Surveying the Perspectives of Middle and High School Educators Who Use Role-playing Games as Pedagogy

Abstract: This qualitative study analyzes interviews from 11 educators who use TTRPGs as pedagogy to identify common perspectives about what benefits these games bring to their classrooms. Findings across settings include practitioner reports of increased engagement, new social connections, the development of affinity groups, and a lowering of perceived social stakes for students in the setting. Additionally, teachers described a change in student attitudes about success in the classroom from an individualistic to collectivist stance. These findings are then examined through Gary Alan Fine's TTRPG Frame Theory. Also noted is the lack of connection between the current work of RPG scholars and the work of these practitioners.

Keywords: middle school, high school, Frame Theory, education, practitioner perspective

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academics have been publishing work on using role-playing games and games in learning settings for years (Gee 2007; Gee 2012; McGonigal 2012; Zagal and Deterding 2024). Hammer et al. (2024) tell us that effective learning with RPGs happens when learning theories are aligned with the strengths of role-play and are appropriately supported by the learning environment. This is not new news. In fact, John Dewey was writing about play in learning over 100 years ago, (Brickman and Cordasco 1970).

At the same time, a number of educators have made the observation that using role-playing games (RPGs) or tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) in middle and high school classrooms has been an engaging and fruitful way to teach content and social skills to a wide variety of students. There remains a disconnect between the theoretical work of these RPG scholars and an understanding of how current educators are actually utilizing role-playing games in their own classrooms.

Although there is informal use of RPGS as pedagogy in K-12 educational settings, researchers and educators do not have a common universal understanding as to what learning RPGs (LRPGs) add to student learning beyond game-based motivation (Plass et al. 2015).

There is a lack of consensus among practicing K-12 educators themselves on some of the most fundamental terms and concepts. For example, some practitioners describe their work as "gamification" (Sederquist 2018; Thompson 2019; Landry Games Studio 2020), while others describe the community as "TTRPG-educators" (Fischer 2021) or "champion[s] for #RPGsinschools" (Reznichek 2021). This adds additional layers of complexity when discussing even the basics of this practice.

Is this because practitioners simply have not gelled around common terminology to describe what they are seeing? Or could it be that practitioners have very different objectives and understandings of what RPGS in the classroom do as pedagogy? What is driving these educators to independently come to the use of RPGs? What do educators understand to be the value of this methodology for their students? Why are educators not using current academic research? There is much work still to do.

2. THE IMPACT OF RPGS ON STUDENT PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENCE TAKING

In the US, there has been a recent boom in using TTRPGs as therapeutic tools for social skills and counseling, headed by organizations such as Game to Grow, The Bodhana Group, and Geek

Therapeutics. One of the inherent parts of an RPG is taking on the role of someone other than oneself. As Carnes (2014) describes, this character does not need to have experiences available to the real life of the person. Through a game, the player can vicariously experience some of the emotional process of "living through" the in-game events, albeit with much lowered stakes (Gee 2007). "Game experiences, therefore, become part of the player's intellectual and emotional history, which future educational experiences can build on to construct new meanings" (Hammer et al. 2024).

Kilmer et al. (2023) describe the social emotional benefits for youth who play TTRPGs, including providing a "sandbox" environment to learn and make mistakes, practice interpersonal conflict with lowered stakes, and have the opportunity to participate in complex social and ethical reflection. It is clear that TTRPGs can have a positive social-emotional impact on players, but for use in the classroom, there is also an inherent need to forward the academic goals and curriculum of the class using the game. Although there are stand-alone studies that show success using RPGs in the classroom (Zalka 2012; Bowman and Standiford 2015; da Rocha 2018; Cullinan and Wood 2024), the use of role-playing games in K-12 settings remains an under-researched area of study.

3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TOOLS

An informal community of educators is describing using RPGs as a successful pedagogy in their classrooms. However, one of the great challenges of analyzing successful pedagogy is determining what success means, and then devising a way to measure that. For the purposes of this study, I chose to allow practitioners to self-identify as utilizing RPGs in a "successful" way. My intention was to find out what they believed success to look like in their classrooms, and if there were themes that stretched between settings.

An established way for qualitative researchers to uncover themes between the experiences of participants is the use of interviews (Kvale 1996). This is especially true when researchers find data feasibility to be indistinct and/or researcher are attempting to examine a phenomenon rather than just record it (Ruslin et. al. 2022).

