Distance Education

MOOCs, Gamification, and Globality

John Allan

USF

Abstract

We will situate Klemke et al.'s work, The Flipped MOOC: Using Gamification and Learning Analytics in MOOC Design—A Conceptual Approach, with contemporary MOOC and gamification literature. Doing so, we bridge our investigation of gamification and MOOCs using an exemplary article of emergent educational research. From this, we may glean an understanding of the ideological tenets that are bound up in current technologically-oriented discourses. Throughout our work, we thread Klemke et al.'s research. First, we attempt to identify gamification conceptually and then move to outline MOOCs as a historical phenomenon. We then discuss notions of globalism inherent to MOOCs. Finally, we synthesize our areas of interest to generate a critique of the humanistic and colonizing potentialities bound to Klemke et al.'s impetus and vision of gamified MOOCs.

Gamification Defined

Although frequently imagined as a recent phenomenon, gamification can be thought of as an ongoing manifestation within a longer historical arc; a ludic facet of the human condition. Evidence of this can be understood by recognizing the convergence of games with the civic and ritual domains of ages past (Detering, 2015, p. 25). Work and leisure were imbricated with one another. Detering provides a metaphor that compares our premodern and modern outlooks by understanding our relationship to play as incarnations of ritual and offering (2015, p.26). A modern distinction between play-as-escape or a frivolous expenditure of time is recent, although this perspective is increasingly complicated by the calculated leveraging of gamification for education, industry, and other spheres of life. In contrast, games for their own sake offer themselves without any pretense of instrumental value. No longer do games appear to have a

isolated cultural role. Of course, most games remain a casual reprieve or at least are perceived as such. Our contemporary period of gamified learning has emerged out of the early 21st century's advances in interactive digital media which helped realize a nascent interest in atypical contexts for games (Detering, 2015, p. 32). The burgeoning field can be attributed to the cultural weight that games as a medium accrued in the latter half of the 20th century. Klemke et al.'s research represent a mature treatise on education technology, practice, and design. Gamification is posited as a solution to poor MOOC performance and more specifically, a lackluster record of student engagement. Motivation through gamified elements is informed by social comparison theory (Klemke et al, 2018, p. 3). As such, we expect a need to unpack gamified terms like "empowerment" as they deviate from conventional use. Along with gamification come rhetorics that define and steer gamification's growth and applications in education.

Detering identifies several rhetorics that support gamification studies and efforts, three of which we will discuss in detail: feedback, nudge, exploitation. We will refer to Detering's other rhetorical formations as we compare and contrast Klemke et al.'s research with critical MOOC and gamification literature. Informed by developments in cognitive psychology, feedback refers to a conception of human beings as computational and economic rational actors" (Detering, 2015, p. 39). Feedback renders inefficiencies in our ordering of the world visible, such as poor student engagement that stands to be remedied. Data comes to be a mechanism that can be analyzed, thus providing feedback, and provide rational actors with the information needed to correct efficiency gaps (Detering, 2015, p.39). Klemke et al. (2018) take cognitive ability as their measure of educational efficacy, especially concerning of "flipped learning," although the authors treat gamification with a similar interest in cognitive yields by leveraging learning analytics (LA) which suggests a "feedback" orientation (p. 3). Nudge rhetorics appeal to

behavioral economics to drive policy outcomes through game mechanics like guilt, reciprocity, and the "sunk-cost fallacy" (Detering, 2015, p.40). For Klemke et al., design considerations and concrete applications of concepts are at the forefront, not policy. However, the authors intervene on gamification for educational purposes precisely because of gamification's ability, in conjunction with flipped learning (FL) and MOOCs, to affect behavior. Exploitation rhetorics frame gamification as an instrumental strategy to extract surplus value while perpetuating false consciousness (Detering, 2015, p. 41). For instance, where a behaviorist outlook may allow for a world where "...layers receive game rewards for brushing their teeth, using public transport, eating certain branded foods, and so on..." (Conor Linehan et al., 2015, p. 82). PJ Rey (2015) cautions that "gamification is gaining currency, in large part, because it fits well with certain ideological assumptions native to contemporary, post-industrial capitalism and that it is promoted because it is believed to benefit those who already occupy a position of privilege within this system" (p. 277). From this vantage point, gamification comes to represent "...one of myriad strategies for developing subjects that are compatible with the needs of late capitalism...a strategy that is just as flexible and mobile as its subjects. Such strategies need not be compulsory and enclosed like schools or prisons but can be voluntary and ubiquitous (Rey, 2015, p. 279). Rey (2015) presents the relationship between games and their players as affordances between user/player and object (p. 278). Educational affordances are nearly identical, being "properties of the relationship between an agent and its physical environment" wherein "properties allow and facilitate specific types of interaction between the agent (Valanides, 2018, p .116). Notions of exploitation will be important as we shift our discussion to MOOCs and their global reach.

