Implementing Tabletop Gaming in the English Classroom:

Promoting Literacy through Interactive Gameplay

by Mike P. Cook, PhD, Ryan Morgan, and Matthew Gremo

Introduction

Table-top gaming, at its core, is simply a term used to refer to any social game that is traditionally played in person around a table. Over the years, the term itself has become an umbrella for all forms of board games, but in gaming culture it is most commonly applied as a label for various role-playing systems. While the concept of a role-playing system may seem like a rather complex idea to fully comprehend, it can most easily be explained as a traditional game that has been stripped of all of its fluff and niceties in order to exist as a system of bare-boned mechanics, which govern gameplay. The entire history of the characters within the game, as well as the entire story and how those characters interact with it, is created and executed by the players themselves while operating within this system of overarching rules and mechanics.

The onset and initial popularity of roleplaying systems can most easily be traced back to the 1974 publication of the original *Dungeons & Dragons.* Since the inception of the original *D&D,* however, a myriad other systems have spawned under the same guiding principal of creating the structure by which players could relate and interact with their own stories. One of the most popular of these systems was released by Paizo Publishing in 2009 under the title *Pathfinder.* While the system itself was a fairly direct reflection of one of the many modern versions of *D&D*, it varied in two very important ways. First, the system itself is more accessible, as some of the more complex and troublesome mechanics of the original *D&D* systems have been stripped in order to facilitate more streamlined gameplay. Second, and perhaps most important, *Pathfinder* offered free digital publication of all of its materials. While

Paizo did, and still does, publish vast tomes of rules and mechanics for the *Pathfinder* system—

in the same vein as *D&D*—all of the materials are available for free online to any player

interested in engaging with the system. Because of these two very important differences, the

Pathfinder system became the springboard by which our new roleplaying system could be

created and implemented in the ELA classroom.

Literature Review

Throughout the previous two decades, the impact of gaming in education has received

much discussion and attention. As a result, teachers now have more opportunities than ever to

incorporate games into their classrooms and curricula. Moreover, the advent of gaming in

outside-of-school spaces has led to many young people engaging in game play in their own lives.

Because of this, it becomes important to further examine potential connections between popular

games and their pedagogical utility. While a review of the literature suggests that this is nothing

new, additional instructional suggestions and uses can lead to a more comprehensive

understanding of games in school and a more robust list for classroom implementation.

Games

By their very nature, games act as communicative activities where users experiment with

and learn ways to effectively use language. Supporting this notion, Dickey found that games are

narrative-based and support narrative design. Defining games, Klopfer, Osterweil, and Salen

stated that they target "the acquisition of knowledge as its own end and foster habits of mind and

understanding that are generally useful or useful within an academic context" (21). Adding to

this definition, Juul posited that games have six features: 1) formal, rule-based systems; 2)

outcomes that are both variable and quantifiable; 3) assigned values for a variety of outcomes; 4)

an outcome that is influenced by effort; 5) players who are emotionally attached; and 6) consequences that are negotiable (6-7).

Games in Education

Scholars have noted a variety of benefits to students from engaging in games in educational settings. Several decades ago, Vygotsky suggested that games and play foster a development of both abstract thinking and goal realization (103). More recently, gaming has been found to support multiple educational practices: breaking down and understanding task goals, success in achieving those goals, providing motivation to write, and practice and scaffolding by compensating for the individual differences in students (Roscoe, Brandon, Snow and McNamara 1). Games can also be used to teach specific content, to test hypotheses and to develop problem-solving skills, and to understand more advanced theoretical concepts (Ebner and Holzinger; Glazer).

Additionally, using gaming in classrooms has been shown to address other school related issues, such as increasing attendance and decreasing behavioral issues (Blaisdel l). While traditional classrooms are often designed around activities that foster intentional learning, introducing gaming into the curriculum can also lead to incidental learning, where valuable learning results as a side effect of gaming (Ebner & Holzinger). The authors found that students' incidental learning was equal to the traditional learning they experienced in classrooms. Kim, Park, and Baek found that engaging high school students in classroom gaming led to the development of specific cognitive strategies, including self-regulation and think aloud (800). Among these educational benefits of games is the facilitation of critical thinking, synthesizing, and application via active and social participation (Colby & Colby 301). Furthermore, the authors stated that an increase in gaming performance correlated with an increase in learning

(310). In their review of over 300 publications, Young et al. found that gaming led to learning in a variety of content areas (e.g., design, analysis, critique, and creation). As such, they suggested focusing educational attention on the collaborative elements of games as well as the interaction between game, player, and context (82).

