IMMERSIVE LEARNING—USING ROLE-PLAYING GAMES TO TEACH CREATIVE WRITING, LITERATURE, AND HISTORY

BY TRENT HERGENRADER

INTRODUCTION: ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AND STORYTELLING

As a kid growing up, I always knew I wanted to be a writer. I had no idea what that really meant but I had an unmistakable knack for telling stories. I read whatever I could get my hands on but I particularly liked adventure books, short stories, and comics. And, like most kids, I also watched a lot of science fiction and fantasy movies. In the 1980s, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and George Lucas's *Star Wars* had a firm grasp on the public imagination and there was no shortage of material featuring knights fighting dragons or space explorers probing far-off galaxies. I was three years younger than my older brothers and thus I was exposed to a lot of exciting, mysterious, and confusing things that were just beyond the reach of my understanding. Foremost of these was the tabletop role-playing game (RPG).

I remember trying to play *Dungeons & Dragons* when I was 7 years old. I'd seen my brothers playing with their friends and I wanted to give it a go. I enlisted a friend my age and we attempted, and failed, to make sense of the rule books and character sheets, with the latter's myriad boxes and blank lines meant for recording a bewildering number of combat bonuses and penalties. We figured out enough to roll up a couple of characters with basic stats—strength, dexterity, constitution (whatever that meant), and the rest—and then had them whale on each other with long swords. I don't think the two of us ever played the game together again, and for all I know he soon forgot about it. But for me it was merely the beginning.

My parents were always good about feeding their children's interests and we acquired several RPGs, most of them published by TSR, the company that invented *Dungeons & Dragons*. Our stack of games spanned every genre and time period imaginable. In addition to the classic fantasy *D&D* and its library of supporting material (called sourcebooks), we also owned *Boot Hill*, a Wild West game; *Top Secret*, a spy thriller; *Star Frontiers*, a game set in deep space; the postapocalyptic *Gamma World*; and later, the media tie-ins of *Indiana Jones, Conan the Barbarian*, and *Marvel Super Heroes.* Every game had its own distinct rule system that explained how to create customized characters and description of the

fictional world, often in excruciating detail. The game sets always included a sample adventure and a few maps to help you start playing. I spent many hours flipping through rule books, perusing the tables of random encounters, examining the weapons and armor available, and studying the monsters and enemies that players might face. These RPGs weren't stories in themselves, but they were chock-full of storytelling *potential*. Even when my siblings refused to play with their uncool little brother, I'd take some dice, a rule book, and a notepad and roll up as many adventures as I could on my own. Afterward, I'd often write stories about what happened to my imaginary characters.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, the experience of participating in a personalized story is one of the primary reasons RPGs came into being in the first place.[1] Back in the early 1970s, a group of war gamers were interested in adding a more personal touch to their play. War games of the period focused on military tactics in which players controlled the movements of hundreds of soldiers as they refought famous battles across historical periods, including the medieval era. RPGs were an innovation because they allowed players to control the actions of a single combatant by the way of the player-character (PC), and they soon injected elements of fantasy, such as ogres and dragons. PC creation quickly expanded to include a wider range of attributes, attitudes, and motivations. While characters were still founded on basic archetypes—the warrior, thief, or wizard—they possessed unique personalities. The PC allowed these players to enjoy a simulated experience of the fantastic worlds presented in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or Robert Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* series. The popularity of the RPG grew exponentially and quickly eclipsed that of traditional war games, especially among adolescents and young adults. RPGs influenced a number of today's most important authors of both literary and genre fiction, including Junot Díaz, Sherman Alexie, China Miéville, and George R. R. Martin[2], to name a few.

HOW RPGS WORK

When I first started teaching creative writing to college students, I employed traditional workshop methods. The basic process entails having students dissect a published work of writing; identify its various narrative elements; produce work that demonstrates their ability with some aspects of craft; and have that writing critiqued by their peers. While the traditional workshop has its merits, I quickly became frustrated by what I perceived as an overall lack of engagement. When we discussed the published fiction, many students thought they needed to know what a story meant before they could talk about issues of craft. They seemed unconvinced when I said that stories have broad themes but no specific, singular meaning. Many students approached their writing with similar single-mindedness, in which flat characters voiced some universal truth the writer wanted to express, and they rarely showed enthusiasm for each other's work. Overall, it felt as if too many of my students were simply going through the motions.

As a lifelong lover of literature and writing, I thought this made little sense. Reading stories and writing your own was supposed to be *fun*, not a chore. So I dispensed with the traditional workshop and focused instead on more experimental forms of creative writing instruction centered on collaborative writing, digital tools, and critical thinking. Print forms of literary fiction did not model

1. For an exhaustive history of the origins of tabletop RPGs, see Peterson, J. (2012). Playing at the world: A history of simulating wars, people and fantastic adventures, from chess to role-playing games. San Diego, CA: Unreason Press.

