

An RPG Zine about Learning through Play



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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to *Skill Points*, a zine about the educational benefits of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs). In this zine, designers, educators, and game masters share their unique experiences in articles ranging from practical tips to case studies to a ready-made adventure.

The zine includes ways to challenge players to use problem-solving and creative thinking approaches in role playing sessions. Jesse Gazic's piece focuses on innovative ways to design better puzzles, while Jillian Wakarchuk explains how to use props to encourage play that is more improvisational. I use puzzles and props to teach the skill of knot-tying in my *D&D* adventure, *The Temple of the Sacred Rope*. Take a look, run the adventure, and send me photos of your knots!

Players can also develop and improve their social skills using roleplaying games. Orion D. Black's article discusses how TTRPGs provide a safe and controlled space in which people gain confidence by interacting and exploring complex topics. Tim Hutchings examines body language and nonverbal socialization in his scenario, which simulates a silent prison.

In addition, roleplaying games have applications in a variety of educational settings. Professor Jason Cox shares how playing the role of professor in a larp has influenced the manner in which he teaches college students. Educator Daniel Kwan explores the many ways TTRPGs can be used as learning devices for students in his program at the Royal Ontario Museum.

Hope you enjoy the zine! For more TTRPG theory, check out my other zines at hotch.itch.io.

~Sam

Socialization in TTRPGs

by Orion D. Black

Games are simulations. Every time you sit down to slay a dragon or kiss some strange and beautiful creature, you're running through a simulation of our social world. Even just coming together, in person or online, is taking a chunk of your time to set rules and boundaries with other people before diving into a shared, specific experience.

Games are often used as methods to communicate with those who have trouble doing so in the traditional social ways we currently entertain. Small talk, dinner and drinks, physically looking at one another, being attentive, asking questions, and responding in ways we assume are correct. It's a great deal of pressure that we rarely subject ourselves to in the age of the internet. This is a net positive, but many people lose the social skills that come with the often awkward stumbling we do in person.

With tabletop roleplaying games, we do a great deal to establish the rules of engagement. The game we're playing, the mechanics we're using, and even the comfort of the individual players sets up a safe imaginary box where we're now free to roam. Any struggle or pain you have in the physical world doesn't have to exist in the game world, or you can specifically interact with those struggles and pains.

The key to the process functioning is becoming deeply entrenched in other people. Whether this is through the narrative, other characters, or from working with everyone at the table to create and build to the moment you, as a person, learn something new. Whether that be about yourself or others.

Once this is realized, each game, setting, and/or story becomes an opportunity to explore different aspects of society, which you are the center point of in these experiences. Even if your character stays to the back of the action (talking, fighting, decision making), you're still perceiving and choosing what you will do next. It's an opportunity to study how others behave and interact, and also how you can contribute to the present moment.

The abilities that grow from tabletop roleplaying games are largely consistent from person to person. Someone who is shy often learns to stand out, but on their own time as their own choice. And even further, that same shy person may play for a while and find comfort in being more reserved and quiet than others. Boilsterous players may naturally lead and position themselves at the front of each adventure, or they may find that they want to be guided by other players instead.

Any facet of your social understanding can be explored through tabletop roleplaying games. It's the shining core of our work. It's, in my opinion, why people keep coming back to play.

So the next time you sit down and start drawing up a character with your friends beside you, think about what you want from your experience. Is it something specific? Do you just want to ride the wave and see what happens? Whatever you decide, know that with your eyes open that you will learn about yourself and those around you. That, for many, is much deeper than any dinner and drinks date they've experienced.

Orion D. Black (@DungeonCommandr) is a Black non-binary queer game designer from the San Francisco bay area. They've released [Mutants in the Night](#), an allegory for marginalization and collective community. Their goal is to create games that inform and relate to their experiences, while building and uplifting the TTRPG community.

Puzzlemancy: Frameworks for Tabletop Puzzle Design

by Jesse Gazic

Puzzles presented in roleplaying games, especially in games like D&D, usually exist as one of a few tired setups. Your players might encounter a riddle displayed on a mosaic wall. Or maybe a room in a dungeon exists for the sole purpose of containing some tricky business with three levers and some statues.

One issue with common puzzles in RPGs is that they tend to focus on solutions based in lateral thinking or rote deduction. It's fine to use these tools when creating puzzles for your players, but a lot of GMs may not realize the variety of other tools available to them when they sit down to design.

Furthermore, not every player excels in solving deduction or lateral thinking puzzles. But instead of bemoaning the fact that your players hate puzzles and keeping them out of your game, consider rethinking your approach to puzzles and how they can enhance your time at the table.

Start by evaluating what you know about your players' interests or skills. If you have a player who excels at languages, you could challenge them to translate some draconic text. If a player is dextrous, you might create an origami-inspired puzzle about folding a magical map. It doesn't matter what the skill is—the important thing is recognizing your players' abilities and creating opportunities to celebrate them at the table.