Gaming and Writing

Several scholars (see for example Colby and Colby; Juul; and others) have discussed the use of gaming and gaming theory to inform writing instruction and suggest that writing pedagogy must recognize the relationship between narrative and play. In fact, as Colby and Colby pointed out, "gameplay becomes an important part of the invention process, helping students creatively discover problems and rhetorical solutions within the gamespace" (310). Additionally, gaming allows students to go beyond the framework of the game and learn "how to respond to cues from other players, how to think ahead, and how to perform tasks in concert with others," (Thomas and Brown 159) all important components of composition. Dickey found that gaming supported both motivation and curiosity, and students were able to transfer their experiences with gaming to writing activities (456). Moreover, Roscoe, Brandon, Snow, and McNamara found that students who participated in game-based practice in class had an increased ability to (1) discuss and describe their new writing strategies and (2) engage in the writing process (i.e., writing and revising) more than twice as often (1).

The aforementioned literature discussing the use of gaming in educational settings, and specifically to foster composition in students, supports the use of game-based activities in the English classroom for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Among these is the use of gaming to promote deeper engagement in narrative analysis and creation. In this article, we discuss one such pedagogical approach using tabletop gaming to (a) further students thinking

about the texts they read, (b) engaging them in parallel narrative creation, and (c) fostering writing about those experiences.

Project Overview

Given the literature on gaming in education and specifically on gaming and writing, our goal here is to provide English teachers and English educators with a method for bringing tabletop gaming into their classrooms to foster student literacy. Below, we offer a detailed description to guide teachers through incorporating gaming into the study of literature and to facilitate student writing about the stories they read. Through pairing reading and gaming, students can further engage with texts in meaningful and personal ways, as they take on the roles of the characters they read about and make authorial decisions that impact the narratives. Thus, the overall goal of this approach is to help teachers make literature relevant for students and to assist students in establishing strong connections to and understanding of the stories they read in their English classrooms.

Connection to Standards

This pathfinder system inherently addresses many of the ELA Common Core State Standards and accomplishes several more through the flexibility of the system, which allows for adaptations of a wide range of texts. As this is an activity that follows reading of the traditional text, students should be aware of the story elements and apply this knowledge to game-play. This forces students to take into account various author choices, including language, setting, and character development. By design, this system asks students to work together in groups to represent four characters in the story. This allows for all students to be involved and to collaborate; additionally, it makes it more manageable for the teacher by only requiring them to run one game for the entire class.

Because each of the four characters possesses different abilities and skill levels, students must work collaboratively to effectively complete the objectives set by the teacher. Afterwards, students engage in reflective/narrative writing, detailing the new story they have created and the choices they made, as well as acknowledging how previous knowledge of the story impacted those choices. Because the pathfinder system allows students to accomplish too many standards to include, below is a list of several standards from varying ELA categories to demonstrate the capabilities of implementing this system.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.6: Analyze how differences in points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.8.3: Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and relevance and sufficiency of the evidence and identifying when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

Classroom Implementation

Overview

To implement this modified *Pathfinder* system (see Table 1 for a list of game materials needed) in the classroom effectively, educators should familiarize themselves with the rules and mechanics of the system before introducing it to students. The entirety of this rule system, with accompanying tips and videos for implementation, is available free to use via our website: Tiny Furnace (http://tinyfurnace.weebly.com/games.html). Additional tutorial videos are available on our YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgp1yAd3G7LxzhmRYzzbxGg). For the purposes of this article, we will provide step-by-step examples of how the system functions with notations for where to find elaborated materials within the guide.

Table 1—Materials Needed

Material	Quantity	Cost
Map	1	N/A
Rule Book & Guide	1	N/A
Character Sheets	4	N/A
Character Markers	4	N/A
Dice*	≈15	≈$10

*While tactile dice are recommended, online randomizers can be substituted to make the entire system free for implementation (https://www.wizards.com/dnd/dice/dice.htm)

While this system is designed to mold to any text, educators should select a text they are excited and passionate about teaching to eliminate doubt and unpreparedness during game-play. The provided examples that follow are drawn from a template we have created to accompany the system built around Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game," as the work is fairly widely instructed and lends itself universally to the system. While there are no prerequisite skills

required to run this system, we suggest implementing it with middle school and high school students *after* reading the original text. This will assist in providing the students the necessary background information that will guide them through the story while simultaneously serving as an informal assessment of reading comprehension. Students who have read the material prior to engaging with the game will also be better equipped to make meaningful and personal connections with the text and analyze the story's elements before completing the writing prompts which act as the capstone assessment following the system's implementation, providing students yet another opportunity to connect to the text and characters and to engage in story analysis.