Interviews can be done as structured interviews that stick to established questions only, as semi-structured interviews that have established questions, but also allow for other conversation, or unstructured interviews, which follow a more unstructured conversational path (Kvale 1996; Holstein and Gubrium 2001). Semi-structured interviews are directed but adaptable, allowing the researcher to record more in-depth answers to questions than a fully structured interview. However, it has more structure than an open-ended conversation, allowing the interview to keep focused on the topic at hand (Ruslin et. al. 2022).

Alternatively, researchers may choose to use questionnaires when they seek a broader, but more superficial understanding or case studies or ethnographic interviews when they want to narrow their focus but increase depth of understanding (Ruslin et. al. 2022).

3.1 Research Question

What benefits do practitioners see in the use of RPGs in their classrooms? The current body of research is missing the answers to this basic question. The intention of this paper is to create a description of what is driving teachers to the RPGs as learning tools in 5-12th grade classrooms. What do these teachers believe are the benefits for learners in their classrooms?

To this end, I interviewed 5-12th grade educators who use RPGs as pedagogy in their classrooms, to determine why they felt the use of TTRPGs in their setting was worthwhile and answer the question: what are educators' shared perspectives on the benefits of TTRPGs in their diverse academic settings?

4. METHODS

4.1 Context

To gather data for this qualitative study, I interviewed teachers who self-identify as using role-playing games or gamification as a major part of their pedagogy. Interviewees were recruited from RPGs in education Discord servers, Twitter posts, recommendations from other practitioners, and my direct recruitment of teachers who had previously used #gamemyclass hashtags in Twitter posts. This study was approved through the IRB of Lesley University. After the initial contact via social media, participants had the opportunity to preview questions before the interview session. They gave both written permission before the interview and oral permission at the beginning of the interview. Participants also had the opportunity to review their answers before any research analysis began.

Interviewees selected met the following criteria for setting, student age and pedagogy. They each teach in a public or private school setting (as opposed to home school, club, or afterschool settings). They taught student populations between 5th and 12th grades, (approximately 10-18 years old), and self-identified as using RPGS as a major part of their pedagogy in the classroom setting, although their schools did not use RPGs as a major part of the overall curriculum, unlike Østerskov Efterskole in Denmark and other more experimental schools. Eleven interviewees met these criteria. Nine of the teachers self-identified as using role-playing games, and two self-identified as using gamification in their classrooms, but functionally did similar work within their classrooms. Seven of the teachers currently work in the USA, and four work outside of the USA (See Figure 1).

4.2 Participants

Semi-structured interviews occurred in October and November of 2022. Participants were asked the following questions, as well as clarifying or follow-up questions as appropriate to deepen interviewer understanding. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, when appropriate, the conversation went beyond the established questions, to add more depth of explanation and context (Ruslin et al. 2022).

- Describe yourself and your educational setting.
- What do the terms gamification and RPGs in education mean to you?
- Describe how you use RPGs/Gamification in your educational setting.
- What drawbacks do you see, or challenges do you find with this method?
- What impact, if any, do you think RPGs have in your classroom for academic skills?
- What impact, if any, do you think RPGs in your classroom have on SEL?
- What impact, if any, do you think RPGs in your classroom have on Executive Functioning?
- What advice do you have for people who want to use RPGs in the classroom?
- What else should I know?
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The interviews lasted approximately between 35-55 minutes. They were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom. Transcripts were later lightly edited for clarity, spelling, and grammar by the author. To ensure the validity of the data collected, transcripts were returned to participants, as a form of member checking, so they could review and annotate the transcript if they wished. This allowed them to add or subtract any details from the transcript before coding. Eight of the eleven participants responded directly to this step, and two participants added or changed demographic details.

Figure 1: Demographics of Participants

	Gender	Country	Subject	Student grade level	Type of school	Stand alone or embedded	Self-Defined Gamified or RPG
1	M	USA	Social Studies	9th-12th Mixed High	Suburban public	Stand alone	RPG
2	M	USA	Band	6th-8th Mixed Middle	Urban public magnet	Embedded	RPG
3	F	Canada	English & Theater	9th-12th High	Rural public	Embedded	RPG
4	M	USA	Health	5th-8th Middle	Suburban public	Stand alone	RPG
5	M	Cambodia	English & Public speaking	9th-11th Mixed High	ESL Private	Stand alone	RPG
6	M	Canada	All (self-contained)	5th Elementary	Public suburban	Embedded	gamified
7	M	Canada	All (self-contained)	6th Elementary	Suburban Public	Embedded	gamified
8	M	USA	English & Science	5th Elementary	Suburban/ rural Public	Stand alone	RPG
9	M	USA	AP Calculus	12th High	ESL Private	Embedded	RPG
10	M	USA	English & History	6th and 7th Middle	Small K-12 private school	Stand alone	RPG
11	m	USA	Title 1 English, Advanced English	7th and 8th Middle	Setting 1: urban public Setting 2: suburban Public	Stand alone	RPG