By the same token, this requires you to have advance knowledge of the people playing your game. If you're running a one-shot at a convention or local game store, any puzzles you include should strive for universal appeal. Your players might be physically or cognitively disabled, or may not be fluent in English. As GM, it's your responsibility to present content that can be adapted to accommodate such factors.

After you've considered which ideas you want to inform your puzzle, think about how you want to shake things up a bit from a simple riddle or logic puzzle. Try brainstorming about how your puzzle design can utilize



your players' senses. Your puzzles might have visual, auditory, or tactile components that can engage players in an unexpected way. Puzzles at my table have included illustrations containing clues, pre-recorded audio, and even a map painted on a shattered ceramic bowl that the party needed to piece back together.

You should also consider the specific solving actions you want your players to undertake to complete the challenge. In cliché tabletop puzzles, these are often actions like 'solve a riddle' or 'figure out what these switches do.' A key part of puzzle design is understanding how to expand that vocabulary. Your puzzle can include actions like 'sort objects into categories', 'solve a cipher', 'complete a jigsaw puzzle', 'solve a math problem', 'interrogate an NPC', 'interpret a map'—the list is endless, and these actions can be combined, rearranged, and expressed through props and effects to create complex, unique experiences.

The final element to consider is how to present your puzzle so it feels like a natural and immersive part of your game. Admittedly, many GMs don't worry too much about this—if the king's castle has a forty-foot-square room that exists solely to contain a puzzle about placing gems in sockets on

the wall, well, who really cares? Some GMs, however, might like to think about the context into which the puzzle fits.

Ask questions about your game in order to develop a sense of how the puzzle is situated: is the cipher used to keep people out of a fortress or tomb? If so, then who made it? Who was trusted with the information to decode it, and where was that information recorded? Is there a magical effect that might cue an audio component that can bring an extra dimension to the puzzle?

Working with this framework can allow you to develop puzzles for your game that utilize different skills, engage multiple senses, and create an immersive experience your players won't soon forget.

Jesse Gazic ([@gazictron](#)) is a writer and designer working in Toronto. He has created D&D modules, escape rooms, immersive theatre, and other interactive works. His latest project is [Many Realms](#), an actual play podcast.

From All Sides: Physical Objects in TTRPGs

by Jillian Wakarchuk

Has your party ever been defeated by a door (like the notorious Vox Machina)? When the rogue fails to pick the lock, the fighter fails to kick it down, and no spellcaster can magically open it, what is to be done? Creative problem solving is how our brains generate new ideas to solve problems. My favourite thing to hear from a player is “Can I try something weird?” If the door cannot be opened conventionally, perhaps it can be burrowed under, or the wall next to it can be broken. Maybe a character can transform into a spider and crawl underneath to open it from the other side. There is always a solution, and game masters (GMs) can help the players get there.

Roleplaying, being performative like theatre, relies on declarations. We declare actions, feelings, and intentions, (sometimes) roll dice, and then declare a result. Just think about how Shakespeare wrote explicit entrances, exits, and deaths for all characters. If you don’t say it, it doesn’t happen or it isn’t true. Playing RPGs, we can sometimes get stuck always doing/declaring the same thing, like insisting that all locked doors must be unlocked. Theatre can teach us to be better at declarations because it encourages play— here meaning experimentation.

Studying drama during my undergrad meant playing a lot of games that, upon reflection, were designed to stimulate creative thinking. Many of these activities involved physical props. “*Hark! What Props do present themselves this night? Hail and well met.*” One game that we played (and maybe you’ve played at summer camp) involves holding an object, declaring it as something else, and performing a related gesture. For example, I may hold an umbrella, announce that it is my helicopter, and twirl it around my head before passing it off to the next person in the circle. The only rule is that the umbrella cannot be an umbrella. The goal of this exercise is to get people thinking beyond the object and its form. Naming an object into a new identity forces us to think unconventionally. Try this game as an RPG warm-up and see how it affects game play.

Coming back to the table, I encourage GMs to bring objects into their games, such as small props for players. For example, players could have costume or inventory items, like a pocket watch or scarf. A player may look to their pocket watch, which hasn't told time in years, and decide that the gears inside will help them fashion a trap against intruders. Or if they bundle their scarf the right way, it will look like a baby and help them convince a character that they need help.

Holding a real world object may give the player a better idea of how their character can manipulate it within the fictional world. This is a great way to engage different learning styles as well, i.e. visual and kinesthetic learners. Like the game with the umbrella, a physical object can encourage the players to experiment before making a declaration, leading to more creative problem solving. Because RPGs rely so heavily on language and speaking things into being, having a physical object can be a strong reminder to consider a problem from all sides.

Jillian Wakarchuk (@OrbWitch) is a multimedia artist based in Toronto. She plays, writes, and creates for TTRPGS, makes the occasional video game, and experiments with the arts. Check out her work at jillianwakarchuk.com.

The Temple of the Sacred Rope

by Sam Hotchkiss

Last summer, I was preparing for the second arc of the *D&D* campaign I GM. The first arc was very intrigue-heavy, and the rest of the group wanted more dungeon crawls. I pitched a quest for artifacts created by the world's gods and hidden away in dungeons.

