# Game-inspired course design: Creating opportunity for agency

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In my presentation, I attempted to provide contrast to the general idea of gamification in teaching – that is, adding game-like aspects into courses and classes. I focused on the aspect of agency – the sense that your decisions have meaningful impact – which is often experienced by players in more immersive games.

I started off the talk with a simple, meaningless game where the audience members were asked to think of a number, and then raise their hands or stand up if they were thinking of particular numbers. Just as students often are, the audience was very responsive and willing to take part in this diversion, showing that games as a source of escapism are useful as light filler activities. Still, if the results of these activities have no impact on the rest of the class or the course, the players feel no sense of agency in the process.

I introduced some examples of agency creation in games like *Stardew Valley* (2016) and *Mass Effect* (2007), where, in the former, players establish and maintain relationships with in-game characters, and in the latter, dialogue options create the perception of agency, even in cases where the choices do not affect the gameplay. In contrast, I mentioned in-class, game-like platforms like Kahoot, which, despite having game-like features, often has no impact on progress in the course or the class.

Through these demonstrations I aimed to show that agency means that the course should be designed in a way in which students feel their actions are directly linked to progression in the course. To put it in another way: instead of adding games to an existing course, the course should be designed in a game-like fashion, where the player's actions drive progress.

To give a concrete example of such a course, I presented the structure of my Business Communication course, in which students must complete tasks in order to qualify for the final exam. These project-like tasks are worked on until all task objectives are met.

One of the most significant changes from traditional course structure is that after the first introductory session there is no nominal mandatory attendance. Instead, students are informed that group tasks must be performed in the classroom, and I will be available for help with any of the tasks or for guidance regarding course-related issues during class time.

During a typical session, I start by inquiring from the students present what their plans are for that session. Any groups wanting to perform a group task get my primary attention, since those need assessment. Other teams are free to observe these performances and to use the best parts in their own efforts. If there are no performances that session, I walk from group to group, which often takes me out of the classroom, as teams are free to practice and work wherever they want. I check on their progress, ask them to rehearse some critical areas or discuss their schedule for the course in general.

Instead of forcing students to attend every session, my goal is to make them feel like there is value in the classroom, in the form of help, advice and support. When groups practice for performances, I listen, and intercede to help them avoid the most common pitfalls. By addressing only issues that come up from the actions of the team, I can be assured that I am using "teacher talk" in ways that are perceived to be relevant to the students.

The task descriptions are all available on the Moodle course platform, which students autonomously read as part of their preparation for the tasks. This material consists of task descriptions, learning objectives, warning flags for critical errors, case descriptions, role cards, etc. Currently, the course in which I use this type of teaching focuses on oral interactions in meetings. The concept can, however, be applied to courses with any content.

From a game-design point of view, the learning environment on Moodle represents a game framework, including levels and missions, with deadlines that are flexible to a point, if students are proactive. My role is that of the tutorial, coach or help file, who can be called on to clarify confusing tasks or concepts. Also, I act as gatekeeper between thresholds, overseeing performances and determining whether or not a task is acceptable. The student is the agent; the teacher is part of the game mechanics.

## References:

*Stradew Valley*, 2016, published by Chucklefish Games, developed by ConcernedApe, video game.

*Mass Effect*, 2007, published by Electronic Arts, developed by Bioware, video game.

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