A Brief on MOOCs

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), barring a more extensive lineage from early E-learning initiatives, began with Stephen Downes and George Siemens (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 61). Their course, connectivism and connective knowledge, was offered in 2008 and is widely considered the first MOOC (Knox, 2015, p. 8). The course itself reflects the connectivist pedagogy that Downes and Siemens intended to inform MOOC design and more generally, networked learning. Connectivism can be thought of as "a pedagogy in which knowledge is not a destination but an ongoing activity (that) emphasizes knowledge production over consumption (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 61). In a cMOOC, there is a greater focus on participatory learning networks or "personal learning networks (Knox, 2015, p. 12). Advocates of MOOCs or "cMOOCs" generally position formative efforts as authentic and disconnected from institutional practices (Knox, 2015, p. 8). Recently, high-profile players with extensive funding — Coursera, edX, and Udacity — have come to the fore. It should be noted that Klemke et al.'s research does not interrogate any particular platform, rather they aim to develop anecdotal design recommendations. Turning back to MOOCs proper, Johnson et al. describe "forms of machine intelligence have been developed as part of these systems to assess student performance" (2015, p. 62). The gathering of student data is a general form of LA, but Klemke et al. (2018) write that, "Learning analytics...is introduced as an instrument that supports game elements applied in a gamification approach to delivering personalized and interactive learning experiences" (p. 3). In this sense, games are understood as a central component to an "engineering view of human behavior" that, when "coupled with a focus on data and predictive modeling...seems to resonate with the existing mental models and practices within software and technology companies (Deterding, 2015, p.43).

MOOCs and Globality

Klemke et al.'s research describes an open, global effort to construct a guiding design principles for a universal and globally applicable MOOC, as indicated by their aspirations for a democratizing project based on human rights, although not without obstacles (2018, p. 1). Express this in writing, "...there are numerous criticisms and assessments that MOOCs have not fulfilled their promise and that their real deficiency is 'more fundamental than just the dropout problem'" (Bandalaria et al., 2015, p. 243). They identify the potential for impactful educational experiences in developing countries based on several criteria formulated by the U.N. Bandelaria et al. link needed educational intervention through a framework of human development within developing countries. Their discourse marks a particularly ambitious and often, celebratory appraisal of MOOC proliferation on global scales that well aligns with Klemke et al.'s vision of democratic participation. Mathews et al. (2015) note that "asynchronous format is problematic in terms of helping students develop a global perspective," which belies a commitment to providing a particular conception of citizenship (p. 144). Bandalaria et al. (2015) acknowledge challenges "include the perceived intellectual neocolonialism resulting from the one-way transfer of educational materials from the rich North to the much poorer South (p. 246). This figuration of "development education and global education diverged in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the different external influences…grew closer together in the first and second decades of the 21st century" where "...themes such as interconnectedness, having a global outlook, and understanding the perspectives of the 'other'" became common themes (Bourne, 2015, p. 14). Certainly, their advantage to scale and potential impact is tremendous. For instance, Balaji Venkataraman and Asha Kanwar (2015) suggest "unbundling" MOOCs with Open Education Resources (OER) by assembling low-cost variations in a piecemeal fashion (p. 207). Also, to

access and quality, distance education in this fashion is regarded as “transnational education” (Bandalaria et al, 2015, p. 246). As the authors point out, partnerships rarely emerge without some interaction with capital investment. It is hard to imagine that an implementation of Klemke et al.’s flipped MOOC would materialize without some financial stakeholders unless it can be assembled through open source courseware and learning management systems as Bandalaria (2015) describes in a case where a non-branded (and thus, low cost and culturally sensitive) MOOC was deployed in the Philippines (p. 243). These efforts contrast “...the market-driven motivations behind the xMOOC format” that are “...often in opposition to the egalitarian goals—that is, unrestricted access and mutual collaboration—which propelled the original cMOOC framework” (Mathews et al., 2015, p. 136). As Klemke et al. seek to incorporate LA into their conceptual approach to design, we find it prudent to touch on globality and LA as a governance strategy.

Typified by feedback and nudge rhetorics, the quantified-self, through gamification and leveraged LA, can be read as a governance strategy with serious implication considering MOOCs global aspirations. Governance, not to be confused with statecraft or civic participation, refers to power and subject formation through consumptive practices (Whitson, 2015, p. 339). Where “gamification practices, in particular, build upon psychological desire for self-mastery and self-improvement, reputation and status building,” LA provides “Performance metrics” that “...become indicators to the inner self” (Whitson, 2015, p. 353). A more uplifting appraisal of gamification and LA support Klemke et al.’s (2015) work as they write that LA “...here is introduced as an instrument that supports game elements applied in a gamification approach to deliver personalized and interactive learning experiences” (p. 3). Even still, the game elements that Klemke et al., provide — most tellingly, empowerment — belie what Whitson (2015)

considers an illusory sense of agency in the sense that "data are sent directly to...teachers" wherein "function creep contributes to more personalized governance measures" (p. 351). Klemke et al. (2018) envision this occurring through LA that "support(s) teachers to create a feedback loop between online and classroom phases and assess the learning of students...this can be done through dashboards or retrospective analysis" (p. 3). Knox (2016) suggests that dashboards aid administrators in pre-specifying "narrow forms of engagement" and "these modes of conduct as the legitimate range of participation" (p. 104). To delve deeper into MOOCs as a global project that, of which Klemke et al.'s research are indicative of, we will look at the humanist underpinnings of MOOCs and tie synthesize our findings with the concept of gamification. Doing so will better elucidate their tandem operation.

