

Role-Playing Games as a Structure for Teaching Art

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### **Action Research Brief**

Creative problem solving skills prepare students to address problems that do not yet exist. Role playing games (RPGs) such as Dungeons and Dragons engage participants in teamwork, creative strategy, and world building. Creating and assuming the identity of a character allows participants to break a bit from self and navigate an adventure by acquiring and developing skills. Imagination comes into play throughout this process to alter the path each team takes. This action research project proposes to investigate how a structure derived from RPGs can be used to initiate the creative process and encourage dialogues about artists, artwork, and art processes.

Art 1 students (grades 9-12) will be divided into groups of 4-5 and participate in a campaign (game) over the course of five weeks of class. The campaign will be introduced by inviting students to solve a mystery of stolen artwork. The content being introduced will serve as clues. Students will work in small groups to recover the stolen artwork, having assumed the identities of characters they have created. Each character has an individual skill set that the student must determine how to use. The campaign will be woven into the structure of the Art 1 curriculum, as students review the Elements of Art and the Principles of Design and are introduced to new content related to the watercolor medium (materials, processes, vocabulary, and art history). Students will be assessed from quizzes, written responses, a journal, art samples, and participation throughout the game and in a final critique. The aim of this project is to use the engaging format of an RPG to present art content and allow them to practice new skills and use obtained knowledge as participants in the growing narrative of the game. Students will be challenged to actively demonstrate knowledge in building strategies to accomplish tasks and follow clues directed by the RPG structure. New characters will be introduced and groups will have to decide how they want to interact with them and what questions they would like to ask

towards solving the mystery. In following the RPG structure students will also roll dice to determine the success of their actions. Both students and the instructor will assess the success of student work and the format of the unit as a means for crafting a safe environment for students to exercise creativity and engage in conversations about art.

**Action Research Question:**

How can role-playing games (RPGs) be used as a structure for initiating the creative process and encouraging dialogue about art?

**Sub-questions:**

- 1.How can using the structure of an RPG help students become more confident in using the language of the arts?
- 2.How does assuming the identity of a character change students' creative confidence and level of comfort in trying new art materials and processes?
- 3.Do students retain more art content when actively learning through the structure of an RPG?

### Literature Review

Games have been a social agent dating back to ancient history (citation). We often play games in low-stress environments with friends and family, and they call upon skills we use in our daily lives without so much pressure. Role-Playing Games (RPGs) emerged with the publications of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) in 1974. W.A. Hawkes-Robinson of the RPG Research project writes, “In the thirty five years since the inception of role playing games, the studies have just reached the tip of the iceberg, the potential benefits indicated so far, seem to hint at something that could be very beneficial to many populations in the next thirty years of research” (2008). Along the same lines as banned books, a stigma rose around RPGs in the 1980s as their fantastical nature caught the attention of religious groups, which found the game demonic. However, as games are gaining popularity as educational tools, RPGs, less stigmatized today, are becoming the subject of educational and therapeutic studies.

“Role playing games are cooperative, improvisational, structured, and free form interactive stories that take place in the participants' imagination, usually seated around a table and using paper and pencil to keep track of events and persona of note” (Hawkes-Robinson, 2008). The free form nature of the campaigns (games), much like a choose your own adventure story, open up the potential for integrating just about any subject or setting into the narrative. Participants assume the role of characters, usually created using a template. The character’s skill levels, and the success of their actions are often determined by rolling dice. “This constant use variables means participants will frequently be immersed in mathematics, statistical analysis and algebraic calculations” (Hawkes-Robinson, 2008).

While a character has specific skill sets, the participant's knowledge base makes the character even stronger—"they are often inspired to learn to research in specific areas of knowledge such as history, language, politics, demographics, craftsmanship, geography, sciences, literature, and many other aspects that they feel will enhance their experience in future game sessions" (Hawkes-Robinson, 2008). Say more here about what this means for your project. Direct quotes should not speak for themselves, but should be explained by you (the writer).

What makes RPGs like D&D different from many competitive games are the aspects of teamwork and collaboration. Participants are typically working together, with one group member serving as a narrator and acting the roles of characters in opposition with the group. "Participants frequently develop life long friendships, and others learn to work with people they normally would have nothing else in common with" (Hawkes-Robinson, 2008). One participant's success is dependent on how well the team can work together "a well-designed game not only facilitates listening but demands it" (Tietel, 1998). Games usually take place in someone's home, or at a comfortable location. There is a certain safety that allows players to take risks, get creative and be open to becoming part of the narrative. They are happening "at a time of day when there's less outside pressure that might be inhibiting--and by imposing a structure or protocol on the interaction to take place, a structure that removes the often-paralyzing onus of social improvisation from the players" (Teitel, 1998). The uninhibited player stands to benefit from using their imagination as much as possible. As children we pretend and play games all of the time. Adults and teenagers become more guarded under the fear of being judged.

