

## Companions of Aeneas: Gamifying Intermediate Latin

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### ABSTRACT

In order to increase Roman cultural content in an intermediate Latin course on Vergil's *Aeneid* at Earlham College, the author introduced elements of role-playing games into an otherwise traditional translation class. Students developed individual characters whose details were informed by weekly research projects on different aspects of Roman culture. An additive grading system was also incorporated to enable students and their characters to track progress in terms of "leveling up." This paper explains the implementation and mechanics of this gamification and concludes that the addition of some gamified courses into classical curricula would prove beneficial; the strengths of gamification (increased cultural content and student motivation) compare favorably to its weaknesses (decreased language content, increased preparation time), especially in departments that have limited course offerings.

### KEYWORDS

gamification, role-playing, *Aeneid*, Latin, translation

### INTRODUCTION

When I last taught the *Aeneid* to a second year Latin class, I tried something different;<sup>1</sup> I incorporated elements of role-playing games (like *Dungeons & Dragons*) into the course as a means of encouraging students to delve further into Roman culture. The standard regimen of assigning a passage for homework, then reviewing the passage in class with close attention to grammar, style, etc., tends to emphasize philology over culture to such an extent that the context and content of the literature itself is often subordinated to more technical concerns, e.g. the double dative and Vergil's uses of the Greek accusative. In response, I decided to take a risk and gamify<sup>2</sup> my *Aeneid* course in such a way that in addition to translation, students

1 This paper is based in part on a presentation given in conjunction with Sarah Landis and T. H. M. Gellar-Goad at the 2015 annual meeting of the Society for Classical Studies.

2 "Gamification" is a term used broadly to describe the addition of game-like qualities to an activity not traditionally conceived of in terms of a game, typically as a means of encouraging increased

would create classically inspired characters whose attributes would develop based both on students' achievements throughout the course and through regular research projects that focused on specific aspects of Roman culture.

My model in this endeavor was Ted Gellar-Goad, whose innovative work in gamifying his Latin prose composition class prompted me to consider how I could use game concepts as a means of introducing additional cultural content.<sup>3</sup> Although Gellar-Goad significantly reconceptualized virtually every aspect of his class to work within a nuanced game setting, I was not ready for such an immersive experience yet still wanted to experiment with gamification. In this paper, I will explain how I incorporated comparatively simple gamification elements into a pre-existing Latin translation course by making minor adjustments to the syllabus and without using any specialized software. I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the course as I taught it and offer my overall reflections on the endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gamification, as opposed to Game Based Learning, is the incorporation of gaming elements into non-gaming situations, whereas Game Based Learning requires students to actually play a game (Pike 2015). For example, credit card use has been "gamified" such that users now frequently earn points every time they make a purchase; enough points and the user might earn a plane trip, or a gift card. Classroom gamification works on a similar premise: students score points and unlock achievements/awards/badges as they complete course materials, master skills, etc. Conversely, having students play Math Blaster to improve basic addition skills would be an example of Game Based Learning (and not the subject of this article).

However, since the intent of classroom gamification is to realize some of the pedagogical benefits intrinsic to game playing, it is important to understand what those benefits are. According to Pike (2015), gaming environments create learning opportunities by 1) increasing students' intrinsic motivation and mastery through personalization, 2) improving their resilience and confidence in taking risks, 3) en-participation in that activity.

<sup>3</sup> On Gellar-Goad's course, see Thomas' 2013 "The Challenge of the Sphinx" or Poovey's 2014 "Ted Gellar-Goad and the Secret of the Sphinx."

<sup>4</sup> I would offer the caveat that the results discussed in this paper are not the product of a course purposefully designed to assess the efficacy of gamification. I approached this course as an educator interested in innovative pedagogy and am sharing the admittedly anecdotal conclusions drawn from my experience teaching a gamified course on Vergil's *Aeneid* to a class of seven students at Earlham College.

hancing students' creativity, and 4) promoting collaboration and social awareness. Since successful gameplay (either in an immersive game or simply in a gamified context) depends on voluntary participation, Pike notes that gamification promotes an intrinsic motivation that feeds into a student's growth mindset,<sup>5</sup> thereby encouraging students to take personal ownership of their part in the pedagogical process and to become more motivated to master the material. These observations are corroborated by Hamari, Koivisto and Sarsa (2014), as well as by my own experiences: increased student motivation and willingness to pursue independent research are some of the chief strengths of the course I describe.