The first dungeon the group reached was an abandoned monastery, dedicated to a lawful goddess of trade and ships. When designing the dungeon, my mind went to *Zelda*, and the way its dungeons each use a central motif for their puzzles. I had already established that ropes and knots featured prominently in this religion's rites, so I decided to use knot-tying as a puzzle motif. I then realized that I could get my players to tie the knots in real life, and started shopping for rope.

The Temple of the Sacred Rope is a *D&D* fifth edition adventure for four 10th-level adventurers. It consists of four segments, each of which takes about an hour to complete. While the combat encounters were designed for 10th level, they can easily be adapted for parties of any level, and the puzzles are appropriate for any group. For each player, you will need two three foot lengths of rope and a dowel or other post to tie knots around.

Introduction and Plot Hooks

The Temple of the Sacred Rope is located atop a mountain, perhaps a day's travel from the nearest village. The monks who maintained the temple were secretive and avoided contact with outsiders. Locals say all who lived at the temple had to dedicate their lives to protecting the Rope of Law, the relic which gave the temple its name. This artifact is said to have been created by the Lawgiver herself, and has the power to magically bind those holding it to the terms of an agreement. The Lawgiver is a lawful neutral god well-known for her Three Precepts: "Law creates balance," "Law protects trade," and "Law leads to the afterlife."

A few months ago, the temple was raided, and its monks were killed or driven out. If your game has an antagonist who would raid the temple, this would be in character for them. If not, the raid may have been committed by bandits, other religious factions, or foreign military groups. The temple is now abandoned and its treasure up for grabs.

The party may have been hired by a merchant, noble or anyone else interested in possessing the rope and its power. Alternatively, they might be followers of the Lawgiver hoping to protect the rope or opportunistic treasure hunters.

The Temple

Explorers would first encounter a village at the top of the mountain populated with small stone houses and other outbuildings, now empty. One can assume these buildings housed people who supported the needs of the monks and the temple, who fled or were killed during the attack. Scattered amongst the village are several stone pillars, each about 10 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter, adorned with thick ropes tied in decorative knots. Upon further inspection, some of the ropes appear to be frayed and decaying, while others seem to have been tied recently.

The temple itself is a large, circular, cathedral-like building. In the center stands a massive pillar, reaching some 50 feet to adjoin the vaulted ceiling. At the base of the pillar, a spiral staircase descends to a lower level containing monk's quarters and a dining hall, dusty, abandoned and in complete disarray due to looting. Etched into a stone pillar at the foot of the spiral staircase is a large, unfamiliar hand-carved symbol.

Searching the monk's quarters reveals nothing of value, save for a few lengths of rope. The dining hall, however, contains a piece of parchment wedged between the planks of one of the wooden tables (DC 18 Investigation). On the parchment, represented by Handout A, are scribbles that appear to be from a novice. The notes contain an illustration of the symbol on the pillar, and instructions on how to tie a knot which seem to correspond with it. If players fail to find the note, a DC 22 Religion check reveals the same information about the symbol and its corresponding knot.

When explorers tie a rope around the stone pillar using a knot matching the symbol on the pillar, the wall behind the pillar recedes, revealing the entrance to an enormous room. Players can either tie the knot in real life, or roll a DC 10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check. Now is a great time to

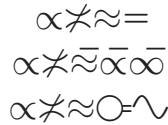
Day 1

- Sister Grace, Novice Advisor
 - Available for advising every day from 18:00-20:00
- Training is designed to test your commitment
 - Temple will give you support, but if this isn't the right fit, talk to Grace
- Schedule
 - 07:00 Breakfast
 - 07:30 Morning Prayers
 - 08:00 Theology
 - 10:00 Ritual
 - 12:00 Midday Prayers
 - 12:30 Dinner
 - 13:00 Knot Symbology
 - 15:00 Knot-tying
 - 17:00 Supper
 - 17:30 Evening Prayers
 - Time for library use and studying after 18:00
 - 21:00 Lights out
- Library
 - Enter by tying a Binding knot on the pillar by the foot of temple staircase
 - Library is reserved for those Sworn to the Rope before supper
 - Never remove a book or scroll from the library
- Knot refresher: Binding (✕)
 - Called a clove hitch by laity
 - Take one end around the pillar
 - Cross over the standing end, then loop back around the pillar
 - Thread the working end under itself and pull
- Start thinking about your specialty, selection due by the solstice
- Go to Sister Grace with questions—don't disturb the temple masters

pass out the ropes and dowels and get players tying knots.

The Library

Beyond the door lies a vast library, containing dozens of bookshelves filled with old tomes and dusty scrolls. The shelves are arranged like spokes on a wheel, converging at a pillar in the center of the room. This pillar is covered in a series of symbols, as depicted in Handout B (and reproduced below). Explorers now need to search the library and its contents to expand their catalog of knots and decipher the code.