In an article for Psychology Today (1998) Teitel wrote,

*The more we became immersed in the world of games, the more we realized that games weren't simply revealing and therapeutic by nature; they were terrific tools for informing people about themselves, for getting them back in touch with the world of pure play and even for civilizing them.*

As we get older we become less creatively engaged with ourselves, and often less creatively engaged in the work we do and the way we learn (Teitel, 1998). He continued by highlighting that the most important thing about games is that they “reopen doors into the world of pretending and childhood, reminding us of unadulterated fun, sparking creativity” (Tietel, 1998). The creative process is not a foreign phenomenon. As we grow older we fall out of practice, and become hesitant to engage. However, once re-opened to our imaginations, games that draw heavily on our creativity and improvisational skills have the potential to serve as a learning experience.

The Teaching website at UNSW Australia offers a guide on the benefits of using Role-Playing Games as Assessments:

*They alter the power ratios in teaching and learning relationships between students and educators, as students learn through their explorations and the viewpoints of the character or personality they are articulating in the environment. This student-centered space can enable learner-oriented assessment, where the design of the task is created for active student learning. Students are actively involved in both self and peer assessment and obtain sustainable formative feedback.*

Role-Playing games can simulate an authentic learning experience. Students are applying knowledge as though it is a tool in navigating a situation. Students must be reflective about their decisions and how they are using their skills in order to best navigate future scenarios. Students

do not feel like they are being assessed because they are actively applying knowledge as they are given “opportunities to see how tacit knowledge can be made explicit.” Along the way each participant is not singularly accountable, but is part of a team and must clearly communicate with peers and the instructor. As the students develop skills, new scenarios can level up to more challenging content. “Scenarios can be scaffolded, gradually increasing in complexity to ensure that students reach a sufficient level of competence.” Role-playing games necessitate that skills are developed and practice before a character may advance. Students are motivated to learn because they want to find out what happens next (UNSW, 2015).

Studies on the use of RPGs in education focus on learning the English language. When developing vocabulary “learners should participate in different task-based activities in their classroom” (Tuan, 2012, p. 260). Role-playing games put new knowledge into practice in a low-risk environment— after all it is a game. “If learners see or use a word in a way different from the way they first met it, then better learning is achieved.” (p. 263). Students must have at least sixteen exposures to new vocabulary before they can retain it (p.261). The scenarios of RPGs have the potential to be structured in a way that allows students to revisit content until they have mastered it. Games can be memorable and motivating stimuli for learning new content (p.263).

Armann Halldorsson, a teacher in Iceland, wrote about his own research and trial and error in bringing RPGs into the classroom. He commented on the nerd culture of games like D&D and how “they provide opportunities for opening up otherwise shy, and possibly awkward people.” Armann muses on the idea of using RPGs to teach literature, having students create character sheets from the characters in novels, causing them to look closer at them. He explains how he vaguely introduced the idea into his classroom. He describes the experience as chaotic, but very engaging for some groups. In a post-lesson survey a student responded about feeling

confused throughout the whole episode. Armann walked away from the experience with an understanding that he needed to prepare better for the structure to work in the classroom and that he needed to spend more focused class time on it (2012).

Literature and studies on implementing RPGs in the classroom are limited. However, what information does exist suggests that there is a lot of potential to be mined. The instructor must be prepared and present the campaign with a high level of focus in order to successfully help students develop an understanding of the content that is being presented. RPGs engage all of the benefits of problem-based learning, and allow students to practice new skills and knowledge in a social environment, consequently furthering their communication skills. As research on this topic continues to grow RPGs may take a greater hold in the classroom.

### References

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**Data Collection Tools**

Sub Questions	Source One	Source Two	Source Three
<p>#1 How can using the structure of an RPG help students become more confident in using the language of the arts?</p>	<p>Journal kept during game:  Students will be required to keep a journal during the campaign from the perspective of their character. The journal will note all new content covered in class (vocab, artists, techniques), and clues retrieved, and map locations visited as part of the narrative. Students will also respond to occasional short writing prompts related to terms covered in class and creative prompts related to the narrative of the campaign.</p> <p>Appendix A</p>	<p>Participation in Critiques:  Students will participate in small group critiques as they create artwork using new materials and techniques. There will be a whole-class final critique at the conclusion of the unit.</p> <p>Appendix B</p>	<p>Final Essay:  Students will complete a 5-paragraph essay describing their final art piece for the unit in detail, citing the use of techniques, Elements and Principles.</p> <p>Appendix C</p>
<p>#2 How does assuming the identity of a character change students' creative confidence and level of comfort in trying new art materials and processes?</p>	<p>Journal kept during game: See above</p> <p>Appendix A</p>	<p>Art Samples:  Students will create art samples at various stages of the campaign to demonstrate use of new skills. Students will each create a final piece of art for the unit demonstrating mastery of the techniques and materials learned during the unit.</p>	<p>Student Survey  Students will take a survey in response to their creative abilities at the beginning and end of the unit.</p> <p>Appendix D</p>



