USE OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Research suggests that game-based education encourages motivation and drives academic progress. Role-playing games integrate challenge, narrative, and collaboration within the overarching theme of character and player development. The review article delves into literature around the international use of role-playing games in education. The findings from multiple qualitative and quantitative research studies are analysed to identify trends and gaps in the research. The findings support the suggestion that role-playing games are being used to develop collaboration and communication skills, and that their educational potential increases when paired with a formal debrief period. Limitations to the current use of role-playing games are identified as varied levels of student and teacher experience with games and small sample sizes of existing studies.

Gathered around an arcane collection of strangely shaped dice, a handful of fifth-graders debate how to best infiltrate the fortress at the center of a haunted forest; an hour later they are working together to solve a dragon's riddle; a week later they are putting those same problem-solving and debate skills to use in a Language Arts classroom. From drill-and-practice activities to role-play exercises, games have long been used by children in education to develop abilities, learn, and perform (Daniau, 2016). Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) such as 1974's foundational Dungeons & Dragons provided a systematic structure for the imagination games of children. This paved the way for the popular RPG video games found today. As new practices and media of play have emerged, educational researchers have looked closely at the ever-changing gaming landscape to adapt these engaging ways of play for use in education. The integration of character development with mastery design within a social context gives RPGs the potential to develop learning skills such as communication, problem solving, and leadership while presenting the learner with narrative agency within the curriculum (Cheville, 2016; Snow, 2008.) How, then, are role-playing games being used by educators? Are multiplayer games, evidenced to drive spontaneous collaboration, knowledge building, and community development (Sancho, Moreno-Ger, Fuentes-Fernandez, & Fernandez-Manjon, 2009), being used to teach learning skills? What are the challenges of introducing RPGs into a classroom of diverse learners with varied gaming experience? I do not remember a time where I was not

fluent and immersed in the world of RPGs. In fact, uncovering my father's original set of dusty 1974 Dungeons & Dragons manuals is one of my most formative memories. I appreciate that my history with these games pre-disposes me to see the benefits of their use, however I believe it does give me a starting point to effectively explore the stated research questions as a teacher candidate. This paper delves into the research around educational role-playing games and the influence of RPG design on course design by shining a light on cases of RPGs being used as texts in the classroom. By exploring the current use of role-playing games in classrooms, educators can make informed decisions around including these games in their classroom practice, and researchers can ground future studies in a more cohesive and complete educational RPG landscape.

Role-playing games differ from educational games by situating their use of mastery model within a narrative driven by character development and advancement. Throughout the course of an RPG, both players and characters develop their skills and demonstrate their rising power by overcoming greater and greater challenges. Some educational game designers have adapted the elements of narrative character progression and open-world interaction into educational RPGs that more closely mirror blockbuster entertainment RPG series such as The Witcher and The Elder Scrolls. Researchers from Texas (Bowman & Standiford, 2015) completed a mixed method case study examining the effectiveness of an educational role-playing intervention into an economically disadvantaged school. A live-action role-playing (LARP) group was invited to establish a series of educational role-playing scenarios designed specifically to address science curriculum content. Scenarios included a murder mystery investigation where students took turns playing forensic scientists, detectives, and suspects; a debate where students assumed the roles of famous scientists from history; a competitive monster-battling exercise in which students attacked each other's monsters using science questions; and an exercise around creating a superhero alter ego based on an element from the periodic table. These interactive experiences embedded clear educational content and science curriculum learning goals into many elements of an RPG: character creation, combat, debate, and investigation. It is worth noting that these experiences took place outdoors and were mediated by LARP group members, not educators. However, these socially mediated RPG experiences led to an increase in interest and enjoyment of science and higher intrinsic motivation throughout the semester. In addition, students expressed that RPG scenarios helped them feel competent in science and enjoy the learning (Bowman & Standiford, 2015). Despite the limited sample size of the study, a single middle school, this demonstrates the potential for RPG intervention within a specific subject area. Although this school experienced success with a LARP intervention, a larger study is needed to assess the methods across wider student demographics, including grade level.

Returning to the stated research questions, we can now see that educators are making use of RPGs in a variety of ways, both in- and out- of the classroom. Multiplayer RPGs are being used to drive collaboration and community-building (Chen & Hwang, 2017; Snow 2008). From computer games rooted in historical worlds to tabletop RPGs designed to tease out social skills, these experiences leverage the mastery model of game design to drive student success. Prager in-character debates during a science fair to group explorations of morality facilitated by an RPG scenario, these games offer opportunities to situate student development within an engaging narrative. They have been used successfully by educators in North America and Asia, resulting in increased reported levels of self-efficacy among students, and increases in student engagement and motivation reported by teachers (Bowman & Standiford, 2015; Cook et al., 2017; Chen & Hwang, 2017, Tarng & Tsai, 2010). Although the examples of educational RPG usage examined in this paper have shown multiple instances of increased short-term engagement, they fail to address how this may change once the novelty of a new classroom practice medium is lost. In addition, educators' lack of gaming experience has been identified as a challenge of using RPGs in education (An & Cao, 2017; Sancho et al., 2009), this may be mediated as the barriers around gaming continue to lessen, awareness of RPGs spreads through educational communities, and the next generation of teachers enter the service.

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