Gameful Learning and Global Social Problems

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Abstract: In Fall 2011, we taught an experimental course pilot for a required undergraduate course in Global Social Problems. We designed this course using a gameful approach that was heavily inspired by the work of Jane McGonigal. Students were given the opportunity to take heroic action through three course missions to research and take action to deal with various global social problems. Ten heroic character traits were used to frame course activities. A peer review process was used to assign scores and award student profile badges based on each trait.

Gameful Learning

What does it mean to be gameful, or to be a part of a gameful activity? According to Webster's, to be gameful means to be, "Full of game or games" (Webster's, 2012). Jane McGonigal's perspective is more nuanced; being gameful is synonymous with serious play—to confront a serious challenge and to "learn and improve" in some way as a result (McGonigal, 2011, Chapter 1). Moreover, McGonigal challenges us to rethink and reinvent our notion of everyday participation in ways that are gameful. To do this in an educational context means providing students with the chance to, "turn intellectual strengths into superpowers, tackle epic challenges, and fail without fear" (McGonigal, 2011, Chapter 7). Gameful learning empowers learners through challenge in ways that are constructive and learner-centered, that guide students through thoughtful reflection, and that motivates students to "change the world in meaningful ways" (McGonigal, 2011, Chapter 11). Gameful course designs can thereby help students to build agency and confidence, and inspire critical evaluation of the world in which they live. McGonigal used a gameful approach to design the real-life alternate reality games *World Without Oil* and *Evoke*. This approach enabled players to participate in ways that motivated them to work at community levels to address serious social problems. Similarly, we provided students with the time and tools to address social issues through social media participation, as well as through involvement with local community organizations. Students collectively created blog entries, reflections, tweets, posted a YouTube video, commented on online news articles, volunteered their time and engaged in fundraising and awareness activities. We adopted a gameful framework by which student activities were grounded through a set of ten "heroic" character traits (our course values). A peer review process provided a scoring system by which students earned character trait points, and 'superhero-themed' badges were posted on public profile pages. It was our hope that a gameful approach to learning about global social problems could provide opportunities for "epic wins" by encouraging students to tackle projects important to them, and to encourage participation that was "heroic" and "satisfying". (McGonigal, 2011, Chapter 12).

Course As Superstructure

Students do not often get the chance to tackle real global social problems within the context of a required class. However, such perspectives are essential if we aim to help students gain global perspectives. Attaining these perspectives requires that we respond to "an ethical call to action", to "reach beyond the classroom to the larger community…and to connect theory with the insights gained from practice" (Hovland, 2006; AAC&U, 2002 as cited in Hovland, 2006). We were thus determined to reinvent the *idea* of what a class could look like, and in doing so adopted what McGonigal refers to as a "superstructure" for our class to foster a highly participatory learning environment (McGonigal, 2011, Chapter 14). The Global Social Problems course at St. Edward's University was heavily inspired by the ideas and superstructure that drives *Evoke*. *Evoke* is organized into a series of weekly missions; each mission challenges players to respond a 'call to action' to address a given social issue. We similarly organized our class using a mission-based framework. Students had to complete three missions in the class: to Research a global social issue, take Action to address the issue, and Imagine a solution to a chosen social problem. Unlike Evoke, students were able to select any global social problem to address, and student teams formed during the Action mission to tackle a broad social problem. Teams tackled issues ranging from Consumerism to Water Security, Poverty, War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Gender Inequality. The overarching goal for this class was to offer students the opportunity to take heroic action to address real social issues through in-depth research, inquiry and action through social media and non-profit volunteer channels.

Game Mechanics

Ten heroic character traits served as the foundation for all course activities and include: Cooperation, Courage, Creativity, Credibility, Empathy, Perspective, Persuasion, Clarity, Precision and Tenacity. In addition, students were asked to contribute their perspectives on each character trait in a live in-class brainstorm using the online tool, Answergarden.com (a collaborative brainstorming tool). The Global Social Problems course site can be found by visiting http://academic.stedwards.edu/globalsocialproblems/, and a listing of character traits, associated attributes and links to Answergarden brainstorms can be found by visiting http://academic.stedwards.edu/globalsocialproblems/page/character-trait-attributes.

Students were asked to provide scores for each of these traits to two other classmates, based on a review of their blog syntheses (http://academic.stedwards.edu/globalsocialproblems/blog). Ratings were accompanied by constructive and critical feedback, which was sent to each student via email. Five peer reviews were conducted over the term after blog syntheses were due, and scores were posted to student profiles (http://academic.stedwards.edu/globalsocialproblems/page/peer-review). Students were instructed to award a maximum of 5 points (on a 0 to 5 scale) per trait, with a maximum of 25 points awarded overall for each peer review. Superhero-themed badges (custom-created for the course by professional artists) were then awarded based on points earned. Three levels of badges were created for each Character Trait based on three corresponding attributes for each trait. Badge Levels were awarded at 8-point intervals (see Table 1). Other examples can be found by visiting student profiles on the course site at http://academic.stedwards.edu/globalsocialproblems/users. In addition to Superhero badges, other custom badges were also awarded for other course activities, such as Twitter participation.

	Credibility Level 1	Credibility Level 2	Credibility Level 3
	Footnote	Sureshot	The Seeker
Superpower	Accuracy	Trustworthiness	Verifiability
Points needed	8 points	16 points	24 points

Table 1: **Credibility Character Trait Badge Levels and Superpowers.**

Limitations

Students participated to varying degrees in the peer review process. While some students provided reviews for two other students, others did not. Therefore, point adjustments had to be made to ensure that people were not penalized in the badge award process. Likewise, student attitudes towards the Superhero-themed elements of the class were mixed. While some students asked their badges and visited their profiles during class, others did not. Further research is needed to determine the extent of student interest in this format. Whatever their attitudes are towards the superhero gaming genre, students demonstrated a high level of engagement in this course overall, as evidenced by their social media participation, participation in their local Action mission projects, and through anecdotal feedback.

References

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