
SPLAT

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Letter from the Editors

When we launched our Kickstarter back in February, we never could have predicted how much the world was going to change in six months. People around the world are discussing race, work practices, power, safety, consent and more as we imagine and fight for better futures outside of oppressive systems that have hurt so many. This zine is a tool we can use to help us imagine and create better futures in the TTRPG industry, inside and outside of the stories we tell.

Splat defines and redefines play, offers advice on how to play safer, reminds us to play more, encourages play in new places, and reimagines play in different forms. We are grateful for the wisdom shared within these pages, and we are itching to play and design more games to put this new knowledge into practice. We hope these pieces speak to you the same way they spoke to us.

We would like to thank our contributors, and all of the Kickstarter backers who made this zine a reality. It is our hope that *Splat* can continue to be a forum for voices in the TTRPG industry, and we are excited to bring you another issue next year.

Jillian & Sam

Our Playfulness Birthright

by Meg Baker

When we are born, we are wide open to the newness of the world, and as soon as we are able, we discover it first through play. The first reactive smile of an infant encourages the receiver to perform that action again, to elicit another smile. What is this if not a game? We use play to make sense of our world, to practice being what we have not yet become, and to tell the stories of how things got the way they are. Playing is part of our inherent nature; so why do we make it so complex? As we grow, our experience of the world becomes more complex and nuanced, so our play must also grow and evolve. We add rules and constraints because they are fun—stack the cups, the floor is lava, duck-duck-goose!, Simon Says, crazy 8s, roll 3d6, match three, optimize your mana. Somewhere along the way, we can lose sight of the fun part and start getting tangled in the constraints part. Here are some tools to help get back to that basic playfulness we all were born possessing.

Imagine a Butterfly

Things that float in the air are endlessly fascinating, especially to infants, who spend a lot of time on their backs, gazing upward. Dust motes, birds, clouds, feathers, bubbles, birds, butterflies. As we grow up, we increasingly look down, starting with learning to walk, then working at a desk in school, driving, and endless technology. To access some of that very first sense of wonder, lie on your back, or at least lean back in your chair and gaze up into the distance. Best if you can look out a window, but that's by no means necessary. Now, imagine a butterfly. Watch it flutter for a moment, then follow it as it flits about, over random things in the landscape, alighting unpredictably. Find the stories in passing, and let them pass.

A little white butterfly over the clover, up over the pond, a fish snaps below, there's a person hanging laundry, including a blue work shirt. Trees sway in the wind, there's a river below with a small white boat with a dog in it, the dog snaps in surprise, the butterfly reflects in the water then there's a bunch of yellow flowers on the bank and laughter and ice cream and music and there's a merry-go-round with black horses. Someone dropped an ice cream, and there's a stream of red mice

carrying tiny suitcases into a tiny door at the bottom of a drainpipe...

Letting your mind wander like this relaxes the pressure to make your thoughts make logical sense, which in turn allows your subconscious to play. Then you can go back over it and think about what tiny stories you imagined - someone working, a dog in a boat, a carousel, a dropped ice cream - and follow those as your butterfly, uncovering new stories. We are often taught that idleness or daydreaming is a "waste of time", and to fear boredom; in fact the opposite is true, and we need time without pressure to perform or produce. We get so caught up in telling the "right" story that we miss the stories. (This is also a fantastic way to drift yourself to sleep, and dancing along the edge of dreams is strange and enchanting.)

Spin out a Rhyme

One of the things that a lot of creative folks, especially roleplayers, sometimes struggle with is coming up with fiction on the fly. The pressure to unspool rich characters and description and evocative setting at either the drop of the dice or only after hours and hours of careful thinking and writing and planning. Both of these can be fun, but they can also be the pits. Thankfully, we all have about a hundred story seeds deep in our memory all the time. They are the very first stories we learned by heart, and we could tell them while we were still infants: nursery rhymes. One of the secrets to a good story is a simple, strong premise, and nursery rhymes have them. I talk about this in detail in my game 1001 Nights, and I'll share it here: pick the first nursery rhyme that rolls off your tongue. Say it out loud.

"*Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey. Along came a spider and sat down beside her and frightened miss muffet away*"

Nursery rhymes contain all the elements of a story in a tiny nutshell. Protagonist, antagonist, rising tension, climax, resolution. No need for more. Now, using only what you have there, embroider on it. You can do this out loud or just think through it. If you have a chance to drive somewhere for 30 mins, see if you can tell the story of just that rhyme for the whole drive. Don't plan it out, don't overthink, don't analyse, just build on what's already there and be open to the surprises your imagination can provide when you give it free reign, like a child who has not been taught they must color the roses red, the leaves green, and to stay inside the lines.

Once there was a young woman named Molly Muffet. She lived a decadent life, surrounded by beautiful things. One of her favorite things was a sky-blue velvet

ottoman, tufted with gold buttons. She sat on it every morning to have her 100% organic cottage cheese with fresh fruit while gazing out over her parent's grand estate and contemplating murder.

Oh my goodness, what happens next?! Once you've told it one way, through to the very end, start over and tell a different story using the same nursery rhyme.