While this system has been simplified down to the bare essentials of necessary mechanics and modified to be more accessible in the classroom environment, it can still prove a rather challenging read to those who are unfamiliar with roleplaying systems in general. Because of this, it is highly advised that any educator who is interested in implementing this system allots a fair share of time to spend alone with the provided guide and rulebook. The execution of this system in the classroom without a certain level of comfort in how the various mechanics operate may prove more challenging for both teacher and students. Over the course of learning the system, educators are encouraged to ask any questions they may have during the process by making use of the submission form provided on our website.

Running the Game

Acting as the guide to understanding and implanting the system, the teacher takes on the role of Gamemaster and facilitates all aspects of the game and students' interaction. In other words, it is the job of the teacher to lead the game and control all elements of the original text as students begin to engage with it. Before beginning, however, it is necessary for class time to be provided to explain how the game functions and to offer students the necessary models of

gameplay that will eventually lead them to taking on the roles of players within the story. The

time required to instruct these mechanics is dependent on a myriad criteria, including class size

and student familiarity with roleplaying systems, but a minimum of 1-2 days of explicit

 examples and class discussion is

recommended, especially if the bulk of the

students are novices, before the system can

be fluidly implemented. If, however, most

Figure 1: Website Templates students have previous experiences with

roleplaying games, it is quite possible to provide the required overview in a shorter period of

time. The story which is instructed via this system is entirely up to the educator's preference and

a template and guide (see Figure 1) for modifying any work of literature to function within the

system is also provided via the website (tinyfurnace.weebly.com/games.html). The desirable

outcomes for implementing the system into the classroom will be partially dependent on which

story is chosen, and while some works of literature inherently lend themselves to this form of

instruction more than others, any text can be translated to function effectively.

<p align="center">**Adapting and Utilizing a Text**</p>

When beginning to adapt a text for this game, the first task of the Gamemaster is to

effectively create a series of goals or outcomes for students, which will in turn effectively act as

the learning outcomes for the lesson while simultaneously providing students with a concrete list

of what must be accomplished during the game in order to prevent them from veering too far

from the original text. Below are the goals and objectives provided in the template for "The Most

Dangerous Game:"

    1.) There are rumors that numerous men have gone missing on this island. Learn as much

        as you can about the island and its inhabitants, namely a man by the name of General

Zaroff.

2.) Survive for three days and four nights as you await transport off of the island.

3.) If you learn the cause for the rumors of men going missing, do everything in your power to stop the disappearances from continuing.

Crafting these objectives is as easy as isolating the key plot points within the chosen text and phrasing them to mirror the goals that students will need to accomplish. Once this is completed, an introductory narrative should be prepared to reflect the original text and provide students with the setting for the game. Below is the introductory narrative for "The Most Dangerous Game" template:

After your ship capsized, you awake on the shoreline of Ship-Trap Island. It is almost pitch black and difficult to see your surroundings, but you hear the waves crashing around 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.

These narratives will help ground students in the original text and help "hook them" into being participants within the narrative itself.

The Game Map

Once these introductory materials are prepared, it becomes the job of the Gamemaster to create a map based on the original text to assist students with both visualizing and interacting with the story. While this may seem like a daunting task, these
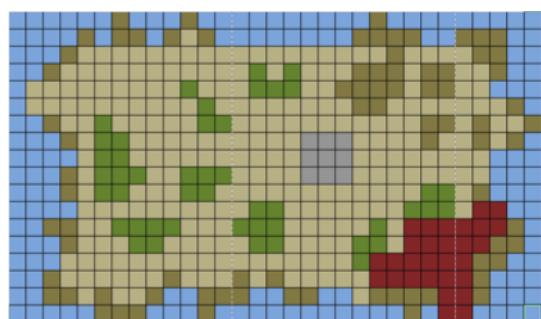
Figure 2: Sample Game Map

maps are nothing more than grid systems, which can easily be crafted as spreadsheets. Those who are uncomfortable creating maps in such a fashion may choose to simply use a large piece of paper or a white board to accomplish the same task. While maps are not inherently necessary pieces of roleplaying systems, it is highly recommended they be used for at least the first stories instructed in this fashion. Doing so will help to better guide students who are new to the mechanics of the system while simultaneously helping them to envision the world with which they will be interacting. Figure 2 displays the map provided with "The Most Dangerous Game" template.

