Teaching American Political Development Through a Fantasy Sports Draft

Zachary McKay[1] and Jill Berge[#]

[1]Lake Washington High School, USA
[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

As student engagement has been down because of increased phone use, finding a way to increase student engagement is paramount to teaching the next generation of students. One way to do engage students is through gamification or introducing games into classes to teach students. While gamification has been used successfully in the past, there has not been a study examining the effect of a fantasy-sports model on student engagement. This study aimed to close that gap by introducing a fantasy-sports draft to teach students US presidents. Surveys, teacher interviews, and classroom observations were used to conduct this study and determine the effect of a fantasy-sports draft on student engagement. Results of this study show that a fantasy sports model does increase student engagement for both students who have not been exposed to a fantasy sport before and for students who regularly play fantasy sports. Implications include adding to the literature of learner-centric as opposed to teacher-centric classrooms and filling a gap in the literature.

Literature Review

Schools are in a losing battle against phones for student engagement and motivation. A recent study found that 97% of teenagers used their phones during school hours with the main culprits being gaming, social media, and YouTube (Radesky et al., 2023). Williams & Williams (2011) describe student motivation as an essential element for quality education; with a lack of student engagement and motivation in classrooms, this is a problem that needs to be addressed. As one of the main activities taking away student engagement in school are games, finding a positive way to introduce games into classrooms as a teaching method has the potential to increase student engagement in schools.

Because of this, there has been a recent push to "gamify" education to engage students in learning. Some education research studies have shown that student engagement is positively linked to learning outcomes such as critical thinking and higher grades (Carini et al., 2006). Combine this with research showing that some forms of gamification can improve student engagement and motivation (Mee et al., 2022), finding new ways to "gamify" education holds promise to increase student engagement in schools, especially in unique ways. Some teachers are open to this push as well, showing optimism for using games to engage students. However, they also have valid concerns, such as being able to mandate students playing the games and needing to be able to properly teach their subjects (Dickey, 2013).

Gamification, as defined by Gerber (2014), an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University, is using game-based mechanics and game thinking in non-game situations. In an educational context, gamification is introducing games and game-like learning into classrooms, generally with the goal of increasing student engagement. In addition, Gerber (2014) explains that many researchers and game designers agree that gamification is more than just points and leaderboards, and that certain elements and traits need to be included. If only points and badges are used, then the best traits of gaming will be left out, such as the unique abilities of games

to immerse students and tell engaging narratives. Poor gamification is reflected by a study that found that students in a gamified classroom with only badges, leaderboards, and other elements had decreased motivation, satisfaction, empowerment, and lower final exam scores than the students in the non-gamified classroom (Hanus & Fox, 2015). Based on these findings, gamification that only consists of points, badges, and leaderboards does not necessarily improve educational outcomes, but can, at worst, harm satisfaction and motivation. This study shows that gamification needs to be more than just points, badges, and leaderboards over a regular activity, as that does not allow the advantages of games to come into play. For example, gamification works best when it creates a "flow" state for the user (when activities for the user are at an above-average skill level for the user) as during this "flow" state, users will typically feel gratification, immersion, and can be at peak performance (Dichev et al., 2015). The point of the increased use of gamification is to try and get students into this "flow" state to enable immersion in the game and a maximal learning environment.

However, if games cannot achieve the flow state or if teachers are not able to see the benefits of implementing gamification in their classrooms, then it is unlikely that its desired effects can be achieved (Sverdvik & Hvisten, 2013). Another problem is when the applications used to gamify education fail to work properly, which can lead to students needing to spend more time on activities as well as increased frustration, time, and effort spent on schoolwork. Metwally et al. (2021) conducted a study and found that even though more students enjoyed completing the gamified homework, they took longer, experienced frustration with glitches, and had lower average completion rates than the control group. These numerous issues can lead to students losing interest and educators deciding to return to traditional teaching methods instead of the risks that gamification holds.

Despite this, there have been many advantages with gamification implemented in classrooms. Watson et al. (2010) conducted a case study of implementing Making History, a World War II education game, in a classroom. They discovered through observation and focus groups that students were much more engaged in class with the video game compared to the traditional lecture environment. Students would be talking about the game outside of class, and more students would be engaged with playing the game compared to the traditional lecture model (Watson et al., 2010).