2. Gilsdorf, E. (2014, July 13). A game as literary tutorial. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/14/books/dungeons-dragons-has-influenced-a-generation-of-writers.html

the kind of work I wanted students to complete so, as a solution, I turned to a very different source: the RPG.

Before I describe my methodology, it's useful to describe how a tabletop (also called pencil-and-paper) RPG works. Generally speaking, a gaming session involves a group of players (usually no fewer than three and no more than six or seven) during which one person serves as the gamemaster (GM), the one who describes the setting, has inside information about the story, and uses the game rules to determine whether the players succeed or fail in their efforts to overcome challenges. The GM also assumes the role of every other character the players may encounter, called non-player characters (NPCs). The players each control a PC (player-character) and choose actions they will take to overcome any challenges. Digital RPGs are a very popular genre of video game in which the GM's role of determining outcomes is assumed by the computer. Digital RPGs offer plenty of advantages, including the ability to play by oneself and the opportunity to replay scenarios multiple times, but players are restricted to the choices presented in the game's code, unlike a tabletop RPG, in which the story can go wherever the group's collective imagination chooses to roam.

Here's an example of how a tabletop RPG works. Let's say that the GM has the PCs meet a queen who promises to pay them handsomely if they can collect information about a rebellion that's allegedly brewing. The GM directs them to a tower in a seedy part of town where a rebel conspirator is rumored to have set up his headquarters, but a burly well-armed guard stands at the door. The players confer and form a plan. Do they try to fast-talk their way past the guard? Sneak up and knock him out? Climb through an open window around the corner? Based on the decisions the players make—and thus the actions their PCs take—the GM decides how the various challenges will be addressed. If a PC attempts to climb through a window, the GM may require that she roll dice against her dexterity ability to see if she succeeds; failure may mean that she attracts attention or even falls and hurts herself. Meanwhile, another PC may be trying to distract the guard through small talk. In this case, the GM plays the role of the guard and engages the player with some impromptu dialogue mixed with dice rolls to see if the PC is successfully convincing, or whether she's roused the guard's suspicions. And a third PC may be lurking in the shadows, aiming his bow at the guard's head while the rest of this is happening. …

As this example illustrates, game sessions are free-flowing and unpredictable. In his book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, Daniel Mackay defines the RPG this way:

> [It is] an episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players' and the gamemaster's characters take place during individual sessions that, together, form episodes or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters. (p. 4)[3]

That's a mouthful but let's break it down into the essential parts. For Mackay, RPGs are:

- *Episodic*, meaning the action happens in discrete episodes, similar to a TV series. RPG game sessions in which the players get together of course have a start and end time in our real world, but the action in the game world is continuous and open-ended.

3. Mackay, D. (2001). The fantasy role-playing game: A new performing art. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

- *Participatory*, meaning that it requires participation from every player. Because everyone is involved in the action, no one can sit on the sidelines during an RPG. Every player's decisions affect the story and everyone else in the group.

- Based on *rules* that give players tools to resolve challenges and give them boundaries for their play. Some of the rules are flexible; others are not.

- *Spontaneous*, meaning that the players generate the game events on the fly. While typically the group has some agreed-upon general plotline, more often than not the game veers in unplanned directions.

- *Lived experiences* of fictional characters, each of whom has personal histories, attributes, desires, flaws, and motivations. The better the players know the dispositions of their characters, the easier it is for them to make decisions on how they would act. This increases their engagement with, and enjoyment of, the game.

In short, an RPG drops players into a fictional world where they control the actions of a detailed, unique character of their own creation. For players to be successful, they must understand both the distinct nature of their character as well as how the world works in terms of its politics, economies, values, societies, and many more details. Thus RPG stories derive from the decisions the character makes as he or she navigates the particular challenges of the given environment.

RPGs promote this flexibility in storytelling by providing sourcebooks full of weapons, armor, maps, NPCs, monsters, vehicles, adventure scenarios, and more. Players can easily mix and match whatever elements they want to bring into the game thanks to the compatibility of the entries in sourcebooks. These entries have *quantitative* and *qualitative* aspects that allow them to be easily integrated into the game. *Quantitative* information is usually objective, expressed numerically, and ensures the world has an internal consistency. The *qualitative* information is usually more subjective in its application, expressed narratively, and gives suggestions for how the entry can be brought into play.

Figure 1 shows an example of a typical sourcebook entry from the *Song of Ice and Fire Role-Playing Game*.[4] The *quantitative* information allows players to understand quickly how the Scout stacks up against other characters. For example, if he has a marksmanship ability of 3, players know the Scout is a better shot with a bow than characters with a marksmanship value of 2, but would be half as good as a character with a marksmanship value of 6. The *qualitative* information gives a short narrative describing a Scout, including details of how he or she might act if encountered in the game.[5]

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4. *Schwalb, R. (2009). A song of ice and fire roleplaying game: A Game of thrones edition. Seattle, WA: Green Ronin.*

5. Carriker, J. (2012). Night's watch: A sourcebook for A song of ice and fire campaign guide: A Game of thrones edition. Seattle, WA: Green Ronin.

