

Article

Leveling Up: Gamification Pedagogy in the Hagiological Classroom

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Abstract: Gamification is a specific type of experiential learning theory (ELT) that emphasizes student choice and activities to transform mundane tasks into a desirable opportunity to learn. This pedagogical approach is particularly useful in information-heavy courses, such as courses that engage in the study of religious mysticism or “hagiology”. In hagiology classes, students are exposed to new hagiographic media and discuss methods that are particularly complicated because this content is not only heavy on data but also engages the affective dimensions of human experience. This article explores lessons learned from the successes and failures of gamification pedagogy in my “Masters and Mystics” course, where students comparatively study Christian mysticism and Muslim Sufism. In particular, this article analyzes gamification’s ability to promote intrinsic student motivation through “game mechanics and experience design”, which is particularly salient in the hagiological classroom. I end the article with a discussion of how I have reworked the course with new gamification practices into a “Comparative Mysticism: Christianity and Islam” course.

Keywords: gamification; pedagogy; hagiology; mysticism; comparative religious studies

1. Introduction

“Tom (Sawyer) appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden. Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation; did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged. . .” He then proceeded to convince the boys around him that whitewashing a fence was more desirable than playing, even going so far as turning down their help. In fact, Tom waited until the boys were so desperate they bartered with him for the privilege of whitewashing the fence. In the end, Tom received “an apple, a kite, a dead rat and a string to swing it with, twelve marbles” and fourteen other items for the privilege of whitewashing the fence. After convincing the other boys that work was not only better than play, but more valuable than the items they offered him to perform said work, he reclined, watching the others work, having “discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain” (Twain 2014).

Psychological studies have documented the human desire for achievement well. Indeed, this desire to work towards a goal is at the foundation of many of the addictive games that envelop our daily lives. Not only do video game consoles like the Xbox or PlayStation create entire worlds in which players spend countless hours striving to achieve various goals, but games figure into one’s desire for “likes” on social media accounts and the accruing of stars at a coffee shop to achieve a free cup of coffee. Credit cards award points based on specific categories to incentivize buying behaviors and even our taxation system awards tax breaks to promote desired financial choices. We are surrounded by choices that promote internal motivation to play a “game” in order to earn desired rewards (Dale 2014).



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Often, instructors will use extrinsic motivations such as grades or an attendance policy to coerce student participation in order to achieve course goals (Ackerman and Gross 2018). These external motivations are often more necessary because the didactic lecture model leaves little room for student autonomy (Banfield and Wilkerson 2014). Even in Socratic seminars, the instructor authorizes the majority of the choices in the classroom, including what to read, what questions to ask, and what assessment students will take after the practice. However, many instructors desire their students to become intrinsically motivated to engage with class materials and to display self-determination regarding class assignments. The problem lies in the discrepancy between the instructor-oriented methods and the desired outcome of the self-determined student intrinsically motivated to engage with the class.

Gamification is a specific type of experiential learning theory (ELT) (Banfield and Wilkerson 2014). ELT juxtaposes with “traditional” course pedagogy in that it emphasizes student choice and activities, whereas the latter is instructor-centered. Gamification, broadly defined, is a pedagogical approach that transforms a mundane task into a desirable opportunity by applying principles that make playing games fun (Yee 2013). Although this approach can be used with most classroom content, this approach is particularly useful in information-heavy courses. Hagiology classes engage with hagiographic media and discuss methods that are particularly complicated for students as they not only present new data but also engage the affective dimensions of human experience. This article explores the successes and failures of gamification pedagogy, used in my “Masters and Mystics” course, where students comparatively study Christian mysticism and Muslim Sufism, to promote intrinsic student motivation through “game mechanics and experience design” to affectively engage with the hagiological classroom. I end the article with a discussion of how I have reworked the course with new gamification practices into a “Comparative Mysticism: Christianity and Islam” course.