It can be easy to make assumptions about gamification as being more engaging or increasing learning. In fact, Dichev and Dicheva (2017) warn about making too many underlying assumptions with gamification, such as the assumptions that gamification is motivating, engaging, and can improve attendance and participation, as research remains inconclusive on these assumptions. Dichev and Dicheva (2017) also argued that asking questions about these underlying assumptions are too broad. They stated that researchers should instead focus on narrower questions, such as whether certain game design elements are effective for a certain type of learner participating in a specific type of activity. This narrower focus is shown by Galiç & Yıldız (2023), where they determined different learner types and modified the game elements appropriately for the different learner types. They found that their mathematical games had a medium effect on students' academic success. There was also a significant effect on student motivation, in line with Mee et al. (2022) reporting that 92% of primary students stated on a survey that they felt more motivated to learn through games and that 93% of primary students reporting that they enjoyed the lesson more with games than without. Additionally, Mee et al.'s findings on games having a positive effect on academic achievement is in line with several other studies, such as Chen et al. (2018) finding that gamified activities can have a positive effect on learning statistical and math concepts, Yuruk (2019) finding that using Kahoot for foreign language classrooms can provide more permanent learning, improve student success levels, and enhance student interest. Another study by Bernik et al. found that students who took gamified 3D modeling courses achieved greater learning success than students who took a traditional online course (2015). As Hanus & Fox (2015) stated, using games that are more immersive, tailored to students, and have substance are key to improving student learning and motivation, because if the games offered are nothing more than points and badges, students lose the motivation and satisfaction and will even do worse academically.

As gamification has had success in improving academic achievement and student motivation when properly implemented, a large quantity of professors and teachers have tried implementing their own forms of gamification in the classroom. One that has been used before at the high school and the collegiate level are fantasy-sports models for math, social studies, and physical education. As fantasy sports have grown from 19 million to 62.5 million estimated players in 19 years ("Industry demographics", n.d.), this increasing popularity shows the potential of fantasy sports to engage an expanding number of people. As fantasy sports applications encourage learning about their respective sports and an ability for players to learn more about and engage with the sport, there is an opportunity for a gamified learning experience that is more in depth and immersive than badges and leaderboards. And the fact that millions of people play fantasy sports shows how engaging fantasy sports can be as well as the increasing familiarity with fantasy sports. And as fantasy sports demands players to know information about the sport to excel in it, players will tend to absorb information about the sport. If fantasy sports could be applied to a subject that is more commonly taught, then students could be able to be more motivated, have more fun, and learn more about the topic than in a traditional learning environment. As such, there have been teachers that have implemented a fantasy-sports based model to engage students in learning certain educational content.

For example, one teacher used fantasy sports to teach basic algebra, by having students use algebra to calculate real-life fantasy scores. Students interviewed said that they felt more engaged and motivated to learn the material that they needed to graduate high school (Barr, 2006). Additionally, another teacher has used a fantasy-sports model to immerse their students in current events. They taught their students which countries were in the news more than others, and the students would learn information about these countries in current events so that they could excel at the game (Nelson & The Learning Network, 2017). Switching to the collegiate level, some professors have, for example, taught their students American political development through a presidential fantasy draft. One professor has used a fantasy-sports-like draft and allowed their students to trade picks to create a fantasy team that would be ranked among seven different ranking systems including an overall ranking, foreign policy, and margin of electoral college victory (Bridge, 2013). Another professor at Madison University has used fantasy football to teach his sports public relations class. He had his students draft a fantasy team and manage public relations for their fantasy team, which would include different coverage depending on how the team performed from week to week (Woo & Davis, 2015).

While there have been multiple descriptive papers and news articles describing teachers using a fantasy sports model in their classrooms, there has not been a scholarly study on using a fantasy sports-model at either the collegiate or lower levels of education. There have only been descriptive papers about teaching their classes through a fantasy-sports model, but there has not been a research study on how it affects student engagement. As there is a need for more empirical studies to bridge gaps in when gamification work best, its limits, and its key strategies (Dichev et al., 2017), conducting an empirical study about a different type of gamification at the high school level could be a valuable way to bridge a gap in the research. This led me to a research question of "What effect does a fantasy sports model have on high school students' engagement?"