SCOUT

MIDDLE-AGED ROGUE/FIGHTER

Whether raiding another tribe or following the seasonal movement of wildlife, any group moving across the wild lands north of the Wall needs to know where they are going, and who (or what) else is likely to cross their path. The scout serves as the advance eyes of the war or hunting party, ranging far afield from the main line of travel and returning to report on the lay of the land. As a part of a more sedentary community the scout can serve as a picket, providing advance warning of incursions, or as a hunter, supplying the village with game. In any case, the scout must have a broad and balanced skill set, to be able to operate independently for days at a time, living off the land and surmounting challenges on his own.

Though he may be something of an outsider, the scout knows the value of the community, and from bitter experience the consequences of being alone in the wild. His missing ears, lost to frostbite, pay testimony to the hazards of isolation, and he counts himself fortunate to have lost as little as he did.

ABILITIES		
AGILITY	4	
ANIMAL HANDLING	3	RIDE 1B
ATHLETICS	3	
AWARENESS	4	
CUNNING	3	
DECEPTION	3	
ENDURANCE	3	
FIGHTING	4	AXES 2B
MARKSMANSHIP	3	BOWS 2B
STATUS	1	
STEALTH	4	SNEAK 1B
SURVIVAL	3	HUNT 2B, ORIENTATION 2B
WILL	3	
QUALITIES		
BENEFITS: BLOOD OF THE WILDLINGS, PROVIDER (SEE PAGE 105)		

Figure 1. An excerpt from an entry for a Scout from the Night's Watch sourcebook from the Song of Ice and Fire Role-Playing Game showing both quantitative and qualitative information.

This combination of the qualitative and quantitative information present in each entry allows players to draw from sourcebooks for their game on the fly. Given the wealth of details RPG sourcebooks provide, players can assemble an infinite number of stories tailored around their specific interests. At the time of writing this chapter, *A Song of Ice and Fire Role-Playing Game* has only four resources—a core rule book, a campaign guide, and two sourcebooks—but those total more than 800 pages detailing the minutiae of the fictional world, its inhabitants, and scenarios for play. It's impossible to browse them and not be flooded with ideas for role-playing stories.

USING RPGS TO CREATIVE AN IMMERSIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

So how can RPGs relate to the work teachers do in creative writing, literature, and history courses? It's because they provide what James Paul Gee refers to as a *situated* and *embodied* experience that educators can use to leverage deep learning.[6] In a *situated* experience, all learning happens within the context of a specific question or problem. In a game, this means players pursue specific goals using a variety of strategies that can be attempted, reflected upon, refined, and then tried again in a model similar to the scientific method. In an *embodied* experience, learning happens through the act of physically doing something or experiencing it through a virtual avatar. Gee argues that this combination of situated and embodied experience leverages deep learning far better than merely

6. Gee, J. P. (2003). What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

reading a textbook of exercises, which tend to be more conceptual and decontextualized, not to mention dull.

This means that educators can use RPGs as a way to immerse students in a world unlike our own in an embodied way through the virtual avatar of the PC. The foreign world being explored might be in a work of literature, a period of history far removed from the present, or a world of the class's own creation. While a commercial RPG will describe the world of the game in detail, for teaching creative writing I prefer to have the students create the world themselves. We spend a good chunk of the course debating how our invented world's societies, economies, politics, and other factors combine to constitute the "daily life" for the characters who live in it. The general framework consists of the following:

- Step 1: *Select an RPG system and discuss its rules.*
- Step 2: *Conduct a world-building survey* as a point of discussion for talking about social structures, institutions, economies, politics, culture, and other dimensions of daily life.
- Step 3: *Populate the catalog with items, locations, and characters.*
- Step 4: *Plot entries on a map* to introduce spatial relations and sense of place.
- Step 5: *Create perspective characters* who experience the world in unique ways based on their attitudes, personalities, and skills as well as their position in society based on their sex, race, age, sexual orientation, and economic class.
- Step 6: *Write short narratives* about the world from the perspective of that character.

Like the RPGs from which this methodology was inspired, this approach is meant to give educators many different pieces with which they can experiment and tailor to their specific purposes. The nature of the activity will require students to work collaboratively and think critically throughout the entire process.

Step 1: Select an RPG System and Discuss Its Rules

While this might seem a daunting task given the wide array of RPGs on the market, it's actually not that hard. RPG players want a system that finely balances various game elements so it doesn't result in lopsided play. For the purposes of the classroom, though, balance is less important because we're using only the core rules, namely the quantitative and qualitative data that define the people, places, and things in the world and the basic game mechanic—dice rolls, cards, and so forth—that determines whether a player succeeds in making a desired action.