It should be noted that this particular map (provided above) in the template is rather complex with a color-coded system for specific areas that denote important components of the setting. These require students to interact differently depending on the terrain. For instance, the red section of the map represents the swamp in the south-east corner of the island which students will only be able to move through at half of the original speed of their characters. When creating a map for any chosen text, teachers may choose to be as elaborate or simple with the creation process as they wish. A simple black and white grid system may function just as well with some stories and save a considerable amount of time during the preparation phase.

Interacting with the Story

Below is a detailed discussion of the game and its classroom implementations meant to offer teachers a guided induction into this approach. Herein, we provide a step-by-step introduction for both teachers and students interested in using tabletop gaming to further engage in literature study and literacy development.

The Character Sheet

Figure 3 character sheet (Warrior):

Class	Warrior
Speed	20
Role	Melee Attacker

Health	Armor	Initiative	BAB
20	15	3	4

Skill	Bonus
Diplomacy	--
Bluff	--
Acrobatics	2
Perception	1
Sense Motive	4
Climb	2
Swim	--
Ride	2
Stealth	--
Disguise	2
Linguistics	--
Survival	5

Equipment
Explorer's Outfit
Plate Armor
Longsword
Heavy Shield

Additional Equipment

Knowledge	Bonus
Magic	--
Engineering	--
Geography	3
History	2
Local	2
Nature	2
Nobility	3

Abilities	Bonus
Dexterity	2
Strength	4
Constitution	3
Intelligence	1
Charisma	3
Wisdom	2

Weapon	Range	Damage
Longsword	5ft	1d8+2

Notes

Special Abilities	Range	Times Per Day	Effect
Battle Shout	20ft	1	+1 BAB for Party
Cleave	5ft	1	Strike 2 Enemies
Bull's Strength	20ft	1	Push Enemy 10ft
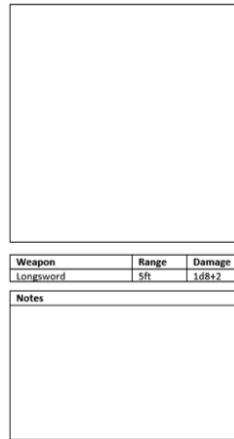
In the classroom, once the map, objectives, and introductory narrative have been provided to students, it will be their turn to begin interacting with the story. The first phase of interacting with the story is referred to as *Open World*. Essentially, students will begin by exploring their

Figure 3: Character Sheet immediate surroundings and interacting with the environment of the original text. Each group of students will represent one of the four characters provided with the system: The Warrior, The Ranger, The Mage, and The Healer (see website for a detailed description of each character). Each of these characters come equipped with their own set of strengths and weaknesses, requiring the students to work together within their own groups and with the class as a whole in order to

Class	Warrior
Speed	20
Role	Melee Attacker

best accomplish their objectives. All character sheets are provided via the website, but examples drawn from the Warrior's character sheet, as seen in Figure 3, will be used for the purposes of explaining each aspect of the sheet itself.

Skill	Bonus
Diplomacy	--
Bluff	--
Acrobatics	2
Perception	1
Sense Motive	4
Climb	2
Swim	--
Ride	2
Stealth	--
Disguise	2
Linguistics	--
Survival	5

Starting with the upper left hand corner of the sheet, the general information regarding the individual character can be found (see Figure 4). This includes the

Knowledge	Bonus
Magic	--
Engineering	--
Geography	3
History	2
Local	2
Nature	2
Nobility	3

simple class nomenclature, the speed of the character, and a brief description of character's role

in the group. The most important thing to take note of in this section is the character's

individual

Figure 4: Skill Information

Figure 6: Knowledge Information

speed. Each square in the grid system, which comprises the map for the story, represents 5ft. The

Warrior's speed is 20, which means the character can move a total of 4 squares on their turn.

During the *Open World* stage of the game, individual character speed is not necessarily

paramount, as the goal of this stage of the game is to encourage students to gather information

and interact with the narrative as much as possible. In order to do this, students will make use of

the Skill (Figure 5) and Knowledge (Figure 6) sections of their individual character sheets.

Skill and Knowledge Checks

Directly below General Information on each character sheet is a series of skills that can

be used by your students during the *Open World* stage of the game. When attempting to perform

any of these skills, students will need to roll a twenty-sided di (teachers may also use a random

number generator) and then add any bonus—as listed in the second column—to the total of their

roll. Bonuses are determined based on individual character strengths and weaknesses. It is the

Gamemaster's job to determine how difficult these checks are to accomplish before students roll

their dice.

