



# **ROLEPLAYING GAMES IN THE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Brian David Phillips

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The following is an early draft of a paper presented to the *Tenth National Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China* - 15 May 1993. The full paper has been published in the *Proceedings* (Taipei: Crane Publishing, Ltd., 1994, 625-648).

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## **Role-Playing Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom**

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*"Role-Playing is getting together with some friends to write a story. It's joining around a campfire or dining room to spin some tall tales. Role-playing is being creative and having fun with friends.*

*In most role-playing games, one person plays the 'referee,' who can be thought of as the 'Editor' of the story. The Editor will, with input from you if you desire to give any, describe a world, or setting. You and your friends, as Players, will take a character and protagonist in this world, and guide your character through the story that you and your friends are creating."*

**- Jerry Stratton,  
What Is Role-Playing?**

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As part of our search to find classroom activities which facilitate language learning and yet provide students the opportunity to creatively use the language in a non-structured way, many English teachers have turned to *dialogues*, *open-ended scenarios*, and *role plays*. There has of late been a movement towards even more free form classroom activities which are similar to the more traditional *role plays* but which descend more from serious gaming activities than from *improvisational theatre*. In this paper, I will discuss the use of **Role Playing Games (RPGs)** in the *English as a Foreign Language Classroom*.

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## **THE NATURE OF RPGS**

First, **RPGs** should be distinguished from *Language Role Plays*, *Classroom Dramas*, and other more commonly employed classroom language learning exercises which teachers attending the conference may be more familiar with. **RPGs** are games played on a tabletop with pencil, paper, dice (*often polyhedral*), and a large dose of imagination (*unlike the more usual language role plays which are acted out before a class, these games are non-performance oriented*). Players can be divided into two types: the referee (*commonly called a Game Master or GM*) and the players. The *GM* creates a scenario which he then sets in motion by explaining the situation to the players who have created *Player Characters (PCs)* to interact with one another and the *GM's* characters (*Non-Player Characters or NPCs*) during the game. Following a set of rules or guidelines,



players determine the success of their actions by rolling dice and consulting tables. Sometimes players will use miniature figures placed upon the tabletop to represent themselves in the game.

Basically, **RPGs** are *Interactive Stories* in which the *GM* furnishes the basic plot elements (*often based in fantastic or heroic genres*) and the players shape the narrative through their actions within the context of the game. The game is played through the verbal interchange of the players, making it ideal for language learners.

Reverend Paul Cardwell, Jr., a long time advocate of **RPG** use in educational settings, likens the games to "a sort of fairy tale written by a committee without an opportunity to re-write . . . [or] 'improvisational radio theater.' Role-playing forms other than in the fantasy genre are more like historical novels, adventure yarns, science fiction, etc. . . . but the mechanics are still the same" (1).

Because they are cooperative games, **RPGs** don't have *winner*s or *loser*s in the traditional sense of the terms. In most games -- board games, card games, and dice games -- there is a clearly defined way to win, and a clearly defined way to lose, and winning is the goal of the game. In **RPGs**, the concepts of *winning* and *losing* do not exist. The goal as a player is to "help to create a story and to have fun. You may give your character other goals, but the success of your character does not determine any sense of *winning* or *losing*. Like life, it's not so much whether you win or lose, but how you play the game" (Stratton, *What Is Role-Playing*). Players (*as PCs*) don't compete against one another; they cooperate in fighting the monsters or overcoming other obstacles created by the *GM*. They also play against chance (*the dice*) and a standard of excellence (*as Terri Toles-Patkin noted that "it is considered bad form to hang back during the fighting and push your way to the front when the treasure is distributed"* (5)).

John Eric Holmes, associate professor of neurology at the University of Southern California School of Medicine and one-time editor of the ***Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set RPG*** rule book, sees the *GM's* duties as providing "an interesting game. Not too easy -- the characters should feel a sense of danger and lurking menace -- but not too difficult -- the characters should be able to swagger through much of their world with firm knowledge that they are heroes" (Holmes, 93). In other words, players tend to be primarily interested in the success of the characters that they create, *GMs* in the success of the game (Dayan, 1222).