4.3 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using applied thematic analysis (ATA) (Guest et al. 2012). ATA is a positivist/interpretive approach that requires themes to be supported through text evidence and is suited to "finding solutions to real-world problems" (17).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Emergent themes and subthemes fell into three major groups. Theme one was the structural and pedagogical impacts on teaching. Subthemes include "phenomenon-based learning," a centering on student emotional experiences and differentiation of class work. Theme two was social emotional learning. Subthemes include games as semi-structured learning and social experiences, the emergence of affinity groupings and a shift in what students feel is winning, as seen through the lens of Fine's Frame Theory. Theme three was the educator's personal history of connection to RPGs, but a lack of connection to established edu-RPG research, in the rational of why teachers began teaching with edu-RPGs in their classrooms.

      Note that the greater TTRPG community has been in conversation about the importance of safety tools to help ensure a positive prosocial experience in role-play games (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2024). Due to the improvisational nature of RPGs, it is possible that players may delve into content that, even unintentionally, becomes upsetting or harmful to one or more players. Because the educators in this survey are working within a school context, there is an assumption that the behavior of student players and the content of the games will fall within the established structures of the school setting. Additionally, teachers are there to act as mediators and mentors in such situations, as they regularly do as part of their professional responsibilities. Although safety tools are not a focus of the findings here, that is because of the underlying assumption that school norms and classroom safety tools will be used in an educational setting. This is an important part of any healthy role-playing group experience. Additionally, it is beholden on the educators to make sure that any TTRPG experience is thoughtfully designed not to reinforce negative stereotypes, racism, and other problematic tropes that can come up in a storytelling format (Hammer et al. 2024).

5.1 Structural and Pedagogical Impacts to Teaching

Teachers who participated in this research described their own reflexivity as being student-centered, inquiry-centered, and cooperative learning-based. They also described the limitations and expectations of their curricula as impacting what they could do in the classroom setting. The structures and freedom of TTRPGs helps them bridge the gap between their reflexivity and the reality of modern teaching. Responses from participants fell into the following subthemes of the structural and pedagogical impacts to their teaching.

5.2 Phenomenon-Based Educational Experiences as Engagement

Phenomenon-based science is an approach where students are introduced to an engaging phenomenon that is not easily understood at first glance, allowing them to ask questions, create theories and draw on multiple areas of science (NOAA 2023). One of the teachers interviewed described this and compared RPGs in his classroom to this teaching method. He called it "phenomenon-based English," and this sums up a lot of what educators described.

The engagement with the plot of the game -- including challenging problems, and choices with consequences -- pushed students to utilize their academic and teamwork skills. As noted by Winardi and Septania, "The draw of using RPG in education mainly comes from its benefit to simulate a group dynamic and presenting a scenario that otherwise would not be encountered in daily life to provoke creativity and critical thinking" (2023, 7). The classroom RPG makes for engaging use of newly learned content and skills beyond rote recitation. Although there may be specific puzzles or events within the fiction of an RPG that have a correct answer, the overall approach towards solving problems and forwarding the plot is open ended, giving students a reason to think creatively and engage with the content and skills they have.

Participants described observing character analysis, perspective taking, quick multidisciplinary thinking, referencing texts, the use of content learning to support in game decisions, numeracy, vocabulary growth and peer to peer feedback, among other observations of student behavior in their classroom. They drew a direct line from student interest in the in-fiction events of the game to an emerging classroom culture of discovery. A self-contained 5th grade teacher said:

> You're going to get cooperation and that gets into the other areas. A sense of urgency and need to do the work. Those are things that are authentic that make the educational aspect of it real. [A student might say] "I have to know how to calculate Pythagorean's theorem because I need to do this right now. It's not just something that Mrs. Hozwaltz wants me to memorize so I could spit it out on a test later. I gotta go kill Duke Yoyobutthead because he done poison the water hole and I'm going to get him!"

