All Players Are Equal: Playing With The Rules In An *Animal Farm* D&D Adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Games can be profound catalysts for pivotal learning experiences. For decades, the connection between games, play, and learning has drawn significant interdisciplinary attention from educators, game designers, and scholars (e.g., Bellotti et al. 2010; Gee 2003; Plass et al. 2020; Squire 2011; Vygotsky 1978). My research contributes insight from a non-digital case study to both 'academic games' (Gómez-Maureira et al. 2022) and 'game-based learning' discourses (e.g., Naik 2015; Plass et al. 2015; Tobias et al. 2014). In this presentation, I overview preliminary playtest data from a *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D] game I designed—based on George Orwell's classic novel *Animal Farm* (1945)—to highlight the transformational learning opportunities offered by leveraging game mechanics (e.g., Logas 2011; May et al. 2014; Sidhu & Carter 2021).

DESIGNING A PIVOTAL PLAY EXPERIENCE

Data was collected from playtests (3 groups, 12 participants total) of a short standalone D&D game—colloquially referred to as a one-shot. The one-shot involved participants role-playing characters (e.g., pig, dog, donkey, horse) and being guided through a series of narrative events similar to those within *Animal Farm*. As in the novel, rules and character abilities were consistently altered. Participants in the playtests had varying levels of D&D play experience and teaching experience. Based on prior research and findings (e.g., Sidhu 2022; Sidhu & Carter 2021; Sidhu et al. 2021), the one-shot was designed to address key Stage 4 and 5 [Years 7-10] NSW English Syllabus Outcomes (NESA 2022) and provide players with the opportunity to experience a pivotal learning moment. *Animal Farm* was selected as it remains a suggested text for study—and is still widely taught—in Stage 4 and 5 classrooms (Board of Studies NSW 2012). Additionally, the novel's exploration of hierarchies of power and the impact of language correlate with broader discussions in the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) community about fixed game mechanics and rules. This presented an intriguing premise for the one-shot.

CHALLENGING RULES, ROLES, AND EXPECTATIONS

> *"'Fools! Fools!' shouted Benjamin, prancing round them and stamping the earth with his small hoofs. 'Fools! Do you not see what is written on the side of that van?'"* – Benjamin the donkey (In 'Animal Farm' by Orwell, 70)

When asked to reflect on any pivotal learning experiences they had during the one-shot, participants from all three playtests described the incident involving the dog character. In every playtest, the dog character would be removed from the game via a slaughterhouse van solicited by the pig character(s). This mirrored a provocative incident in the novel where Boxer—a horse protagonist—was taken to a knacker. As not all characters in the one-shot were given the ability to read, players of the donkey character—who were able to read the side of the van—were faced with a choice: 1) alert the others about the situation or 2), decide not to say anything. In conjunction with this, players of pig characters were directed by game rules to persuade the donkey character into staying silent in exchange for greater in-game privileges and abilities. In two out of three of the playtests, players of the donkey character chose to say nothing.

All three participants that played the donkey characters were conflicted between what the rules of their character dictated they should do in that situation versus what they wanted their character to do. One participant noted that "the description and personalities [of the characters] are quite thorough but not prescriptive. There's a strong guideline implied but you end up making all the decisions." However, the flexibility in interpretation of the rules was also used to justify the subversion of player and narrative expectations. One participant reflected that they were "about to save [the dog character] but I wanted to surprise everyone at the last second. I kind of surprised myself actually, but it was really interesting seeing the fall out and was definitely the standout moment of the game for me." The rigid characterisations and rules for players were in direct opposition to the perceived flexibility in role-play.

The above responses point towards the impact that game mechanics and rules have in creating and facilitating pivotal play moments. The rules of the one-shot guided players into a compelling play experience that exemplified how power and rules could be co-opted and corrupted—a core message of the novel. To better understand games and their inherent learning affinities, it is necessary to continue experimenting with their design so that new pedagogies and ways of learning with games can be uncovered.

BIO

Premeet Sidhu is a PhD student at The University of Sydney. Her PhD focuses on understanding the modern resurgence and appeal of the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D]. Her current research interests include investigating how meaningful player experiences in both digital and non-digital games can be applied and considered in education and pedagogy.

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