Playing Around with Literature: Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Middle Grades ELA

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What is a unique characteristic about the protagonist that you recognized?” the teacher asked. Silence from the class. “Was anyone able to make any personal connections?” she prompted. Blank faces stared back at her. “Okay, can anyone tell me something about the story?” After continued silence, one student offered, “I didn’t get it.”

Class discussions like this prompted us to look for new ways to engage middle level students in literature study and to foster meaningful connections with the characters and plots in classroom works of literature. As gaming fans, we were interested in exploring how tabletop role-playing games could fit within the English language arts classroom and promote student learning. Furthering our interest was the fact that there continues to be a significant bit of educational chatter over the pedagogical utility of gaming in the classroom (Alexander, 2009; Apperley & Beavis, 2013; Chess & Booth, 2014). Coupled with the fact that gaming in the ELA classroom and gaming creation as an act of writing have received relatively little discussion, additional consideration is necessary. Thus, we began creating a game specifically designed for this purpose. In this article, we offer teachers our experiences implementing a tabletop role-playing game designed to align with a traditionally taught text—Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game”—in middle school ELA classrooms. We also offer teachers suggestions for writing and implementing their own role-playing games.

To design our game, we adapted the Pathfinder gaming system to facilitate small groups working together to control game characters. Role-playing systems such as Pathfinder are essentially stripped-down mechanics that inform the design and creation of other game types (e.g., board and video). One key benefit in using a role-playing system is that it is adaptable, based on classroom context and student and teacher needs. Simply creating a board game or simulation, for example, would only allow for a single text to be effectively adapted. Modifying a role-playing system creates a framework that can allow for adapting any text into a gaming experience.

Our goal was to create an experience in which students could use collaborative gameplay to foster critical thinking and problem solving, two benefits often discussed by gaming scholars (Harushimana, 2008; Sabatino, 2014). Many of these complex cognitive processes stem from students being required, through gameplay, to negotiate settings, language, meaning, and a variety of social spaces. Additionally, we wanted to use gameplay to expand the ways in which students thought about, discussed, and experienced literature in the classroom.

Designing a Game around a Class Text

We developed our game by paring down the Pathfinder system to only the essential mechanics (e.g., predefined skills, rolling dice to make decisions, collaborating to control characters) and materials (Table 1).

Gaming systems such as Pathfinder can be incredibly complex. For example, Pathfinder has evolved over the years based on player input. The games themselves can shift and adapt during gameplay as a result of player decisions, character interactions, and the gamemaster’s goals. While the complexities are often seen as necessities in the gaming community, we streamlined our game to include a simplified guide and rule system to avoid

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Map</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rule Book &amp; Guide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character Sheets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character Markers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dice*</td>
<td>≈15</td>
<td>≈$10</td>
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*Online random number generators can be substituted for dice.
confusing teachers and students, especially those new to RPGs, and to focus students’ attention on the narrative itself (the story) rather than the intricacies of the game. Noteworthy changes we made to the *Pathfinder* system include the following:

- **Character creation.** We created four stock characters—Warrior, Ranger, Mage, Healer—each with their own strengths and weaknesses based on their characteristics in the *Pathfinder* system. We wanted these to be user friendly and to encourage collaborative efforts. These four characters are standard for most role-playing systems and are the least complicated to control. Including four stock characters allowed us to put students in four groups (for a story with only one protagonist) to promote engagement and collaboration.

- **Combat simplification.** We removed the more complex rules of engagement strategies (e.g., evasion, cover, grappling, resistance) as they are unnecessary for educational use.

- **Open-world modification.** We streamlined character skill and knowledge systems for the classroom to allow students to make gaming decisions without worrying about the wealth of options available in the original *Pathfinder* system.

- **Non-playable characters (NPCs).** Non-playable characters are all those controlled by the gamemaster, in this case the teacher. We created additional characters (Zaroff, Ivan, dogs) who the teacher controls in order to allow more instructional freedom and to provide an additional way to keep the game focused on the narrative. Additionally, NPCs allow the teacher to offset the intrusion of the four new characters into the story—that is, teachers can use the NPCs to ensure all actions and decisions align with the gaming narrative (in this case, "The Most Dangerous Game").