It was cold in the garret, and Ms. Muffet huddled on her little stool, hands cupped around a rind of cheese she gnawed idly. The spider in the corner was talking again, talking talking in its silky voice. "Run, run, run away. Spin webs they can't see and flee, flee!"

To use these in play, really all you have to do is pick your rhyme and keep it in mind. This works great for player character backstory, NPCs with a point, or as the spine for an entire plotline.

18 Uses for an Object

For this, you need to be able to see or ideally hold a non-toxic, non-breakable object. Explore it as a toddler might. What does it really feel like? Rough, smooth, cold, soft? Not what you've been taught it feels like, but how it actually feels in your hand. Weight and shape, texture, smell and taste. What could you use it for? What could it be part of? What sounds can it make? This exercises the part of your brain that was creative and exploratory before there were rules about how that could happen. We are an extremely tactile species, and we learn about our world first through sound before birth, then through touch upon arrival. The rest of our lives are spent navigating a physical world, no matter how cerebral we become. Add tactile details into your games! Do it a lot!

Look at the most simple fun you can remember, the most innocent and timeless delight you had as a child. Through the lens of your grown self, what made that so fun? How could you get back to that? What would happen if you allowed yourself to play as a child plays, full of wonder and openness? Go find out!

***Meg Baker** (@NightSkyGames) co-designed the award-winning ttrpg Apocalypse World and helped launch the Powered by the Apocalypse game design engine. Her work centers on the idea that everyone has a story worth telling, and roleplaying provides a good framework for those stories. When not doing game design, she works in museums, focusing on non-dominant voices in local history and community in western New England. Meg is very fond of tea, rocks, birds, and socks, and can tell you a story about each.*

Make Games for People, Not Gamers

by Matthew Gravelyn

We are in a new era of tabletop gaming, a renaissance, a golden age. There are thousands of new games releasing every day and they are more accessible than ever before. Gone are the days of expensive 300-page books being the de facto standard! Today you can get immersive and engaging experiences for mere dollars, sometimes even for free. There are digital files, pamphlets, zines, and books in a dizzying array of themes, tones, and price points. There's literally something for everyone.

Despite this wonderful new age of gaming, there are still barriers. I talk constantly about making games approachable for "new gamers" but the fact is that every person picking up your game is "new" in some capacity. Maybe they've never played a game in their life, maybe they're just getting into the tabletop scene. They might be checking out a genre or theme for the first time. At the very least, they are new to your game the first time they read it. We are all new to gaming all the time.

There's a lot to unpack to making games approachable—not to mention accessible—but we can all start that journey with a few simple considerations regarding how we write them, what materials we require of players, and how we champion safety during play.

Jargon & Terminology

One of the most common ways players feel disconnected from a game is through its terminology. Jargon, industry terms, genre-specific language, and completely made-up words can bolster the theme of your game and convey specific meaning, but can be lost on players who are not familiar with the industry, fandom, or genre you're referencing. In general, my advice is to always write in plain language.

Think about the phrase "roll on a table". Chances are if you've played a tabletop roleplaying game you know what that means, but for new players it's not always clear. What this phrase is trying to say is "roll some dice and compare the result to a list of options" and even that isn't the whole story. This ties into additional rules the table engages with, like character creation or combat. Instead of requiring players to learn terminology at the same time as learning your game, just write out what you need them to do.

When it comes to creating your own terminology, it's tempting to start putting labels on every rule. This can be driven by thematic reasons, like trying to come up with science fiction sounding names for things, or it could just be human nature to classify and label virtually everything. In my experience, most of these terms are unnecessary, either because the term doesn't get used that often or because learning the term is actually more labor intensive. Consider both the frequency of the term and how much effort goes into learning it. If you have a low usage or high-effort term, swap it out for common wording or just explain what you mean.

If you do use terminology in your game, it's helpful to visually distinguish those terms from the rest of the text with formatting. This signals to the reader that this word or phrase has special meaning that they should pay attention to. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as using a bold or italic font or adding text decoration like underlining.

Prohibitive Materials

If you do an internet image search for "tabletop roleplaying" you will be overwhelmed with pictures of tables covered in books, maps, miniatures, dice, and a never-ending parade of accessories. There's nothing wrong with these—and there's a good chance you have many of them—but that can cause issues for the games you create. Since you have these things at your fingertips, it can be easy to forget that not everyone has access to these materials. These can quickly become cost prohibitive, or at least problematic for some players.

I believe that removing mechanics and materials from games is good design practice; it keeps the experience focused and clean. It also ensures that you're not requiring materials of your players that don't add to the game. For example, using a pile of tokens to represent wealth or magical energy is visually appealing, but you can just as easily count that on a sheet of paper. Make the tokens optional and you allow more people access to your game.

Some materials become prohibitive for accessibility reasons, such as rolling physical dice or pulling blocks from a tumbling brick tower. For people with limited mobility or those who struggle with fine motor control, many activities able-bodied gamers take for granted become a huge barrier to playing games. Look for ways to simplify the material requirements of your game, or at least consider alternatives to help accommodate as many people as possible.

