



CASE STUDY 23 Jun 14

## CLASSCRAFT: GAMIFYING THE CLASSROOM

More than 7,000 pupils in 25 countries are learning with Classcraft, a platform that turns classrooms into MMORPGs. With the average young person in the US spending at least 10,000 hours playing online games by the age of 21, it seems like a logical move for education. But does gamification work for everyone?

Location **Canada**

*Do kids perform better when they feel like they're playing a game?*  
Classcraft (2014) ©

### Scope

When one of Quebec-based physics teacher Shawn Young's pupils brought a fondue set into class, lit it and started melting chocolate, he didn't hit the roof. In fact, he didn't do anything. Because in this classroom, the student wasn't breaking any rules. He'd earned the right to eat in class through points he'd won in Classcraft, the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game-style platform Young invented to encourage his pupils to focus in his lessons. With Classcraft, lectures, meaningless rules and staring at a blackboard are out. Collaboration, rewards and mobile phones in class are in. Pupils are transformed into Warriors, Mages and Healers, and 'level up' in pursuit of extra credit and privileges.

Young claims pupil engagement has 'skyrocketed' since he introduced the system. But does gamification work for everyone? And what lessons can it teach us about team-work, engagement and success in the 'real world'?

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Classcraft, named after the enormously popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, places a layer of fantasy over life in the classroom. Working in teams of eight, each student chooses whether to be a 'Healer', a 'Warrior' or a 'Mage'. Each persona comes with their own special set of powers and rewards to spend their game points on. Healers can work towards the right to listen to an iPod in class, or check whether their answer is correct in an exam, for example. Warriors can eat in class and hand in their work late. Mages can get extra time on an exam or turn up late to lessons. And they can all help out a teammate, or the entire team, in a bind.

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When pupils first arrive in class, they check the Classcraft screen projected on the wall to see how they're doing in the game. They might have gained experience points by correctly answering a question or helping another student with their homework. Or they might have lost a life by arriving late or arguing with the 'Game Master'.

Classcraft is currently free to use, and being played by over 7,000 pupils in more than 25 countries. It's set to become a freemium product – so players can buy items and pets to customise their avatars – and in September 2014, a linked iOS app will be released (with an Android version to follow) so pupils can check their progress outside of the classroom and on the go. [1]



Each class – Healer, Warrior and Mage – has different abilities and advantages  
Classcraft (2014) ©

**Context**

“The average young person today in a country with a strong gamer culture will have spent 10,000 hours playing online games by the age of 21,” said Jane McGonigal in her TED talk ‘Gaming Can Make a Better World’. “So what we’re looking at is an entire generation of young people who are virtuoso gamers.” She argues that games are not only more popular than ever, but have a powerful effect on behaviour; they actually allow “many of us become the best version of ourselves... to get up after failure and try again.” [2]

Gaming’s intense cultural power has led to a glut of ‘gamification’ products entering the market – with many aiming to incentivise learning. *Spore* teaches the theory of evolution, by letting players evolve their own creatures from ‘cell phase’ to ‘civilisation phase’. Duolingo promises to make learning a language as addictive as *Candy Crush*. And MIT’s Scratch teaches programming and maths skills.



Can connected learning help digital natives engage with education?  
Brad Flickinger, Creative Commons (2012) ©

But 'gamification' is just part of a broader shift in the role of students from pupil to 'user'. Responsiveness, interactivity, connectedness, immediate rewards; these things are increasingly seen as standard expectations for a generation raised on sophisticated interfaces and social media. "Young people growing up in our time are not only immersed in apps," writes Howard Gardner in *The App Generation*, "they've come to think of the world as an ensemble of apps, to see their lives as a single, extended, cradle-to-grave app." [3]

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*Shawn Young, creator of Classcraft*