Method

To answer this question, five high school US History classes were chosen to implement a presidential fantasy draft, which is called "fantasy presidents." Teachers assigned students to groups of 5-6 by putting one student whom they knew had played a fantasy sport in each group to ensure that every group would have one person who would be somewhat familiar with the process. Students were then given a handout explaining the process of the draft, what they are asked to do, where they can look for research, and the digital draft board with every president available to be drafted, which was every president from George Washington to Bill Clinton. The draft board was managed by the teachers (see Appendix D for the full student handout).

Table 1. Note. Order of Rounds One and Two, with Examples. From: "Fantasy presidents: A game that makes research more exciting," by D. Bridge, 2015, PS: Political Science and Politics, 48(04), pp. 621-625 (doi.org/10.1017/S1049096515000876). Copyright 2015 by the Cambridge University Press.

Table 1

Order of Rounds One and Two, with Examples

Overall Pick	Team	Draft Pick
	Round One	
1	1	Lincoln
2	2	Washington
3	3	FDR
4	4	Jefferson
	Round Two	
5	4	Reagan
6	3	TR
7	2	Nixon
8	1	Clinton

The draft was conducted in the way that Professor Bridge, an associate professor of political science at Baylor University, described in his paper (Bridge, 2015). As described in Professor Bridge's paper, fantasy presidents will consist of students forming groups to research different presidents, which will be ranked on six different categories: the last four presidents taken by that team, overall, scandal, appointments, foreign policy, and relations with Congress. These categories, out of the multiple suggested by Professor Bridge, were chosen because rankings were easily available to grade the teams. The other categories would have required a presidential scholar to grade them. Presidents were then drafted in a snake draft as shown in Table 1, which consists of the first pick of the first round having the last pick of the second round, and the last pick of the first round having the first pick of the second round. A snake draft is roughly equal for all teams regardless of draft pick position because the way the draft picks are inverted for the second round.

A OneNote page was used as a digital draft board with every available the president's name, and when a president was picked their name was written down in the OneNote page that students had access to so that students could easily figure out which presidents had already been picked, and which ones were available to be picked. Once a president was drafted by one team, they could not be picked by any other team as there can only be one president per team. Each team was given sixty seconds per draft pick to select a president, and if they ran out of time their draft pick would be moved to the end of the draft. After the students drafted their teams, they placed each of their presidents into two categories, out of the four available categories to place their presidents into. Their teams were then graded based on the six categories stated above. These categories were graded through presidential rankings from C-Span, The Wall Street Journal, and Ridings and McIver. These rankings can be found in the student handout in Appendix D. After the draft, students turned in written reflections on the draft itself, answering questions about what they could have done better or justifying certain draft picks they made. The learning mostly happens in research before the draft and the reflection questions after the draft, as the draft itself is to have a "point" to the research and engage students but is not necessarily where the learning happens.

After the draft was over and students turned in their essays, they were given a questionnaire. The questionnaire was primarily made of Likert scales, such as the one used by Metwally et al. (2021). Metwally et al. used Likert scales in their study to gauge the student perception of their intervention. As gaining student perception for this study was needed to measure students' engagement, Likert scales were implemented to help answer the research question. Likert scales are typically on questionnaires and give respondents options, generally from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree." To determine student engagement and motivation, students were asked about whether they have played a fantasy sport before and were then given   3-point Likert scale

asking about their engagement, motivation, phone use, et cetera. The questionnaire given to students can be found in Appendix B.

To determine teacher perception, student engagement, and student motivation for fantasy presidents, I had a semi-structured interview with teachers, such as the one used in Watson et al.'s "A case study of the in-class use of a video game for teaching high school history," (2010). In their study, Watson et al. determined areas of questioning to focus on what they wanted to learn about the teacher. In my study, I focused on an area of questioning to interview the two teachers who ran fantasy presidents in their classes. Interviewing the teachers allowed for a more in-depth look at student engagement and motivation which was not available from surveys alone.