**RPGs** can be found which are suitable for play in almost any genre. Most are based upon fantasy or heroic literature. Many are based upon films or books. Teachers who choose to use **RPGs** in their classroom may wish to develop games from any



of these basic more common genres or to experiment with other types as they see fit:

**FANTASY OR SWORD AND SORCERY.** This genre deals with stories centered on myth and legend. Usually these stories revolve around characters who are warriors or mages who often are sent upon quests. These are tales of the fantastic with monsters and magic all around. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, Louis Cha's *Swordsman* novels, Jessica Amanda Salmonson's *Tomoe Gozen* books, Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* stories, Piers Anthony's *Xanth* series, the legends of King Arthur, the *Chinese Ghost Story* films, and many others. This is probably the most popular genre for **RPGs**. {Games: *Ars Magica, Chivalry & Sorcery, Dungeons & Dragons, Empire of the Petal Throne, Fighting Fantasy, Middle Earth RPG, Palladium, Runequest, Talislanta, Ysgarth, and many more.*}

**SPACE ADVENTURE.** This is a *Science Fiction* genre most often based in the far future. Characters are often space travelers who have adventures while traveling across the galaxy. Isaac Asimov's novels, Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* books, some of the novels of Janet Morris, the *Star Wars* films by George Lucas, the *Star Trek* films and television series, and others. {Games: *Buck Rogers, Legacy, MegaTraveller, Ringworld, Space 1889, Star Frontiers, Star Trek, Star Wars, Traveller, and others.*}

**SPIES AND SUPERSPIES.** This is a genre based upon the secret agent. The most famous example of the genre is probably Ian Fleming's *James Bond-007* books which have been made into several films. Other examples include Robert Anton Wilson's *Illuminatus* novels, the *In Like Flint* films, the *Get Smart* television series, and the *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* television series. {Games: *James Bond, Ninjas & Superspies, Top Secret SI, and others.*}

**DETECTIVE.** These are the stories about detectives and private eyes. Most of Dashiell Hammet's books fall in this category (*Philip Marlowe is the ultimate private dick*). *Remington Steele* is a character of the genre, albeit a bit more polished. The *City Hunter* stories (*comic books, cartoons, and the movie*) loosely belong to this genre. {Games: *Gangbusters and others.*}

**HORROR.** This genre is different from *Sword and Sorcery* or *Fantasy* in that it pits "regular/normal people" against supernatural or fantastic creatures. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the classic archetype for this game genre, as well as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Almost anything by Edgar Allen Poe fits here. The *Chthulhu* stories by Howard Philips Lovecraft have inspired many of



the **RPGs** in this genre. While chiefly part of the action/adventure genre of films, the *Indiana Jones* movies can be considered as part of this genre, albeit loosely. The *Ghostbusters* films are good examples of humorous stories in the genre. Naturally, almost any book or movie involving vampires or werewolves falls into this category. {Games: *Bureau 13, Call of Cthulhu, Chill, Ghostbusters, Indiana Jones, Werewolf, Vampire, and others.*}

**SUPER HERO.** This is the comic book genre. Characters are heroic men and women with super-human abilities who fight crime and generally try to save humanity from evil super villains. Many American comic books are of this genre. Films from these which belong to the type are *Superman, Batman, and The Flash. The Incredible Hulk, Spiderman* and *Wonder Woman* television shows are also of this type. {Games: *Batman, Champions, DC Heroes, Marvel Super Heroes, Superworld, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Villains & Vigilantes, and others.*}

**TIME TRAVEL.** This is another *Science Fiction* genre. In these stories, characters from one time travel to another. Usually the characters are from the present day traveling to the past, but not always. L. Sprague De Camp's *Lest Darkness Falls* and many of Keith Laumer's novels are very good examples of literature which treats this subject. *Time Tunnel* and *Quantum Leap* are television series which have dealt with time travel. Movie examples include *Back to the Future, Terminator, Somewhere in Time, Time Bandits*, and the *Bill and Ted* films. {Games: *Doctor Who, Fringeworthy, Time Lords, Timemaster, and others.*}

**WESTERN.** This is the genre of the *American Cowboy* story or film. When many Americans are children, they often play the child's game of "Cowboys and Indians." This genre is an extension of that curiosity about and fascination with the *Old West*. Some movies which are representative of the genre are *Silverado, Pale Rider, Dances with Wolves, Unforgiven, High Noon*, and the *Young Guns* films. {Games: *Boot Hill, Desperado, Wild West, and others.*}