For example, if students—as The Warrior—roll a 15 on their twenty-sided di in an

attempt to climb the jagged rocks on the coast of Ship-Trap island, they would add a +2 bonus

from their Climb skill for a total of 17. If the Gamemaster decided that an 18 was required to

climb the rocks, then students have failed to do so. The severity of a failure or success is

determined by the teacher and is dependant on how far below or above the required number a student rolls. To demonstrate this, a student rolling a one on a climb check may fall on their face and take damage, whereas a student rolling a twenty may scale the wall with great ease. Deciding upon the value required for success will be dependent on numerous variables: the difficulty of the chosen action, its impact on the story as a whole, how informed the request is by the original text, and so forth. For instance, if a student is attempting to climb a tree to hide from General Zaroff, it would be wise to keep this value rather low as climbing a tree is not partciularly difficult, and the request is in keeping with the actions of the story's protagonist. On the other end of the spectrum, a student attempting a Stealth check to sneak into the General's home in broad daylight may be met with a much higher value. In almost every case, it will be of the upmost importance to keep the required number for success private, as sharing this number with students may negatively impact the way they interact with the story. Descriptions of each Skill and examples of how they may be used by students are provided on page six of the guide.

Knowledge checks function almost exactly the same as Skill checks, save for one difference: characters without an alloted bonus to a specific knowledge check may not attempt that check. Take for example The Warrior who has no knowledge of the magical nature of the world nor the intricacies of engineering and thus may not make these Knowledge checks. Students taking on this role would be required to rely on other characters to gather this information. Descriptions of each type of knowledge and examples of how these checks are used are provided on page nine of the guide.

The Role of the Gamemaster/Teacher

As students begin using their Skills and Knowledge to interact with the environment, they may at first be confused by what exactly they need to implement to complete a task. Because of

this, it is important for the Gamemaster to understand the potential of all of these mechanics; if a

student were to ask "Can I jump onto that ledge, dive into the river, and climb the ladder on the

oppostie side?" the Gamemaster needs to know that this requires three individual skill checks:

Acrobatics, Swim, and Climb. A student who fails their intital Acrobatics check may slip from

the ledge and fall into the river, or backwards onto the ground behind them. A student who is

successful on an Acrobatics check and manages to jump to the ledge, but fails a Swim check,

may be required to make another Swim check just to get back to land. If the student is successful

at both their Acrobatics and Swim checks, but fail their Climb check, then they may find

themselves falling from the ladder and back into the river. What is most important, however, is

that teachers encourage students to interact with the environment. As such, it can be beneficial to

make the success values for such checks rather low in order to reward them for their efforts.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the learning comes from interacting with the

setting and the plot; thus, gamemasters should ensure students have ample opportunity to engage

in situations their characters would have encountered. It is through these elaborate questions and

checks that the experience becomes a memorable one.

Abilities	Bonus
Dexterity	2
Strength	4
Constitution	3
Intelligence	1
Charisma	3
Wisdom	2

Ability Checks

If at any time a student makes a request that is not

explicity covered by a pre-existing Knowledge or Skill

check, then their individual Ability Scores will function

as

a means for them to accomlish the task. This section can be found in the middle of each character

sheet (see Figure 7) and is implemented as a "catch-all" for unexpected student requests. It

should be noted, however, that this does not mean that teachers must always allow students the

Figure 7: Ability Information opportunity to perform every single request. Students often actively attempt to veer the story off track or ask to accomplish tasks that will in no way benefit the instruction of the story as a whole. In these cases, it is entirely appropriate to meet such requests with a simple "no." Doing so will allow for the game to continue as a tool for facilitating learning and remind students that while they are inherently partaking in gameplay, they are still doing so in a classroom environment.

Combat and the Initiative Stage

This *Open World* stage of the game exists for as long as the Gamemaster and students wish it to. If students are engaging with the narrative and learning from simply exploring their surroundings, then it may be in everyone's best interest to prolong this stage of the game for as long as possible. Some stories, in fact, may be effectively translated to this system making use of only this stage of the game. However, it would be rather optimistic to assume that all students will let this happen, and for stories such as "The Most Dangerous Game" combat is an expected and necessary element to the plot's development, regardless of direct student interaction. When the story calls for combat to take place, the turn-based elements of this system—or, in other words, the elements that feel more like a "game"—are implemented in the *Initiative* stage.