2. Gamification

Gamification pedagogy contains a litany of specific terminology and paradigms, most of which are employed through digital learning management systems (LMS). Terminology within gamification pedagogy can be broadly organized into three categories. The first and perhaps the most important terminological category in gamification pedagogy is “student choice”. Student choice focuses on the internal motivation of students to determine the quality of their work, resulting in an appropriate grade in the course. In the gamification literature I surveyed, I found at least three psychological factors to consider when promoting student choice. First, students need a sense of ownership over their chosen actions, or “autonomy”. This does not mean that courses are without structure (Brunvand and Hill 2019). Rather, students have autonomy within the space provided by the gamified classroom. Second, student “competence” relates to students’ belief in their ability to learn the course material. Classrooms that provide a variety of opportunities are more likely to engender student competence (Brunvand and Hill 2019). Finally, gamification pedagogy discusses “cognitive load”, the measurement of the load burdened upon an individual’s “cognitive learning system” (Wu 2018). When students are provided with excessive information, this results in a high cognitive load, which results in poor student performance and an inability to retain the material (Wu 2018).

The second series of terms relates to class assessment. Gamification employs additive grading, where students begin with a zero in the course and through the completion of assignments achieve their desired grade. This is in contrast to traditional grading, where all assignments combined equal 100%, all assignments must be completed to achieve 100%, and student work is measured by reducing their scores from 100%. This results in assessments that measure how few mistakes a student can make during the course rather than demonstrated mastery (Jones et al. 2022). An example of additive grading is a course that lists an “A” as 5000 points and a “B” as 4500 points, with quizzes counting as 50 points, essays counting as 500 points, and tests counting as 1000 points. Depending on how the

course is designed, students have the choice of how many quizzes, essays, and tests to complete in order to attain their desired grade. This is not to say that students receive full points simply by completing an assignment. Assignments are still graded according to mastery, but students have the opportunity to complete as many assignments as necessary to attain the total points they desire for a grade (Brunvand and Hill 2019).

Within the assessment category, gamification employs “locks”, “badges”, and “leaderboards”. A lock is an assignment that must be completed and a certain level of excellence attained before students can move onto other assignments. For example, an instructor may require a student to achieve a 90% or higher on a quiz, or a series of quizzes, prior to being afforded the opportunity to take the exam. This means that prior to exam day, students will have to work to display a certain level of competency before being afforded more difficult assignments. Locks also afford students opportunities to receive feedback and correct mistakes prior to more difficult challenges, which affords students more opportunities for success (Brunvand and Hill 2019). A badge is a visual reinforcement displayed before the class that represents a student/group completion of difficult assignments. Rewards for badges may be as simple as visual bragging rights, the option of adding a few points to a quiz grade, or allowing the student to run a portion of the class because they mastered the material (Brunvand and Hill 2019). Badges are displayed on the course “leaderboard”, which is a public display of the student’s progress in the course. Because of Family Educational Rights and Privacy (FERPA), instructors should not display grades publicly. Instead, instructors can display the badges, points for activities that do not bear on grades, or other non-grade-bearing activities (Ewing 2017; Yee 2013).

The third category is principled paradigms. James Paul Gee’s book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* provides thirty-six gamification principles; however, I will focus only on those I found most helpful when thinking through gamification in the pedagogical classroom (Gee 2003). I subdivided the principles I use from Gee’s work into two groups. The first group are what I call the “literate” principles because they concern the relationship between the student’s identity and the course materials. The “Situated Meaning Principle” emphasizes embodied meaning within signs (words, objects, symbols, etc.). Meaning comes from embodied experiences where students relate new knowledge to old knowledge, and the context of the old knowledge influences the meaning and importance of the new knowledge. Learning arises from students choosing to create space to relate their real-world identity with new learning, which Gee calls the “Identity Principle”. Personal identification with learning extends student engagement with course material because it is relatable and compelling, which Gee calls the “Committed Learning Principle”. Such a learner does not regurgitate data. Rather, a committed learner customizes her or his learning experiences by producing new content based on the exchange between one’s identity and the course material, which Gee calls the “Insider Principle”. Finally, the act of producing new material results from students who learn new aspects about themselves through engaging with the material, which Gee calls the “Self-Knowledge Principle”.

The other group of principles I have found useful are those I call the “assessment” principles. First, students must understand that they can “fail often to succeed sooner” (Manzo 2008). Gamified courses offer numerous opportunities for students to practice the skills and knowledge required and allow students to revisit previous work on assignments until they master the material. This “Practice Principle” lowers the risk of failure on assignments, encouraging students to risk being wrong, which Gee calls the “Psychosocial Moratorium Principle”. Students are therefore not attempting to maintain a perfect score through minimizing errors. Key to lowering the risk of failure and encouraging mastery is the provision of ample opportunities to work at the outer edge of a student’s understanding. Good gamification operates at the edge of a student’s growing competence, replacing the pressure to operate the class at the lowest common denominator with individualized student growth (DiSessa 2000).