Plenty of RPGs offer "quick start rules," which allow players to test the system before making a purchase, and these bare-bones versions allow students to work from the same rules without having to make a costly purchase. I recommend downloading a few and skimming the section on player creation.[7] As you read, ask yourself: Is this easy to understand? If not, choose a different system. Some popular games include *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, *Savage Worlds*, various *GURPS (Generic Universal Role-Playing System)* environments, and *World of Darkness.* In my creative writing classes I've

7. The website DriveThruRPG (drivethrurpg.com) offers dozens of free "quick start rules"; free basic rules for Dungeons & Dragons can be found at http://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/basicrules.

used *World of Darkness* because I appreciate how the system foregrounds the range of attributes, both physical and mental, that go into the character-creation process, but the choice is rather arbitrary because much of the classroom work will be customizing the system to specific learning outcomes. Even the core system of the high-fantasy, combat-oriented *Dungeons & Dragons* could be a model for a setting, such as a historically accurate 19th-century Southern plantation, for example. Have the students read the description of the world presented in the rules, and then ask them: In about as much space, how might they describe the most prominent features of the world they're creating? *Dungeons & Dragons* emphasizes the language and tone that emphasize adventure and exploration. What language and details might be appropriate when describing the setting of a 19th-century plantation?

Once you've chosen an RPG system, spend some time in class discussing what kinds of quantitative and qualitative information makes up the catalog entries of the role-playing game and begin making adjustments. For example, I used *World of Darkness* (*WoD*), a supernatural horror RPG, for a creative writing class that chose to create a postapocalyptic world. Character creation in *WoD* consists of players' assigning a finite number of points across three primary Attribute and Skill qualities (divided into physical, mental, and social categories), allowing for a tremendous amount of character diversity. Some of the skills, such as the mental skill of Occult Knowledge, for example, were specific to the supernatural horror genre and made no sense for a postapocalyptic setting. We swapped this out for Faction Knowledge, meaning characters with this skill would have information about various factions that had formed after society's collapse. Likewise, we didn't think the physical skill of Larceny would mean much in a lawless world, so we changed it to Scavenging, an action characters commonly perform in postapocalyptic stories.

Changing the rules to suit your needs provides a good classroom introduction to this entire process. It relies on a group dialogue that flows freely in a constant exchange of ideas, and decisions can always be revisited and altered later. The instructor acts as both facilitator and moderator, pushing students to think about alternatives while ensuring the process doesn't veer too far off the task at hand.

Step 2: Conduct a World-Building Survey

To create an immersive learning experience for students assuming the role of characters, they need to fully understand the complexities of the world in which they'll be immersed. This means becoming familiar with a wide range of factors that influence daily life for the people living in the world, including social forces they might not recognize. In creative writing lingo, describing such minutiae is called *world building*.

Before you begin world building, it's a good idea for students to practice deconstructing worlds distinct from our own and to identify the various social, political, economic, and cultural influences present in them. In my creative writing class, I had students read postapocalyptic short stories in the collection *Wastelands*, watch the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and play the digital RPG *Fallout 3* as an introduction to role-playing games. We discussed the varieties of apocalypses we'd experienced, including talking about the social structures formed after society's collapse, what constituted "power" in these new worlds, the roles adopted by men and women in these societies, and much more. We also roughed out sketches of the protagonists and main characters as if they were RPG characters, identifying their primary skills and abilities. This exercise exposed them to a range

of ways that writers and artists built worlds and also foregrounded the kind of work they'd be doing during their own world building.

When it came time to create our own world, I conducted a Web survey that consisted of two parts: one that answered "big questions" about the postapocalyptic world and a second that addressed more specific social, economic, and political concerns. Both parts provide a starting point for discussions about writing the world's metanarrative, or the story that told the story of the world. The "big questions" part asked the following:

- How the apocalypse happened (biological warfare, nuclear war, pandemic, etc.)
- When the apocalypse happened (ancient, Renaissance, Industrial Revolution, early 20th century, present, near future, or far future)
- How long ago the apocalypse had happened (anywhere from yesterday to 100 years ago)
- Whether the world was an alternative version of our reality or an entirely new world
- The size of the explorable world (a country, an average-sized state, large city, small city)
- The geographic features present (coastline, desert, forest, mountains, etc.)
- The season (winter, spring, summer, or fall).

The questions were quantitative, that is, radio buttons and sliders as opposed to short answers. Such questions provide a general framework for the fictional world and also stimulate thinking about how answers might combine in interesting ways. For example, a world where a disease wiped out most of the population one year earlier will be quite different from a world 100 years after a nuclear holocaust. Beginning writers often fail to think about geography and the season when starting a new story, yet shelter and travel are dramatically affected based on the weather; frigid winter and hot summers present unique challenges for characters, especially those living in a world without a stable infrastructure.