While these modifications drastically simplify the gaming system, other scaffolds are necessary. Role-playing systems take shape predominantly in the imagination of the players, so we found it beneficial to create a map of Shiptrap Island to provide students with a tangible touchstone. Game maps can be created on whiteboards, large sheets of paper, or wherever else and with whatever materials you deem appropriate. As part of our game, we used Microsoft Excel to create a color-coded representation of the island (see Figure 1) and projected it for the class to see. To do this, we pulled information from the short story to create the rocky cliffs (note the shaded areas around the edges of the island), the quicksand (as seen in the area in the southeast corner of the map), Zaroff’s house, trees and vegetation (as noted across the map), and the water surrounding the island. Using a map allowed students to continuously see everyone’s progression through the game, and ultimately Connell’s story, and toward the objectives. In other words, it helped them to envision the world with which they interacted.

To make the game applicable to the ELA curriculum, we created an interactive narrative based on Connell’s story including all gaming documents—for example, character sheets for the four characters controlled by students and for the NPCs controlled by the teacher/gamemaster. Each character sheet includes all information relevant to that character and provides students with the information necessary to take on the role of that character and to make collaborative decisions toward accomplishing their objectives. See Figure 2 for the Warrior’s character sheet.

The bonus numbers on the character sheets help determine the outcome of actions in the game and correlate to each character’s traits. For example, the Warrior is a fighter, so the bonus numbers in the categories related to fighting are relatively high. The four individual characters were designed to balance the group as a whole. While the Warrior is battle ready, the Healer is more of a scholar and diplomat. Each Skill, Knowledge,
and Ability set is assigned specific point values and distributed differently for each character based on that character's role in the party (e.g., the Warrior is strong, but the Healer is smart). One example of this working in our game is if the character sheet lists a speed of 20, they can move a total of four squares—one square equals five feet on the map. The higher value numbers on each character sheet function in direct relation to the strengths of each character and the lower values align with their weaknesses.

The character sheets we used are somewhat complex, but teachers can pare these down to only those characteristics they are interested in providing their students. One way a teacher could do this would be to limit the students controlling the Warrior (Figure 2) to three skills—diplomacy (talking to others), perception (awareness of surroundings), and stealth (the ability to move undetected)—and one knowledge trait (e.g., geography). Likewise, teachers can simplify the character sheets and the game by limiting the abilities and equipment that accompany a given character. On the Warrior's character sheet, teachers could reduce the number of abilities (e.g., include only strength and wisdom) and equipment (e.g., allow only a longsword and shield rather than the full list).

Figure 3 shows the character sheet for General Zaroff, an NPC, controlled by the teacher. The sheet provides a description of the character, a list of the weapons and equipment he carries, and important information about his speed, range of attack, health, and ability to injure other characters. This information helps students make informed decisions as they progress through the game and the narrative.

The entirety of our system's guide, character sheets, templates, and sample videos are available online (https://goo.gl/Rxv5l8) to assist teachers in preparing for implementation before taking the game into the classroom.

**Composing Games:**

**Teachers as Writers**

Designing a classroom game fits well within our understanding of the importance of teacher-as-writer because composing games is writing. In fact, scholars have argued that game design is equivalent to the process of writing in a variety...
of ways, including fostering engagement, awareness of audience, and problem solving (see, for example, Hsu & Wang, 2010; Sabatino, 2014). Composing games can also foster transferable writing skills, such as logical and creative thinking, storytelling, and approaches to a variety of rhetorical situations. Not only does the act of composing games allow teachers to engage and grow as writers, but it also creates powerful opportunities for them to model writing for students, a vital component in writing instruction.

We have found the process of game composition to be important to our growth as thinkers, as writers, and as teachers of writing. For us, gaming, and specifically gaming in the classroom, has created new spaces to think about the myriad roles writing plays in our lives as educators and as fully literate citizens. Ultimately, finding new ways to enter the writing process helps us, and more importantly, our students, to continue expanding their understanding of what writing is and the ways in which authentic writing can take shape.

Implementing the Game to Foster Learning about Literature

We encourage teachers to allow adequate time for students to fully engage in the gaming experience, especially given that many students (and teachers) may have limited previous experience with role-playing games. In fact, we created a unit (short story, gameplay, writing activities, and discussion) that spanned twelve days (see Figure 4 for a breakdown of classroom instruction).