The thesis of Jim Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us* (2003) is that successful video games operate along the principles of good learning, and that players learn a great deal in addition to the base content of a given video game. Depending on the game, players might learn to interact socially with other players ("affinity groups"); to "read" and "write" within the game's "semiotic domain" (i.e. to read context clues and react accordingly); to explore different identities; and to think in ways formerly alien from themselves (i.e. to view themselves/their character as a moral entity, or an immoral one, or as a problem solver, etc.). Gee states that exploring those different identities is the means by which players become invested in the game and start to engage actively and independently in a way that fosters both creativity and internal motivation to continue. That internal motivation is observable in players' willingness to experiment with trial-and-error, wherein players test a hypothesis about how the (video game) world works. When that initial hypothesis inevitably fails, players readjust and try a different approach until they eventually succeed and move on to the next obstacle. This resilience is cited as an integral part of successful independent learning. Although the elements of role-playing games that I incorporated into my class are quite distinct from video games, both capitalize on players'/students' propensity to "buy in" to their avatar's identity and thereby increase their internal motivation.

The educational uses and benefits of gamification and Game Based Learning have also been discussed at some length on *Extra Credits*, a bi-monthly online

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of the growth mindset was pioneered by Carol Dweck (2007). Its basic premise is that a fixed mindset attributes success to "fixed" innate traits (intelligence, strength, etc.). A growth mindset attributes success to behaviors such as hard work and persistence. Those with a fixed mindset often experience failure as an unalterable result of their own lack of ability ("I'm not smart enough"), whereas those with a growth mindset are prone to experience failure as a step on the path toward success ("I should try harder, or use another technique").

informational video series written by James Portnow that focuses on various aspects of video games and the gaming industry. Several videos in the series are explicitly focused on pedagogy; in one (“Gamifying Education,” May 2011), Portnow addresses the psychological and motivational benefits of the additive scoring systems found in most video games. With an additive scoring system, the player starts at zero and earns points by playing the game, thus being rewarded for her successes; in the standard classroom, a student begins with 100% and loses points throughout the course, thus being penalized for her failures. While there is little mathematical difference between losing three points on a ten point assignment (7/10) and gaining seven points on the same assignment (7/10), the psychological difference is significant, as detailed in several case studies throughout Lee Sheldon’s *The Multiplayer Classroom* (2012). Portnow also stresses that games are at their most pedagogically affective when played voluntarily (“Games in Education,” 2013), and can spur players/students toward tangential learning, i.e. the pursuit of knowledge indirectly linked to material encountered in the game (“Tangential Learning,” Mar. 2011).

Despite these potential benefits to gaming and gamification, Young et al.’s (2012) survey of the usage of video games in the classroom warns that the nature of video games makes comprehensive studies quite complicated and that “perhaps no single experimental manipulation (independent variable) can ever be defined to encompass the concept of video games writ large. Furthermore, given the diversity of student learning goals and abilities, likewise perhaps no singular outcome (dependent variable) from video games should be anticipated” (84). It is precisely because of these difficulties that this article does not seek to be broadly applicable but limits itself to an assessment of the particular gamification elements I employed in one specific course. That said, based on the available data, Young et al. were able to suggest that games have high pedagogical potential—especially in the field of language study—for encouraging “deep understanding” but come with the cost of “efficiency and curriculum coverage” (81), a trade-off I noted in my classroom and will discuss in greater detail below.

