
Eat, Play, Love

Re-figuring Media Literacy Instruction as Play

Chris Rosser, *Theological Librarian, Oklahoma Christian University*
Heath Rosser, *Student, Oklahoma Christian University*

ABSTRACT Gameful design empowers curators and creators= for *(in)formative* instruction. For re-visioning and reinvigorating course building, gameful design offers a next-level move for transformative learning by creating *(in)formational* spaces where desire drives students to explore, overcome challenges, and earn rewards. Our own approach incorporates five elements: structure, story, aesthetic, play, and desire. This session introduces two exemplar courses that demonstrate robust philosophical, pedagogical, and playful thinking electrifying *(in)formation* via gameful design, emphasizing the value of non-required, desire-driven learning.

MOVE 1: THE GAME WE'RE PLAYING

Friends, both virtual and visceral, we are grateful for this opportunity to share this presentation entitled *Eat, Play, Love: Re-figuring Media Literacy Instruction as Play*. My name is Chris Rosser, Theological Librarian at Oklahoma Christian University; presenting with me today is my son Heath Rosser, student at OC who began working with me as a library intern several years ago in high school. Part of Heath's work as intern was to help think about curricular and co-curricular design and to develop instructional delivery aspects for several courses. Heath has been able to participate in gameful course design both behind the scenes as a developer in several courses and as a player (or student) in *Eat, Play, Love*, the media literacy course that is the focus of this presentation.

I've been very grateful to Heath for the ideas and creativity he's shared along the way—it's very helpful to have a student on hand to beta test what may seem like odd or out-of-the-box strategies for course design and delivery. For over seven years now, I've worked to understand and implement gameful design in all my courses, including courses whose heart is information and media literacy instruc-

tion, and I've presented at the Atla Annual Conference for several years on aspects of gameful design and its application within theological librarianship. Gameful design offers a means for converging curricular and co-curricular learning, and I believe this convergence is the future of education.

Last year, I presented an ethical orientation to our media-rich, info-saturated society, claiming that media discernment (rather than media literacy) offers an important way forward. The heart of last year's message was this: "Among players who live, move, and have our being in a media-rich, info-saturated system, media discernment refers to a disposition of heart and requisite skills for critically attending to self and to other in love so that info consumption nourishes well-being" (Rosser 2022, 183). Now, we hope to demonstrate how this ethic was not only delivered but also profoundly actualized within and through a gamified course. Proof of concept has been achieved, and we'd love to share the results.

We invite all participants to see yourselves as players—after all, participants at a conference and students in a classroom are just roles we adopt within the play-full worlds we already inhabit. We invite you into the storied worlds of these gamified courses with the hope that our explanation will become for you a meaningful and transformative experience. Among this learning community, we hope to share how *gameful design* actualizes *(in)formation* through encounter, how gameful design facilitates whole-person learning—mind, heart, body, spirit. Let's begin by offering our point and purpose so that the end will be clear from the beginning:

Point

Gameful design empowers curators and creators for *(in)formative* instruction.

Purpose

To offer participants two exemplar courses that demonstrate robust philosophical, pedagogical, and playful thinking electrifying *(in)formation* via gameful design, so that together we might discern the pedagogical value of non-required, desire-driven learning and generate ideas for gamifying instruction.

Our game today involves three moves: What, Why, and How. We want to first talk about *what* gameful design is and *why* gamification is a transformative mode for engaging students; but the bulk of

this presentation will be a conversation about *how* to create desire-driven spaces so that participant-heroes might also gain ideas for gameful application in your own contexts. So, if you're ready, players, let's play.

MOVE 2: WHAT WE'RE PLAYING AT

We begin not with what gamification is but rather who and what we are as theological librarians and those associated with the Atla community. Several years ago, Atla rebranded as “Collectors and Connectors in Religion and Theology,” and I really appreciate these markers of shared identity. To collectors and connectors, we also add curators of information; and these three markers—connectors, collectors, curators—are charged with the needed energies for electrifying gameful design.

We are *connectors* because we know that encounter with difference is the heart of learning and of love. We facilitate third-space encounters by which students come face to face with new information and unexpected others. We serve at the intersections, within the interconnected matrix of diverse voices and perspectives, and the connections we foster are the mode and medium of love and learning: *self* face-to-face with *other*, since learning and love each requires encounter with difference or otherness.

It's an odd move, but I requested my library name badge read, *Chris Rosser, Necromancer*. While this title typically gets a confused stare and sometimes a laugh out of students, the term reveals something important about librarianship: librarians connect patrons with the words and thoughts of other minds, often the minds of those long dead! Such acts of blessed necromancy are facilitated by the collections we build and preserve. So, librarians as *collectors* conveys the access we provide to other minds, to unknown ways of thinking and of being, calling forth the strange and unexpected, which is the art and science of necromancy.