The second and longer section was titled "tricky social questions" and laid the groundwork for critical classroom discussions. Each question features a rating scale of 1 to 5 and covered the following:

- Gender relations (from strongly matriarchal to strongly patriarchal with 3 being gender equality)
- Economic strength (from depression and scarcity to a booming economy)
- Economic distribution (from near total equality to extreme inequality)
- Race relations (from little tension between races to extreme levels of tension between races)
- Sexual orientations (from complete acceptance to zero tolerance of non-heteronormativity)
- Population size (from small [25K people] to very large [1.5 million-plus])
- Law and justice (from complete anarchy to robust system of laws, policing, courts, and jail)
- Political infrastructure (from "war of all against all" to strong democracy and free elections)
- Health care and education (from virtually nonexistent to widely available to all)
- Religious influence (from nonexistent to religion's being central to all aspects of daily life).

The questions are intended both be value neutral and thought provoking. For example, a world with a strong economy but high inequality could either be primed for a popular revolution against those in power, or it could be fragmented with gang factions fighting in the streets over scarce goods. Either option could provide a rich backdrop for storytelling. The process works just as well for discussing a work of literature or for a historical setting. Think about how a class might try to quantify Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or a series of historical accounts about cities in the antebellum South.[8]

As we discussed the survey results in class, I asked students to relate their answers to our *actual* world. For example, I asked students where they thought our society is in terms of gender equity. While no one suggested we have a matriarchal society, some (usually young men) suggested we're somewhere between equality and slight patriarchy. Predictably, other students (usually young women) took exception to that, and as instructor I moderated the conversation as necessary, keeping discourse civil while suggesting questions students perhaps hadn't thought of themselves, including questioning how they quantified their answers. For example, I asked, "What does it even mean for a society to be *slightly* patriarchal? What would be the hallmarks of slightly patriarchal society? How does that differentiate from a mostly patriarchal society, for instance?" Such questions press them to ground theoretical concepts into a real world or situation. When the class reached some consensus, or when I called time, the question turned back to how the issue should be handled in the fictional world and the conversation continued. I repeated this for all 10 questions, a process that took several class periods.

The final decisions needed be turned into narrative for the qualitative part of the process, which proved to be an interesting writing challenge for students, especially when they opted for pat answers. For example, if a class decides that the postapocalyptic world has reached perfect gender equality, the logical question is "So how did that happen? Given the history of the world as we know it, that would be an extraordinary accomplishment." Such questioning across all categories prevents the speculative world from becoming mere escapist wish fulfillment and requires the authors to think hard about how social, political, and economic realities come to pass, and then to express that in the form of a narrative. The quantitative answers from the survey help pose these "tricky questions," and the qualitative narrative descriptions attempt to answer them.

During this process, appointed note takers recorded class decisions and posted them to a course wiki. Wikis have the advantage of being editable by any authorized user and each page features change logs and discussion threads. This prevents users from deleting content anonymously and also allows them to carry on conversations after class. I reserved class time for students to work in small groups and encouraged groups to consult with each other as they wrote. For example, the students working on the world's economic system were in constant discussion with the group writing about governmental structures. As instructor, I remained actively involved to steer any content away from genre clichés or essentialist depictions of groups of people, and I also prompted students to create new categories as they saw fit. For example, I encouraged them to begin adding professions and political factions once the economy and governmental structures had been better fleshed out. The process is flexible in terms of time requirements, as a less detailed world may be fleshed out in a matter of hours with details to be filled in later, or the process can span multiple class periods over weeks.

8. For an example of using this methodology in a literature class, see Kip Glazer's chapter "Beyond Gameplay—Using Role-Playing Games to Teach Beowulf in High School English" in this volume.

In my classes, we took about two weeks—the equivalent of six to eight classroom hours—and the students produced roughly 8,000 words or more than 30 pages of collaboratively written metanarrative.[9] While some students contributed more than others (which I tracked and assessed via the wiki page histories), no one could claim sole authorship for the work, because all parts of the world were inextricably linked to the others. Furthermore, students developed deep interests in certain aspects of the world and wanted to start filling in the narrative with more concrete details, which led to the next phase: populating the catalog.

Step 3: Populate the Catalog With Items, Locations, and Characters

Students revisited our game rules and determined which attributes were necessary for each of three entry types—items, locations, and characters—and how catalog entries should be quantified and qualified. In most cases, using a wiki allows students to add entries with a minimum of fuss; however, in situations in which technology might not be readily available, a wiki might introduce an unnecessary level of complexity. In this case, color-coded note cards would work almost as well. You could determine that all characters would be on red card stock, locations on green, and items on yellow. As long as the students provided consistent quantitative information on each, this would be a perfectly acceptable work-around.

I steered students toward making comparative, rather than numeric, terms to increase an entry's interpretive possibilities and resist essentialist claims.[10] For example, rather than stating that a wooden crate required a Strength of 6 to lift, it could be defined as being "very heavy." As long as entries use the terminology consistently—an encyclopedia and grand piano cannot both be described as "very heavy"—then the descriptors can suggest more fluid, interpretive relationships. A "very strong" person might be able to lift a "very heavy" object, but a "weak" one could not; for a "strong" person it would be a spontaneous judgment call.

