

Briefly, on Roleplaying Games in Teaching: A Sample Assignment Response

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Since the emergence of Dungeons & Dragons in the 1970s, tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs), with their collaborative, extemporaneous, imaginative narration, have been a staple of alternative pastimes. Though some still view them as gateways to occult knowledge and practice, RPGs are increasingly incorporated into mainstream United States cultures. Accordingly, they are receiving more and more attention from those who study those cultures and their various components. One thing that emerges from the attention is that, RPGs are good to use in the classroom.

In one example of that emergence, Celeste (2017) remarks at length about the value of RPGs. He compares the most iconic of them to graduate school and academe, the aggregate body of higher education and institutional intellectual endeavor. For him, the two activities tap into the same impulses and offer training in similar skillsets. Recognition of patterns and implications and some basic statistical interpretation are among such skills. Perhaps most important of them is making the arcane accessible and engaging. Celeste points out the common tendencies of literary criticism and RPGs to be obscure and complex, in need of disentanglement, remarking that “A role-player and an academic, then, must know how to explain their world to others.” He also notes the delight that emerges from clearing away confusion for new audiences in RPGs and academe. Indeed, his piece is valedictory throughout, commending RPGs to teachers’ use. The piece also bespeaks a joy in the subject that is often lacking from academic writing and that itself argues in favor of incorporating RPGs into the classroom.

My own experience with RPGs and the classroom has not been dissimilar. I have remarked on incorporating bits from my RPG play into my teaching (Elliott, 2019), for example, and my academic career has several times turned its attentions to gaming, such as in an early

thesis project and in informal essays that have attracted notice. Since my research typically incorporates itself into my teaching, RPGs have appeared in my classes. I have found that using their materials as professional examples in my classrooms has been useful. They do particularly well as technical writing samples. RPGs have to make themselves accessible amid gaming, so clarity of writing and completeness of information have to be on display. They also tend to be artistically laden, so that paratextual concerns show up in them quickly. Further, they do reasonably well as more “literary” pieces, as many offer short narratives throughout their texts. Sometimes, the narratives are connected, but not always, or not overtly, and the interleaving of those narratives offers material for analysis. And, ultimately, because they are somewhat silly, they help students to get away from the perception of stolidity that often accompanies academic humanistic study. RPGs allow them to get into materials more deeply than might otherwise be expected, and so they make for good classroom use.

That RPGs have a place in the classroom does not mean that all classes must incorporate them, of course. “The classroom” is not the same as “all classrooms,” and there are disciplines that do not readily admit of the kinds of things that RPGs do. But there are a great many that do, and they would do well to look not only to Dungeons & Dragons, but also to the many other games readily available, for ways they can more effectively reach their students. Perhaps in doing so, they can help more students take more from their studies, fostering a lifelong love of learning that many curricula seek.

References

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