

## *Create realistic leveling opportunities*

One of the most appealing parts of gamification is leveling up, but if not structured properly, students will get stuck at a low level or progress to the end of the game too quickly. Levels should be created with your typical course calendar in mind and should include varying degrees of difficulty.

## *Allow multiple ways to play*

True gamification offers options. For example, all students might have to complete five quests to get to the end of the game, but what each student does to complete these can vary. This is a great way to differentiate for the various learning needs your students may have.

## *Incorporate social/emotional learning*

Building strong character, self-improvement, developing a growth mindset, empathy, and decision making are not content related but are vitally important to teach. Find ways to build these types of learning activities into your game and give students rewards for exhibiting these behaviors.

Finally, it may be challenging to keep student interest in learning through gamification over time. They will most likely be very excited about it at first, but by the end of the year, the novelty may wear off. Be prepared to modify as you go, take students' ideas and opinions into account, and have backup plans if something goes wrong.

## **Works Cited**

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