Once the class reached an agreement about how catalog entries should be quantified and qualified, the world built out very quickly. I took the requirements for each type of entry and created a page template to ensure entries were completed consistently. For example, every item required a weight, value, and rarity—expressed either numerically or descriptively—and a brief narrative that gave it some context for how it is used in the world. Assigning students even a modest number of entries results in a very dense world. If every student creates only five locations and characters, in a 25-student class the catalog will have 125 unique locations and characters available to them for fiction writing, all in a matter of a few weeks.

Step 4: Plot Entries on a Map

The world-building survey establishes whether the catalog will be contained in a geographically small but dense urban area (e.g., Manhattan, Tokyo) or spread across an entire region, such as Southern California. The density of entries on the map will also affect the narrative: Do characters have to travel 30 miles to see their neighbor, or can they simply walk down the hall? How might that shape character

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9. To see the scope of the writing produced during this time, visit the student-built site Welcome to Hellwaukee's Master narrative page here: http://hellwaukee.wikispaces.com/Master

10. To read more on some of the problems with essentialism in role-playing games, see Arjoranta, J. (2014, August 1). Game definitions: A Wittgensteinian approach. Retrieved from Game Studies: http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/arjoranta

interactions? My first class chose the greater Milwaukee area, and the second chose the region of southeastern Wisconsin.

Using markers in Google Maps results in a map very similar to the ones found in digital RPGs such as Bethesda's *Fallout 3* or *Skyrim*. Figure 2 shows a close-up of more than a dozen map markers—some of which are locations and some are characters—in postapocalyptic Madison, Wisconsin. Note that the marker description contains a link to the wiki entry so users can easily move between the map and wiki.
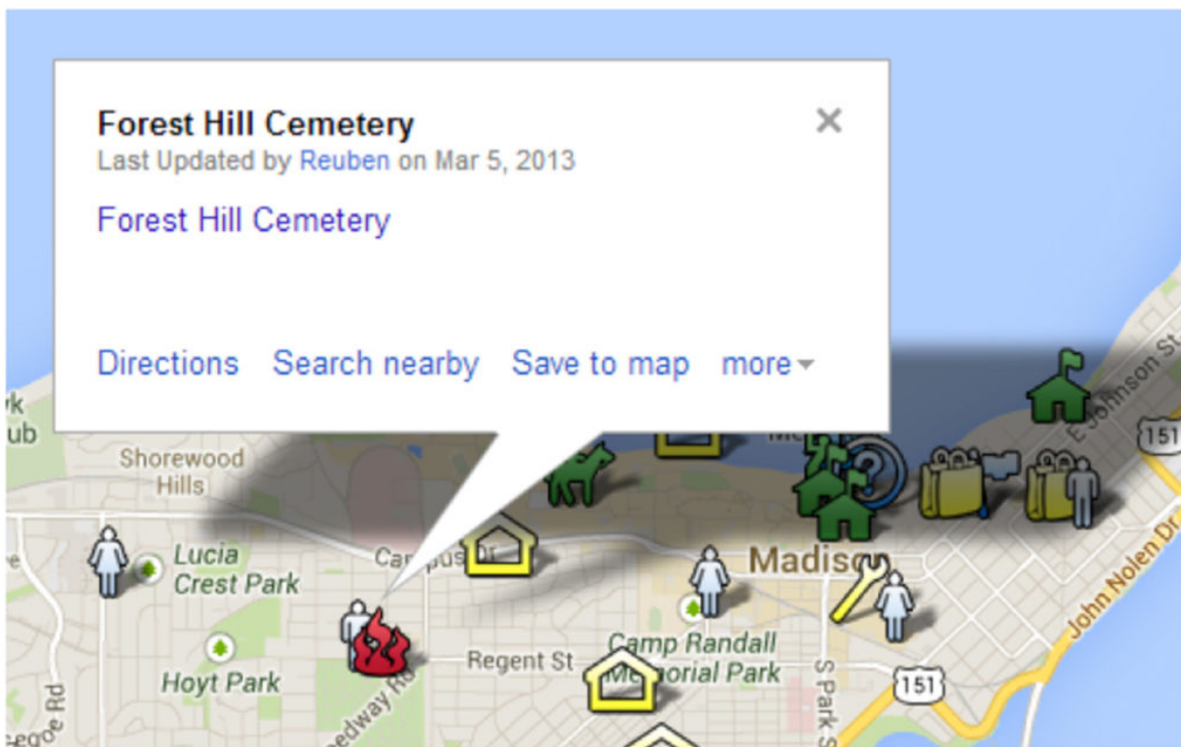

Figure 2. Map markers in postapocalyptic downtown Madison in Google Maps.

Students also gain a better spatial and temporal relationship between locations and characters through plotting locations on an actual place. Mapping also encourages them to use monuments and other culturally significant spaces in their fiction in meaningful ways. The map section can also be layered over the city where the students live, giving them incentive to reimagine and explore their own communities through the lens of a fictionalized world. If a Google map isn't feasible because of technology limitations, a large paper map would work just as well. Students could place numbered stickers, color coded by category, to identify various locations.