We are also *curators*—and this marker of identity is where much of our focus will be in this session because curation of information is how we build out robust spaces for desire-driven learning that is the heart and soul of what we mean by gameful design. But let me suggest what gamification is not: gamifying learning is not simply or merely adding game elements to instruction—elements like points, badges, leaderboards, and avatars. Such elements add a gamified

feel, but gameful design is so much more. *Gamification* means applying game-design principles in non-game contexts (Boskic and Hu 2015): “gamifying a learning experience offers a means for imbuing education with curiosity, imagination, and play; it offers freedom to make mistakes (a mess-up means starting over again and again until you’ve gained the skills to level-up). Through gamified learning, students are driven by desire to explore and overcome challenges” (Rosser 2020, 176).

Several years ago, I discovered Kevin Bell, whose book *Game On! Gamification, Gameful Design, and the Rise of the Gamer Educator* exchanges *gamification* with the concept of *gameful design*. Bell says, “Gameful design takes elements of what makes games, or other forms of engagement, intriguing, boils them down to a fundamental level, and then applies them to educational experiences” (Bell 2017, 17; cf. Bell 2018, 42). Reframing gamification as gameful design has truly been a game changer in my own instructional design.

In my own teaching and in all my courses, I incorporate five elements of gameful design: structure, story, aesthetic, play, and desire. *Structure* refers to a cohesive conceptual model around which the course is built. *Story* refers to an imaginative world or narrative into which students are invited and that facilitates course flow. *Aesthetic* refers to sound and image that captures imagination as students play through the course. *Play* refers to aspects of gameplay, like adopting an avatar or gamified persona, earning badges or micro-credentials, gaining special tokens for obliterating misses, exploration that leads to serendipitous discovery and reward, boss fights instead of exams, and other such elements that make learning feel like play. And finally, *desire*, which to me is the most important element of gameful design, by which we build the course to foster and facilitate learning motivated by desire, with loads of options, low risk, high flexibility, and high capacity for reward. Two other elements—not necessarily gamified elements but crucial nonetheless—are feedback and reflection. We’ll spend more time with each of these elements as we discuss two exemplar gamified courses: *Eat, Play, Love: Adventures in an Information Ecosystem*, and *Heroes in the Making*.

MOVE 3: WHY WE PLAY

To better frame our next move, let’s consider: Why might gameful design offer a beneficial approach to course design, specifically for

today's learners? Although I've mentioned this in past presentations, I think it's important to offer my own philosophy of teaching, not least so that it becomes apparent that gameful design is not kitsch—we don't diminish our teaching by incorporating gameful design:

Learning is an encounter between self (sameness) and other (difference). Whole-person learning considers body, mind, heart, and soul—aspects envisioned as thriving, understanding, desiring, and imagining. Through facilitated encounters between self and other, students enlarge capacity to thrive, broaden understanding, clarify desire, and electrify imagination, so that love and learning transform body, mind, heart, and spirit. My purpose therefore is *(in)formation*—to reach and transform a student's heart, soul, mind, and strength. I recognize that the truest path to the heart is not through the head but through the gut, and gamification enables us to bring learning to spaces of desire. Transforming the whole person involves reorienting or clarifying desire so that students' love (i.e., what they desire) vectors more truly toward diverse others. Love is therefore both the motivation and goal of teaching. (Rosser 2020, 177-78)

As co-curricular spaces, our libraries can intentionally facilitate third-space encounters between self (sameness) and neighbor (difference). In my own context, *(in)formation* is our catchword, conveying identity and intent as we fulfill our ethical and instructional aims to form and inform for whole-person learning.

So again, let me underscore: gamification is not kitsch; we as instructors do not diminish our teaching when we incorporate gameful design. On the contrary, gameful design brings learning to spaces of desire, important for learning because humans are players — we are creatures-at-play — and human activity (including learning) is infused with play (cf. Huizinga 2014; Rosser 2020). My philosophy of teaching is informed by a belief that humans are players, which, among other things, means that humans intend the world through story, and story is truth's profoundest delivery device. We make sense of the world through story because we are storied creatures; so, rather than thinking about ourselves as *thinking things* (homo sapien), we are instead *playful things* (homo ludens), driven as we are by story and by desire.