Using the library requires Intelligence (Investigation) checks. When a player makes a check, refer to the table below to see what they uncover. For each DC, use the results in order from top to bottom, and don't use the same result more than once. For the sake of brevity, the table lists the knot's real name instead of instructions on how to tie it. I recommend using animatedknots.com as a reference for your players, especially if your group plays online.

DC	Symbol	Name and Description
11-	N/A	"Living The Three Precepts"
11-	N/A	"A History of the Temple"
12-15	N/A	"Mechanics of Knot-Writing"
12-15	∞	Ascension, overhand
12-15	≈	Attraction, double overhand
12-15	=	Balance, square knot
12-15	⋈	Binding, clove hitch
16-19	N/A	"A Treatise on Accents"
16-19	⊖	Life, noose
16-19	α	Unity, carrick bend
16-19	∞	Wealth, figure eight
20-29	N/A	Law (α ⋈), Trade (α∞), Afterlife (⊖∞)
20-29	N/A	Reveal two new knots
30+	N/A	An unnamed knot, trucker's hitch

- “Living The Three Precepts” discusses how to apply the Lawgiver’s Three Precepts (see the introduction) to one’s everyday life.
- “A History of the Temple” recounts the Temple’s founding, and how the monks sought the help of a dragon to protect the Sacred Rope.
- “Mechanics of Knot-Writing” offers instructions for reading the knot symbols. Each knot is a word or idea, and multiple knots in the same rope form a sentence. Two or more knots are often used to express complex concepts. Symbols are written from left to right.
- “A Treatise on Accents” covers how to modify knot symbols. The most common accent is a horizontal bar above a symbol, which inverts the meaning of that symbol. To tie an inverted knot, use the right-hand end as the working end.

Players who are unable to tie knots can roll Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) checks to tie them, using the same DCs from the table above.

The Crypt

After deciphering the codes and tying ropes to the pillar that correspond to each of the three sentences etched into it, the pillar starts to shudder, descending slowly into the floor, revealing another spiral staircase leading from the library to the temple crypt. The crypt is a long, bare hallway with a low, vaulted ceiling. The stone walls on both sides of the hallway have been fashioned into shelf-like slabs, each containing the remains of long-dead monks wrapped in burial shrouds. At the end of the hallway is a ornately carved locked wooden door adorned with more symbols painted in silver.

As the explorers approach the door, they hear rustling, then rattling sounds behind them. As they turn toward the sound, they see eight re-animated skeletons tearing their way out of their shrouds and cautiously approaching. The skeletons’ rib cages are illuminated by a dull pink light, which is cast from a glowing Knot of Binding symbol etched into their spines. If explorers attack the skeletons, they will defend themselves using their bare, bony fists. Apply the following template to the priest (*MM* 348):

Type. The creature’s type changes to undead, and it no longer needs to eat, breathe, or sleep.

Damage and Condition Immunities. The skeleton has immunity to poison and piercing damage, and can’t be exhausted or poisoned.

Damage Vulnerabilities. The skeleton is vulnerable to bludgeoning, force, and thunder damage.

Burial Rites. The skeleton loses all possessions it had in life, including weapons. It also loses all spellcasting abilities.

Ritual Undeath. The skeleton is animated by an enchantment centered in the symbol etched into its bones. Lethal damage will destabilize the enchantment, causing the skeleton to fall apart into a pile of bones. Tying an inverted Binding knot around the symbol will break the enchantment.

Reassemble. At the end of the skeleton's turn, if it has fallen apart due to lethal damage, it reforms and regains all hit points.

If allowed to approach the party unimpeded, the skeletons will attempt to communicate by tying various knots in the ropes tied around their bones. Players may use their catalog of knots to determine what the skeletons are saying and respond accordingly. The skeletons will try to discern why the explorers wish to enter the next chamber. If the skeletons believe the explorers are worthy of continuing their journey, they will offer to accompany them, and one of the skeletons will tie a knot shaped like a key (a trucker's hitch), which they use to unlock the door.

After explorers pass through the door, they see an ascending staircase brightly lit from above. The staircase ascends upward for 1,000 steps in a winding, clockwise fashion, ending inside the mouth of an enormous cave. Proceeding further into the cave, explorers find themselves in front of a 20-foot high silver plated door, which can be pushed open with ease.