Assignments must be challenging, but not perceived as impossible—the “Regime of Competence Principle”. If students are constantly pushing the edges of their understanding, then the distinction between mastery and learning blurs because course competence becomes a door that opens more learning opportunities. This “Ongoing Learning Principle” makes the act of learning the goal rather than simply the mastery of course materials. Finally, these assessment principles can only work if students are offered multiple paths to succeed in the course. This “Multiple Routes Principle” empowers students to choose work that emphasizes their style of learning while offering alternative opportunities to explore new information.

The goal of gamification terminology and principles is to create a classroom that furthers the instructor’s pedagogical objectives. Granted, gamification pedagogy is not meant for all classrooms. Perhaps the material for the course may not fit well with gamification pedagogy. Oftentimes, instructors do not have the time to prepare a gamified course. A more significant barrier is gamification pedagogy’s reliance on technology, which instructors may not feel competent to use apart from their institution’s required application of learning management systems. Thus, in what follows I will discuss how I employed a “low-tech” gamification pedagogy in my “Masters and Mystics” course and what I will do differently the next time I teach the course.

3. Case Study: Gamifying a Hagiology Course

In Spring 2023, I taught RELI 433—“Masters and Mystics”—at Wheaton College to a group of graduating seniors. This course addressed questions relating to the doctrine of God, mysticism, and piety by engaging with the historical writings of Christian mystics and Sufi Muslims. The learning outcome of the course is that students who take the course will understand mysticism as that which bridges the limits of the human mind to reach God through an appreciation of Christian mysticism and Sufism in order to reconceptualize contemporary Christian faith and practice.¹ Even though the students were competent in Christian tradition because they are required to take Old Testament literature, New Testament literature, and Christian theology, studying Christian mysticism would introduce complicated new concepts within the Christian tradition. Additionally, asking students to understand not only the Muslim tradition but also Sufism and then to make comparisons to the Christian tradition would be a high cognitive load.

Brunvand and Hill outline a flow chart for instructors to follow when considering whether gamification pedagogy is suitable for their classroom (Brunvand and Hill 2019). First, the instructor must decide if gamification fits with the pedagogical objectives and content of the course. My goal in the course is not only for students to understand and appreciate Christian mysticism and Sufism, but that students will begin exploring the affective dimensions of these mystical traditions. Gamification pedagogy encourages students to situate meaning within embodied experiences (Situated Meaning Principle), encourages students to relate their real-world identity to new learning (Identity Principle), and allows for customizable learning experiences that produce new insights based on a dialog between the student’s identity and the course material (Committed Learning Principle). Gamification pedagogy presented multiple frameworks to pursue the pedagogical objectives of my “Masters and Mystics” so that students affectively engage with the course material. Indeed, gamification pedagogy seems particularly suited for the hagiological classroom in general.

Brunvand and Hill recommend that the instructor is comfortable with using technology in the classroom (Brunvand and Hill 2019). Although I am comfortable with learning management systems (LMS), I do not believe that technology is necessary for the gamified classroom. Yes, LMS can afford greater flexibility and more opportunities to gamify a classroom. However, my course does not employ a significant amount of LMS work apart from that which is required by my institution for grading and assignment uploads. Instead, I created a gamified classroom through the use of role-playing characters and traditional assessment measurements (quizzes, writing assignments, and tests). Thus, my “Masters and Mystics” course stands as an example of a “low-tech” gamified classroom.

I began designing the course using backward syllabus design, contemplating the major themes that might arise from comparing Christian mystic and Sufi course material and then backfilling readings assignments to arrive at the goal. First, I desired that students appreciated the mystical tradition. As Wheaton is a Christian liberal arts school and students have a certain depth of knowledge of the Christian tradition, I decided to use Jason Baxter's *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* to introduce the mysticism because it is addressed to Christian undergraduates (Baxter 2021). I chose Bernard McGinn's *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (McGinn 2006) and Michael Sells' *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Sells and Ernst 1996) because I needed student engagement with a large amount of primary source material from the Christian and Muslim traditions. I was faced with the problem of balancing the substantial course material, a high cognitive load, with students' ability to master the material—the Regime of Competence Principle. Thus, I decided I would gamify the course to provide students the ability to navigate the material on their terms and at their pace while maintaining a high standard for mastery of the material.