These are of course only representatives of a very large hobby industry. There are games for almost any other genre of film or literature, including *humor, adventure, and cyberpunk*, not to mention many which are more specialized. While most of the **RPGs** mentioned in the above table are separate game systems with their own sets of complicated rules, some games can be ported to various genres using the same basic set of rules. These are known as *Universal* or *MetaSystems*. Some examples of this type of game are **GURPS** (*Generic Universal Role-Playing System*), *Dangerous Journeys*, **FUDGE** (*Freeform Universal Donated Gaming*



*Engine*), *Hero System*, *System One*, *To Challenge Tomorrow*, and *Universal Soldier*.

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## **LANGUAGE LEARNING BENEFITS OF RPGS**

*Role playing* has several beneficial language learning characteristics which Gillian Porter Ladousse has effectively described in her useful introduction to the topic, *Role Play*. Many of these characteristics are also present in tabletop *RPGs*. It should be noted that *role play* and *RPG* activities are not limited to language practice as language learning certainly is also taking place during the games (Ladousse, 9). For *RPGs* to be effective in this way, they should be part of what Ladousse calls that "category of language learning techniques sometimes referred to as low input -- high output . . . the teacher-centered presentation phase of the lesson is very short" (9). *Role-Playing* activities offer opportunities for *real* use of the language. Although they are more often used in many *English for Special Purposes* courses, they can be used with *general* classes too at any level (Mugglestone, 115).

There can be two ways of looking at language work in *RPGs* and similar *role plays*: either the students manage with the language they already know or they practice with structures and functions that have been presented in an earlier part of the course or lesson (Ladousse, 9). Either way, the students can only benefit from the experience. William H. Bryant used adventure/survival discussion games similar to *RPGs* in his *French Conversation* classes and found them to be very effective:

One thing for certain, however, is that, used properly, these kinds of activities are usually very effective in engendering a lot of animated conversation and communication on the part of the students. The main reason for this is that the hypothetical situation presented . . . is . . . "*emotionally charged*." (348)

As outlined in Cardwell's "*Role-Playing Games and the Gifted Student*," there are several language and non-language based learning skills developed directly when students become involved with *RPGs*. According to Cardwell, these include but are not limited to *Following Directions, Vocabulary, Research, Independent/Self-Directed Study, Planning, Choice/Decision Making, Mental Exercise, Evaluation, Cooperation/Interaction, Creativity/Imagination, Leadership, Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Predicting Consequences, Figural/Spatial Reasoning, Taking Other Points of View, Asking Questions, Ethics, Prioritizing, Interrelated Learning, and Continuity of Learning* (4-6). There is also some evidence to suggest



that *role-playing* methods facilitate attitude change, increase self- concept, and produce behavioral change (Swink & Buchanan, 1179).

Along with developing language skills and other related skills as noted above, because **RPGs** are language-centered communication games, they have a definite positive effect on student socialization skills which are central to **RPGs** "where much of the game depends on a common perception of the information presented to the players by the [GM]" (Toles-Patkin, 5). One player characterized the games he most enjoyed playing as having strong social/negotiation elements: "The games we love have a certain amount of diplomatic negotiation going on. A player tries to influence the outcome of the game by interacting with other players" (Shaw, 128).

For students who create their own adventures, instead of relying upon published source material, the act of doing so helps them become better thinkers and writers. This is because a scenario requires internal logic, a balance that is the very condition of collective involvement. Sociologist Daniel Dayan characterized the standards for good **RPG** campaigns thus: "The fictional background or *universe* must be relatively convincing and may call for some amount of historical validity, but it is defined less in terms of historical realism than by the consistency of its imagined features" (1222). Similarly, many claim that the game offers an outlet for those with adventure fantasies of their own and teaches them about problem-solving, leadership, and survival (Toles-Patkin, 9).

