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RPGs and Lessons Learned

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Résumé :

Cet article est le fruit d'une rencontre entre deux enseignants s'intéressant à l'intégration de jeux de rôle sur table dans l'enseignement supérieur. Le premier est à l'Université de Paris-Est Créteil et le second à l'université de Valparaiso aux États-Unis. Si nos objectifs pédagogiques ne sont pas les mêmes, notre passion pour ce type de jeu est commune ! Les JDR sont de formidables outils pour nos étudiants. D'ailleurs, dans le cadre d'un concours de scénarios, plusieurs équipes mixtes avec des Français et des Américains imaginent actuellement de nouvelles aventures pour le JDR *Dungeon Crawl Classics*.

Mots-clefs :

Jeu de rôle sur table, JDR, enseignement supérieur

1.

Abstract:

This article is the result of a meeting between two educators interested in integrating tabletop role-playing games (RPG) into higher education. The first is at the University of Paris-Est Créteil and the second is at Valparaiso University in the United States. While our pedagogical objectives may differ, our passion for this type of game is shared! RPGs are fantastic tools for our students. In fact, as part of a scenario contest, several mixed teams of French and American students are currently imagining new adventures for the RPG *Dungeon Crawl Classics*.

Keywords:

Tabletop role-playing game, RPG, higher education

RPGs and Lessons Learned

1 INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, Martin and I began exchanging ideas regarding our use of role-playing games in our teaching. Meanwhile, a team of students from the IAE Pari-Est was reaching out to Goodman Games and Akileos to launch a scenario creation contest for the Dungeon Crawl Classics role-playing game¹. This project was even nominated for the 2023 Goodie Awards². As you read this text, around ten scenarios created by students from UPEC and Valparaiso University (working in mixed teams) will be undergoing evaluation! The best one will be announced during the CIGE event. In this article, we offer a brief overview of our experiences with RPGs in our respective universities.

2 EXAMPLES OF RPGS USE IN UNIVRSITY

2.1 VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY (USA), BY MARTIN BUINICKI

The numerous benefits of using roleplaying games in the classroom may not be readily apparent. In part, the term itself is the problem: “roleplaying” suggests either performance - a step away from the self to take on a part - or, if we are working more in human resources or sales, simulation exercises primarily meant to acclimate participants to interpersonal exchanges. And, of course, we aren’t even addressing the word “game,” which despite continued growth in the field of ludo-pedagogy, still connotes frivolity, such that we use the term “serious games” if we want to emphasize their value in education (see, for example, Connolly *et al.* 2012). (And not many have used the term to refer to RPGs.) Finally, for those of a certain generation, roleplaying games may still carry with them a whiff of public controversy from the 1980s, when Dungeons & Dragons evoked fears in some that players would fall victim to dark influences or lose the ability to distinguish between the real world and fantasy (Laycock 2015). While much progress has been made, roleplaying games are not yet common parts of curricula.

Having now taught a course in Writing Roleplaying Games for two years, I’ve learned several valuable lessons regarding the benefits students gain from creating their own adventures, as well as some important issues to consider before incorporating RPGs in the classroom. First,

¹ DCC RPG : <https://goodman-games.com/dungeon-crawl-classics-rpg/>.

² Goodie Awards 2023 : <https://goodman-games.com/blog/2023/11/18/announcing-the-winners-of-the-2023-goodie-awards/>.

while Dungeons & Dragons remains the most well-known, it is now only one of hundreds produced by numerous publishers, each with their own settings and rule-systems³. Second, despite the game’s long history and rising prominence in popular culture, few of my students had actually played D&D, or any tabletop RPGs at all. This led to both opportunities and challenges.

Because many of my students were new to RPGs, I was able to avail myself of the variety of systems available and choose the one best suited for my goals. I chose Dungeon Crawl Classics (DCC), published by Goodman Games, as the RPG we would focus on in the course. Part of what is considered the “Old School Revival”—games that evoke the early days of Dungeons & Dragons⁴—DCC focuses on “sword and sorcery” adventures. I am very familiar with the game, having started my own publishing career writing adventures for the system. The game includes “0-level” adventures that feature player characters who are “peasants,” meaning they do not have class-based abilities like healing or magic. This reduces the complexity of planning encounters and allows the students to focus on issues I prioritize in the course: the story, setting, and non-player characters; in other words, the narrative aspects of game design. Finally, Goodman Games is a publisher committed to building community and supporting new creators, and I want students who are interested in pursuing game design professionally to have a finished product they could consider crowdsourcing and publishing.

In terms of challenges, my students’ lack of experience meant that in addition to learning how to accomplish the various writing tasks involved in creating an original game adventure, they also had to learn the rules of the game itself. The “0-level” adventures of DCC helped with this, but even still the learning curve for roleplaying games—knowing what dice to roll when, for example—can be steep. And for experienced gamers, having to learn a new system could be disappointing for those who just want to write for the system they know. I met the first challenge through both interactive lectures and through in-class play, with students working in groups that included experienced players. The best way to learn a game is through playing it, after all, and by having experienced students run published adventures, novices could learn by doing.

³ RPGs: <https://rpggeek.com/browse/rpg>

⁴ OSR: <https://leyline.press/blogs/leyline-press-blog/old-school-tabletop-roleplaying-game-design-principles>

I met the second by encouraging those students who were enamored with another RPG to write 1st-level adventures in *Dungeon Crawl Classics*: these include character classes and spells, generally more like D&D. I also emphasized that skills they were developing writing for DCC were transferable across systems. In other words, I reminded them that the goal for the course was to become better at writing roleplaying games, not at writing for one system of rules.