We took six class periods to teach the short story and to engage students in a variety of instructional activities. One class period was used to familiarize students with the game mechanics. We used three class periods to play the game. The final two classes were used for debriefing (one for reflective writing and one for class discussion). While the twelve-day unit worked well for us, teachers may be hesitant to set aside twelve days of class instruction for this. As such, teachers can adjust the timeline to fit their classroom needs. For example, teachers could shorten the days of the short-story instruction and/or shorten the game to one or two days. They could also limit the debriefing to one day or have students complete the writing for homework. It is also important to note that once both the teacher and the students are familiar with the game, the time required for implementation will be greatly reduced.

We believe the game offers the most benefit after students read the text. After reading and engaging with the story, the game allows students opportunities to take those experiences further by entering the story and applying their experiences during gameplay. In other words, we feel that gameplay after reading allows students to become more active throughout the unit. Another benefit of the game is that it can foster empathetic relation to texts, an important goal of literature in general. By entering into the story-world after reading the text, students can go beyond vicarious interaction to active, personal interaction and begin to make strong, empathetic connections to the characters, the setting, and the scenes that make up the plot line.

Because of these benefits, we encourage teachers to first provide adequate time for instruction on the text of interest (for us, “The Most Dangerous Game”). It is also useful to take the necessary time to familiarize students with the game mechanics. It is important that teachers familiarize themselves with the game prior to

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**Figure 4. Short Story Instruction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher used a variety of strategies:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Small group and whole class discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Graphic organizers</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Free-writes</td>
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<td>• Journal entries</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students read the story in three sections:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Read first section as a class, so teacher could model annotation strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Read sections two and three in small groups—read, discussed, and collaboratively completed activities</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Teacher provided students an audio version of the text (using iPads and headphones):</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Students could move back and forth between text versions</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Six class sessions were organized in the same way:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Journal prompt (online, using Google Classroom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Class discussion to establish collaborative learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Small group reading and activities</td>
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introducing it to students. The easiest way to do this is to play, whether with a group of avid gamers (students may prove quite helpful with this) or with colleagues who are equally interested in experiencing and learning about tabletop RPGs. Additionally, there are a wealth of videos available online (including the tutorial videos we offer on our website, https://goo.gl/Rxv5I8) that demonstrate the various aspects of role-playing game mechanics.

While introducing students to the game can be done in a variety of ways, we made the decision to dedicate one class period to modeling for and walking students through the stages of the game. The biggest differences between the two stages are the turn-based mechanics and gaming rules and protocol. The Open World stage generally involves planning, exploring, and decision making. For example, characters (i.e., students) can explore the map and/or collaborate to make decisions (e.g., a student may suggest speaking to another character before making the decision to attack). The Initiative stage, by contrast, is a more concrete, turn-based experience (thus, the “roll for initiative” function). Once in the Initiative stage, students are required to act and make decisions in accordance to the game rules and do not have the freedom to explore and experiment they had in the Open World stage.

To do this, we selected student volunteers to lead one of the game characters through a series of actions—character movement, skill and knowledge checks, and a brief combat scenario—all intended to illustrate to students how the Initiative stage works. In the Open World stage, students were provided time to explore the game map, interact with other characters, and get a feel for the role-playing experience.

Running a Game with Students

Because there are a limited number of characters in the game, and because one potential benefit of role-playing gaming in the classroom is collaboration, this is an opportunity for teachers to put students in small groups (we suggest four or five students per group, depending on class size). When grouping students, we were interested in including them in the process, so we surveyed students to rank their preference of characters (e.g., Warrior, Ranger, Mage, Healer) and used those responses to strategically place students in groups (every effort was made to give students one of their top two choices). To foster collaboration and discussion, students can sit around tables or with desks turned to face one another. This seating arrangement was already in place when we joined the classroom, so the transition was smooth. Throughout the game, groups of students work together to control characters and to make all gaming decisions. In our experience, we found that students used the group experience to engage in meaningful collaboration, both in their small groups and across the class as a whole, and to achieve the objectives (see Figure 5 for samples of student and teacher responses about collaboration).

Prior to beginning the game, it is vital to provide students with the gaming objectives (similar to unit goals or essential questions). This drives the decisions they make and serves as a constant reminder that they are interacting with the class text and that their decisions should align with the text itself. We would encourage teachers to develop their own goals and objectives that best fit their purposes. Those we provided to students include the following:

1. Rumors spread that numerous men have gone missing on the island. Learn as much as you can about the island and its inhabitants, namely General Zaroff.