Classcraft's success is arguably down to its method of placing pupils in a position of power and control. The deferred, abstract goals of 'career', 'attainment', and 'doing well' are replaced by instant benefits and measurable progress. "Traditional rewards (good grades, for example) are a long-term benefit that may not be immediately apparent for kids," explains Young, "whereas the rewards in Classcraft have immediate consequences." [4] A study by the *Harvard Business Review* found 'progress' to be the single most motivating factor for people at work, coming way ahead of praise – which they had predicted to come out on top. [5]

And Classcraft is just one of a wave of alternative education systems pursuing excellence by replacing traditional structures with systems that favour autonomy and independence. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) open up a world of study to anyone with an internet connection – and have attracted 10 million students to date. [6] Radical institutions like [École 42](#) dispense with stringent entry requirements – and even teachers. Instead, they open their doors to anyone who can prove themselves through active collaboration and problem solving. And organisations like the PlayMaker school similarly promote learning through active gameplay, fun and teamwork. [7]

"In free play, children learn to make their own decisions, solve their own problems, create and abide by rules, and get along with others as equals rather than as obedient or rebellious subordinates," says Boston College psychology professor Peter Gray. [8] Young agrees that the digital age has shifted power dynamics. "What's different today is that kids have access to more resources than ever," he says. "They can learn anything on their own over the Internet and often have surprising skills (like hip hop dancing or mechanics or drawing) that inform how they learn and think about the world. I think it takes more for teachers to earn their authority today: it's not just about knowing stuff." [4]

But is gamification right for everyone? "There's a lot of hype around gamification," says Adam Kleinberg, CEO of media agency Traction. "And while it is a powerful tool, that doesn't mean it's a magic bullet." [9] Without something for players to genuinely engage in, gamification can be little more than a gimmick. Research agency Gartner reports that 80% of gamification apps fail due to poor design and a "focus on the obvious game mechanics, such as points, badges and leader boards, rather than the more subtle and important elements, such as balancing competition and collaboration, or defining a meaningful game economy." [10]



Gamification can help kids learn – but it doesn't work for everyone  
Brad Flickinger, Creative Commons (2012) ©

## Insights and opportunities

Collaboration and social engagement add an extra layer of engagement to gamified systems. It's the social aspect that keeps 7.8 million players on *World of Warcraft*, and drives attainment on social gamified products like fitness app Fitocracy. [11] Whether you're in the classroom or in the gym, it's harder to give up if you know other people are watching you – or worse, relying on you.

And by mixing fantasy with very real benefits and prizes, Classcraft lends its game economy genuine meaning. "The risks and rewards in Classcraft are real, they have immediate consequences and they give you power," says Young. "They aren't just something you get once; they're something you can do." [4]

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Just as 'cool' was defined by marketing professor Margaret Campbell as "a subjective, positive trait perceived in people, brands, products, and trends that are autonomous in an *appropriate* way," Classcraft gains 'cool' – or credibility – with students by breaking some of the rules of normal school life without destabilising it. [12]

Brands dishing out meaningless stickers and rewards have arguably undermined gamification's reputation in recent years. But in essence, gamification is less about the visual language of games and all about unlocking the pleasure of progress and achievement. Intense gaming can look a lot like work. It requires deep focus and concentration – but with none of the agony involved. It's what McGonigal calls 'blissful productivity' – in other words, voluntary, active engagement.

Brands looking to capture some of that engagement are taking note of what Young calls "the design elements hidden in the game's mechanics: real rewards, real consequences, community, power over one's fate," which have a value and application even beyond education. "These are not specific to age or setting," says Young. "These are human motivators." [4]

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## Related behaviours

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[Blended Reality](#): Disappearing distinctions between online and offline.

[Codes of Conduct](#): Internet culture manifesting in real life.

## Sources

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4. Interview with Shawn Young conducted by author
5. ['The HBR list: breakthrough ideas for 2010'](#), *Harvard Business Review* (January 2010)
6. ['Top Free Classes Connects More Students to MOOCs Through Convenient, User-Friendly Directory'](#), Reuters (January 2014)
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