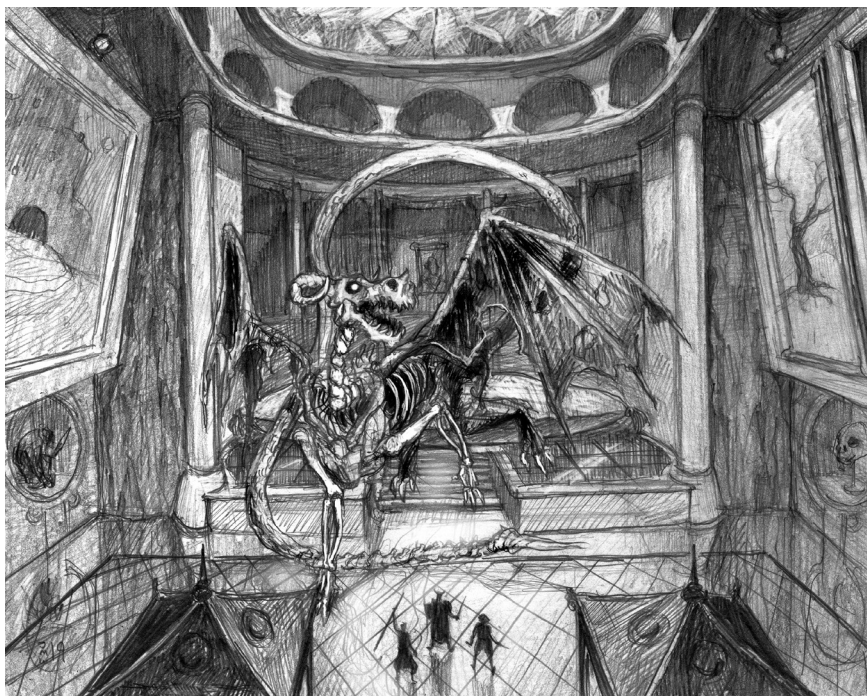
The Dragon's Lair

When explorers enter the massive, vault-like room, the first thing they notice is the smell: the odor of rotting flesh permeates the space. The vast room appears to be a museum of sorts, filled with jewels, artifacts and works of art displayed inside glass cases. Prominently located in the front of the room is a large ornate case clearly created to display the master piece of the exhibit. The case, itself a work of art, is empty, although it appears intact. As explorers meander through the exhibit, they finally reach the back of the room, where they find, reclining on a throne-like pillow, the decomposing corpse of a Huge silver dragon. When an explorer walks within 10 feet of the corpse, it rouses—its scattered bones reassemble into a facsimile of its former shape and it begins to roar.

This is a combat encounter with an adult silver dragon using the skeleton template from the previous section. For the purposes of the unbinding ritual, the dragon counts as 5 creatures as explained in the following table.

Body Section	Symbol Location	Actions
Left Front Leg	Shoulder	Claw
Right Front Leg	Shoulder	Claw
Tail and Back Legs	Tailbone	Tail
Chest and Wings	Spine	Breath, Fly
Head and Neck	Back of Head	Bite

If the dragon is defeated, players may explore her lair more extensively. The Rope of Law, which may have been housed in the now-empty ornate display case, is still missing. The dragon's skull contains two large wounds, suggesting it was fatally stabbed in the head. Searching for who took the Rope (or what killed the dragon) could be something that's resolved in the next adventure, or something to structure a whole campaign around.



Sam Hotchkiss ([@Hotchmoney](https://twitter.com/Hotchmoney)) is a game designer based in Philadelphia. He is currently working on *Chosen*, a coming-of-age RPG. Check out hotch.money for links to his games and blog.

Imaginary Education

by Jason Cox, PhD

In my professional research I engage with tabletop and larp roleplaying as a reflective practice that challenges my personal and professional assumptions and to broaden my conceptions of how people think and act. For example, in the blockbuster larp *New World Magischola* (NWM) I played an imaginary version of my real-life job as a humanities professor to look at how I was thinking about higher education. Whereas in the real world I am an Assistant Professor of Art Education, in this game I was Alfred Contreras, professor of ethics, ideologue, and wounded veteran of his world's politics.

The idea behind this practice is that the bleed between the imagined game identity and professional identity allows a player to try out new pedagogical ideas with relative safety, to extend a sense of identity, to imagine new perspectives, and to invest their skills into their hobby for the benefit of the community they play within. While it is useful to have an objective when entering into a roleplayed situation used this way, it is important to remember that the collaborative nature of the game injects uncertainty that can lead to unforeseen revelations.

My original goal in taking on the role of a professor was specifically to examine more deeply how I thought about relationships between college faculty as an exercise in reflective metacognition. I was fairly new to being involved in higher education, and found myself moving into new leadership roles that I was unaccustomed to. However, I also discovered that the roleplayed experiences presented an opportunity to re-examine and redefine myself as a teacher, a leader, and a person. In short, roleplaying as Professor Contreras transformed my pedagogical understandings of the world.

While the physical and temporal boundaries between students, colleagues, and administrators often make reflective practice difficult in the real world, the assumption players have in an RPG is that meaningful encounters should be sought out and collaboratively created. I developed a set of principles for the courses I was expected to teach in-character: for each



Dr. Cox as Alfred Contreras. Photo supplied by Jason Cox

class to feel magical, to teach about the magical world of the game, and to connect back to the real world. These lesson plans were revised as students interacted with them (consequently revealing their interests as stakeholders in the experience) and as I observed my fellow “professors” in action (challenging my concepts of best practices and introducing new techniques).