Whether students are playing in scenarios created by their classmates or using pre-generated modules, **RPGs** have a strong curiosity appeal which Patricia Mugglestone called the one "primary motive relevant to every teaching-learning situation, whatever the status of the target language, whatever type of course is being followed, whatever the learner's nationality, age, and level of language proficiency, whether he is a *volunteer* or *conscript* learner" (112). According to Mugglestone, "projects appeal to the curiosity motive if their content is interesting to the learner and if the learner is allowed to develop the project in his own way" (115). This certainly describes the typical **RPG** activity.

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## ***DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY OF RPGS***

***Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*** was the first fantasy **RPG** and is still the most prominent. Gary Gygax, a wargamer, developed the game in the early 1970s after founding a subgroup of the *International Federation of Wargaming (the Castle and Crusade group)* and devoting his time to designing and playing miniature war

games with a medieval focus -- using small metal sculptures to represent armies. With Jeff Perren, Gygax wrote *Chainmail*, the rules booklet for the group. Dave Arneson, a member of Gygax's group, broke away and began to operate his own game. Arneson experimented with the rules by introducing magic into the combat system. Gygax discovered Arneson's system -- as well as his character creation additions -- through wargaming newsletters. Founding *TSR*, he then merged all these concepts and created *Dungeons and Dragons*. This was the birth of *RPGs*. More games soon followed. A much more complicated version of the early *D&D* game, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D)*, is now the industry leader. Today, Gygax is no longer with *TSR* but is working with a rival company, *Game Designers Workshop*, for whom he has developed the *Dangerous Journeys* system.

Some of the more important early games include *Top Secret* and *Traveller*. Eventually, these tabletop *RPGs* evolved into a form of *Live Action Role-Playing Game* promoted by the *Interactive Literature Foundation* in which players dress up like their characters and role play in a full environment setting (*for instance, turning a convention hotel into a Space Ship for the duration of a game*). The most recent spin off of the original *RPGs* has been to the form most popular in Taiwan -- computer game *RPGs*.

Since my own teaching projects have concentrated primarily upon the use of the tabletop *RPGs* in *English Conversation* class, that has been the focus of this brief exploration into the topic.

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## ***RPGS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM***

At this time, I will briefly summarize some of the ways *RPGs* have been effectively employed in language classroom at different levels. The methods described will primarily be examples from teachers who have used the technique effectively in their own English classes: as conversational free-form or open-scenario exercises, as an on-going writing exercise or dialogue at varying levels of difficulty or immediacy, and as other *RPG*-related writing projects.

### ***As Conversational Free-Form or Open-Scenario Exercises***

Robert J. Di Pietro outlines a teaching technique for conversation classes which is very similar to *RPGs* in facilitation of language use in his insightful article, "*The Open-Ended Scenario A New Approach to Conversation.*" *RPGs* are used as a





basis for class discussion around open scenarios provided by the instructor or prepared by the students themselves. Since conversations are based upon *meted-out information*, Di Pietro cites the educational scenario in which information is gained through further contact as being superior to more standard *role-plays* (19) -- this is how the **RPG** scenario is constructed. My own use of **RPGs** at National Chengchi University in the Republic of China have typically been of the student-centered/student-created school.

For those teachers who prefer not to use fantastic or heroic literature as the models for their classroom activities, **RPGs** can be fairly easily adapted to any situation -- including *real life*. When Scott D. Orr was teaching Czech students in 1990, he used a **Role-Playing Game** as a teaching aid. Since it was right after the revolution, the students were not only very interested in American English, but in American culture as well. Orr chose not to use a commercial **RPG** system and simply created a basic game for the students, requiring them to imagine their own character types (*they played ball players, cowboys, pilots, and detectives*). Orr reports that the activity was very successful not only because it was a tool for learning English, or just a game, but because the students were able to role-play being members of a culture they were interested in.

While most have the students create and run their own games, some teachers have chosen other methodologies for using **RPGs** in their conversation classes. W. Troy Tucker employed a science-fiction **RPG** as a teaching aid while he taught at a science university in the People's Republic of China. Tucker used the game **Traveller** as he felt the students could more readily use the vocabulary of the sci-fi genre in their professional and academic lives. Now that Tucker has returned to his home in the U.S., he is once more utilizing a horror **RPG**, **Call of Cthulhu**, to teach Japanese *ESL* students. Tucker's methodology has been to run the games with himself as *GM* and the students becoming as *PCs*.

