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The Gamification Dilemma: Balancing Enjoyment with Essentials

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Play to Learn? The Emergence of Gamification in Education

Gamification, a term describing the integration of game design elements into non-game contexts, such as education, is one of the most captivating trends in the rapidly evolving field of digital learning. Educators utilise gamification to enhance learning outcomes, engagement, and motivation, as students grow up in a digital environment that is highly saturated with games, social media, and instant gratification.

Kahoot!, Quizizz, Duolingo, and Classcraft are gamified learning platforms that are gaining prominence due to their ability to transform mundane content into interactive experiences. These tools have been shown to increase student engagement in online environments when used with variety and surprise elements (Raju et al., 2021). These tools use points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, and awards to make education competitive and goal-oriented. As interest grows, questions arise: does gamification improve learning or lower academic rigour?



Understanding Gamification: More Than Just Games

Playing games is not the same thing as gamification. Rather, gamification involves utilising game mechanics such as challenges, feedback loops, and tracking progress in a strategic manner to influence user behaviour and engagement. In the context of

education, this means making lessons more captivating, quizzes more interactive, and classrooms more engaged.

According to Jose et al. (2024), effective gamification aligns with the self-determination theory, which highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs that drive learning. When gamified features address these needs, they can foster deeper engagement. This is what gamification is based on in the classroom. Well-designed gamification meets these needs by providing students with choice (by allowing them to select tasks), tracking progress (through levels and rewards), and fostering social connection (through collaboration or competition with other players).

When executed effectively, gamification has multiple benefits. It may enhance student motivation, especially among individuals who have become bored with traditional learning methodologies. Immediate feedback, such as quiz scores or virtual incentives, reinforces good responses and encourages self-improvement. Raju et al. (2021) demonstrated that leaderboards and XP-based systems can encourage both individual competitiveness and team collaboration, leading to improved motivation and performance. Additionally, platforms that allow real-time adjustment of difficulty and personalised tracking can meet the diverse needs of learners (Saleem et al., 2022).

Gamification additionally aids in personalised learning. Platforms can meet the diverse needs of learners by tracking individual progress and adjusting difficulty levels accordingly. Moreover, when learning a language or participating in rote memorisation activities, regular repetition with gamified apps enhances retention while preventing the experience from becoming monotonous. Gamification meets the expectations of digital-native students for involvement and fast feedback, making education more relevant and engaging. Teachers also benefit from real-time data analytics, which enables them to identify

struggling learners, analyse performance patterns, and tailor strategies for teaching as needed.

The Hidden Costs of Gamified Learning

Gamification is not without flaws, even if it offers advantages. The risk of oversimplifying complex subjects is a big concern. A significant challenge, as highlighted by Jose et al. (2024), is that gamification often promotes extrinsic motivation—students engage to earn badges or outperform their peers, rather than to truly understand the content. Such approaches might result in surface-level knowledge, where factual memory takes centre stage over critical thinking or conceptual mastery. Furthermore, the risk of fostering “ghost students”—learners who are present physically but disengaged mentally—remains a troubling phenomenon (Jose et al., 2024).

Another issue is external motivation replacing intrinsic drive. Students may learn to acquire badges or outperform friends, not because the information is relevant. The “gamification fallacy” occurs when rewards are removed, killing motivation. Gamified environments are not for all students. Leaderboard comparisons might demoralise low-confidence students. Competitiveness may cause stress or inspire cheating in the classroom. Poorly implemented gamification tools may become distractions for educators, especially if they are not closely linked to learning outcomes.

Striking a Pedagogical Balance

The design of gamification must be deliberate and pedagogically effective to make a significant contribution to digital learning. Instead of focusing on flashy interfaces, teachers need to ensure that game features align with cognitive goals. For example, the distinction between motivation and comprehension can be bridged by establishing a connection between rewards and critical tasks such as problem-solving or incorporating reflection after an assessment. Educators should also avoid over-reliance on gamified methods and diversify assessment formats. Saleem et al. (2022) suggested that educators should align rewards with meaningful tasks such as critical thinking and reflection to avoid shallow learning. A balanced mix of gamified and traditional methods caters to multiple learning preferences.

It is equally crucial to instruct students on the most effective methods of learning with gamified instruments. The usage of apps or platforms by educators must be presented as tools to reinforce comprehension, encourage practice, and stimulate curiosity, rather than purely as entertainment. This stimulates the development of digital literacy and cognitive skills, which are necessary for navigating the broader digital learning setting.



Positioning Gamification as Support Rather Than Solution

Gamification enhances digital education, not replaces it. It requires careful integration, ongoing feedback, and curricular alignment to be effective. Gamification is a powerful supplement to digital learning when carefully planned and assessed. Raju et al. (2021) emphasised that regular shuffling of team members, diverse quiz tools, and dynamic feedback mechanisms help sustain student interest throughout a semester.

As education shifts to hybrid and online platforms, the intriguing potential of gamification must be balanced with academic integrity and depth. As Jose et al. (2024) cautioned, over-reliance on external motivators can undermine intrinsic learning goals if not continuously evaluated and personalised. Like any educational innovation, its value depends on the people who create, execute, and adjust it for meaningful learning.

References

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