Most character goals require interaction with others to achieve within the context of a game, and those interactions will affect how the characters think and act. The social nature of RPGs also helps make this a complicated process of experience taking, wherein a player actively defends and acts according to principles and ideas that are not their own. This doesn’t necessarily mean that they come to believe these things, but rather that they have directly encountered those traits as a human possibility. If one of the characters involved is an authority figure, the power dynamics tend to highlight questions of institutional authority. Because Contreras was a Professor of Magical Ethics other players had a reason in the game to present me with the moral quandaries their characters were facing, which I took great joy in examining and complicating using the same principles I

had used in my lesson planning. However as “the authority” my character faced a pressure to follow through on his words with actions, both in terms of how characters would treat him and the kinds of experiences my community of play was looking to co-create. In short, I had to live up to the mantle of authority that I had assumed.

A final aspect is how players react to both in-character and out-of-character emotional needs. Because the social encounters of a game are not predictable, this is a constant challenge. Some games have mechanics that allow players to opt out of or slow down interactions that are uncomfortable, while others have developed processes for checking in on players in a low-risk environment during a game. It is important to know where your own limits are when it comes to emotional bleed, and to respect those of your fellow players, but it can be productive. Over the course of NWM I have experienced grief at the loss of a loved one, shared joy in a romantic union, and a sense of profound loss both in and out of character. As a player and a character, I supported my community of play, but also learned that I needed them to support me as well. Reminding myself how to support and be supported by a community is essential to functioning as an educator, where institutional mechanisms can grind down humanity all too easily.

While I have focused this essay on my NWM experience, roleplayed reflections can come from any experience that a player enters into with an open mind. The key is not to just have the experience, but to treat it like a constructivist enterprise. Ask yourself what you hope to learn, enact the experience, consider how your view has changed, and integrate that difference into your next experience. In this way can you continually learn and grow as a teacher, a player, and a person.

Dr. Jason Cox (jarmec@gmail.com) is an Assistant Professor of Art Education, games scholar, and larpwright who lives and works in Toledo, Ohio. He is currently collaborating with Dr. Lillian Lewis on Mantles in the Museum, an edu-larp designed to make arts criticism more accessible to non-experts.

An Homage to *Sign* and *Primitive*

by *Tim Hutchings*

You Can't Win (1926) by Jack Black describes the author, among many other misadventures, spending years in a 'silent' prison in Canada. No speaking, no noise making, just silence unless you were addressed by an authority figure and required to respond. Playing tabletop games is an innately vocal experience with the authority figure describing the world and players using words to respond. Sure, we use miniatures and maps and sketches, but mostly it is words. Words, words, words. (Note: A handful of larps and freeform games explore silence, most notably *Before and After Silence* by the Larp Factory and *Sign* by Thorny Games. *Primitive* by Kevin Allen, Jr. invokes the time before we had language.)

In this scenario, we challenge ourselves to utilize silence in the tabletop environment. We point, we gesture, we communicate without words as we solve the problem of escaping a magical 'silent prison'.

The Spread

Utilizing a method from *Primitive*, all important aspects of the prison cell are written on note cards. If you need to indicate the little barred window on the door you will point at the index card with "Little Barred Window (Door)" on it.

The Spread is a systematic breakdown of the contents of a prison cell, a taxonomy of confinement. The Spread is dynamic, it will grow and shrink over time. If the players need a card indicating the West Wall then make that card and drop it on the table. If a leering tradesman infrequently peers in through the outside window, take the "Leering Peasant" card on and off the table as needed. No need to announce these things, just plop them down and pick them up.

The Silence

Everyone should be as silent as possible. Players learn about their environment by pointing at things, as described below. The facilitator should answer silently, writing additional information on cards. If players

need to speak, or prompt the facilitator to speak, then there should be a penalty—perhaps a week of prison time goes by.

Punish silence not like an authoritarian master of dungeons but as a game mechanic. A player asks a clarifying question, answer it and scratch a day onto the record keeping paper.

The Cards and How To Examine Them

Any given index card will state a simple thing, “A Bucket Of Gruel,” and get complex as players examine them. Players examine things by pointing at cards, or pointing at specific things written on cards. I point at “Gruel” and the facilitator writes underneath it “A mulch of weeds and bits of meat.” Someone points at “meat” and the facilitator writes “Actually, it’s surprisingly tasty bits of charred meatbeast flesh. Rib meat, you think.”

Players can examine any aspect of any particular card, stepping inward for as long as they like: “These meatbeasts are called ‘elkenhorns’ among the elves of the K’hosh region, and are ridden into battle.” Facilitator, this is a challenge to you! Rise to it.

Examining items takes time. Three examinations might show that a day of time has passed.

The Length of Days

Time is experienced differently in real world prisons¹. Let time fly by. Keep a sand timer and let each flip represent a day of time. Assign time passing each time the players examine an aspect of a card. Punctuate time with random events, with smaller just as significant: “A Large Beetle Buzzes Into The Room.” Create a regular schedule: place the “Trusty” and “Stan the Guard” cards down, place “Bucket of Gruel” and “Communal Spoon” down, remove “Trusty” and “Stan the Guard.” Place them down two minutes later and remove the bucket and spoon. Repeat this regularly. Create a rhythm. Keep a piece of paper on which you scratch the passing days.