The teacher interviews focused on three of the four factors of student engagement, as shown in Dixson's (2015) paper: skills engagement, emotional engagement, participation engagement, and performance engagement. The teachers signed consent forms (see Appendix A) and were informed of any risks to the study before moving forward. Students were not tested on their knowledge in the research study. Therefore, only skills engagement, emotional engagement, and participation engagement were the main topics of the interview. The semi-structured interviews mostly focused on the skills engagement, emotional engagement, and participation engagement through the teacher's perception of those indicators. The interview questions prepared beforehand can be found in Appendix C. The interviews also focused on the logistics of implementing the draft for the teachers, such as what they would change, what was difficult, or what they liked or disliked. The interviews determined how the teachers saw student engagement and motivation throughout the course of the study, as well as how difficult it is for an average teacher to implement fantasy presidents. Teacher interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word's "transcribe" feature to easily access teacher's answers after the interview. Data will mainly be comprised of the Likert-scale responses from the survey, field notes that I took, and from what the teachers who conducted this study stated in their interviews. Triangulating this data will help determine if the level of student engagement and motivation changed from one of their more "typical" class periods, which will show how fantasy presidents influences student engagement and motivation.

Results

To analyze the survey data, I categorized responses based on the overall percentages for each scale and by how students answered the first question "Have you ever played a fantasy sport?" Categorizing student responses (see Figure 1) by whether they have played a fantasy sport in the past year, whether they have played a fantasy sport but not in the last year, or whether they have never played a fantasy sport allowed me to determine how effective fantasy presidents is on student engagement, especially students who are new to the concept of fantasy sports. As not every student has played a fantasy sport, determining the effect of fantasy presidents on those students is paramount to answering the research question posed. The students who answered "not sure" were not put in any category. Figure 2 shows survey data from all students. 52% stated that they felt engaged "most of the time" during fantasy presidents, compared to 18% stating that they felt engaged "most of the time" during their respective history classes. Note that Figures 1 and 2 do not add up to exactly 100% as percentages were truncated.
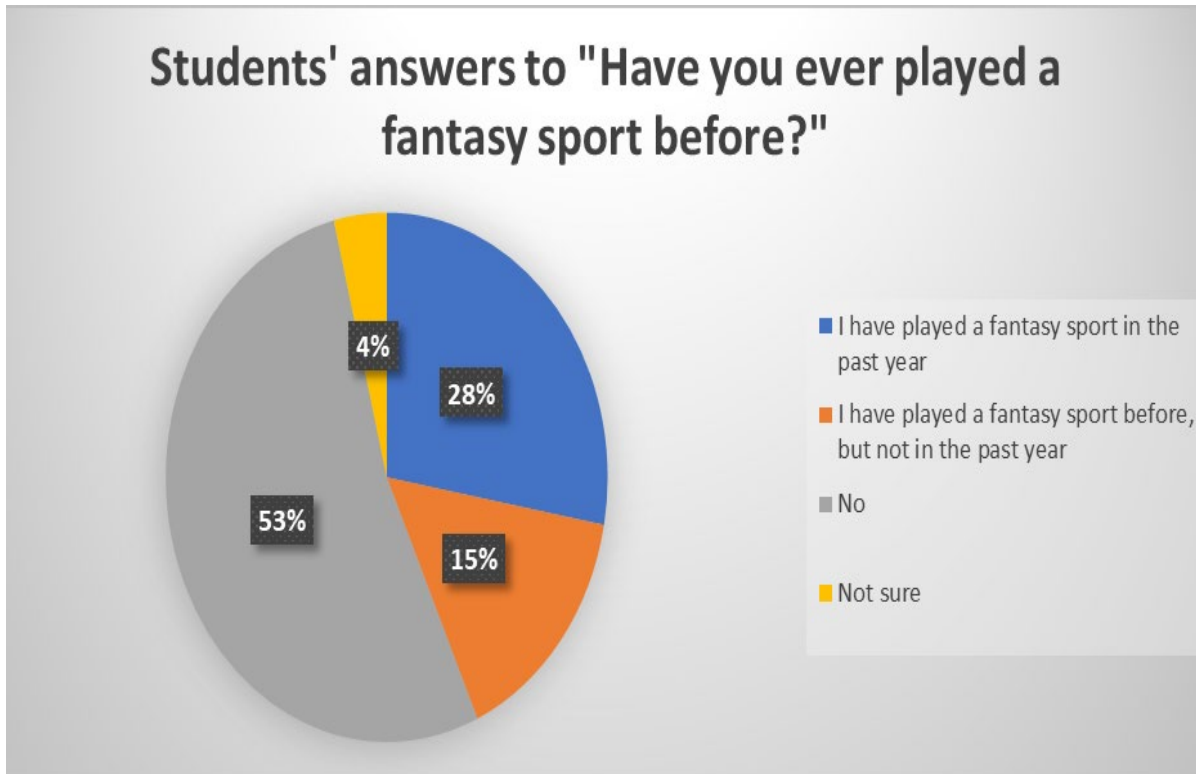
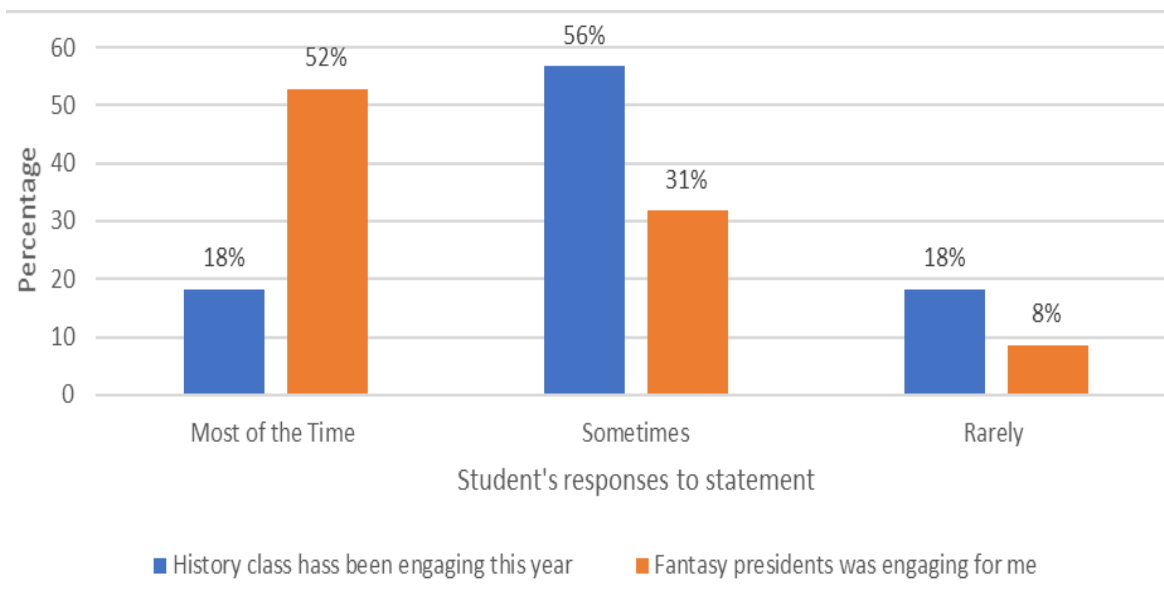**Figure 1.** Students' answers on whether they have played a fantasy sport before.

Figure 2. Likert scale data from all students

Compare this to Figure 3, which shows engagement in students who have not played a fantasy sport. Figure 4 shows the number of students on their phones at different times as observed during one period of a fantasy draft. For example, at 8:30 AM, I counted 2 students on their phones. The drop to 0 students using their