Gameful design empowers librarian-instructors to actualize *(in)formation* as we live, move, and have our being in liminal spaces between the curricular and co-curricular. Gameful design can facilitate encounter between self and other in special worlds where students, as whole persons motivated by desire, are formed and informed. This is the heart of gameful design.

MOVE 4: HOW WE PLAY AT LEARNING

To introduce a gamified media literacy course I teach entitled *Eat, Play, Love*, let's attend to the first minute of an under-four-minute introductory video together (<https://bit.ly/EatPlayLoveIntro>). Here's the script from the video's beginning:

Friends, welcome to Media Literacy! My name is Chris Rosser and I'm Theological Librarian for the Beam Library; I'll be your instructor—or maybe better, I'll be your travel guide—as we engage media literacy and discernment as a game we'll be playing together all semester.

Media Literacy is a three-hour, online, gamified course that sharpens critical-thinking skills for more thoughtful, ethical information consumption. Students participate in information creation and dissemination, identify and analyze misinformation and disinformation, and encounter media-immersed humanity not just as consumers but as neighbors to love.

Hmph. That description sounds boring. OK, let me tell you what the course is really about: Media Literacy is just the stuffy name for the course catalog; the real name for our course is *Eat, Play, Love: Adventures in the Information Ecosystem*.

And our course is a game we'll play for the next three weeks, encountering and engaging news, media, and information in real time. You see, rather than just thinking about media literacy or media ethics, we're paying attention to *who* and *what* humans are and *how* and *why* humans behave the ways they do in relation to information.

The purpose of this course is to challenge participants to play with media literacy, or media discernment, as crucial for (*in*)formation. As mentioned, we wonder: “Is it possible that our use of media—our use of these devices that tether us one to another—is it possible that our use of media might initiate within us growth and maturity?” (Rosser 2022, 183). These are questions we're wrestling throughout our course, ethical questions similar to gritty tensions raised in games like *The Last of Us*, for example, with which some might be familiar through the recent HBO series. Ambiguity and gritty questions are the foundation of robust world building.

So, first, we consider structure. While the course unfolds linearly (task to task and module to module), the course and all activities reflect an overarching model, Joseph Campbell's “Hero's Journey” cycle: leaving the familiar or status quo, followed by departure into unfamiliar spaces where heroes encounter trials and then ultimately return from their trials with a treasure of discoveries made in special, upside-down adventures (Campbell 2008).

The Hero's Journey is a cycle of departure, initiation, return, and this cycle is also the spiral of experiences we encounter in students, especially those beginning college-level studies, who depart the familiar for the unknown. So, the Hero's Journey model naturalizes movement into and through "special worlds" so that encounter with the unfamiliar becomes a normalized experience; in other words, the Hero's Journey model normalizes the strange.

Including an architecture—what we're calling *structure*—means incorporating an overarching model so that students might better conceptualize their journey as learners through the course and beyond. Let's take just another couple of minutes to consider a secondary orientation video that better explains the story, aesthetic, and play elements of this course (<https://bit.ly/EatPlayLoveActivation>). Here is the video's under-four-minute script:

Hero, you've been activated! Briefly, let's overview the game we're playing and get you started off right. As you know, you're a hero with a sword, a sword named Krino, and you're on a mission to discern the true intentions of Medea Literati, a super secret organization with global influence. In 11 moves—and by the way, we're calling each new learning content a "move"—in 11 moves, you're gonna make it out of this nightmare dungeon-crawl with some answers. Resistance is counting on you, hero!

Each move will take about three hours (or less, depending on your pace). Since this is a three-week course that's worth 3 credit hours, we have to think in terms of a 15-week semester and a course that meets three times each week. You'll work through 11 moves, each taking about three hours time-on-task, with a couple of extra bits of content thrown in, and some work in a side-quest-like desire-driven learning space called the Ianua Forum. So, if you'll commit to three hours a day (not including weekends or holidays!) over the duration of our three weeks together, you will have no problem finishing this course—you've got this hero!

Alright, here's how to get started. Begin by overviewing the syllabus; you'll probably wanna review the syllabus throughout our course to see how far you've come and all you have left to overcome. Sometimes, the syllabus isn't enough, so don't hesitate to reach out to your instructor—I am here to help!

Next, take a moment to explore Blackboard, see what's lurking behind each menu item, and get a sense for where things are in terms of our course platform. And when you are ready to begin, click Dungeons, and let's go.

New content opens each time you click "Mark Reviewed." So, to access your next move, click "Mark Reviewed," and new content will appear. Each move is introduced with a special transmission from Resistance Headquarters to help orient you, to give you a sense of what to expect. Listen to (or read) the transmission, click "Mark Reviewed," and your next move will appear.