I have always been partial to the pedagogical metaphor of the pilgrimage, where the instructor is the pilgrim leader who has walked the path before and is guiding students along the journey (Smith and Felch 2016). Being a fan of role-playing video games (RPG) in my youth, such as *Final Fantasy*, *Fallout*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, where players develop their character's persona with specific strengths to complete the game, I decided to combine the pilgrimage metaphor with the RPG player development format and created four thematic characters from major themes within the course. First, the "Ascetic" emphasizes spiritual realities, individual engagement with the divine, erotic desire for the divine, and deep contemplation of scripture. The Ascetic rejects materiality, civil institutions, and human-originated desires. Second, the Qalandar (Antinomian) emphasizes immediate union with the divine, ecstatic utterances, and antinomian behavior. They reject civil order, religious laws, cultural norms, and materiality. Third, the "Monk" emphasizes disciplined human practices, hierarchical leadership, and the study of scripture. The Monk rejects antinomianism. Finally, the "Philosopher" emphasizes the role of human reason and rejects hierarchy and antinomianism.

On the first day of class, I explained the four characters and told the students they had the first three weeks while we read Baxter's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* to decide. After students made their decisions, they became responsible for mastering the assignments on the mystics and Sufis who aligned with their chosen character. For example, students who chose the Ascetic would be required to earn at least a 93% on their response paragraph to Athanasius of Alexandria's *The Life of Saint Anthony* or Farid al-Din 'Attar's discussion of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya in his *Memorial of the Friends of God*. However, when we read Meister Eckhart's *Sermon 101* on union with God or al-Hallaj, it was the Antinomian who was responsible for mastering the material. Students were still required to complete the material, but they were not required to achieve a certain mark. Additionally, we had daily quizzes that lasted about 5 min, with two questions on the readings for all students and an additional question for the RPG character pertaining to the mystic of the day.

In the final assignment, student chose either C.S Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* as a comparative hagiological study with Sufism. Students begin by reading the text and discerning questions that arise from their reading. Then, the student draws out major themes from the Christian mystical and Muslim Sufi traditions that will be applied comparatively with the chosen contemporary Christian mystic. The goal is that this comparative study between a contemporary Protestant writer, on the one hand, and Christian mysticism and Sufism, on the other, will draw out the mystical qualities of Lewis' and Bonhoeffer's works. Students conclude the paper with implications that they can take away for their personal faith and practice.

I envisioned several strengths in this approach. First, using the RPG model promoted student identification with the material (Identity Principle) and allowed students to rewrite their papers for the mystics they were required to master (Psychosocial Moratorium Principle). By providing students with three weeks to become familiar with the course's

themes through Baxter's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* and by beginning with Christian mystics, which are more familiar to Wheaton students, before moving to Sufi Muslims, the course encouraged students to operate at the edge of their understanding (Regime of Confidence Principle). Finally, I believe gamification offers a simulation of the mystical disciplines that students read in class. A derivative goal of the class was for students to understand that the mystical path is not emotivism but a disciplined and arduous lifestyle that cultivates deeper spirituality to attain a higher engagement with the divine. Finally, I envisioned gamification pedagogy's emphasis on student mastery through multiple attempts, offering students a similitude of the disciplined life of the mystic who fails and tries again in their quest to reach the divine.

4. Next Steps

Gamification pedagogy is not predictive. However, gamification can motivate individuals and groups to achieve what was initially seen as banal. Indeed, even Tom Sawyer knew this when he convinced his peers to paint the fence. After reviewing the course assessment at the end of the course, I realized that despite assessment showing that students achieved the goal of developing appreciation of the mystical tradition, the course did not promote student choice. Although students had a certain amount of autonomy in choosing their RPG character, they became locked into a series of assignments for the remainder of the course. This lack of autonomy undermines the Multiple Routes Principle, which empowers students to emphasize their style of learning and choose interesting assignments to explore the course materials. What is needed the next time I teach the course is a reworking of the assessment regime to promote student choice. I would like to end this article by exploring how I have reworked my new syllabus to better reflect gamification pedagogy in the class.