2. Survive for three days and four nights on the island.

Figure 5. Sample Responses about Collaboration

Student: “Our character provided knowledge for other characters.”

Student: “My character stayed with the group wherever they went because I was the healer, the support player.”

Student: “We were all into the game and cared about what other groups had to say.”

Teacher: “By the end of the game, students were all competing together instead of against each other.”
3. If you learn the cause for the rumors of men going missing, do everything in your power to stop the disappearances from continuing.

As gamemaster, the teacher is responsible for preparing for and facilitating the gaming experience. This begins by reading an introductory narrative to the class, which can be as simple or detailed as the teacher chooses. Moreover, it can be generated by the teacher or simply read from the text being studied. The purpose here is to establish setting, purpose, and context. In our game, we wrote and read a paraphrased introduction to Shiptrap Island as a way to help our students begin to think like Rainsford after being shipwrecked in a mysterious place:

After your ship capsized, you awake on the shoreline of Shiptrap Island. It is almost pitch black and difficult to see your surroundings, but you hear the waves crashing against the sharp rocks all around you. The air is humid and heavy as you suddenly recall hearing three gunshots from the island before you fell unconscious.

Before allowing students to make their first moves or choices, we encourage teachers to provide each group two to three minutes to strategize. Once the game has begun, we suggest providing each group thirty seconds to discuss each turn and to determine what they want to do (e.g., move, climb, hide, fight, talk to other characters). Once they make a choice, they either move or roll the twenty-sided die for a skill or knowledge check. A group’s ability to complete this action is determined by the teacher, who will have a required number for each move as part of the gaming documents. For example, if students want to ask a question, the required number could be low, but if they want to perform an acrobatic feat such as flipping out of a tree to surprise attack Zaroff, the number would be quite high. These thresholds and whether or not students are allowed to proceed are completely up to the teacher and how efficiently and quickly they want the game to progress or how radically a student request would impact the story. In other words, the teacher has ultimate control to keep groups within the story line and to ensure that thought and discussion go into every decision.

Lastly, it is important for teachers to keep notes, especially of where each class ends, so they can seamlessly pick back up in the next class period. This could take the shape of written notes, a photograph of an actual game map, or saving images on an electronic game map. We, for example, created a map using Microsoft Excel and were able to save a version for each class. It also allowed us to utilize technology rather than concrete game pieces or more abstract mental representations.

Debriefing After the Game

In our implementation of the game, we provided one day for students to respond in writing to reflection prompts and a second day for follow-up discussion. Here, we wanted—and we would encourage all teachers to consider how—to create meaningful opportunities for students to engage in metacognitive reflection. To this end, we offer our three prompts.

1. How did your previous knowledge of the story influence the decisions you made during the game? Be sure to include specific differences, using textual evidence as support.

2. How did your specific character contribute to or deter other groups from accomplishing the objectives? Why did your group make these choices?

3. In what ways did playing the game impact your understanding of the story?

Given the collaborative nature of the game, it can also be quite useful to allow students to debrief and reflect in a similar way through class discussion. Likewise, this provides the teacher with opportunities to ask prompting questions to help students elaborate and engage in further thought (e.g., Can you tell us more about that? Did anyone have a similar experience? What about a different experience?). As we pointed out in the opening vignette, many students struggle to connect to, and thus comprehend, the stories they read in class, especially if they have difficulty making personal connections to those texts. The game quite literally puts students in the text, thus giving them the experience (e.g., background knowledge and schema) to draw from during collaborative conversations and class discussions. The discussions that accompany this game, both during gameplay and as part of debriefing, allow students to make, strengthen, and articulate personal connections to the characters, themes, and plot of a story.

Impact of Gameplay

Ultimately, we feel role-playing games can positively impact student learning. In our experience, the students and the teacher enjoyed it. More importantly, we were able to watch students work together to solve problems
and make complex decisions that demonstrated an understanding of the short story. Two specific benefits emerged from our observations and the debriefing sessions. First, throughout gameplay, students made decisions that were informed by the story. They made clear connections between the story and the game and used those as a lens through which to view and interact with the story (see Figure 6). Second, students used gameplay to become their character. That is, they effectively took on the role of the character through the process and used gameplay to vicariously experience the story by putting themselves in the place of the characters: thinking like they think, making decisions they would make, working toward equivalent resolution, etc. See Figure 7 for sample student and teacher comments.