Step 5: Create Perspective Characters

With the completion of the critical world-building part of the course, the students should have a firm understanding of the multifaceted, complex world that will serve as an integral and active backdrop for their fiction. However, good stories need emotionally well-rounded characters too, lest the characters wind up feeling more like soulless lists of stats.

Tabletop RPG players often create elaborate identities for their player-characters (PCs) and write

stories about them that take place before, during, and after game sessions.[11] For my fiction writing courses, I have adopted the term *perspective characters* to describe the personalities the players assume when writing their fictions, and I refer to them using the same abbreviation (PC).

First off, PCs should have at a minimum the same statistical categories as the wiki entries to ensure consistency across all characters in the catalog. Using the character-creation method described in the RPG system you chose is also a good option, though you might need to modify the rules to prevent student PCs from becoming larger-than-life superheroes.

Second, as an in-class activity, I ask a series of quantitative and qualitative questions inspired by creative writing textbooks and RPG character prompts.[12] This begins with their PC's "driver's license" and "tax return" information—height, weight, eye color, race, gender, occupation, level of education, economic class, current living situation, and so forth. They then include more personal details such as tattoos, style of dress, or other distinguishing features. In summary fashion, I ask them how a stranger at a bus stop might describe the PC at a glance in one to three sentences.

Next we move to broader, evaluative questions. I ask them to describe in three to four sentences their character's home life growing up and attitude toward education; then I ask for three to four sentences on the character's social network, attitudes toward the opposite sex, and his or her short- and long-term life goals.

Then we move into a series of quantitative aspects. I ask them to review a list of dispositions (angry, anxious, apathetic, ashamed, calm, contemptuous, curious, excited, joyful, melancholy) and choose the top two that best represent the character. I also encourage them to offer any alternatives. Then I ask them to rank their characters' following attributes on a scale of 0 to 100:

- *Outlook*—from pessimistic (0) to optimistic (100)

- *Integrity*—from unscrupulous (0) to conscientious (100)

- *Impulsiveness*—from spontaneous (0) to controlled (100)

- *Boldness*—from cowardly (0) to daring (100)

- *Flexibility*—from stubborn (0) to adaptable (100)

- *Affinity*—from cold/aloof (0) to warm/hospitable (100)

- *Comportment*—from gruff/antisocial (0) to charming (100)

- *Interactivity*—from reserved/loner (0) to engaging/outgoing (100)

- *Disclosure*—from secretive (0) to candid (100)

- *Conformity*—from conservative/orthodox (0) to heterodox/shocking (100).

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11. For more on storytelling and role-playing games, see Cover, J. (2010). The creation of narrative in tabletop role-playing games. Jefferson, NC: McFarland. For a psychological perspective on character creation, see Bowman, S. (2010). The functions of role-playing games: How participants create community, solve problems and explore identity. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

12. The prompts here are a combination of character-development exercises culled from Bernays, A., & Painter, P. (1990). What if?: Writing exercises for fiction writers. New York, NY: Harper Collins; and Bowen, A. (n.d.). The guide. Ash's guide to RPG personality & background. Retrieved from http://rpg.ashami.com/

I then have them give five-word catchphrase answers for their character's opinion on religion, general political views, sex and sexual relations, war and violence, drugs and alcohol, and the government.

The next section asks them to select their characters' two primary motivations and assign them values between 1 and 99 that cannot exceed 100 from the following list:

- *Achievement*—to be a career- or goal-oriented person
- *Acquisition*—to accumulate world possessions
- *Balance*—to seek an equilibrium between personal, social, and professional lives
- *Beneficence*—to give to others and improve society
- *Chaos*—to disrupt social institutions and sow chaos
- *Competition*—to find ways to test and prove oneself against others
- *Creation*—to value artistic endeavors
- *Destruction*—to tear down institutions and creations
- *Discovery/Adventure*—to explore the world and try new things
- *Domesticity*—to create and maintain a safe home space for a partner and family
- *Education*—to engage in intellectual pursuits or gain new skills
- *Enslavement*—to submit the will to authority figures and obey orders
- *Hedonism*—to revel in the pleasures of the flesh
- *Liberation*—to be free from social conventions or institutions
- *Nobility/Honor*—to live and lead by following a strict moral code
- *Order*—to promote specific social structures by which to live
- *Play*—to push the boundaries of social acceptability
- *Power*—to acquire the ability to make life-changing decisions on the behalf of others
- *Recognition*—to gain outward validations from members of the community
- *Rebellion*—to undermine authority and institutions
- *Service*—to give one's life to improve life for others
- *Torment*—to harry and harass enemies
- *Tranquility*—to find inner peace
- *Understanding*—to develop insights into the complex workings of the world.