phones was when the draft started at around 8:40, while the rise in phone use was as the draft went on and more and more students started to go on their phones and lose touch with the draft. As only one or two students per group can actively call out draft picks during the draft, the other students can tend to feel lost with what to do, and end up on their phones. While not ideal, most of the learning happens during the research and reflection and not the draft, meaning that the increased phone use is not necessarily a problem in terms of learning. Additionally, that class had 30 students, which means that there were no more than 34% of students on their phones at any one time. However, other aspects of fantasy presidents before the draft had higher engagement, while the draft, which was the gamified part, had lower student engagement as supported by the classroom observations and the teacher interviews.
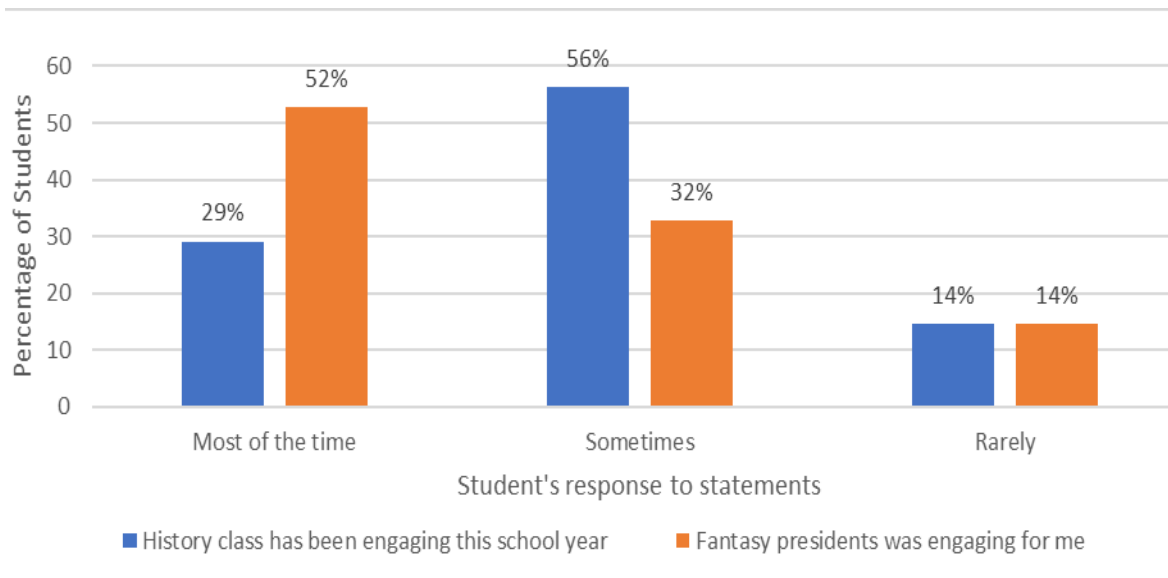

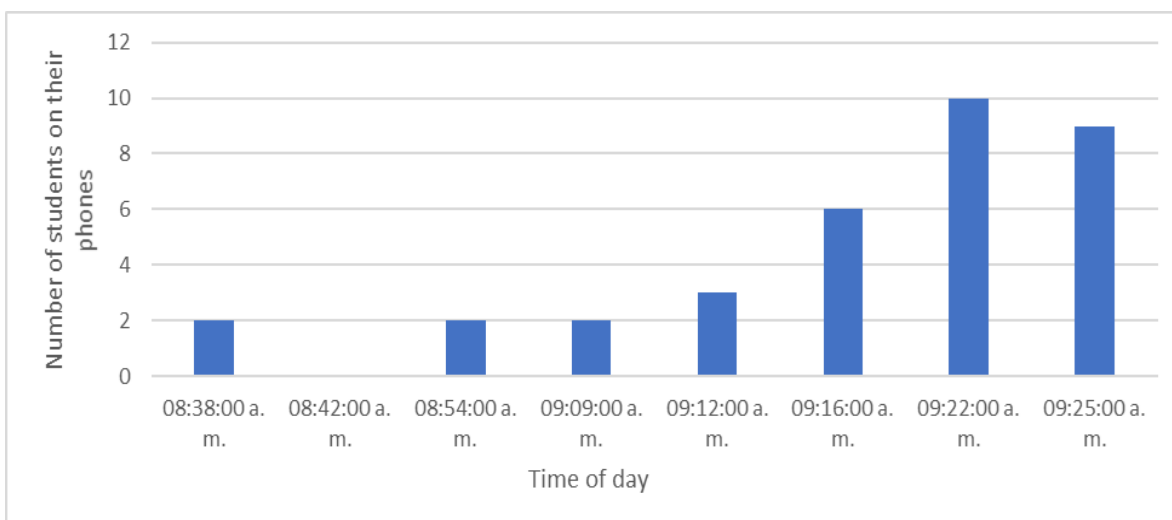**Figure 3.** Likert scale data from students who have not played a fantasy sport.

