Gamifying a Large, Introductory Course and Fostering Student Autonomy

University of Michigan Provost's Teaching Innovation Prize

2013 WINNER

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Political Science graduate students Benjamin Peterson, Bonnie Washick, and Justin Williams have been instrumental in both developing and implementing many of the ideas described here.

Innovation Description

"Gamification" is the application of structures, rules, and logics encountered in games to non-game contexts. Gamifying a course doesn't consist of just converting conventional grades to points. Rather, the logic of rewards must be pervasively changed. Conventional reward systems "mark students down," discouraging them from a crucial part of learning: failing and trying again. However, when students focus on "leveling up" and earning points, they are motivated to do more work and to take on new challenges. When students aren't penalized for unsuccessful efforts, the only cost is their time.

The most important game element in a course is having multiple paths to achievement. Autonomy and problem solving are fostered when students must think about how to navigate the challenges posed by a menu of creative options for major assignments. Reflecting on their interests and strengths develops students' metacognitive skills, and they become self-regulated learners. Choice and creativity also rev up students' willingness to thoughtfully and enthusiastically engage with complex texts by authors who died centuries ago. Effectively, this turns a liability (the mismatch between students' expectations and the content of an introductory political philosophy course) into a feature.

https://myumi.ch/48Gb4   https://myumi.ch/5WDMM

Student Comments

"[POLSCI 101] required me and my peers to not only take full responsibility [for] our final grades, but also turned the class into a game and interactive experiment."

"Students were enthusiastic and excited to contribute.... This was not a tedious endeavor for most students."

"Students gained points for completing tasks and also gained badges or extra credit if they performed exceptionally well."

"Choices about assignments...allowed the students to evaluate their strengths and how they learned best."