They are also free to suggest other motivations not listed.

The final section is a series of 24 questions I ask in 24 minutes, or one minute per question. Students are encouraged to complete each question in the time allotted, though they may come back to questions later if they get stumped. The pressure to answer under duress replicates the quick thinking

required when playing a tabletop RPG, and such snap decisions help them learn more about their own characters. These are some examples of questions I have used:

1. What would shame or embarrass your character?
2. What is your character most afraid of?
3. What's your character's greatest flaw?
4. Does your character have any prejudices? Why or why not?
5. What secrets does your character keep from others?
6. When is the last time your character cried and why?
7. What are your character's greatest strengths?
8. What's your character's idea of a perfect date?
9. What makes your character most happy in life?
10. What person had the biggest positive impact on your character's life?
11. How does your character feel about animals? Keep any pets?
12. How does your character feel about personal grooming and dress?
13. How many friends does your character have? How many close friends?
14. How many people has your character slept with? Currently sleeping with?
15. How many people in your character's immediate family?
16. What's your character's favorite book?
17. What's your character's most prized possession?
18. What's your character's favorite food?
19. What one album would your character take with him or her to a desert island?
20. If your character dressed up for Halloween, what costume would s/he choose?
21. If someone made a movie about your character, who would be the lead actor and why?
22. If your character were one of the four seasons, which one would it be and why?
23. If your character were an animal, what kind would s/he be and why?
24. If a bartender created a drink and dedicated it to your character, what's in it and why?

The PC customization process can be completed in one class session. The time limit forces spontaneous thinking similar to that required during an RPG session. To mix things up, I also choose certain attributes for students' PCs. For example, in my postapocalyptic class I had 70% of their PCs living in crushing poverty, which dramatically altered their relationship to other characters, especially wealthy ones.

Step 6: Write Short Narratives

At the end of the process the class will have a sprawling, collaboratively built world complete with a detailed history plotted onto a map, and each student will have a unique PC. The entire process can be completed in about six weeks, based on three hours of class time per week. While students typically develop plenty of story ideas in this time, instructors can also add more gamelike variations such as:

- Choose at random two characters, an item, and a location for each PC and have students write a story that prominently features each entry.

- Choose two locations and have the PC travel between them, describing what he or she experiences along the way.

- Ask PCs to give a detailed, personalized history of a specific location on the map.

If you're teaching literature or history, such prompts can easily be adjusted for critical essays. For example, you could draw a random character or location from the entries and ask students to write on how the protagonist from a literary work would react to such a person or place, and have them ground their answer in evidence from the primary text. For history, you could select two random characters from the entries and have students write an essay explaining what those people's typical day might have been like in the given time period, reflecting on the unseen social forces that would likely shape their behaviors.

THE RPG AS TOOLBOX FOR IMMERSIVE LEARNING

Like the world we inhabit, fictional RPG worlds are extremely complex. Both worlds are in a sense governed by rules. The difference, however, is that RPGs must make the rules explicit; otherwise the game becomes no different from little kids' playing make-believe. These rules are inscribed on the fictional world through a combination of quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (narrative) elements that help players quickly and consistently add to their play. RPG stories derive from well-developed characters' making a series of interesting choices based on a variety of factors, including the characters' personal histories, motivations, and abilities, all which are factored against the types of challenges the game world throws at them.

In the fantastical worlds of commercial RPGs, this usually means some kind of adventuring, such as fighting dragons or hunting vampires. RPGs remain extremely popular because they provide a unique experience of being able to assume an identity different from your own and immersing yourself in an unfamiliar world. This immersive experience closely resembles the disciplinary goals of creative writing, literature, and history, through which we want students to think critically about the human condition from different perspectives that span multiple cultures and historical time periods. Thus the RPG offers an excellent model for collaborative classroom projects in which students attempt to first quantify and then narratively explain the complex workings of a world, and then to rationally describe the actions of the people who live in it.

The modular nature of the RPG also makes it an ideal teaching tool, or rather a set of tools: a toolbox. This chapter outlined a complex multiweek project with many different moving parts, but using just a part of this—the world-building survey, the mapping, or character creation—completed during a class period or two can be very effective as well. The goal is not to create a world for play, but rather to lay bare the workings of a world through rules. Expressing these rules through a combination of numbers and words presents a unique challenge for students, who must work together to create a coherent and consistent model through debate and compromise. Making these decisions requires that they return to the primary texts as they search for relevant details. Asking them to inhabit a personality, perhaps one unlike themselves, requires them to reflect on how social forces can affect an individual life, and how such forces change through time. Rather than passively absorbing content from a textbook, students develop a deep understanding of the course material through a situated and embodied experience that fosters critical thinking, and their newfound knowledge can be easily extended to how they view and live their own daily lives.

STUDENT WORLD-BUILDING SAMPLES

- http://steampunkrochester.wikispaces.com
- http://hellwaukee.wikispaces.com
- http://rivertown.wikispaces.com