If and when students decide to face General Zaroff in "The Most Dangerous Game" template, all four student-controlled characters would roll a twenty-sided di. Following their rolls,

Health	Armor	Initiative	BAB
20	15	3	4

the Gamemaster will roll a twenty-sided di for General Zaroff. The results of these rolls are what

Figure 8: Character Bonus Values

determine the order by which your students will engage in combat. Just as with Skill and Knowledge checks, these rolls receive a bonus depending on the individual character. The bonus

to Initiative, as well as other information directly related to combat, can be found in the top-middle of each character sheet. See Figure 8 for a sample of character bonus values. Each character controlled by the Gamemaster, such as General Zaroff, will also have their own initiative bonus. This bonus can be found on the corresponding character sheet crafted by the teacher when adapting any given text to function within the system. These sheets are far less complex than the ones representing the students' characters and a guide for creating characters is available on the website. An example character sheet, in this case one created for General Zaroff, is provided in Table 2.

Table 2—Character Sheet for General Zaroff

NPC	General *Zaroff*					
Description	A tall man just past middle age, with white hair, thick eyebrows, and a black pointed mustache. He is seen as having the face of an aristocrat.					
Health	**Armor**	**Initiative**	**BAB**	**Equipment**		
30	16	6	4	Pistol, Four Bullets, Journal		
Weapon				**Range**	**Damage**	
Pistol				20ft	1d8+1	

While this may seem like an overwhelming amount of information, the mechanics of combat within this system are actually rather simple. Once each initiative bonus is added, the turn order is determined. An example of how this may look is as follows:

1. *Warrior*: 14 (+3) = 17
2. *Zaroff*: 10 (+6) = 16
3. *Ranger:* 10 (+5) = 15
4. *Mage:* 13 (+2) = 15
5. *Healer:* 12 (+0) = 12

As the warrior has the highest value in this example, this character will be the first to act. On their turn, each character can take the following actions:

- Move: Based on the individual character's speed, they may make a single movement action to position themselves during combat. While this may not be particularly beneficial to the Warrior, the Ranger, and Mage may find it more beneficial to gain distance from their opponent before unleashing ranged attacks.

- Minor: Also known as "free actions," characters can make use of their Skill and Knowledge checks during their turn if they believe them to be of any benefit. For example, at this stage in the scenario, the Warrior may decide upon talking Zaroff down from combat. However, with the Warrior's low Diplomacy and Bluff checks and Zaroff's

  overwhelming desire to hunt him, he will most likely fail at doing so.

- Standard: The "meat" of a turn is referred to as the standard action. This includes making a single attack or performing a Special Ability. Special abilities are unique to each character and can be found at the bottom of each character sheet. Elaboration on how these abilities are used can be found on pages 17-19 of the provided guide.

A Walk-Through of a Combat Example

In order to understand how combat is actually orientated, it is helpful to see an example (see Figure 9) of how an engagement may look during the game on the provided map for "The

Most Dangerous Game." Once the Warrior has exhausted his Move and Minor actions—if he chooses to make them—it is time for him to attack. First, however, he must make an Attack Roll to see if he is capable of hitting his opponent. In order to do this, the Warrior must roll a twenty-sided di and add the

value

listed under the BAB (Basic Attack Bonus) section of his character sheet. In order for the attack roll to be successful, the Warrior must be in range of his target and his roll must meet or exceed

Figure 9: Sample Character Engagement the Armor of his opponent. It may prove beneficial to see the Armor value of any character as the equivalent to a success value, which determines whether or not students can complete their requested Skill and Knowledge checks.

Weapon	Range	Damage
Longsword	5ft	1d8+2

General Zaroff has a high Armor of 16, because of his experience and constant readiness to hunt. Therefore, the Warrior, with a BAB of 4, needs to roll

Figure 10: Weapon Information

at least a 12 on the twenty-sided di for an attack to be successful. Failing to do so means the attack is unsuccessful and the Warrior's turn has ended. If the attack hits an opponent, however, then the Warrior must determine the amount of damage done by referencing the weapon information (see Figure 10) provided on the middle right of each character sheet. As noted above, The Warrior's Longsword does a total of 1d8+2 points of damage. In order to determine this value, the Warrior first rolls an eight-sided di and then adds 2 to the result. For instance, if the Warrior rolls a 4, a bonus of 2 would be added to that value for a total of 6 points of damage. This damage is then subtracted from the total Health of General Zaroff. The Gamemaster will take note of this on General Zaroff's character sheet. As Zaroff began with 30 Health, he would now be at 24 Health.

After the Warrior has completed his turn, General Zaroff is next to act. Just as the Gamemaster would act as General Zaroff in speaking with the other characters, s/he must also take on Zaroff's actions during combat. This is where teachers must do their best to imagine how the character would react. As seen in the provided character sheet for General Zaroff, he is

equipped with a pistol. However, whether or not he chooses to use that pistol is entirely up to the teacher. While this may sound like a confusing and stressful situation, it helps to simply think of these actions as part of the larger story. It is also important to determine what students are expected to get out of this encounter. What experience would be gained by fighting? Is this fight necessary to the story's development? Would they have as much fun if Zaroff (or a vital character in any other story) simply ran away?