Gamification, MOOCs, and Humanism

Drawing on a posthuman framework, Knox describes currents of colonialism, among other complications, within MOOCs as a holdover from the humanist canon that was born through enlightenment philosophy. To be clear, posthumanism is a critical stance useful to question humanism, not prescribe a set of tenets. It is "concerned with articulating a relational and hybrid being, not one that is grounded in an undeniable essence, but that is intermingled in 'technical, medical, informatic, and economic network'" (Knox, 2016, p. 36). Knox (2016) argues the formulation of an exceptional state of man, differentiated from the external world, and "progress of mankind through a self-regulatory and teleological ordained use of reason and of secular scientific rationality allegedly aimed at the perfectability" endures in the MOOC project (p. 28). We should preface that there's nothing inherently objectionable to a Western ideal or form of subject, only that "the unproblematized assumption of the existence of a rational and autonomous 'Man', conceived in Europe…" is "…assumed to be universal in physical and

cognitive form" (Knox, 2016, p. 29). The importance of our synthesis of MOOCs, gamification, and globalization become a pressing concern: what ways of knowing (epistemology) and ways of being (ontology) are globalized by MOOCs? For instance, pertaining to Klemke et al. (2018), their "role (for) learning analytics is to explore the potential of feeding learner-generated data into the selected game elements to foster personalization, interactivity, and engagement" (p. 3). Despite this, the most open-ended game element chosen, "storytelling," is constrained by their expectation that "following of a predefined path" would be required to "provide a meaningful story" in realizing a gamified MOOC (Klemke et al, 2018, p. 8). This seems inexplicable unless we consider the basis for progress and empowerment narratives present in their work and that of others.

We view the gamified elements as an example of subject "maintenance" where "education which becomes the necessary engine" to cultivate "a unitary and self-enclosed human subjectivity" (Knox, 2016, p. 30-31). Framing Klemke et al.'s text this way explains their impetus for privileging "…individual intentions, expectations, and goals" (Klemke et al, 2018, p. 9). Instead of a radical innovation, opposed to some educational orthodoxy, the MOOC project is deeply invested in "civilizing the non-human" (Knox, 2016, p. 31). The MOOC, then, comes to be researched and deployed on the assumption of a global space that is "…interpreted as a universal condition or a single homogeneous planetary space'" (Knox, 2016, p.52). The inclusion of gamification within MOOCs arguably extend "knowledge…that is primarily gathered for exchange value…rather than for pleasure, joy, fulfillment, or action in the world" which serves "knowledge from the contexts in which it was created or in which it is used, treating knowledge as commodities to be mastered" (Ramirez, 2015, p. 633). We should clarify that it is not the curriculum here at stake, but the conditions for learning set by the MOOC and gamification's

constraints. The rational subject that Klemke et al. wish to intercept is prefigured; the gamified community intended to interact and progress through "levels." Knox argues that this form of engagement employs "…a logic of purification that closes down rather than opens up educational possibilities" and that "…the idea of community is fraught with the 'modalities of exclusion' (2016, p. 92). We close with a brief look at the implications of humanist presumptions found Klemke et al.'s research on gamified MOOCs.

Thoughts and Conclusion

We touched on colonialism earlier, but Knox (2016) differentiates forms of data-colonialism from traditional understandings, writing that colonialism "…is epistemic as well as political, an idea underscored by...the violent assertion of Western ways of perceiving the world" and are a "way of imposing and establishing a dominant understanding of the human subject" (p. 55). Just as gamification and LA could, perhaps, impart forms of self-regulation as governance, when mobilized as a component of Klemke et al.'s vision (despite a claim to emancipatory potentials) the very individualistic ideals embedded in the Western episteme. For the sake of brevity, we have avoided focusing on the ways MOOCs might align with the needs of labor; this is very much a concern and would further complicate the vision for gamified MOOCs. Gamification can be understood anthropologically where some cultures prefer competition and others, social status. However, unpacking Klemke et al.'s text using such taxonomies of cultural affect would overlook the premise of MOOCs and gamification as large and their self-avowed focus on learner engagement (rather than culturally sensitive gamification). Shifting our focus to the learner, true to behaviorism, Klemke et al.'s gamified MOOC take hold of an ideal learner and seek to impart "assumptions already encoded in the routines of data collection" to construct

"…an 'active' learner performing the kind of conduct predetermined by the tasks and assessments of the course" (Knox, 2016, p. 105). We consider these issues part of a larger problematic: how to incorporate gamification without stifling the tenets and values first espoused by cMOOCs. We expect researchers to reassess their commitments and aspirations for global education, not to dismantle innovation and progress, but interrogate the ontological and epistemological weight that instrumental pedagogies often occlude.

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