## METHODOLOGY

The premise of this course was that, in addition to the standard intermediate Latin pedagogical goals, each student would create a “companion of Aeneas”—a fictitious character making the journey with Aeneas from Troy to Italy, whose traits and characteristics would develop as a direct result of the student’s performance in

the class (attendance, translation, exams, etc.) as well as from weekly “character quests” in which students conducted independent research on aspects of Roman life. In addition to the character quests, the course was gamified in two distinct ways: 1) using an additive rather than subtractive grading system, and 2) “reskinning” the syllabus and course terminology to create an overarching class narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this gamification, all of the standard course elements remained; students still spent the majority of each class working through their translations, they read most of the *Aeneid* in English and discussed the text as a work of literature, and there were regular exams and a culminating final project. In fact, in any given class period, minimal time was spent on gamification. Most of that work (both on my part and on the students’) was done outside of class as homework. There were occasional in-class announcements regarding character advancement (requiring no more than three minutes), and we did devote one entire class period to elections to public office as the culmination of the quest-line on Roman politics, but otherwise the day-to-day workings of the course did not differ much from the norm.

While the classroom experience remained principally the same, *outside* of class students were conducting weekly research projects on aspects of Roman culture to help them develop their individual characters (sometimes referred to in gamification literature as “avatars.”) These weekly character quests accounted for 10% of the student’s overall grade in the course. As an example, the first week’s project was for students to choose names for their characters. This meant not only conducting research on Roman naming conventions, but also considering the significance of the name they chose. By leaving character quests fairly broad, I enabled students to direct the development of their characters—and thus their own research—as they saw fit; one student chose a Greek name to reflect her status as a former slave, another chose the praenomen Decimus to indicate his status as the youngest of ten siblings. As the semester progressed, students researched more details about their characters: their occupation, clothing, religious practices, house design, etc., and in the process of completing these quests to develop their characters, students learned far more about life in ancient Rome<sup>7</sup> than they typically do in a standard translation course.

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6 The term “reskinning” refers to minor cosmetic changes (usually regarding software) that result in no *real* differences but drastically alter the feel of a game or program. Typical examples include changing the color pallet of an email program, or switching a video game character’s gender; the visual difference may be striking, but the utility remains unchanged.

7 Given the rampant cultural amalgamations present in the *Aeneid*, students fashioned their own characters on Roman models (broadly understood) despite their characters’ putative Trojan origins.

Furthermore, to better reflect the growth of students' characters through quests, I used an additive grading system in which students started with a grade of 0% and earned points for their successes instead of the typical system where students start at 100% and lose points for their mistakes. With additive grading, many of my students reported feeling a greater sense of accomplishment as well as more motivation to succeed.<sup>8</sup>

This additive grading system provided a better framework for neatly mapping students' in-class accomplishments onto their avatars since it parallels character-leveling systems utilized in many role-playing games wherein a player's character improves as she completes various tasks, defeats enemies, etc. Character improvement in these games is typically tracked by "experience points," and at certain specified increments, a character will "level up" and gain a modest increase in power and/or abilities. In practice, this meant that as students completed coursework, they earned points that directly corresponded to their character's "level"; the higher the student's grade, the higher the character's level (and vice versa).<sup>9</sup>

When a student's character leveled up, the student received a notification (via email) detailing an achievement specific to her character. At low levels, the awards were small; characters would perhaps discover a trinket, or strengthen a social connection. At higher levels, the achievements became more prestigious: a warrior character might earn a promotion in the army, or a merchant might purchase a ship. Even though these achievements were awards, they were in essence yet further opportunities for independent cultural research: the first student needed to research military organization to determine his new rank, the second researched and sketched the merchant vessel he wished his character to have. So although these achievements were essentially new assignments with no graded value, students still treated them as rewards and were genuinely excited about pursuing them.

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<sup>8</sup> Anecdotally, this had a palpable impact on student complaints regarding participation grades. In my standard courses where students lose points for absences or lackluster class participation, there are invariably a handful of complaints regarding the number of points lost. In courses where I have employed an additive system, this is surprisingly not an issue. There seems to be a clear understanding that students do not lose points due to their absence, they simply cannot earn points when they are not present. The end result (a daily participation grade of zero) remains the same, but student attitude is quite different.

<sup>9</sup> *The Multiplayer Classroom* runs through a number of interesting systems for combining a student's grades with their character's level, and I adapted from there a 1000 point system that made grade calculation simple for myself and my students (See Appendix 1). Overall, Sheldon's text was particularly useful for many technical aspects of my course.