Conclusion

Based on our experience with tabletop role-playing games, we encourage ELA teachers to consider implementing gaming in their classrooms as a useful component of literature study. The benefits we describe—making decisions informed by the story and using gameplay to become the characters—represent powerful learning affordances, including helping students interact with literature in new and layered ways. Through gameplay, students can begin to recognize relationships across texts, the game, and their writing. Furthermore, structuring the game around the story can foster a deeper understanding of the sequence of events in the story itself. Finally, pairing gameplay with literature study can foster an improved sense of community by requiring small groups and the whole class to debate strategies, to think through their moves, to evaluate all options, and to actively contribute to their learning. All that said, it is vital that teachers take the time to familiarize themselves with role-playing games by reading about, utilizing resources for, and engaging in gameplay. In other words, teachers must put themselves in the place of their students before attempting classroom implementation. This allows teachers to better understand role-playing systems and mechanics by experiencing it themselves, to better anticipate the areas in which students may struggle and how to best design scaffolds into gameplay.

One way to scaffold students as they learn to interact with a game such as this one is to pare down the protocol and mechanics even further. For example, teachers can provide students with more specific options. This could take the form of providing each group with a list of possible moves and actions from which to choose. While this narrows the focus, it can help to use class time

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**Figure 6. Sample Comments on Making Decisions Informed by the Story**

Student: “Well since we had to read the story before we even played the game, we knew what to do. For example, when in the story Ivan got trapped, we knew we should set a few traps.”

Student: “I was impressed by the students who started building traps, even though we didn't necessarily tell them they could do that, because that is what Rainsford did in the story. They also knew to be suspicious of Ivan and Zaroff.”

Teacher: “I was impressed by the students who started building traps, even though we didn't necessarily tell them they could do that, because that is what Rainsford did in the story. They also knew to be suspicious of Ivan and Zaroff.”

**Figure 7. Sample Comments on Becoming the Character**

Student: “I got to be the person, so I got it from their perspective.”

Student: “I was in their shoes, so I got to understand the stress.”

Teacher: “The game allowed them to picture themselves as Rainsford and relate to the characters more deeply.”
more efficiently. Another way to help students focus on fewer options is to begin narrow and then expand with experience. For each group’s first character action, the teacher can offer a list of three options (e.g., survival, diplomacy, perception) and expand the options as the game progresses. This could help guide students (and the teacher) by keeping the game within user-friendly parameters.

Aside from the direct benefits to students, composing games is also beneficial to teachers. Because game composition is, in fact, writing, creating these classroom games provides teachers additional opportunities to be writers and to engage in the writing process. Moreover, the act of writing games for classroom purposes is visible to students and allows teachers to model especially nontraditional types of writing for their students, to openly acknowledge and value a wide variety of reasons for and ways of writing, and to create a classroom community of writers.

It is important to keep in mind that this role-playing system can be adapted to fit many classroom texts. While all literature is not as combat oriented as “The Most Dangerous Game,” students can still reap the benefits by being placed in open-world experiences (e.g., Romeo trying to convince the Friar to help him marry Juliet). Additionally, the gaming experience could just as easily function as a means of simulating an experience students read about: the difficulty in gathering information, making deductions, hiding from other characters, or any other common theme in classroom literature. Utilizing only the Open World stage of the game can engage students just as fully as the Initiative stage, as these interactions are far more reliant on word choice and critical thinking.

It is also important for teachers to gain experience running role-playing games. Perhaps the best way for teachers to gain this experience is to regularly implement gaming in their classrooms in a variety of ways. Teachers may, for example, choose to start small (i.e., quick games with minimal objectives that last only a few minutes) and gradually build in time, objectives, and complexity. One example of a short gaming experience could be to place students in the role of Fortunato in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” and require them to engage in open-world discussion with Montresor to determine how he offended him. This role-playing experience could be implemented in small groups and completed in a few minutes. Using the same short story as an example, a slightly more complex version of the game could ask students to go beyond simply questioning Montresor to actively trying to prevent Fortunato’s imprisonment in the end. Our goal here is to help teachers see that there are myriad possibilities for implementing role-playing games in the ELA classroom, whether in short, single-objective games or longer, more complex versions similar to our experience shared here. Regardless of the implementation choices teachers make, tabletop role-playing gaming offers a number of possible benefits to student learning.

References


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