If it is determined that fighting is necessary, then all actions in combat are bound by the same mechanics explained in the above example for The Warrior. Combat, and the Initiative stage of the game, continues until one side of the altercation is defeated or runs away. At this time, the game returns to the *Open World* stage and continues with the narrative of the original text. For elaboration on the *Initiative* stage of the game and how combat is carried out and resolved, refer to pages 12-16 of the guide.

It is entirely up to the Gamemaster as to when the game is "over." This system is designed to be executed in windows of 45-60 minutes to accommodate the standard timeframe of one class period. However, no schedule is set in stone, and teachers may find that ending the game earlier can be just as beneficial as using two class periods to complete one adventure. Students can alternate between the *Open World* and *Initiative* stages for as long as they and the teacher choose before continuing the story. What it comes down to is the objectives teachers wish for students to meet. A strong guide in assessing whether or not the game is "over" is by looking at how many of the predetermined objectives students have completed.

The Writing Assignment—Making Meaning from Gameplay

The performance of students interacting with the story acts, in itself, as an informal means to assess reading comprehension while simultaneously providing a tactile form of

engagement with literature. However, the true purpose of this form of instruction is to both promote and inspire new ways of expressing understanding. As such, upon completing the interactive story, students will be provided a series of writing prompts that will function as a more formal means of assessment and as an opportunity for student learning to come full circle. While the in-the-moment learning of the game is invaluable, it is vital that teachers provide students time and space to reflect, to consider their experiences and what they ultimately mean. Additionally, this allows students to take a step back and examine and evaluate their own learning and their own experiences as active participants in the story itself. As students are provided the opportunity to live within the text as opposed to passively digesting it, these prompts are crafted to pull first-person experience based on independent and collaborative interaction among their peers.

To allow students to individually demonstrate their understanding of the text, we have crafted four writing prompts that target analysis and reflection.

- Write a short narrative telling this story from the perspective of your character.
- What decisions did you and your party make that directly changed the way the story was told? How was this experience different from the original text?
- How did your previous knowledge of the story influence the decisions you made during the game?
- Do you feel that you or anyone else in your group acted outside of your character's motivating forces? Why did you and your group make these choices?

In answering these questions, students are rationalizing their actions, analyzing their roles within the story, comparing story elements between differing mediums, and making meaning of the text for themselves. These prompts may be adapted or exchanged for others, depending upon what

specifically the educator wishes to assess. It is important, however, to provide students similar opportunities (regardless of prompt or mode used) to reflect, to further their learning, and to selfassess.

Assessing Learning

Using this approach (i.e., reading, gaming, and writing) provides students with meaningful opportunities to interact with and make meaning from texts. Likewise, it also offers teachers myriad ways to assess student learning, including engagement during the game and the reflection taking place subsequently via the writing prompts. Below are sample aims and goals, but each teacher should give individual thought to why and how they use the game and writing assignments. In other words, prior to implementing the game in class, teachers should determine their objectives and standards for students and how they plan to assess student learning.

During gameplay, various opportunities will arise for routine informal assessment. These assessments range from both small and large group collaboration that touch on the majority of speaking and listening standards within CCSS to a rather unique means of gauging reading comprehension based solely on the ways in which students choose to interact with the story. In fact, every aspect of gameplay provides alternative means to assess group and social dynamics while simultaneously providing students a "non-traditional" means of demonstrating understanding. Due to the wide range of standards addressed, it may in fact prove beneficial to outline specific criteria for assessment before classroom implementation. These criteria can shift and alter from game to game depending on, in part, what text is utilized.

More formal assessments are provided via the aforementioned writing assignments and may also be altered to best suit individual needs. When combined with the chosen assessments for gameplay, the goal of the entire system is to provide a holistic approach to reading,

understanding, and engaging with literature. Instead of asking students to fill in a bubble or provide a short answer on a multiple choice quiz, they are given the opportunity to show genuine understanding through their actions; instead of asking students to analyze characters from an old text, they become the characters themselves.

Reactions from the Classroom

As mentioned above, we have used this game with a variety of students, including those in eighth-grade English Language Arts classrooms. In fact, we are currently collecting and analyzing data for a larger scale study on the impact of this game on students' abilities to connect with and make meaning from the text and to subsequently write about those experiences. To better provide a rationale for using our game in the classroom, it is important to offer readers a view into our own classroom implementation, including the voices of the students and teachers involved. What follows is a description of student and teacher experiences from interacting with the game and engaging in the instructional unit.