Because the gamification of the course all but guaranteed this class would be significantly different from the rest of the students' courses, it was important to convey this disparity early on. In the first place, I did not want students to be surprised by any aspect of the course's operation, and in the second I wanted to quickly establish that the role-playing element was an integral part of the class. To do this, I "reskinned" the syllabus such that familiar grading categories were reclassified to fit with the class's overall role-playing theme: translation became "Exploration," exams became "Enemies," etc. As an example, the syllabus' section on attendance reads as follows:

Time at Sea (Attendance)

*As a companion of Aeneas, you are on a journey across the sea, traversing the Mediterranean in search of Rome. Sometimes, showing up is half the battle.* Also, since language acquisition works best through frequent and repeated exposure to the target language, consistent attendance is essential to this course—especially since we only meet twice per week. Students who come to class on time and stay through the duration of the class will thus earn five points every day. (Late arrivals/early departures will earn fewer points.) In the event that a student does miss class, it is her responsibility to complete any homework assigned and learn any material covered.

The title is different, as is the addition of the italicized flavor text and the additive grading language, otherwise this section is much the same as on my other syllabi. These changes are simple, but their incorporation on a document as important as the syllabus quickly set the tone for the class and made it clear that this course would be markedly different than most.

I should also note that throughout all of this, I utilized no special software. Assignments and character level / student grades were tracked through the college's course management software (i.e. Moodle), and communications to students about character development were conducted either through Moodle or email. More advanced and interactive software is certainly available (e.g. Classcraft)<sup>10</sup> but unnecessary. <sup>10</sup> For a first-hand account of how Classcraft has been used in an introductory Latin course at Be-

sary, and for those piloting the type of gamified classroom discussed here, the time requirements of learning new software on top of managing the extra layer of role-playing may be an unwelcome burden.

### COURSE STRENGTHS

The most tangible benefit of the course was that students demonstrated a substantial increase in knowledge of Roman culture as compared to my other intermediate Latin courses without gamification elements. They researched and synthesized material about Roman naming conventions, geography, occupations, family structure, clothing, religion, historical exempla, domestic architecture and commemorative literature (see Appendix 2 for sample prompts and responses), then presented the results of their research at the end of the semester in the form of a biography of their character. In class evaluations, student responses overwhelmingly cited increased cultural exposure as a positive aspect of the course (see Appendix 3 for a representative sample of student remarks).

This increase in Roman cultural content, while clearly not comparable to a classical civilization course, is still of considerable merit—particularly in departments that are not large enough to offer a full complement of classes that focus exclusively on either language or culture, or in high school classes. The role-playing element allowed our department to introduce more cultural content to a class that did not traditionally include it, meaning that our majors benefited from the additional Roman cultural knowledge and our non-majors left the Latin language sequence with an increased appreciation for Roman culture.

By gamifying what was essentially a series of independent research projects (i.e. casting them as character quests, or as rewards for levelling up), there was a notable increase in student motivation. Since this research directly correlated to the development of their characters, students often went above and beyond in the execution of their projects.<sup>11</sup> The freedom of the assignments also enabled them to pursue avenues of inquiry that most appealed to their own interests. For example, on the loit College, see Matthew Taylor's blog *Adjunct Provocateur*: <https://adjunctprovocateur.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> This enthusiasm carried into other aspects of the course as well. When class discussion turned to more esoteric queries such as, "What physical evidence exists for the Carthaginian worship of Juno?" or "What is the earliest reference to the *Argo's* ability to speak?", we often continued the conversation beyond the classroom because I was able to offer "side quests" in which students could be awarded bonus points (roughly 1-5) in exchange for providing the swiftest, most accurate, detailed, and well-cited response. I often had answers within the hour.



project regarding Roman professions, students clearly needed to research viable jobs for their characters, but could direct that research into areas they personally found interesting, e.g. soldiery, legal work, or farming. As far as levelling up, the design of the course functioned such that when students earned enough points that their character's level (and thus their own grade) increased sufficiently, their reward was an opportunity to do more research—which they often carried out with enthusiasm.

Importantly, this style of gamification is fairly easy to incorporate. It requires little in-class time, no special software, and no specific knowledge of role-playing games. It is, in essence, a re-contextualization of standard coursework with an addition of independent research assignments. The innovation is in the framework and the over-arching narrative structuring the coursework.

