

Game design, education and evangelization



Young people operate Playstation controllers at a gaming exhibit. (CNS photo/Reuters)

Ever since taking a game theory course in college, I have been playing German-style board games. I knew I had a problem, an addiction of sorts, when my wife bought me a strategy game for Valentine's Day last year. Nothing says a romantic evening like playing Settlers of Catan.

I admit it. I am a nerd.

It never occurred to me to integrate my love for games into my teaching until I attended a conference for community college leaders last spring. The gamification of education was one of the hot topics at the conference, and I eagerly attended several sessions, learning how theories on motivation, player types, and game mechanics can be used to increase student learning. In recent months, I delved deeply into the theory of gamification, and even had the opportunity to present on the topic at a regional conference. It was during this time I realized some practices could also be applied to the way we instruct others in the faith.

Foundational to gamification is the distinction between different types of motivations. First, extrinsic motivations are external rewards or punishments for performing an action. They would include money, grades, or gold stars as rewards, and spankings, timeouts, or fines as punishments. An intrinsic motivation is internal and based on personal fulfillment, such as engaging in an activity because it is fun, enjoyable or interesting.

Let's examine some hypothetical classrooms to illuminate the distinction.

On the one hand, a teacher using largely extrinsic motivations might announce on the first day that grading will be done on a bell curve with a certain amount of As, Bs and so forth. Students would be assessed randomly and frequently, and the teacher

would make little to no effort to engage students or try to interest them in the material. On the other hand, a teacher using purely intrinsic rewards would eliminate grades and not require attendance. Students attending the class would be free to discuss what they were interested in without any graded assignments.

From these examples, the strength and weakness of the two types of motivations is fairly evident. The extrinsic motivations are powerful, but their long term effectiveness is questionable, as students will dislike the subject matter. Students will learn in this type of class, but they will not enjoy it. In the second example, I cannot image the vast majority of students gaining any significant knowledge, but they would probably enjoy the class, if they attend it.

For Catholics, extrinsic motivations would be the fear of hell and purgatory, and the hope of heaven. Old prayer books even had small extrinsic rewards attached to certain prayers, for example a 500-day indulgence. An intrinsic motivation would be doing something purely out of love for God.

In games, education and faith formation, the goal is to move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivations. A well-designed “game” begins with small challenges and frequent extrinsic rewards. As the skill of the player increases, the challenges become more difficult and the extrinsic rewards decline.

This model makes perfect sense for any parent or teacher. With young children, parents use a lot of timeouts and rewards, but as children grow older, parents hope they will act properly on their own. Similarly in education, younger students are graded daily on assignments, and offered countless extrinsic rewards. Yet when I was taking doctoral classes, I was required to read lengthy monographs every week, and there was no grade attached to the assignments. In several seminars, I went through the entire semester without receiving any feedback (extrinsic motivation). At that point, it was assumed students would complete the assignments due to their interest in the subject matter (intrinsic motivation).

Now, we turn to faith formation in Catholic schools and religious education. From my observations, we seem to be doing the complete opposite of the proven model. At the youngest age, there is no mention of extrinsic rewards – hell, purgatory, or heaven. When heaven is mentioned, it is not as a reward for good actions, but a

place where nearly everyone goes after they die. Instead, we offer only intrinsic motivations. That is, we instruct children to do religious actions out of love and because they are fulfilling.

In many ways, Catholic formation is like the class with no grades, optional attendance, and you get to do whatever you feel like. To be more specific, there is no sin, you do not have to go to church, and everyone goes to heaven in the end. It is no wonder young Catholics lack motivation.

Do not get me wrong. I understand that intrinsic motivations are superior, but they are most effective for master game players, doctoral students, and living saints, in their respective areas. Every game designer would laugh at the failed strategies of the Catholic Church. I would assume many Catholics are stuck in an elementary level of faith, yet we are giving them assignments appropriate for graduate students.

In this movement from one motivation to the next, we need to also realize that extrinsic motivations are a means to an end. As a parent, I am overjoyed when my children clean their rooms without a threat of punishment, but I am slightly disappointment, when afterwards, they ask for a treat for their work. As a teacher, I am annoyed by students who complain about an 88, stating that they always get As, but never once reference their interest in the content of the course. Likewise, at our judgment, God will look for more than a fear of going to hell. It is understandable that Catholic reformers in the last 50 years have targeted extrinsic rewards, but they made a grave error by eliminated them completely.

Lastly, game designers have discerned several different player types, and if you are curious, you can take a test online to determine your player type. Most games are designed for two player types: achievers who like to win game and who are highly motivated by extrinsic rewards (racing and shooting games), and explores who like to discover new things and who respond better to intrinsic motivations (simulations and role-playing games). Given that people respond to different motivators, the least the church can do is to balance the approaches that are used in faith formation.

Psychologists and game designers have studied the reasons why people play games, and they have used their knowledge to develop fun and addictive games.

Shouldn't Catholics examine these theories? After all, people spend countless hours swiping candy or role playing on the Internet, but we cannot motivate people to spend an hour a week at church, when their eternal salvation is on the line.