And this speaks to perhaps the most important lesson I learned from teaching the course, and why I feel so strongly about encouraging others to try using these games in the classroom. When I first proposed “Writing Roleplaying Games,” I focused on how students could improve their technical writing skills—providing clear instructions to readers—along with their creative writing—building exciting narratives with vivid worlds and characters. However, I completely underestimated the range of skills playing the games would help students develop. These include collaboration and group problem-solving; improvisation; public speaking; conflict management, and leadership. At the end of the semester, when the students sat down to lead groups of strangers through their games in a public event, they had to teach rules that many of them had learned only a few months earlier. Their preparation gave them confidence. Because they were running adventures they had written, they were intimately familiar with the content. Because they had done some playtests in class, they had some idea what to expect, and had already revised their games to make them stronger.

Nevertheless, after the event, every student had a story about something unexpected or surprising happening at their table, and of how they handled it in the moment, and how they would further refine their game based on their experience. So, let’s add resilience and thinking under pressure to the list of skills practiced, as well. All told, this is an impressive catalog of lessons learned, all from a course offered as an elective that students chose because of their interest in games. In my experience, students that may shy away from public speaking, improvisation, or technical writing course, embrace all these tasks when put into the context of games.

Faculty interested in incorporating RPGs into their courses may face some of the same challenges the students face. If unfamiliar with the games, they need to choose a system and a setting appropriate for their course and their goals, and then they need to learn the RPG themselves. Then, they need to look closely at their syllabus and figure out how they will achieve all the student learning objectives for the course while also incorporating gaming into

the schedule. Time management is a perennial challenge, but in my experience, time spent workshopping and playing games is well spent. As for learning RPGs, happily, faculty can manage this the same way students do: by simply playing games. Visit game-stores and find games to join; attend conventions; even playing online offers an effective way to learn games. Understanding how a game works goes a long way in conceptualizing how to incorporate it into class.

2.2 UNIVERSITE PARIS-EST CRETEIL (FRANCE) BY PHILIPPE LEPINARD

The project presented in this communication falls within the scope of the pedagogical and research project in game-oriented approach called EdUTeam⁵ conducted at IAE Paris-Est, the university business school of the University Paris-Est Créteil (UPEC). The aim of our work is to propose a method based on RPG to implement action-oriented pedagogy (Council of Europe, 2001 p.15; Perrot & Julié, 2017, p.102) and thus overcome inhibitions in student speaking in English teaching. This project, formally initiated in 2018 (Lépinard & Vaquiéri, 2019), involves conducting several sessions each year with third-year undergraduate students. Originally intended for integrating RPGs into courses on foresight, management, and languages (Lépinard & Vaquiéri, 2019), our work has shifted exclusively towards English teaching. Two initial sets of experiments were conducted in 2020 (in-person) and 2021 (remote) to measure Level 1 of Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model (reaction), identify the most mobilized communicative language skills, and study the particularly natural connections between RPG practice and the implementation of action-oriented pedagogy (Fournier-Noël *et al.*, 2020 ; 2021 : 2022).

Beyond these pedagogical aspects, these experiments allowed us to highlight the logistical constraints that need to be addressed in order to properly implement an RPG in classes. They also demonstrated the benefits of decontextualizing environments (fantasy universes) to facilitate student engagement. All experiments were conducted in exactly the same way over three years, whether concerning class levels, scenarios played, or the time dedicated to the activity (between 2 to 3 hours per session, including briefing and debriefing). The sessions notably allowed students to practice two specific skills: flexibility and precision in English communication. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), flexibility refers to the ability to adapt language to new situations, while precision involves being able to explain something in detail rather than just presenting the main

⁵ EdUTeam project: <https://eduteam.fr/>.

points. Through several self-assessment questionnaires and observations, students and teaching colleagues confirmed that RPGs are a pedagogical modality that motivates the vast majority of participants, enables them to gain confidence in oral communication, and ultimately improves certain skills. However, during a subsequent activity after the RPG sessions, we noticed the presence of pre-existing difficulties among some students. As it stands, our game-oriented approach doesn't seem to be able to address certain deeply rooted gaps in learners, despite real behavioral changes during the gaming phases by these same students. Therefore, we will explore the feasibility of implementing other types of cooperative games with informational asymmetry to diversify communication modalities (during the academic year 2023-2024, for example, we will test the game FIASCO⁶).

The implementation of a fantasy RPG in English teaching clearly demonstrates the value of such game-oriented practice. Students visibly gain confidence and no longer hesitate to speak up. While the development of language skills is also noticeable, the arrangement of multiple pedagogical activities around RPGs and their universe should enhance knowledge acquisition. In fact, during the latest experiments, we asked students the following question: "Would you have liked to have more RPG sessions as part of this English course?" Nearly half of them wished for the entire course to be structured around RPG practice, with only five considering the four sessions to be sufficient. Perhaps it would be possible to envision the design of a fully role-playing course? More broadly, in the context of management education, it would also seem interesting to implement our approach within intercultural management sessions.

3 CONCLUSION

While Valparaiso University's course focused primarily on improving writing skills for native English speakers, and the course at IAE Paris-Est sought to determine whether or not RPGs could effectively aid in English-language learning, students in both courses exhibited several similar benefits. Students demonstrated greater confidence in public speaking, and increased level in student engagement. Furthermore, students from both courses were able to learn more about game design—and writing in English—by working together and communicating through the online platform Discord. As *Dungeons & Dragons*, the original roleplaying game, celebrates its 50th anniversary, the work done at these two universities serves to show the potential for continued pedagogical innovation and collaboration.

⁶ FIASCO : <https://bullypulpitgames.com/products/fiasco>.

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