I renamed the course "Comparative Mysticism: Christianity and Islam", simply for the sake of student comprehension on course listings. I then divided the course into four main sections—Introduction, Christian Mysticism Part I, Christian Mysticism Part II, Sufism Part I, Sufism Part II, and Final Project—with each section attached to an academic skill mastery or "lock". Locks are based upon the academic skillsets I want students to master—paragraph writing through analytical essays, mastering quizzes through data-heavy tests, mastering summarizing material through preparing a research preproposal. I took these three skillset trajectories and inserted them as "locks" for each course section. Assignments for each section opened at the beginning of that week's section and closed at the beginning of the next section. For example, during the Introduction section, where we read Baxter's *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, the online LMS (Canvas) provides students with a series of 10-question quizzes (50 points), paragraph prompts (50 points), and reading summary assignments (50 points). After feedback, students are able to repeat the assignments until the section closes after three weeks. Students must achieve a minimum 400 points by then end of the section. Completing these assignments serves as a "lock", where students must master a lower-tier assignment, paragraph writing, before attempting more difficult assignments, such as essay writing. We would then move to Christian Mysticism Part I, using McGinn's *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, with 20-question quizzes (100 points), 300–500 word analysis papers (100 points), and comparative summaries between Baxter's introduction and the McGinn readings (100 points), with a minimum of 300 points by the end of three weeks. I would then repeat the same assignment selections with the minimum 300 point total for Christian Mysticism Part II and Muslim Sufism Part I and II sections. The final is a project proposal worth 1000 points with an attached rubric that requires students to reuse their summary papers and written materials to present how the course has affected their beliefs and practices (a requirement for Wheaton College courses).

This approach emphasizes student autonomy, providing them multiple routes to achieve the required points for each section. A benefit of this approach is its use of basic LMS technology, such as through online quizzes, paper uploads, and setting a time limit for assignment openings and closings. This "low-tech" model provides familiar assignments to students and lowers the instructor's preparation requirements. Another benefit is the

constant movement from one section's assignment to the next using "locks", which keeps students moving at a constant pace. These locks keep highly motivated students at a consistent pace while motivating less organized students to maintain their workload with short measurable goals. The goal is to have a course with more student choice, more opportunities to practice with low risk, and multiple routes to the final project.

Even with these revisions, the first attempt at this course was very successful. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive and students produced deep personal insights into Christian mysticism and Sufism in a few short months. It is my conclusion that gamification is an excellent pedagogical tool for the hagiological classroom. If mysticism is "a rational, ethical, and systematic preparation for an experience of the fullness of God" (Baxter 2021), then gamification's emphasis on personal identification with the course material through an "insider principle" changes the course from simple knowledge production to a course where students can imagine alternative realities for themselves. This is not to say that students should expect to reach the beatific vision or achieve *fanā'* (annihilation of the self in the divine) in a semester. Indeed, no class should have this as a course outcome. Rather, gamification pressures students to dialogically engage with the alternative narrative of reality that mystics and Sufis present. This dialogical engagement, even if the student rejects the alternative reality, promotes dialogical engagement along Martin Buber's "I-Thou" conception of identity (Buber and Biemann 2002). The more times students dialogically engage an alternative Thou, which hagiological gamification emphasizes, rather than through dialectics or simple analysis, then the more a student has to employ their "insider principle", resulting in a reconfiguration of the "I" (the student) in the "I-Thou" relationship. Understandably, I am utilizing these pedagogical methods within an institution that explicitly promotes spiritual formation in the classroom and this is not the case in most higher education institutions. Even so, I contend that gamifying the hagiological classroom moves students closer to engaging with the transformative power these saints proffer in their texts. I would be very interested to see if this is indeed the case.

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Note

- ¹ Instructors at Wheaton College are required to incorporate "Faith and Learning" standards into the classroom that explicitly assess how the course material engages with the student's Christian faith and practice. Thus, this class fulfills this requirement by requiring students to reconceptualize their personal Christian faith and practices in light of the course material. I assess this reconceptualization through their essays and final project, which require students to articulate how they have learned from the Christian mystic or Sufi and how this learning has prompted a rethinking of the student's Christian faith and practice.

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