The emerging collaborative fictional world spilled over into the real-life culture of the classroom as students became more interested in utilizing their emerging skills and content knowledge to solve immediate in-fiction problems.

5.3 A Centering on Student Emotional Experiences (Real and Fictional)

More specifically, the use of student generated fictional characters gave many teachers a way to connect kids more intimately to the intricacies of content standards on an emotional level. They reported that students had more motivation and interest in working on assignments that involved their characters - for example, calculating the damage their character could do, creating backstories, connecting characters with the hero's journey, genres, and archetypes.

Although these characters are not real, and the experiences students had while playing these characters are not real, the teachers described the emotional connection students have to their characters being quite real. The specific events of the game, or interests and skills of the character helped students make choices in what to study and what plot choices to make.

RPG researchers describe the impact of the emotions of the fictional character on the player, and vice-versa, as *bleed* (Bowman 2015). Students can feel the joy of success as their characters and become invested in their progress. They become invested in the story of these character and want to see them be successful.

However, when there is in-game failure or something unexpected happens, players can also separate themselves from their character. It is not the student who made the error, it was the fictional character. This is called *alibi* (Bowman 2015). This lowers the social and emotional stakes of failure, and allows students to try to work with academic concepts multiple times without fearing judgment from peers or teachers.

5.4 Differentiation of Work

Additionally, the fictional layer of plot in the classroom allowed for differentiation of work to happen within a classroom context. As described above, students made choices in what to study based on their characters or plot. If an in-game group of students became interested in a specific subject due to the plot of their game, the entire group might research and learn content with value to them, while other groups studied something else. This could happen on an individual level as well, easily adding opportunities for enrichment and extension. The fictional game provided a more authentic reason to do work and allowed for differentiation while allowing all groups to learn the same skill set.

Also, within the context of the plot, the teachers, as moderators, can give a variety of levels of challenge to different students within the same classroom, with the same goals of solving an in-game mystery. A 7th and 8th grade English teacher said:

> I can say that using it as a tool is not only good for English… but it also seems to affect all the other disciplines that people would want a tool to affect. You can't be dumb and play [RPGs]. Say a kid starts and you think there's no way they're going to be able to play this game. If you could teach them to play that game, they're no longer that kid anymore. They're going to be able to learn any system that you want them to. So academically, I'll say that the challenges provided by the game are enough for some of the highest learners to be challenged. Of course, the lower learners are challenged, but the incentive is there to attempt, because the idea of playing a game at all, no matter how much or little they understand what they're actually doing, is enough to allure them into at least sitting there with you and helping them fill it out. It's an incredibly powerful tool and I've seen it do almost miracle work.

5.5 Impact on Student Relationships

5.5.1 RPGS as Transformative Semi-Structured Social and Learning Experiences

Participants described RPGs as semi structured social experiences in the classroom that provide support and opportunities for students to make social or academic mistakes in a supportive space. Because RPGs are collective storytelling experiences that occur over time, there is an opportunity for reflection and a reason for students to come back to the table and discuss intragroup friction or player disagreements (Kilmer et al. 2023). This is different from group work. What the participants describe is more akin to an affinity space, as coined by Gee (2017).

5.6 RPGS in Context - RPGs as Affinity Spaces

Affinity spaces, as defined by Gee (2004; 2017), are primarily online spaces that have two defining features: a portal and an endeavor. They are bounded spaces where people with the same interests come together to discuss these interests. A Discord server to share fan theories about *The Bachelor*, or a subreddit about fixing antique Fords might be an affinity space. But affinity spaces are more than a place to gather. They are spaces where people have a common affinity for solving the same kinds of problems (Gee 2017).

Affinity spaces have common endeavor, low bias, multiple routes to leadership, shared expertise, varied levels and kinds of participation and content creation, and passionate members (Halaczkiewicz 2020). Because of this, there is an ebb and flow of leadership and power within the group. As tasks change or different subjects become the focus, different members of the group can take leadership roles

and provide expertise. This is a non-hierarchical system where anyone can make content, ask questions and provide leadership based on their emerging expertise (Gee 2017).