The Escape

Let the players escape. A good idea will work, or the third bad idea. The point here is to communicate and explore differently, not get mad over the mechanics.

1 Guilbaud, Fabrice, and Amy Jacobs. “Working in Prison: Time as Experienced by Inmate-Workers.” *Revue Française De Sociologie*, vol. 51, 2010, pp. 41–68.

The Things You Might Place on Cards

Columns, The Door, The Barred Window in the Door, A Tiny Window Leading Outside, Straw, Old Manacles, Slop Bucket, Water Pail, Dipper, Stool, Flagstone Floor, Magical Ward, Prison Uniforms, Charwoman, The Burlly Sergeant Pillsman, Slime Puddle, Jackdaw At The Window, Rodney the Trusty, A Stone Column, The Gnome Who Walks on the Ceiling, Arm Length Centipede, An Idol To Yodo (The God Of Prisons), Graffiti, Bucket of Gruel, Ghost, Torch Sconces, Skeleton, Pen and Ink To Order Things For The Trusty To Buy For You From Town, Pipes, A Flood (temporary), Oakum to Pick (a job), Spots and Illness (on a prisoner), A Vampire (looking to trade trinkets for blood), Other Prisoners.

The Prison

Keep the environment small, but know that a lot of old-timey dungeons were pressed into service for multiple uses. The architecture can and should be strange and complicated. A small cell is boring. Let the guards be more than mindless automatons, more than cruel caricatures. At the very least this will help stem the tide of murder that might be the easiest way out.

Prisons are Not Fun

Dungeons are a trope of fantasy. My favorite example might be an oubliette in Jack Vance's *Lyonesse* series and the call back to it in the final book made me almost cry with misplaced nostalgia and delight. But real prisons are not places to play in lightly. Read the literature on prisons, listen to stories told by convicts, support prison reform, be suspicious of white men like me telling you things about how prisons work. Do not treat them lightly.

Tim Hutchings (he/him) is a game designer, gallery artist, and soon-to-be professor of analog game design at Bradley University. He manages the Play Generated Map and Document Archive in partnership with The Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, NY, and is the fellowship coordinator for The Interactive Museum of Games and Puzzlery in Oregon. Hutchings is most interested in using games and play to explore communication and power. He's the designer of [A Crow Funeral](#), [Dear Leader](#), and the horrible [A Tiny Person](#) which he has never played. This summer Hutchings is releasing [Thousand Year Old Vampire](#) and the very dark [A Guide to Depression Era Soap Carving Competitions](#), and in the Fall his game [Weird Horror Rules](#) will be released by TSR. Talk to Tim about his new art-and-games publishing project!

Roll with Advantage: When TTRPGs and Museums Meet

by Daniel Kwan

Roleplaying games can serve as powerful experiential learning tools for fostering development of the skills required to both interact with traditional curricula and navigate the world outside of the classroom. These include, but are not restricted to mathematics, history, science, art, literacy, communication, self-reflection and advocacy, critical thinking, and resiliency. The museum is a unique catalyst through which this is all possible.

From 2011-2019, I was an Instructor at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)—Canada’s largest cultural and natural history museum. My role as an educator there was far from conventional as my primary teaching tools were tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs). This was a position that married my love for natural and cultural history with tabletop games. Tabletop roleplaying games are used by my teaching team and I to add a new level of understanding to the world inside and beyond the museum. By connecting game content and worldbuilding practices with hands-on educational experiences, learning is made even more interactive and accessible.

So how do tabletop roleplaying games and a museum come together? The answer is simple: the combination of structured discussion-based learning and tabletop roleplaying proves to be a powerful means of creating *affinity spaces*—places where informal learning takes place.

I run 7 programs throughout the year: three 8-week Saturday morning, afternoon, or full day programs, a single March Break program, a 4-day winter holiday program, and two 2-week and one 1-week programs in July/August.

Drawing upon my background in biological anthropology and archaeology, lesson plans and outlines are written by me prior to the start of each program. However, the content is *never* set in stone and purposefully changes to accommodate student curiosity, special exhibitions, and current events outside of the museum. Despite the name of the program (“Dungeons & Dragons”), my staff team and I employed a variety of

tabletop RPGs including: *Dungeons & Dragons* (editions 3.0, 3.5, & 5.0), *Pathfinder*, *Starfinder*, *Coriolis*, *Tales from the Loop*, *Mutant Year Zero*, *Spycraft*, *Cold Steel Wardens*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Delta Green*, *Trudvang Chronicles*, *Lady Blackbird*, *Dread*, and the staggering variety of Powered by the Apocalypse games like *Dungeon World*, *Night Witches*, *Ross Rifles*, and *Urban Shadows*.

Mathematics, History, & Science

According to Alice Pitt², “learning about content is not the same thing as learning from it. In other words...learning is something more than a series of encounters with knowledge; learning entails, rather, the messier and less predictable process of becoming implicated in knowledge.” Indeed, genuine learning comes about through experience. The best way to cultivate experience in a learning space? Teaching students to care about their experiences at the table and dig deeper into game content.

