When I first began teaching, I was a 7th grade Language Arts teacher. At the time, I had been steeped in the philosophy of Nancy Atwell and her ideas about teaching reading through a workshop approach. The most powerful aspect of this model was the amount of student choice in literature. Throughout my time teaching, my techniques and strategies for implementing the workshop have evolved. As every teacher knows, differentiating for learners at different levels is one of the most challenging parts of the job. How do we motivate strong students to keep pushing themselves while simultaneously creating opportunities amongst struggling readers? And, the older students get, the harder it is to find high-interest, low-level books that they are not embarrassed to be seen reading. One way that I found to address this complication was through the gamification of choice reading using the Accelerated Reader (AR) computer program and some creative thinking.

Our students today, come to us as digital natives, well-versed in the language and culture of video games and technology. Gamification is the idea that we can apply game design elements to non-game contexts to improve engagement, productivity, and even understanding. Accelerated Reader is a program that allows students to take a short quiz to demonstrate their comprehension of a given book. The best thing about it is that it records the reading data of your class in one, easy-to-see place. Other programs, such as MyOn or Lexia could also be substituted as ways to track student reading and progress. The main thing is to have standardized set of criteria for students to meet. In my case, it the data also tracked the number, length, and level of books students were reading.

I divided my students up into groups according to their reading ability. Some kids needed to earn 12 AR points each month, others 10, and still others, just 8 points. I did not consider this “grouping” in the traditional sense, because I was not instructing them in these groups. Rather the amount of points that any group needed was designed to allow them to participate in the game structure without getting frustrated. And the game structure was where the creative thinking came in.

If students exceeded their expected points in a given month, they would trigger “bonus AR points” which I would add to their score. In this way, students reading for just 8 points could, if they worked hard, earn more points than their counterparts in a more advanced group. This had the benefit of encouraging effort and not ability. In addition to earning bonus points, students could also accrue points to be used toward specific benefits. For example, if they read more than their expected points before the end of the month, they would get an hour of free reading time. I would allow them to opt out of certain direct instruction or group work lessons and instead use the time to sit in a comfortable place and simply read. Another “bonus” was extra library time during which they got to take a personal pass—prearranged with the media specialist—and visit the library independently. Yet another “bonus” involved students earning increasingly comfortable and coveted places to sit in the room. The thing these “bonuses” all had in common was that they acted to encourage more reading and faster point accumulation.

One of the most popular aspects of the gamification was called “leveling up.” “Levelling up” allowed students who read a certain number of points to gain access to a secret shelf of books. The secret book shelf was located behind my desk and covered with black paper. On it were 10 to 20 new and highly-coveted young adult titles, which I rotated frequently. Students would eventually get a sense of what books were on the shelf, but making it a secret was highly engaging and motivating, especially for my strongest readers. They would work hard at earning points in order to gain access to these new books. And, kids who were working hard, even in the 8-point group, would also gain access to the trove which contained graphic novels and high-interest non-fiction.

It was not a perfect system. Occasionally, books would not have tests on AR, and I would have to resort to a book report style write-up. Also, AR points, like everything else, must be moderated carefully to guard against cheating. But, in the end, I found that kids enjoyed the game, and it encouraged them to read at school in a way that simply allowing them time had not. We did not stop reading novels together or studying poetry through song lyrics, but when it came time to read on our own, having something tangible to work toward was a good benefit. Especially when what we were working for was simply more reading!