Figure 4. Classroom observation data of students on their phones

To analyze the interview data, themes were established in the interviews and data was organized by "codes," or subthemes. The themes used were Student engagement, Peer pressure, and Student motivation. These themes allowed the teacher's perspective on student engagement and motivation to be analyzed. For a clear analysis across interviews and survey data, these themes will be analyzed in the discussion section. Teachers will be referred to as "Teacher A" and "Teacher B" in the discussion section.

Discussion

Before moving on to discussing the findings of this study in depth, some limitations must be addressed, such as the group that was studied. Five high school US history classes in Kirkland, WA were part of the study. The median household income in Kirkland, WA is $135,608. Compare this to the median household income of $90,325 in Washington State and $74,580 in the United States of America ("Quickfacts…", n.d.). This is not an insignificant gap in income and as a result, the average classroom in this study was most likely not representative of the average high school classroom in the US. Additionally, as surveys were used on students, this study has limitations on what the students felt about the draft. As only one class was observed and students were not asked about their engagement before the study, students and teachers could remember their engagement or motivation differently than how they felt at the time. Additionally, not every student involved in the study took the survey, meaning that only the experiences of students who took the survey could be analyzed. This means that while the results and findings of this study may not be able to be widely applied, the results can still be a valuable tool for future researchers to build on.

Student Engagement

To start with, Teacher B explained how a student's regular engagement in class influenced how engaged they were during the study. They described how students with moderate engagement and no connection to fantasy sports "did what they had to do," while students with moderate engagement but familiarity with fantasy sports increase. Teacher B also stated that during the research stage of fantasy presidents, they saw increased engagement for most students regardless of their prior familiarity with fantasy sports. Teacher A stated that the students "were definitely more into it than sitting and listening to a lecture or other activities."

On the flip side, Teacher B described the drafting of presidents as leading to lower student engagement, as shown in Chart 4. However, Teacher A stated that "I didn't see much phone use at all during the actual draft." This difference could be due to a difference in classroom policies between the teachers. Phone use in Teacher B's class is shown in Chart 4, where phone use was low at the start of the draft, but started to increase as the draft went on, mainly because it is difficult for 5-6 students in a group to be engaged with the draft as the nature of the draft only allows for one or two students to call out picks, leading to the other students who are less familiar with the draft to become lost or confused, which can then lead to students going on their phones. Lower student engagement during the draft but higher student engagement during the research portion shows that the gamified aspect of fantasy presidents failed to engage students, while the more traditional research aspect, where students learned more, ended up engaging more students. This is an example where the anticipation of the event can lead to more excitement and engagement about the event, while the event itself does not engage students as much. This shows a different side of gamification, where the traditional activity has higher engagement because of the following gamified activity, while the gamified activity itself is not as engaging.

While student engagement was higher during the period in which fantasy presidents took place, it is important to know why student engagement was higher, because knowing why students were more engaged allows for wider ranging applications and an ability to design gamification around aspects that are proven to

increase engagement. Both teachers identified two main factors which drove students' engagement and motivation.

The first factor was competition. There is one winner in fantasy presidents, and teachers felt that competition drove some students to high levels of engagement. Teacher B describes one student who stated that "I am trying so hard on this and I do not even know why." The reason why, as stated by Teacher B, is that the student is competitive in nature and wants to win. Adding on to that, Teacher B described that "they were more engaged with this. They wanted to win, they wanted to have the best team" and "there was a reward out there, but they weren't even 100% sure what that reward was going to look like. They still wanted to win." For some students, the competitive nature of fantasy presidents is what motivates them to win, and in turn increases their engagement throughout the entire process. The reward does not necessarily matter to these students with a competitive nature, and they are instead driven by a need to win, even if the competition may seem meaningless. The aspect of competition engaging students is in line with past studies, such as one by Pettit et al. (2015), where at least 85% of respondents for their gamified approach stated that they enjoyed the friendly competition and were focused on the activity. Another study, when reviewing gamification literature, stated that while there is support for the importance of competition against peers, being challenged by overcoming the game's obstacles and mastering them is what matters most to players (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017). As the game in this study did not necessarily have obstacles, competition was a factor that helped drive student engagement. However, not every student has a competitive nature. For students who tend to be less competitive and do not necessarily care about winning, there was another factor that mainly drove their engagement.