While most teachers will use **RPGs** as small-group exercises, it is possible to use them as class discussion facilitators. Ken Rolston currently is the editor for one of the more popular Fantasy **RPGs**, **Runequest**. Before changing careers, he was an English teacher and used the game **Ghostbusters** by **West End Games** in his classes:

- *The setting is modern-day and almost universally accessible -- the **Ghostbusters** films were popular in Taiwan as well as the United States and other countries.*
- *The system is very simple. It was originally designed by **Chaosium** and developed by **West End Games** specifically for out-of-the-box playing.*



- *Rolston invented scenarios using the school setting invaded by spooks and/or lurid alien influences (thereby placing the students in a concrete context). The introductory adventure had large groups (30 students) dividing into six small groups which represented the six main PCs. The groups then worked cooperatively by brainstorming to decide on the character's actions. This increased the density of ideas and actions while providing protection for less- verbal and less spontaneous youths.*

David F. Nalle, professor of European history at the University of Texas and writer of several **RPG** systems, has used similar techniques to teach history.

### *As an On-Going Writing Exercise*

Teaching in Saudi Arabia, Jeff Neufeld has set up a project in which students use their word- processing skills to participate in a bi-weekly *play-by-e-mail* campaign. Students would create their characters and then read a summary of the past *move's* results prepared by Neufeld. They would then decide what their character would do in the situation (*including any dialogue they might say*), sending the results to the teacher via electronic mail. Neufeld would then combine all the data, re-shaping it into a single narrative, and send the results to the students --starting the process for the next move. As many *EFL* instructors have found, the use of student-generated dialogues as the basis for composition assignments is usually quite effective (Di Pietro, 19-20).

For those teachers whose student computer accounts give them *Internet* access, Julie Falsetti suggests teachers trying a similar, but less time constrained system through the use of several **RPG** programs called **MU\***'s. These games are computer-based **RPGs** available from any location in the world connected to the *Internet* via *TELNET*. Players use simple communications programs to have their system call the host system which has the program and then login on a freely available account. Usually players are given the choices of character types they may become and then begin play.

**MU\***'s are played interactively in real time with other players from around the world. This is very beneficial for students as the games help them gain valuable *real-world communication* practice with their second language: the focus of the communication is not on the language but on the content. Their language has to meet standards of communicability in order for others playing the game to understand their moves --the members of a team/party in one game are often on different sides of the world, many are native English speakers and many others are speakers of English from other countries who are not Chinese. These games afford



interested students the chance to make direct contacts with people from around the globe who share common interests but who must use English to communicate -- thus, stressing the value of language learning other than *school grades*.

### ***Other RPG-Related Writing and Reading Projects***

Although, the major benefits of **RPGs** in the language classroom come from their use with Conversation skills, there are uses for them in other areas of the curriculum. The above examples concentrate more on writing than speaking skills. There are other writing applications to be sure. One of my own more successful writing units was that of *Descriptive Writing* in which students compiled monster descriptions for a "**Cheng-ta Monstrous Compendium**". Teachers may wish to adopt an **RPG** format for a collective writing exercise in which students take turns writing chapters of a fantasy story. More and more students have been making moves into this sort of writing in recent years, particularly among undergraduate fans of Robert Lynn Aspiron's *Vulgar Unicorn* projects -- these include such international efforts as the **NET Fiction Writing Project**, the **Dragon's Inn Project**, as well as a *fanfic* version of *Tales of the Floating Vagabond*.

The reading teacher may find **RPGs** useful for checking student comprehension as well as engendering a more thorough appreciation of literature. Reading comes alive for students when classroom teachers incorporate creative genre into the whole language curriculum (Diaz-Rico, 199). Teachers may wish to prepare (*or have students prepare*) **RPG** scenarios based upon a reading assignment as a means of review.

Outside reading may increase for students who join in **RPG** activities on a regular basis. Many hobby players of the game do a great deal of outside reading -- in a very wide variety of genres and subjects -- in order to better play the game (Holmes, 94). Many game players have a marked increase in both their reading quantity and the quality of comprehension (Cardwell, 2). Of course, these observations on increased readings are of native speakers and not language learners -- we need to be wary of claiming the game can do more than it can. In any case, the improved comprehension gained through role play can still be claimed with confidence.