Student Voices

Entering the unit, approximately half of the students self-reported having no previous experiences with roleplaying games. Even those that acknowledged having experience only noted adjacent connections (e.g., Clue, Monopoly, video games). Only three students actually mentioned experience with a game with a similar protocol to the one used within the unit. We also asked students to rate (using a scale of 1-10) how difficult it was to (1) learn the game, (2) collaborate with members of their own group, and (3) collaborate with other groups and then calculated class averages. Most students did not find the game overly difficult to learn (mean=3.21). Additionally, students found it relatively easy to collaborate with members of their own groups (mean=3.14). Students did, however, note a bit more difficulty in working together

with other groups (mean=4.5). Based on these numbers, we suggest scaffolding these conversations by providing guiding prompts, hints, and so forth to encourage meaningful discussion across groups.

Student responses to interviews ranged from surface level to quite specific. Several students discussed benefits from the game with statements such as "It was easy because I read the story," "It helped me better understand the story," and "I liked the action better than just the story." In contrast to these more generic statements, others were able to more clearly articulate exactly how they benefited. For example, one student pointed out that they took on the role of the character: "I got to be the person, so I got it from their perspective." When asked how the game helped to better understand the story, another student responded with "Like what Rainsford was feeling when he thought he was going to get caught. I kind of felt like that when the general was about to get my character in the game." Yet another student found help from interacting with characters by stating, "I asked questions to General Zaroff that Rainsford did not ask." There were also a few student statements that pointed to difficulties working in small groups. These ranged from "some of the time it was hard to choose whose idea we wanted to use" to "we all knew what to do and didn't need to discuss." This suggests the importance of the collaborative component of this game, and we argue it is helpful for students to have previous experience working effectively in groups.

Teacher Voice

A view of responses from the teacher is also helpful at assessing the educational utility of the game. At the conclusion of the unit, the teacher noted how upset students were that the game had to come to an end and that they wished to continue engaging with the story beyond the original text. In addition, she noted that knowing they would be playing the game positively

impacted how they read and discussed the story. For example, many of the students made comments during reading about how they would have dealt with specific situations that Rainsford found himself in. These same students, the teacher argued, seemed to become more aware of the consequences of such choices when placed in the protagonist's shoes. In the teacher's words, by mimicking the actions of characters within the story (i.e., climbing trees to hide, setting traps, etc.), students were able to "think more strategically about how Rainsford's actions influenced the other characters within the story." Perhaps the biggest benefit the teacher discussed involved the collaborative aspect of the game (paralleling the student responses above). She pointed out that the game provided students with structured opportunities to properly communicate in small groups; moreover, she stated that students were able to pick up on communication tactics that allowed them to more easily function as a cohesive whole in order to meet the objectives.

As evidenced by these voices of experience, we, and the students we have worked with, have found a variety of benefits from implementing gameplay into ELA curricula. Additionally, the classroom teachers involved in this work have described student engagement, collaboration, critical thinking, and a range of other benefits to student learning. It was this success that served as the catalyst for our ongoing research study and prompted us to write this article to share our approach with classroom teachers. Our goal then is to offer teachers an engaging way to further foster learning and literacy in their own students.

Conclusion

As English teachers, it remains vital to help students make meaningful connections to the texts they read. Moreover, in our Web 2.0, interactive world, it is equally important to provide students guided opportunities to interact with texts, with narratives, with a variety of modalities,

and with peers. One way to achieve this is to incorporate gaming in the classroom. Games, by definition, are narrative in nature and when paired with more traditional classroom texts can foster critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, and collaboration, just to name a few.   The purpose of this article, thus, is to offer teachers one approach to incorporating gaming as a major component of literature study and literacy instruction. By guiding teachers through this approach, we hope to help them facilitate student engagement and learning. By pairing gaming and classroom texts, educators can create new opportunities for students to engage with the texts they read in personal and powerful ways. Doing so encourages students to think differently about text components (e.g., characters and plot) by becoming the characters and entering the world they read about and to consider story development in new ways by making informed, authorial decisions that contribute to the story itself.

The overall goal of this approach is to make literature relevant and to help students make strong, personal connections to class texts and develop deep understandings of the stories they read. Throughout the literature, there is strong support for gaming in education, including gaming and writing. This suggests that games can serve as powerful sponsors of student literacy and learning. As such, English teachers should consider new methods of instruction that incorporate tabletop gaming into their classrooms to foster learning and literacy.

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