For each move, you'll find instructions about how to proceed. Follow the instructions completely so that you don't miss anything, since there are typically multiple minor tasks to accomplish for each move.

You'll proceed in this way—clicking “Mark Reviewed” and opening and completing new content—until you reach your final move, which is called Hour 11: Resolution. As described in your syllabus, you'll learn more about this “final showdown” as our game progresses.

Throughout, you'll be responding to discussion prompts or posting content in submission folders—and if you have questions as you go, be sure to ask your instructor. You'll also be spending some time in the desire-driven learning space of the Ianua Forum (*ianua* is a Latin term for “door”). But you'll learn more about the Ianua in a separate video, hero. You'll also hear more about grades and badges as we go, so don't sweat it; let's just get started.

Finally, be on the lookout for non-required opportunities to gather with other heroes for our Virtual Dumpster Fires! These are always a great chance to sharpen each other and share what we're discovering. Alright, once you've explored a bit and feel comfortable, click Dungeons, open new content by clicking “Mark Reviewed,” knock out your tasks, and let's do this, hero! Three hours a day for three weeks, and this adventure will be worth it. Reach out if you have questions, and keep Krino sharp. Let's go!

As you can see, we incorporate story as an important aspect of gameful design. Humans are storied creatures, and we inhabit storied worlds, making sense of the world through story (cf. Rosser 2020). Since the term *student* can signify a character in the drama of learning, we design to build out the stage upon which students will play. “The imagined world of story is formative space, and what we learn in storied worlds follows us out” (Rosser 2020, 180). Gameful design, then, involves developing storied worlds for students to inhabit as they play through the course.

In the case of *Eat, Play, Love*, students imagine themselves to be a hero-traveler bearing a sword named Krino—the Greek root of our term *critical* thinking—on a spiraling adventure through the information ecosystem. Students come to see themselves as a hero-character carrying Krino; they are invited to “don the hero's garb, strap on the hero's katana, and to see themselves as a character in a story as much as they are a student in a class” (Rosser 2020, 180). Students are encouraged to post an avatar or image that conveys how they envision themselves as heroes.

Perhaps surprisingly, introducing an overarching story does not require drastic revision to tasks and assignments; not every aspect of the course must be saturated by the story. Instead, learning hap-

pens beneath the overarching narrative so that *krino* simply offers a touchstone throughout, recalling students to the story of our game without the game itself turning into a distraction. So, as you design, consider crafting storied worlds your students can inhabit; encourage them to see themselves as characters on a journey as they play through the course.

Gameful design also thinks about aesthetics. Syllabus design can be playful, and your learning management system can become a playground of gifs or images embedded within discussions, tasks, and announcements, aesthetic aspects that convey story, reminding students of the game. In *Eat, Play, Love*, students earn a special token for going beyond bare-minimum requirements; they can get the Red Mage, a token that lets them obliterate a missed task. In our LMS, an earned Mage appears as a GIF: armor igniting in flame to reveal spreading wings! So, gameful design makes good use of the LMS and syllabus by aesthetically conveying play-full elements.

Beyond story, aesthetics, structure, and play, we discover desire-driven learning as the beating heart of gameful design. Friends, as librarians we are curators; that's a strength we have, and curation is a profoundly transformative aspect of gameful design because curation fosters and facilitates desire-driven learning.

Now, what I mean by *desire-driven learning* is this: learning that is driven by desire (a super technical description!) The way to accomplish or to facilitate desire-driven learning is to create lots and lots of non-required options, to allow for high flexibility, and to provide loads of feedback (students need to feel instructor presence, to know we're all on this journey together). Briefly, let's consider a video summary of a one-week course entitled *Heroes in the Making*. The video was created to introduce faculty to gameful design; it reviews and reinforces gameful design concepts we've covered in this session and also describes desire-driven learning (<https://bit.ly/HeroesInTheMakingCourse>). Here's the under-five-minute script:

Dear Faculty, I'm gonna do my best to condense this presentation on gamification for the Fall 2022 Faculty Workshop down from 25 to under five minutes. Here we go!

Gamification refers to the incorporation of game design into course design. But gamifying a course is not just a kitschy move; there are profound pedagogical reasons for gameful course design, and not least because gameful design pays attention to who humans are and how humans learn. People are players, we learn with and are driven by our gut as much as our noggins. People are desiring, storied beings, and we make sense of the world

through story. So, in my own courses, I apply two primary aspects of game design: I invite students to adopt a persona, to see themselves as a hero who carries a sword named Krino (a tool for discernment); and I invite them join our hero's journey, a model around which our course is constructed. Now, you can pause the video and read my own philosophy of teaching, if you like; this captures the heart of why gameful design is impactful for me and for my students and how gameful design centers whole-person learning and transformation.

