

# Teacher as Game Master: Using Tabletop Role-Playing Games in the Classroom

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## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

In tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), a game master (GM) is responsible for describing how a fictional world reacts to the actions of their players. The GM is described by (Garcia 2016) as a ‘teacher, facilitator, and writer’, with their role including the ability to navigate when to teach the players about the space they are inhabiting and when to allow players to construct their own environment.

The parallels between GMing and teaching make the use of TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974) in a classroom setting a simpler transition for teachers than adopting the use of videogames that require specific digital literacy. The flexibility of worldbuilding in TTRPGs provides opportunities for teachers and students to adapt the world in ways that suit them, allowing teachers to ensure they are communicating relevant learning objectives while letting students feel as though they have agency over their learning experience.

TTRPGs allow players to imagine a character, take on the guise of this character, and orchestrate the development of that character’s narrative—whether by engaging in tactical combat, spatial exploration, or socialisation with other characters (Garcia, 2017). In this way, players can interact with tabletop role-playing in a way that not only suits their preferred method of play (Bartle & Bateman 2009) but that also aligns with their preferred way to learn.

Although an imperfect learning theory, Gardner’s multiple intelligences (Armstrong 2017) suggest the ways varied stimuli might teach similar concepts better depending on the learning preferences of individuals. Those who favour Logical-Mathematical Intelligence will thrive when calculating dice rolls and modifiers, while those with Spatial Intelligence will benefit from visualising (or possibly drawing) the finite details provided to them by the GM when an environment is described. Students with Interpersonal Intelligence will engage in strategised conversations with non-player characters, while those of Bodily-Kinaesthetic Intelligence will enjoy the physicality of rolling dice and demonstrating the actions of their character. With a classroom containing a variety of individuals—each with their own favoured learning styles—TTRPGs allow teachers an access point for appealing to as many of those styles as possible with one system.

Although many TTRPGs exist, the learning benefits of *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* have been most widely explored. Kaylor (2017) suggests that *D&D* can improve the literacy skills of individuals who play them, providing an example of a student who described himself as dyslexic and ‘having poor reading skills’ whose reading improved after he became invested in *D&D* and its accompanying collection of books and manuals. Kade Wells, a teacher from Houston, Texas, also uses *D&D* in his classroom to aid with teaching literacy skills—as well as numeracy and critical thinking (Wizards of the Coast 2015). Wells presented his experiences at the 2015 World Literacy Conference in Austria, where he discussed the positive impact of using *D&D* on the grades of his students.

In addition to meeting learning objectives such as literacy and numeracy, TTRPGs can be used in classroom settings to help students develop new strengths and interests, develop a better understanding of themselves, and foster self-confidence (Daniau 2016). This is due to way TTRPGs encourage players to experiment with being somebody unlike themselves. For example, an introvert might be able to play an extroverted character and interact with their classmates in new ways, practising confidence (Gilsdorf 2018). TTRPGs like *D&D* have been used as a treatment for anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions (Blackmon 1994), and thus have the potential to provide students with an outlet for expressing themselves in addition to teaching them general academic skills.

Although the transition from teacher to game master is potentially simpler than to the facilitator of a digital game, it is still not a seamless one for somebody with limited experience with TTRPGs. Many teachers grew up experiencing the ‘satanic panic’ prevalent in the 1980s which, although combated by *D&D* writers in years since (Riggs 2016), was part of the media narrative long enough that some teachers may still be resistant to its use.

Even teachers who are open to using TTRPG systems in their classrooms may struggle with understanding how to implement it. To facilitate the use of TTRPGs by open-minded teachers in high school classrooms, we will be presenting a framework for their use, as well as several examples of how this could be applied. This framework will generalised so as to apply to multiple TTRPGs, and will be made publicly available after the conference. Further, we will be outlining potential for further research including the testing of this framework within the school system.

## **BIO**

Michael Smith is a Serious Games student at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He has been playing *Dungeons and Dragons* regularly for three years, and is an excellent dungeon master in his own right (or so his friends say). He is passionate about the way games can bring people together, and always has an overflowing pile of boardgames in the back of his car.

Dr Alayna Cole is a sessional course coordinator and lecturer in Serious Games at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She holds a doctorate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) and has broad research interests, but is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. She is currently researching the representation of queer identities in games from the mid-1980s to present.

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