### **Anticipated Obstacles and Opportunities**

For the duration of this project, student will be working in teams of 4-5. This may present challenges for students that don't work well with others, but will provide an opportunity for those students to become better team members and develop communication skills. Group work can sometimes allow unmotivated students to take the backseat and allow their peers to carry the workload. I will have to monitor each group and develop a system that makes all group members accountable. Students may struggle in dividing up the workload, so some suggestions may need to be made about delegating tasks. I would like to see all students take on roles that complement their strengths and through working with a team be able to gain tools for combating weaknesses.

While some students may take easily to the idea to assuming the role of a character, and developing that character, I anticipate resistance from some students. Clear examples should be provided to initiate the process. There may be a need to develop some loosely premade characters for students to build off of. Some students at the high school level may be resistant to being imaginative, ice-breaker activities in the form of bell ringers may help students loosen up, as well as improve games. Students lacking creative confidence will be given an open environment to develop. I hope for those who take more readily to creative assignments to emerge as leaders and help classmates. This unit will involve a solid amount of writing. This will be a challenge for students struggling with literacy skills. Appropriate aids and support must be provided to help struggling writers.

Sometimes when games are used for educational purposes the objectives get lost in the playfulness. The game aspect will likely engage and excite students, but they must stay focused. Otherwise, the art content will end up watered-down. If used appropriately, the RPG structure

will allow students to experience and learn art context through a different lens. It may enhance student engagement and result in greater creative confidence and a mastery of the material being presented.

**Time Line - Art 1 - 3rd Quarter****Week 1**

- Analyze student data from 1st and 2nd quarter
- Students take beginning survey about creative abilities
- Introduce RPGs and basic structure of the campaign we will follow
- Students fill out Character Sheet
- Students begin keeping journal as character during campaign
- Introduce watercolor techniques and history
- Students complete watercolor sampler

**Week 2**

- Quiz over watercolor techniques
- Introduce leg 1 of campaign
- Students complete art sample #1

**Week 3**

- Introduce leg 2 of campaign
- Students complete art sample #2

**Week 4**

- Introduce leg 3 of campaign
- Quiz over vocabulary and history
- Work on final art piece
- Small-group in-progress critique

**Week 5**

- Introduce concluding leg of campaign

- Complete final art piece
- Final Critique
- Student survey

**Appendices**

**Appendix A**

**List of things to include in journal**

- Vocabulary
- Techniques
- Information about character
- Information about group
- Location visited during campaign
- Clues
- Characters met during campaign
- Artists/art history covered in class
- Sketches and memos
- Important dates
- Writing and creative prompts
- Strategy notes
- Questions

**Appendix B**

**Critique Participation**

<b>Not Yet.</b>	<b>Yes, But...</b>	<b>Yes!</b>	<b>Yes, and...</b>
Student did not participate in critique	Student made at least one comment but did not connect comments to newly covered content.	Student made multiple comments that demonstrate an understanding of 1-3 items covered in class.	Student made multiple comments that demonstrate a clear understanding of 4-6 items covered in class.

**Appendix C**

**Final Essay**

<b>Not Yet.</b>	<b>Yes, But...</b>	<b>Yes!</b>	<b>Yes, and...</b>
Essay is incomplete.	Essay cites the use of 1-4 Elements and 0-2 Principles in the artwork. Student uses 1-4 new vocabulary words.	Essay demonstrates a clear understanding of at least 5 Elements of Art and 3 Principles of Design, and content covered during this unit in great detail, using at least 5 new vocabulary words.	Essay demonstrates a clear understanding of 5 or more Elements of Art and 3 or more Principles of Design, and content covered during this unit in great detail, using 5 or more new vocabulary words.

**Appendix D**

**Student Survey**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD \_\_\_\_\_

**Rank your agreement with the following statements. You may use the space in the boxes to further explain your response.**

	1 Completely Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Somewhat Agree	4 Agree	5 Completely Agree
I can easily sit down and start drawing or creating artwork with little guidance.					
I believe in my ability to learn and use new art techniques and to work with new materials					
Things I see and experience in my daily life inspire me to make art.					
I am interested in using art to express my ideas and respond to things.					