RPGs in classrooms function as an emergent in-person affinity space. Some teachers described RPG games with a whole class divided into smaller factions or guilds. In other classes, there are multiple independent games going on within the same space. In each case, the boundaries of the affinity group(s) are with whoever else is playing in the same fiction. Unlike in most spaces, where the passion for the shared endeavor builds the community, classrooms, by function, must begin with the group of students who share the classroom. RPGs as pedagogy allows for the building of shared endeavor within the fictional space over time. As the high school Drama and English teacher in the study explained:

> My students identify with one another better all of a sudden. Community is being created in a way, and especially in an area like ours where the strata is so diverse. I have found that to really break down stereotypes and to break down divisions between the social groups in our school, the second they have to cooperate and learn to communicate with one another... They'll ask each other more about their day, and then I hear them having more conversations in the hallway and bullying becomes a little less, at least in my classroom and when I'm around those students, they've been forced to work as a team, they've been forced to take turns and listen, truly, actively listen to one another.

Whitton (2018) described specific playful learning tactics for the classroom. These include role-play or storytelling; engendering empathy for characters and imaginative story generation; including elements of public performance to a group; and the act of making things. Whitton notes the importance of having a safe place to fail and try again. RPGs inherently include the majority of these tactics. Additionally, RPGs, as games, have explicit rules and participant roles that allow for scaffolding and guardrails as students develop interpersonal skills. The game format takes some of the implicit social rules of interaction and makes them explicit within the game setting: turn taking, points, success/failure, resource management.

Participants described how this allows for increased purpose and lower stakes in academic work. Additionally, it allows for immediate social feedback in fiction that is lower stakes than in real life. RPG play encourages practice of emotional regulation, teamwork, patience, thoughtful risk taking, and empathy in students because they have a shared goal of progressing within the fiction with their team. The fictional nature of the game allows for student alibi (Bowman 2015) as described above, lowering the perceived social stakes for failure in the classroom. Thus, failure often became humorous, and the structure of the game allows for students to reassess the situation and try again, instead of lashing out or giving up.

Adolescent loneliness is associated with a lack of positive social relationships at school and home (Yang and Petersen 2020). The development of new social connections, friendships, and affinity groups within the class are crucial to student development as learners and as people.

Teachers who use RPGs in their classrooms described a deepening of friendships, the emergence of new friend groups based on their RPG groups, not social cliques, and students returning years later to talk about in-fiction events together. Daniau (2016) found that RPGs are effective to foster growth of content knowledge, team building, collaborative creativity, and assist with personal growth and exploration. As Coe says, "Once participants experience the many motivating processes of [RPGs] they continue playing because there are multiple layers of processes that allow them to meet psychological, social, emotional, and developmental needs and drives in a manner that propels them to continue playing" (2017, 2857).

5.6.1 A Change in What "Winning School" Means to a More Collectivist Stance

Teachers interviewed for this project clearly had a passion for their games and spent much of the interview describing the fictional world they and their students had created. Whitton describes the fictional magic circle as being key to playful learning; it is an environment in which many real-world rules can be transformed and evolved. Key to the pedagogical rationale for using playful learning in education is support for the spirit of play, development of intrinsic motivation and the positive construction of failure as part of the process (Whitton 2018).

Participants in this study describe this as well. Although participants spent much of their time in their interviews describing the fictional world of the classroom, the most interesting results were the explicit and implicit descriptions of a shift in the community-based thinking and strategic gameplay thinking of students. We can use Fine's Frame Theory to unpack this further.

5.7 RPGs in Context: Gary Alan Fine's Three Frames Theory

The foundational text about learning and thinking in the brains of RPG players was written by Gary Alan Fine in 1983, in his book *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Fine's work proposed a three framed system within the minds of role-players as they played a game together. These consist of a primary (self/social) frame inhabited by the actual people playing, a secondary (strategic/ game) frame inhabited by the strategic thinking done by players, and tertiary (diegetic) frame inhabited by the fictional characters, such as in game dialogue, dramatic irony within the plot, and the emotions of the characters within the fictional context of the story (Fine 2002). This is similar to the results found by Eseryel et al. (2014) in their study of play relationship to computer games.

5.7.1 Self/Social Frame

Fine's first frame is an acknowledgement that the game is played by human people. There are skill sets that must be utilized to facilitate the event taking place, and a participant's inclusion in this event. These include time management, turn taking, group dynamics, understanding social norms of the group, body regulation, and attentional regulation.

5.7.2 Strategic/Game Frame

The second frame, the in-game frame, observes the participant as a strategist within the context of the game rules. In this frame, the participant is "gaming the system" – using the resources, rules and items they have within the game to work towards the best outcome for participants individually and/or as a group. This is the frame of boardgame players, poker players, and sports, where the quantitative aspects of the game are found. This may include teamwork with other players, using combined resources to assist in the goal, or working against them. This is the frame of planning, logical thinking and resource management. This is also the frame of dice rolling and calculating moves based on the intersection of resources, dice roll outcomes, and character stats.