The second factor that teachers identified as driving student engagement was peer pressure. Not every student is competitive in nature and might not care about winning a "meaningless" game. But both teachers identified peer pressure as a major driver of student engagement and motivation. As teacher B describes peer pressure from a student perspective "Like, I'm doing this. I care about it. I need you to also get on board and do your research." Teacher A furthers this by stating that "each person in each group was given a certain amount of presidents they had to research, and I told them [their] group is depending on the research that [they] do for [their] president…Whenever there is group work, you don't want to be the person that doesn't do anything." Teacher A also remarked that there were "the kids who have done fantasy sports before and were really into it…And I think their energy brought in, engaged other students in their groups." Peer pressure was a major motivator for most students who normally would not care about the project. This adds to the findings of a study showing group learning engaging students constructively and interactively (Hodges, 2018). By making fantasy presidents a group activity, only one or two students per group needed to be engaged to bring the rest of their group into the activity.

Both teachers, when referring to student motivation, cited the competition and needing to win as a major driver of student motivation. Teacher A stated that "having a competition like that in class is always fun, like a harmless competition. There were definitely kids who had never done a draft before. They were definitely more into it than sitting and listening to a lecture or other activities." Teacher B also stated that students would not even know why they were so engaged and that it mainly boiled down to the competitive nature of some students and that they wanted to win – even though there was a small extra credit reward, they felt like the activity was still engaging for them not because of the reward, but because the students wanted to win. Teacher A further described that during the draft itself, they did not see much phone usage and instead saw students engaged and even reacting to what was happening during the draft. The main benefit of fantasy presidents on student engagement and motivation was its ability to engage enough students who could then engage other students.

Conclusion

The main findings of this study were that a fantasy sports model does increase student engagement in teaching American political development, and that the main factors driving this increased engagement were peer pressure and competition. This addresses the previously stated gap by adding to the existing literature on gamification by finding the effect of a fantasy sports model, a type of gamification, on student engagement. As this had not been done before, the results in this study have led to a new understanding that a fantasy sports model does increase student engagement in teaching American political development.

In terms of implications of this study, as mentioned before, the students in the five classes at the high school history classes in the study were not necessarily indicative of the average high school student nor the average high school in the US. However, the students studied were students in the mandatory US History classes, and not the Advanced Placement (AP) US History classes. As such, students in the mandatory history class could be more representative of an average group of high school students who do not necessarily care about history or would usually be engaged in a history class. As stated by Watson et al., who utilized a video game to teach history, games can transform classrooms from teacher-centric where students are mostly passive to a learner-centered classroom where students are actively involved in making decisions and interacting with each other (2010). Fantasy presidents had a similar effect on students as students were able to research presidents themselves and were able to actively make decisions and interact with each other. This learner-centric model, focused on group work and students learning together, led to an increase in student engagement in this study, as described by teachers and shown by the students in their survey responses. The results of this study can help teachers introduce an activity with confidence that it will give students an overview of past presidents without requiring students to memorize specific presidents, as well as designing activities that use competition and peer pressure through group work to increase engagement in their students.

Areas for Future Research

The previously stated limitations of this study are areas where future research could improve on. For example, the average income where the study took place is much higher than the rest of the US, which means that the high schoolers in the study were not necessarily indicative of the average high school student in the US. For further research into a fantasy-sports model in history classes, a future researcher could expand on this study by implementing a similar method in a lower-income school, or in a different environment than a suburban town, such as a high school in the city or in rural America. Additionally, a future researcher could implement a fantasy-sports model with a younger age group, to determine whether fantasy presidents would work with a younger age group. Or future researchers could focus on a different method of gamification to expand learner-centric models to science, English, math, or a different class other than history. Another category that was not tested was student's learning as a result of this study. Future research could attempt to assess student learning and add to the past research on the link between engagement and learning, or find new avenues on the effect of student learning as a result of fantasy presidents, which would help bridge a gap in the current research.

Acknowledgments

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