Encouraged "to create unconventional projects about the texts," students "were presenting card games and comic strips to explain political theory."
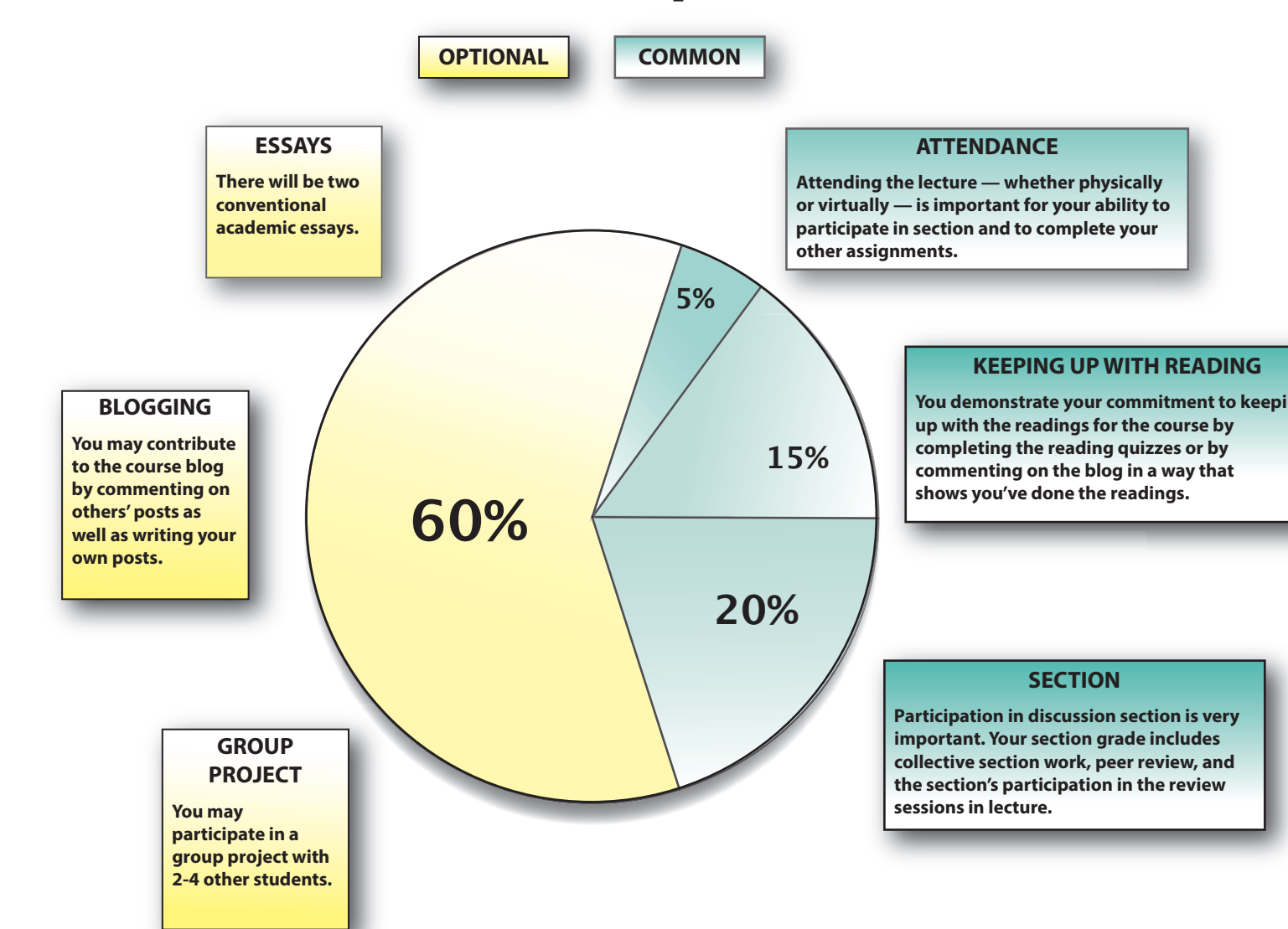
"Students not only understood the presented materials, but were given the opportunity to actively engage in the concepts: a style of teaching that truly prepares students to be successful after college."
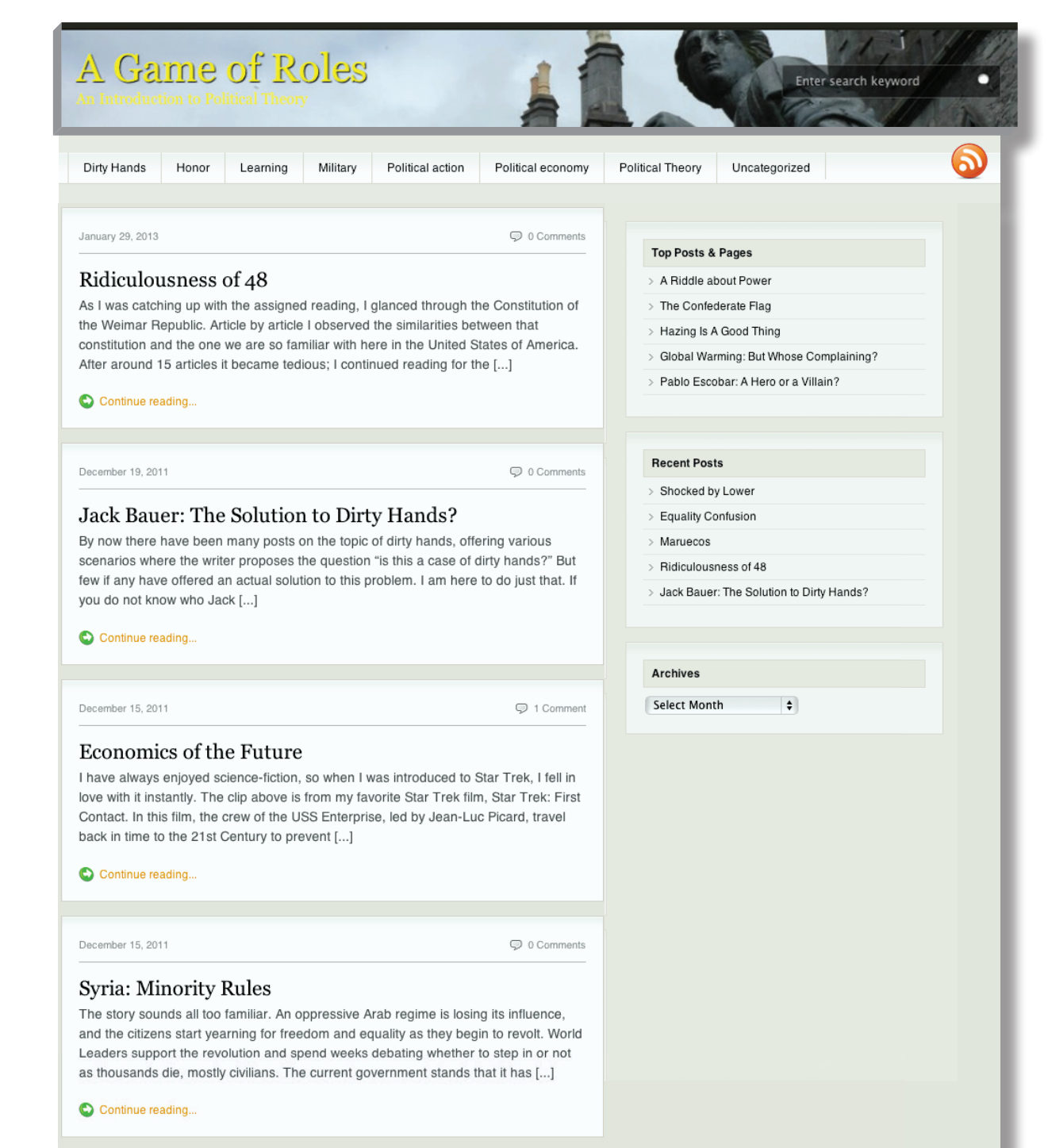
Examples of Teaching Innovation
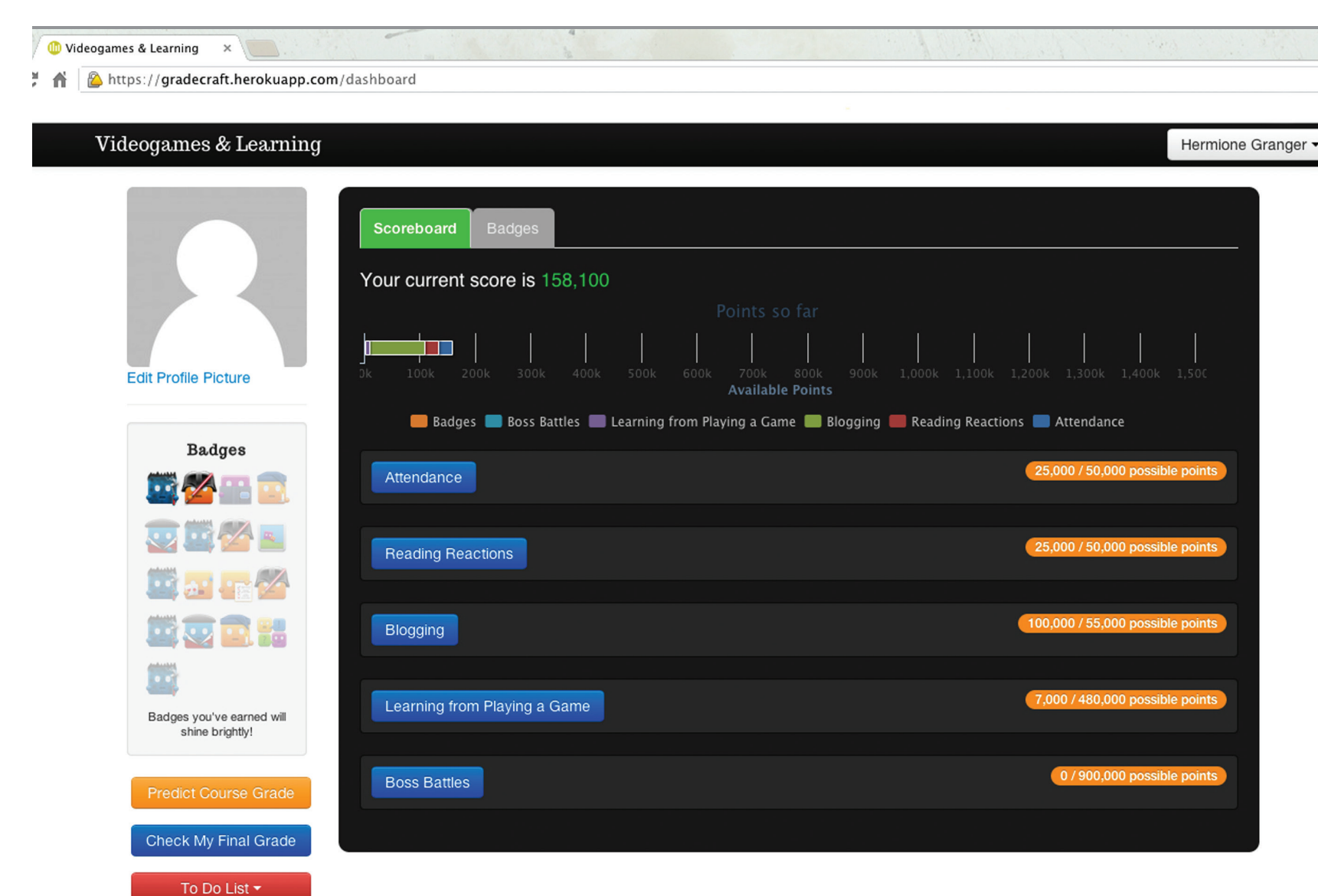
Students plan which assignments to undertake and track their progress with Gradecraft, a web app developed by graduate student Caitlin Holman, School of Information.
https://gradecraft.herokuapp.com/

Graded Components

By the fall study break, students must decide what percentage of their grade to allocate to the optional assignments that they've chosen. Once set, weights cannot be changed.

By writing blog posts, many students found themselves making connections to more of the texts than they would have through writing essays.