5.7.3 In-Fiction/Diegetic Frame

The third frame Fine describes is the in-game fictional world of play, also known as the diegetic frame or *magic circle* where participants role-play as characters within the agreed upon fiction (Stenros

2014). This is the frame where people make choices in-character that may or may not be choices they themselves would make in the social frame. The magic circle of play is another metaphor that acts as a shorthand for a more complex set of social interactions that create the in-game space (Stenros 2014). Although there is some disagreement about exactly what the magic circle means, one can observe that between the participants of imaginary play, there are spoken and unspoken agreements about what is within the fiction.

5.8 Fine's Three Frame Theory in Action

Respondents described how, previous to RPG gameplay, students had a competitive or individualistic sense of how to "play the school game." Students might be competitive over who got the best grade on a quiz, or at least were aware that their progress in the class was unrelated to the progress of the student next to them. However, one of the emergent themes of this research is the change in how students now viewed success.

Through the emergence of affinity groups and strategic play of RPGs is a student shift to a more collectivist and empathic view of success for themselves in relation to others in the class. Although students could still succeed individually, the success of their classmates directly impacted the fictional world they had co-created as well. Nel Noddings' Care Philosophy (1986) is based on the concept that future moral choices are built on the memories of caring and being cared for. The collective stakes of the in-fiction story have allowed students to begin to care about each other, and their success, in new ways. Students were able to use their understanding of how to "win school" to shift from caring about their own progress to caring about the progress of everyone within their affinity group.

A self-contained 6th grade teacher in the study stated:

> My class functions much like, say, Hogwarts houses, right? They have a group that they are with the entire year and they don't succeed individually, they succeed as a collective. So, the idea is that 'Yes my own success is important, but I'm not the only one that can contribute to that.' The same would be true about failure. If you've got a student that struggles in a certain way, we need to circle around that person and lift them up and make sure that we give them what they need.

An RPG is inherently a collective storytelling endeavor. The success or failure of the group happens together, not because of any one person. With the emergence of an affinity space, different students can take leadership, have ideas, and build content for the group as the circumstances change. Students learn from each other and lean on each other's strengths. Students who are not the leaders in traditional classrooms may have a divergent point of view or different set of skills, allowing students to see each other in a different light. In this way, the group begins to rely on each other and help each other, instead of competing or discounting each other's performance within the class. As the band teacher said, "If they don't talk together and work together on that, there's no community, so [the in-class RPG] really helped with that and those kids that are in 8th grade now that went through that experience, they're all the closest of friends."

Given the complex interplay between the social, strategic, and diegetic frames of thinking in RPGs, this pedagogy allows for learning that can be harnessed by thoughtful educators to create opportunities for growth well beyond the explicit learning of facts, or extrinsic motivators of other types of educational games. Students are learning in many ways at the same time while they think they are just concentrating on the fictional aspects of the game.

5.9 A Personal Connection to RPGS and a Disconnect from RPG Research

5.9.1 My Experience

As a classroom educator myself, I found myself drawn to RPGs as educational tools because they were a solution to many conundrums at the same time – building classroom community, the possibility of differentiation, a greater impetus for students to work well together, privileging creative solutions, and fun. Unlike many of the educators interviewed, I did not play RPGs as a child, although I was a theater kid.

I knew I could not be the only person who had ever thought of using edu-RPGs as a regular part of teaching in the 5-12th grade school classroom. I was first introduced to the informal community of educators using RPGs in their classrooms through an article about Scott Hebert (CBC News 2018). He is an educator in Alberta, Canada, who had transformed his science classroom into a year-long role-playing game. This was the first time I had ever seen someone else doing what I was trying to do. Hebert suggested that Twitter was the place that educators came together to discuss what they were doing (Scott Hebert, email communication to author, October 9, 2018). Through hashtags like #gamemyclass, and later, community Discord servers, I found other educators. Four years later, the informal community of online educators became the basis for the recruitment of participants for this study.

As I became more interested in the theoretical and academic justifications for the use of edu-RPGs, outside of my own lived experience, and that of my edu-RPG-using colleagues, I was challenged to find peer-reviewed research on this topic. When I gave presentations at conferences on this topic, teachers frequently asked about academic research on the use of RPGs in the classroom, and no one seemed to know where to find any. There was a disconnect between any published research and the educators who might need it. This was why I began doing this work.