## **METHODOLOGY FOR RPGS IN CONVERSATION CLASS**

My own primary experience with using **RPGs** in the *EFL* classroom has been with conversation students. For their initial exposure to the method of playing **RPGs**, I decided a system in the *Fantasy* genre would be ideal. The game system I originally chose for my class was **Advanced Dungeons & Dragons** (*the system was later abandoned as being too complicated for the immediate purposes of my students but it served as a model for what followed*). In hindsight, I would recommend that the teacher considering using classroom **RPGs** use a different system: **Call of Cthulhu, Fringeworthy, Ghostbusters, and Star Wars** are all excellent for the beginner. Very basic systems which may be appropriate for lower-level language classes include the **Basic Dungeons & Dragons Set, Dragon Quest, and Hero Quest**.

In order to introduce the basic concepts of **RPGs** to the students, I brought in example games, dice, adventures, and literature based upon various games -- trying to represent several genres. Since students in Taiwan have little experience with this kind of game -- most of them only know of **RPGs** in relationship to their computer game background, I felt it useful to bring in several examples (*as well as books, comic books, and computer games -- particularly the AD&D games*). As part of this orientation to the games, I gave my own version of what Pierre Savoie calls "**The Talk**" which he uses as a guide whenever he is teaching the basics to newcomers to his own gaming groups (*this is a fifteen minute preparatory talk normally given just prior to an introductory D&D game*):

**"THIS SHORT ADVENTURE** is only a small example of a role-playing game. Other games are more sophisticated and detailed, and there are other game "**systems**" for any type of fiction literature (**sci-fi, horror, fantasy, spy**)."

**THE SETTING:** "**D&D** is a fantasy game, set in a world of "sword and sorcery, centering around fantasy, exploration, and problem-solving in mysterious underground places called **DUNGEONS**. (Other more complex settings are possible, such as cities and towns, wildernesses, castles, weird fantasy locations, etc.) You may not personally like fantasy literature, and there are many other games. But fantasy settings can be fun because of their unpredictable nature. Science-fiction has the familiar trappings of spaceships and laser-guns; but in fantasy fiction there is no guarantee that if a character grasps a door handle, the door handle won't grasp back!"

**DUNGEONS & DRAGONS and ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS:** They are two different game versions; the first is designed for simplicity, the



*second is more popular but has differing, more complex rules. (In fact, a simplified form of AD&D, or "winging it," might have to be designed for beginners to save time.)*

**CHARACTERS:** *"They are like a very flexible playing-piece whose actions you control. A character can do more than just combat (whack and slash); you may suggest any action you can think of for your character to do. **The Dungeon Master (DM, or Game Master, GM)** presents a game for you in which the characters exist; players act as a team and do not compete against each other, not even against the **DM**. The object is mostly to have fun with an unfolding story, presented in game form by the **DM**."*

**DIALOGUE:** *"The **DM** presents imaginary situations. The **DM** tells you what your characters could see at a glance. To spot further details you must ask the right questions to the **DM**. <Give examples.> Take reasonable precautions with your characters during play, such as having them "**listen at doors**" before barging in. You describe what your characters do, then the **DM** tells you the outcomes based on what he knows about the situation (and you don't!). This goes on back and forth until the game-story is "**played out**."*

**CHARACTER DEATH:** *It is possible that a character will receive too much "damage" to continue surviving. This is the only way a player can be said to "lose" in a role-playing game, and is usually followed by the preparation of a new character for play.*

**MATERIALS:** *"Use **PENCIL**, not ink, on the sheets used to represent characters. Many numbers on the sheets will change in a game."*

**USE OF DICE:** *Explain the special dice and how they are read, e.g. how to read a 4-sided die (do) and how to avoid confusing a ten-sided die (duo) with a twelve- or eight-sided die (e.g. duo has kite-shaped sides, not pentagons or triangles).*

**USE OF FIGURES OR COUNTERS:** *Explain their use and how to tell which way they are facing (e.g. obvious for figures; top of counters indicate forward direction.)*

**MAPPING:** *Many maps are used during play as situations change. For **D&D** and **AD&D**, one-quarter inch squares on graph paper represent 10 feet of distance. The **DM** normally assists when there is any confusion.*

***Encourage the players to ask questions about anything.***



**RULES:** Then, allow each player to select one of the characters, based on the descriptions of the characters and/or their specialties. Go over the rules, starting by describing what the numbers on the sheet represent, and how dice are used to make decisions based on these characteristics. This will help players immensely (and save you work rolling dice for them.)