Traditionally “crunchy” games like *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* (editions 3.0/3.5) are incredibly powerful tools for the informal development of mathematic skills. Aside from those specific titles which my program used extensively during the first 5 years of my tenure, all roleplaying games that involve dice rolling offer staggering ease of engagement when it comes to basic geometry, shape recognition, and the four basic operations of arithmetic. Why? Because the use of dice rolling to mediate outcomes and risk provide direct opportunities for math to be used in a way that feels immediately beneficial. Players roll dice to resolve narrative action, do the math at their own pace, and own the outcome.

2 Pitt, A. (1995) ‘Subjects in tension: engaged resistance in the feminist classroom’, Unpublished Dissertation, OISE/UofT, Toronto, ON. Page 298.



Daniel with members of his program. Photo credit: Kiron Mukherjee

From ancient histories to natural wonders, everything encountered by players in a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* is informed by the world around us. For instance, the arms and armour you see in the *Player's Handbook*? All inspired by artifacts housed in the same building my classroom calls home. Curious about archery? Let's meet up with curators or a curatorial technician to shoot historical bow and arrows. Having trouble describing how you'd wield a weapon? Let's find an expert in the building to provide us with an answer. Curiosity-driven discovery is heavily augmented by the material culture housed within the museum and my academic background.

This also isn't limited to fantasy RPGs. Games like *The Warren* and *Time Watch* are excellent examples of how science can come to life through classroom gaming. *Ross Rifles*, a First World War Powered by the Apocalypse game I co-created with Patrick Keenan and Daniel Groh (both alumni of the ROM *Dungeons & Dragons* program), is my own contribution to developing an understanding of history through play. *Microscope* takes it a step forward and allows students to explore a history of their own creation on a grand scale. Fueled by structured lessons, discovery-based learning, and engaging with educational content through

play, students develop culturally relative worldviews. With these, they craft inclusive and diverse fictional worlds and tales inspired by their educational experiences.

Social Skills

In storytelling games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, practicing helpful behaviour is commonplace - with every session involving structured collaborative problem solving that helps develop students' abilities to *communicate, reason, learn from failure, and connect*.

Communication in tabletop roleplaying games is everything. It's how we create shared narrative experiences and mediate conflict. By creating vivid experiences through storytelling, students are encouraged to craft clear and engaging messages that all can understand.

Now let's talk about failure. Sometimes, failure is to be expected and accepted. When experienced in structured settings like a gaming session, failure can be better articulated, reflected upon, and appropriate responses can be developed through the structured problem solving intrinsic to every session. Participants must recognize and define problems, explore options, consider strategies, execute their plans, and reflect on the process and outcomes. Games like *Dungeons & Dragons* allow players to learn and adapt from failure. Games like *Dungeon World* take it a step further and reward player failure through "experience". By doing so, players are committed to learning from their mistakes. By embracing the lessons of failure and taking ownership of mistakes, students become more resilient and better equipped to react constructively. The ability to learn from problems is directly related to a student's ability to understand patterns, evaluate possibilities, and make decisions. As such, the player agency granted by tabletop roleplaying games provides context-specific means of practicing pattern recognition and reasoning related to in-game behaviours.

From all of this comes connection - a student's ability to understand themselves, empathize, and influence others. Tabletop roleplaying games encourage them to recognize and manage their own feelings, and understand how they affect those of others. By playing cooperative games in a shared physical space (i.e. the gaming table), understanding and interpreting appropriate responses to the physical, verbal, and emotional reactions of those participating in said space becomes critical to collective success.

Connection also comes in the form of leadership. Due to the highly collaborative nature of RPGs, playing them facilitates highly democratic learning where pro-social behaviour is encouraged by fellow players and the positive outcomes provided by the facilitator. As a form of informal apprenticeship, the relationship between the facilitator and students is a natural venue for leadership skills development – particularly with regards to distress management, peer education, and inspiring constructive emotions in others.

The majority of my paid staff and volunteer team is comprised of former program participants. I have implemented a scaffolding of responsibility that starts when a student demonstrates interest in joining the program as a volunteer. Those who have been with the program for a number of years will have developed a high degree of proficiency in game systems and classroom practices. During character creation and gameplay, senior students are encouraged to share their knowledge and help those newer to the program or game. Upon “aging out” at 15, students are encouraged to enroll in the museum’s leadership summer program where they will be given further experience in volunteer responsibilities. Once completed, students are given the opportunity to volunteer as teaching assistants in the Dungeons & Dragons program and ultimately develop their skills to the point of employment. This scaffolding of responsibility not only ensures continuity of the high-quality programming, but also creates a highly positive environment for the development of real-world leadership skills.

Education through experience is the underlying goal of the Dungeons & Dragons program at the Royal Ontario Museum. This program is not meant to only prepare students for the classroom, but for the world beyond it. Experience and play are central to successfully incorporating tabletop roleplaying games into educational contexts - even those outside the definition of a traditional classroom. Through innovative educational programs like this, we can educate the next generation of innovators. More programs like this are needed in the world, and this is but one blueprint.

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