### COURSE WEAKNESSES

The greatest weakness of this course was that the additional content, no matter the benefits to student engagement and increased Roman cultural knowledge, came at the cost of time spent translating Latin. Although this loss is notable, it was limited; I estimate a 15-20% reduction in the amount of Latin we could have covered had I not introduced a role-playing element. As noted above, this was not due so much to in-class demands on time as recognizing that asking students to complete weekly research projects would necessarily impact their available time for translation and other readings. For most students this was a welcome tradeoff.<sup>12</sup>

As with any assignment or lesson plan (no matter how traditional or innovative) some students will simply be averse to it; this gamification proved no different: when asked to rank on a scale of 1-10 (with 1 the worst and 10 the best) the level of benefit yielded by the gamification element, six of the seven enrolled students responded with 8, 9 or 10, while only one reported a 2. Based on that one student's remarks throughout the semester, his dissatisfaction stemmed largely from the sheer length of the endeavor. (This student would have been happy with a gamified week or two, but found the semester-long gamification excessive.) This fortunately did not impact the day-to-day routine of the class, but it is something to be aware of for those considering adopting this model. Even though the gamification element is clearly articulated on the syllabus, a critical mass of students who do not "buy in" to the game could make for a difficult learning environment. That said, to my

<sup>12</sup> On the final evaluation, one student did report feeling that any time spent not working on grammar or translation (including time spent discussing the *Aeneid* as literature) was wasted. Even so, this did not impact the student's full participation in the course.

knowledge, no professors have needed to abandon or significantly modify a gamified classroom for this reason.

The final issue to be aware of is that even though this is a comparatively simple gamification, time and creativity prove to be necessary resources. While this is designed to attach neatly to an existing course, converting to an additive grading system, reskinning the syllabus and coming up with regular character quests that fit within a larger course-specific narrative takes a considerable amount of preparation time before the semester begins. During the semester, most of the onus (other than assessment) is on the students, except when the instructor needs to craft character-specific awards of varying import for each student. While this is an opportunity for creativity and engagement with students' characters, it has the potential to become rather time consuming with high course enrollments.

### FINAL ASSESSMENT

I do not advocate for introducing role-playing elements into every course; it necessarily diminishes the time spent on the target material, has the potential to be off-putting for some students, and requires more work from instructors than standard courses. Still, the benefits provided—additional cultural content in language courses (especially in small departments), and increased student motivation to conduct independent research—are compelling reasons to incorporate role-playing elements into a small number of courses.

In future iterations of this course, I would suggest making a few alterations:

- 1) Personalized, character-based rewards for leveling up are appreciated and provide good alternatives to the default incentive of “bonus points,” but intersperse them with other types of rewards (e.g. in-class recognition, badges) to increase their value.
- 2) Incentivize positive group dynamics, as discussed on *Extra Credits* (Portnow May, 2011). Offer points (or other in-game rewards) to the entire class contingent on all students meeting certain benchmarks, e.g. when everyone comes fully prepared to translate, or when no one scores below 80% on an exam. This would, ideally, encourage students to help one another succeed, either in the classroom or during independently organized study groups.

- 3) Add a minor software component beyond the college's course management system to further student buy-in. Classcraft appears easy to use, and the ability to interact visually with the program (i.e. tracking progress via status bars, customizing avatars, etc.) will likely increase student motivation and participation.
- 4) Make use of "achievements"/"badges" (symbols of goal-accomplishment modeled on marks of achievement in video games) to publicly reward students and incentivize progress toward specific goals.<sup>13</sup>

I would encourage instructors curious about piloting such a program to try it for themselves. The risks involved in testing this in a single course are minimal and will be offset by the variety the pedagogical approach presents to both students and instructors within a department's traditional course offering.

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<sup>13</sup> Badges/Achievements can be used in a myriad of ways, limited only by the creativity of the instructor. Examples include one-off badges for specific goals (earning 100% on a quiz/exam, turning in an assignment the day before its due date) or incremental badges for more long-term goals (coming to class every day for eight weeks, scoring above 80% on ten quizzes). With incremental badges, providing students with status updates toward their badge completion (e.g. "four of eight weeks completed" or "six of ten quizzes above 80% completed") can incentivize positive long-term behavior.