Stress that the players need not know the rules in detail, but the **DM** handles most of the dice rolls and rules which decide outcomes, and also handles unusual decisions. Some rolls are made secretly in situations where characters would not normally know if they succeeded or not; remind the players that the **DM** "knows things" about the story that the characters will have to discover the hard way.

**ALSO CHOOSE APPROPRIATE FIGURINES OR CARDBOARD CUT-OUTS TO REPRESENT THE CHARACTERS ON MAPS.** Erase any old pencil-marks on the prepared character sheets, maps, etc. and **BEGIN TO PLAY THE GAME!**

**A helpful hint . . .** is to take a sheet and on the top half draw an outline of the table you are using (e.g. **rectangular.**) Write "**DM**" at the bottom of this outline, then write the first names of the players on the outside of this outline, in their positions relative to you. Then write in, on the inside of the outline, the names of the corresponding characters the players are using, and other major information about these characters. This helps you remember who is who, and is similar to an outline for bridge hands published in newspaper bridge columns!

The bottom half of the sheet can also be split up into areas to keep track of "**game time**" elapsed, relative formations of the characters (the "**marching order**"), etc.

You can now go through the game normally. The players are still beginners, but you laid the groundwork properly and they have a clear understanding of what **RPGs** are about (fun, hopefully). If short of time, pace yourself to skip over needless details and reach a satisfying conclusion.

At the end, when the amazed glow of their faces subsides enough, repeat that this game is just a short sample in one game system. It's like making clear to a caveman that you can't judge TV by a single episode of **MIAMI VICE!** Like TV entertainment, role-playing games can cover any sort of (adventurous) fiction, and its strength is that games are tailor-made to player preferences. That way, the beginners will want to try out somewhat longer, more intricate and interesting role-playing games later, in many genres.



*Don't forget to ask for comments from the players. If they came across a boring or frustrating bit in your game, look at it to see if you can't improve your game for next time. And you may consider having more than one special beginner game designed, preferably in a different game system and type of fiction.*

In a brief message on the Internet, Laird Popkin gave a very succinct summary of key points for the beginning **RPGer** to remember when just "**Starting Up**," in the hobby. Briefly, Popkin's main points are: **(1)** create a few sample characters and play sample combat first, **(2)** don't get overly elaborate for your first games, **(3)** don't worry about the rules (bending them if necessary), **(4)** keep an eye on pacing, **(5)** don't let dice rule the game, **(6)** there are many different styles of gaming and different people like different things, **(7)** make NPCs (non-player characters) interesting (even imitating cartoon characters if that helps), and **(8)** don't spend too much time preparing but be prepared to improvise.

Once my students were given a brief explanation of the fundamentals of the game, they played a sample game with the teacher as game master. Because there were too many students for the one game to be played well with everyone in the standard interactive style, the class was divided into two groups of eight students. Since the class meets for two hours each week, one group played the game in the first hour and the other group played during the second hour of one class day. This allowed the students to get a more realistic idea of how to play.

It is important that the teacher use a very basic introductory scenario -- typically, a "save the princess from the dark tower" story might work. While an average **RPG** game among serious hobbyists may last four to six hours, and involves five to ten players and games may be played as frequently as several times a day and as seldom as once a year, the average being weekly (Toles-Patkin, 5), teachers can not make those kinds of demands upon students. Most teachers will typically use the activity a few times in a semester, often only scheduling it for a few partial class-periods. Scenarios must be limited in complexity for them to be suitable for the time constraints of a classroom activity.

Once my class of sixteen was introduced to the concepts and mechanics of **Role-Playing Games**, the students were asked to create their own adventures for their classmates to play. Within the remainder of the semester, the **RPG** activity was scheduled four times. Each time, the activity took up one hour in the two-hour period. At each time, the students were divided into small groups of four, each with one student acting as **GM** and the remaining three playing **PCs**. Each time the activity was scheduled, the students were placed in different groups and new students became **GM**. In this way, each student in the class was able to "play" with

each of the other students -- and all of them had the opportunity to GM their own game. Under this system, the **RPGs** quickly became the students' game and not the teacher's.