The ethic energizing all my courses is the self-other construct, and whadaya know that construct also mirrors our Hero's Journey model. I use the hero's journey because it normalizes experience of the strange and unknown—students anticipate that they will encounter new and challenging learning, but they also anticipate return to the familiar, but now empowered with new knowledge, insights, and experiences. So, let me share a gamified course—*Heroes in the Making*—as a recent exemplar of gameful design.

During Honors Summer Academy, *Heroes in the Making* met face to face daily for one hour with some outside-of-class work to be completed online. As you can see, the syllabus reflects the course's playful intent. Outside-of-class learning content followed the contour of the hero's journey, and students were required to select and complete one Heroic Task each day. Completion of a task earned the students XP (or, Experience Points), and students were encouraged to complete work beyond the required minimum to earn extra XP since our course culminated in an epic Boss Battle, and abundant XP was a key to victory! Students also had opportunity to earn XP in a fully optional, non-required space for desire-driven learning. In this forum, discussion threads provided lots of options for further learning that resonated with or reinforced our in-class conversations. I added new options daily, which typically consisted of a curated video to watch and a simple prompt to guide reflection. Here are some results to consider: In total, there were 311 posts (about 160 from students, and the rest offered my feedback to student posts); the totally optional, desire-driven learning forum offered 17 different threads, and most were worth five (5) points; this optional forum received 125 posts, and students earned 267 total non-required points! All of their earned XP was needed to overcome the nasty Human Salvo Cleric (there's a backstory here, don't worry about it now)—and the boss battle involved using XP to cast attacks or charms by rolling giant, inflatable dice at the Cleric (who was one of my kids in costume, super fun!)

This brief video doesn't offer space for me to describe how gameful design helps me assess learning outcomes, how gameful design helps me create a culture of reflection and feedback, how gameful design can generate a robust learning community in virtual spaces—but it does, and if you wanna know more about gameful design, I'm here for it. So, all the best as you incorporate strategies for active learning this semester; the Teaching and Learning Committee is here to help!

Crafting spaces to facilitate desire-driven learning by creating numerous, non-required options is the heart of gameful design. This concept has been proven in my own courses, including a recent World Religions course, which I'll hopefully more fully discuss in a future Atla Annual Conference session. For now, suffice to say that out of over 100 learning experiences created to guide learning and fulfill outcomes, students chose their own path to course completion; they followed their heart into learning they desired, and their reflections posted at each point of encounter powerfully conveyed the substance and value of these learning experiences. Among 30 students and in all the threads of our many discussion options, we made over 1,350 posts! Half of those posts reflect my own feedback to students, revealing robust interaction between students and instructor normalized in a gamified context, since "games . . . create a two-way communication path embedded in a ludic [playful] space" (Breuer, Bessant, and Gudiksen 2022 140). Robust feedback and intentional reflection are key to learning, knowledge transfer, and retention (cf. chs. 5-6 in Chan 2022). But consider: 30 students made nearly 700 substantial posts; this means that almost every student composed the equivalent of a 10-12 page paper and didn't even realize it. We'll talk more about this course in a future Atla session.

MOVE 5: PLAYFUL TAKEAWAYS

Friends, here we are, at journey's end. Heroes, you did it—you successfully navigated the light and dark of another Atla Annual session. And what did you gain as you rounded the arc out of strange encounters with out-of-the-box course design and now return to your status quo? Let me briefly share my own takeaway, what I discern as the aim of gameful design:

Through gameful design, together with students we inhabit *story* as class becomes its own storied world; students envision themselves as hero-travelers in search of light from new learning facilitated by encounter; they are a hero carrying a sword called Krino (discernment), not a weapon but a tool for facilitating encounter between self and other. Intentional, humble encounter between self and other is our ethical orientation since we know that learning and love each requires encounter between *self* (sameness) and *other* (difference). Through encounter, we enlarge our capacity to love the neighbor as the self, which makes learning a game worth playing and game-

ful design a worthwhile endeavor. As noted above, gameful design brings learning to spaces of desire, where whole-person transformation involves reorienting or clarifying desire so that students' love (i.e., what they desire) vectors more truly toward diverse others (Rosser 2020). Love then becomes both motivation and end (or telos) of teaching, and gameful design empowers us—curators and creators—for *(in)formative* instruction.

For associated materials including course syllabi, a gamified course final, and videos from these and other gamified courses, visit: <https://bit.ly/eatplaylovefinal>.

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