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### APPENDIX 1: ADDITIVE GRADING SCALE

Final Grades and Character Levels will be based on the following scale:

<u>Points</u>	<u>Level</u>	<u>Grade</u>
0— 99	1	
100—199	2	
200—299	3	
300—399	4	
400—499	5	
500—599	6	F
600—669	7	D
670—699	7	D+
700—729	8	C-
730—769	8	C
770—799	8	C+
800—829	9	B-
830—869	9	B
870—899	9	B+
900—929	10	A-
930—969	10	A
970—1000	10	A+

As is evident from the chart (taken from the course's syllabus), the point ranges correspond directly to the standard grading scale employed by Earlham College and many other institutions (F: 50%-59%, D: 60%-66%, etc.).

**APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE RESEARCH PROMPTS AND RESPONSES*****Character Quest, Week 2: Everybody Comes from Somewhere***

*Choose a birthplace for your character.*

*Consult the map below for cities/regions. Once you've picked a few possible places, do some basic research about the terrain and/or local mythology (if applicable). How does this affect your character? How did your character make it from that place to Troy?*

Sample Student Response: Although like my father I was born in Troy, my family is said to be originally from the countryside surrounding Mount Ida and the temple of Apollo at Gergis. Mount Ida was the area where Troy's founder Teucer is said to have settled. My ancient grandmother used to tell two stories that I personally believe to be apocryphal. The first is that our family arrived with Teucer from Crete following a family where my great-great grandmother served as a handmaiden to Teucer's daughter Batea. Her other story was that my great-grandfather served as one of the guards whom Zeus himself purposely made ill to help facilitate the abduction of Ganymede. I believe it more likely that we were a family of shepherds tending our flocks before the shadow of the mountain (like Paris) before my grandfather traveled to Troy as a young boy to become a soldier. Such stories were therefore invented to portray our family in a more ancient and heroic light.

***Character Quest, Week 6: Toga! Toga! Toga!***

*Your character desperately needs to find some clothes.*

*There are several websites below. Consult them, among others of your choosing. Pick out an ensemble you think suits your character. (You should have good reasons for every decision in this process.) What clothing are you wearing? Is it dyed? How? Any jewelry? What about shoes? Hats?*

*I would like a physical description of your character's getup, as well as an explanation behind each article. If you are the artistic type (I am not), you may also draw your character's outfit in lieu of describing it, but you should still provide an explanation of each of the bits and pieces.*

Sample Student Response: *Viridis, as per his name, wears a great deal of green. His tunica is green, his sandals (although when marching he wears boots) are green, his shield and armor are painted with bands of green over the bronze and wood and leather. As there is no Rome yet in which to be a citizen, he does not wear the toga. In ritual he wears a chiton and himation. His shield and armor both bear gorgonic eyes, and his corselet also bears a full gorgon-face emblem on the breast. His helmet is both horned and crested. Regarding the colorful clothing, the Romans ("Trojans"), like the Greeks, favored the same riotous colors as their neighbors, a fact often elided by the bleaching effects of the sun and the aesthetics of later ages.*

### APPENDIX 3: REPRESENTATIVE STUDENT EVALUATION SAMPLES

#### Positives

- “I like additive [grading] far better...”
- “I was satisfied [with additive grading]—it helped because it was a motivator.”
- “The role-playing element of the class was engaging and fun and let us use our imaginations for the class.”
- “I really like this approach to teaching culture. That way, different people can learn about their interests.”
- “[Character quests] increased our knowledge of culture and I found them extremely engaging—and fun!”
- “[Character quests] helpfully broke up the occasional monotony of the translation. I would recommend them further.”

#### Negatives

- “[Additive grading was] stressful at the start of the year but ultimately I was satisfied with it.”
- “I was indifferent [to the additive grading]. It made calculating my grade a little more difficult, that was a minor complaint.”
- “I could not get motivated for the character quests and found them to be busy-work.”
- “While the format of the course was interesting, it was ultimately a distraction that hampered my primary objective of learning Latin.”