Despite its popularity among hobby gamers, **AD&D** proved too complicated a rules system for a university freshman class (*despite its rating of being for ages ten-to-adult*). My students readily abandoned the complex rules and developed a free-form system, following the **AD&D** model.

Once students have discovered the concept, the actual rules system used by the teacher is not particularly important. While I would strongly encourage teachers unfamiliar with **RPGs** to purchase at least one of the commercial systems, there are alternatives for classroom use.

For those students with Internet access, there are several systems which are public domain and freely available. These include **ARM, Anarcha Australis, Brand X, Extexo, FUDGE, Mage to Mage, System One, URP**, and others. While many of these systems are less complicated than many of the commercial systems, they are often more difficult for the beginner to start with as they do not provide *role-play* information.

Some teachers who have used **RPGs** in the *EFL* classroom have developed their own systems -- or allowed the students to do so on their own (*with proper guidance, this is an excellent option*). Scott Orr's approach with his Czech students was of this type:

*I let each of them name 4 or 5 skills he was good at, and then roll a d6 [six-sided die] to determine just how good. Then I just used the die for skill checks . . . I kept it extremely simple -- I don't think we ever had any combat -- in order to stress the role-playing than the "reality". If you've got the time to prepare, you may want to do something a little more complex -- maybe a few basic attributes (the four used in **GURPS** -- strength, dexterity, intelligence, and health -- are good . . .). You also might want to make the skills a little more complex, although I think a simple system like mine should do just fine . . . let them be best in the skills they like best.*

My own spin-off project has been to develop a *Basic English Role-Playing System (BERPS)* specifically intended for *EFL* students. Peter Adkison, president of **Wizards of the Coast Game Company**, has begun development of **RPGs** for general educational purposes -- which should still be useful to the *EFL* instructor. Also, Dave Nalle's **Ragnarok** games have obvious educational uses as well as Greg Porter's **BTRC** systems.





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## THE LESS-ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Obviously, **RPGs** have the most immediate benefits and possibilities for the upper-level all-English conversation classroom. Lower-level *English Conversation* classes may not find as much immediate use in the games (*students may feel intimidated by the free-form nature and language demands made by the games*). For upper level classes, the teacher need only "*get them started*" -- lower level classes present more difficulties.

If the students don't know how to describe an action in the game, they may revert to simple language rather than exploring other possibilities for description. One of my initial groups would simply roll the dice to determine success and spent a large portion of their first game using simple language as follows:

**STUDENT ONE:** *I hit the monster.*

**STUDENT TWO:** *Roll the dice.*

**STUDENT ONE:** *I roll a four.*

**STUDENT TWO:** *Okay. You hit. Roll again.*

**STUDENT ONE:** *Fine, I roll a six.*

And so on . . . . Not very promising. However, once it was explained that they needed to use more description, they tried harder -- making the game more enjoyable for themselves and useful for their language development. At this stage, the teacher needs to be there more to answer questions about language and vocabulary as they arise -- thus the teaching is in response to student generated needs, a highly effective technique (Di Pietro, 19).

For classes which are less English-intensive and more elementary in nature (*the High School curriculum, for instance*), long free-form **RPGs** of this type may not be so effectively when conducted in English. The teacher may find it more useful to make the sessions shorter and to follow Patricia Mugglestone's lead in having new language items themselves presented as the problems to be solved in the game (115) -- any students who have seen the final "*Grail Scenes*" of the popular film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* will appreciate that Indy's three challenges to reach the grail were essentially a vocabulary quiz -- *penitent man, name of God, etc.* (*there is an Indiana Jones Role-Playing Game which some teachers may wish to try*).

## CONCLUSIONS

While *Role-Playing Games* may not be appropriate for all *EFL* classes, they certainly have the potential of becoming a very useful addition to many teachers' arsenals of worthwhile language learning activities for conversation (*and other*) classes. It is hoped that more work in this subject might produce even more beneficial techniques for the classroom teacher and helpful learning aids for the student.

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