5.9.2 The Participants (Don't) Speak Out

My personal experience with discovering RPGs for the classroom was mirrored in the stories of my participants. Although I did not ask directly about how participants came to use edu-RPGs as pedagogy, the majority of interviewees mentioned their own experiences with TTPRGs and/or boardgames as impetus for utilizing them in the classroom. Participants either described childhood TTRPG games as being formative for them, or they described discovering TTRPGs and boardgames as adults, and wanting to take the camaraderie and creativity of these genres to their classrooms. A fifth-grade teacher described how he began using edu-RPGs as an enrichment for advanced learners.

> The idea of gamification in my class started off as a way to challenge my enrichment students. I had a lot of students that were very high achievers and that were able to do the work very quickly. So, I was looking for something that would keep them occupied, while the other class was working on the required curriculum… I dabbled in a little bit of like role-playing games as a teenager… I did *Magic the Gathering* a little bit… I kind of knew of game mechanics and I play some board games. [Edu-RPGs] allowed me to take all those things and steal what I could to take the best of that and build my game. From that idea of wanting to help those students that need that enrichment I thought, why just them, right? Why not make it for everybody? Let's make this a full class thing. Anyone can do this enrichment thing! And then it grew.

Another teacher said:

> [A friend] had just gotten me into *D&D* and I was sitting there and I was like, man, this is really cool game, I really enjoy. This this fun! I heard Dragon Talk and Greg Tito and Shelly Masanobu talking to some educators and I believe it was a psychologist who was talking about how he used *D&D* as a part of the RPG therapy experience. [Dragon Talk: Teaching with D&D, 6/11/18] I was just like - Oh. This is great. I could do this. This is awesome, I love it.

Another teacher mentioned how he turned to RPG games in the classroom to increase engagement and manage behaviors. He said, "I needed a behavior management strategy that was different and [gamified online behavior management system] Class Dojo was a little too young for them. These kids who are out running drugs on the streets, don't really care about the little class Dojo monster… they needed more."

However, not one participant mentioned any academic research or theoretical basis for their use of edu-RPGs in their classroom. Each one of them had drawn on person experiences, or the experiences of other teachers and/or RPG stakeholders in the growth of their own edu-RPG.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The eleven educators interviewed for this study all value RPGs as pedagogy in their classrooms. They describe the many ways that they have observed the culture of their classrooms, the behavior of their students, and their own teaching as shifting through the use of this collective fictional storytelling framework. They describe observing more engaged learners, the creation of affinity spaces and a shift in the way students view success in their classroom. They did not mention academic research into RPGs as a motivator or support for their work.

The implication is that participants feel that RPGs have been a successful way for to have their students experience curricula. Teachers are still directing the learning to follow the content standards required by their setting, but they report that the use of RPGs gives opportunity for student centered learning, differentiation within the curricula, and increased student engagement.

Although the teachers are not in regular contact with each other, they have come to many of the same conclusions independently, based on observations of what works well for their students in the classroom setting and their personal social history with games.

Additionally, this research suggests that the work done by academic RPG researchers is not trickling down to the 5-12th grade educational practitioners that might benefit from it. There is a need for greater connection between 5-12th grade educators working with students based on their personal experiences and academics who research the theoretical grounding for this work.

7. CONCLUSION

The participants of this study have all independently decided to use this pedagogy. They are continuing to experiment with the format, rules, systems and content of their games. However, there are clear threads of purpose that weave between pedagogy in each classroom. The emergence of game-based affinity groupings between students, semi-structured social environments, and increased student effort and engagement are some of the key benefits that have been reported across settings regardless of age of students, location or content area taught.

This study is intended to be a descriptor of how educators in classroom settings understand the benefits they see from the use of this pedagogy. Additionally, I hope to begin to build a bridge between

the theoretical academic work being done and the in-classroom work of educators. It is my hope that this can be a foundational text to ask more complex questions about how to use RPGs most effectively for 5-12th grade students' academic, social and emotional learning.

Given these shared benefits across settings, additional research should be done studying classroom RPGs in more detail and design games to most effectively create desired circumstances. Much more additional research and communication between academic researchers and practicing teachers is needed to understand and assist educators in developing and utilizing this pedagogy as effectively as possible for their learners.

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