Content & Safety

The final area I'll cover is safety. This is a divisive topic but the bottom line is that it is the responsibility of the creator to make sure players feel safe. This can be as simple as including a content warning in your game and, ideally, in the listing for your game online. Games about violence, tragedy, and trauma are great ways to work through emotions and experience new things, but players *must* be informed and consent to that experience. Let them know exactly what to expect from your game before they even start reading.

Once players have consented to your game's content, the next area to focus on is safety during play. There are a number of existing safety tools that handle a variety of topics and themes, and you can easily reference those for players. Some tools allow you to copy the text directly into your game so players can easily reference it. These are very low-effort ways to help players feel safe and in control with your game.

I am not an expert on safety in games; when my games create experiences that require safety tools, I listen to those who know better. You absolutely should seek out safety tools and those who create them, educate yourself on the experiences of people who have experienced trauma during games, and hire safety and sensitivity experts to work on your game with you. When in doubt, err on the side of safety.

Final Thoughts

At the end of the day you are a creator and your game is your game. You are entitled to create it however you want. I'm betting many of you may be feeling resistant or defensive by this point. I urge you to explore those feelings and identify why you feel that way. The advice presented here is done so with the purpose of encouraging more people to enjoy the world of tabletop gaming and—if money is your aim—buy your content. If you are actively choosing to make your game unapproachable or inaccessible to certain groups of people, I encourage you to examine why you are doing so.

Matthew Gravelyn *(@mrmatthew) is a game designer, writer, and editor living in the Pacific Northwest. He makes small, narratively-focused games that are approachable to new gamers, offer equitable player agency, and, above all, are fun. His work includes* Humblewood, Mall Kids, *and a series of how-to guides on creating* D&D *subclasses. You can find more of his games on his itch page. When not writing about games, Matthew enjoys being outdoors, making things with his hands, and spending time with his wife and son.*

The Novella Method

by Chris O'Neill

The Wellspring

While much has been written on the wargaming roots of the roleplaying hobby, there has been much less focus on its literary roots. When Gary, Dave, and the rest of the progenitors of our hobby were playing the proto-games that became our hobby, they were also avidly reading genre fiction—which has far more to do with stories and adventures than any wargame does.

Interestingly, the genre works of the time were much shorter than those of today. The stories that gave rise to the worlds populated by dragons and strewn with dungeons were often short stories, comics, and quite commonly—novellas.

While often described as a work in length between a short story and a novel – novellas can be defined as a story with a compact and pointed plot. A novella tells a *single story*—unlike a novel which can have multiple plots, subplots, and threads (and woah, let's not even get started on serialized novels).

The tales of Elric, Fafhrd, Conan, Jirel of Joiry, and the like were single shot. One tale. One story. The world was shown, not exposited. The actions of the character took the forefront—and the "detail" was glossed over. These stories were not told chronologically. They didn't always agree with each other internally. The companions changed. There was no expectation on the part of the writer that you knew everything about their characters, or their world—or even fantasy stories.

To muddy the waters further, much of contemporary fantasy fiction is intrinsically tied into the world made by roleplaying games. Tales of characters "leveling up" and gaining treasures and power are now the norm. Growing up, one of my favorite book series was *MIDKEMIA* by Raymond E. Feist. Only much later would I realize that the reason that it felt so much like the *Dungeons & Dragons* games that I played was that it was literally based on an early *Dungeons & Dragons* world.

The problem with modelling our current roleplaying games on current

novel models is two-fold. One, it sets the stage that the "standard" fantasy story is one that tells a long story about a character or group that gets better at what they do, but to do that, you need a whole campaign. No single story will ever be enough.

Two, since these tales are laid down on top of each other, they have to keep raising the stakes in order to preserve drama. This leads to power creep, grinding, and a focus on achievement over storytelling.

The Novella Game Form

When I was 15, it was easy to spend 15 hours a week role-playing—grinding characters through massive dungeons and complicated plots, spending 5 hours in a fake tavern. I don't know about you, but when I have 5 hours to spend in a tavern these days, I want to spend them in a place that actually sells beer.

The Novella Form is an approach that tells you how to build and run RPGs that are extremely satisfying to play—but are not massive commitments of time and effort. Like a novella story, a session of a Novella Form game shouldn't run too long but it should be a complete story. A compact but complete telling. My belief is that the sweet spot for a modern, tabletop game is 2 to 3 hours of play, with as little prep on the part of the players as possible. Everything here is built around that idea.

Like a novella, start in media res (in the middle of things) meaning you don't need to spend time world building and setting up. The important parts of the world will unfold naturally as you show the players the world without exposition. Get into the heart of the story and avoid side treks. Make subplots into their own session and run that game at another time.

Because you're jumping into the middle of things, establish together how the players already know each other. These pre-established relationships will allow your players to agree to a shared, attainable goal. Competing desires will make streamlining play very challenging. Give the players a few options for their shared goal. Having the players make a choice allows the group to take ownership of the story. By establishing choices, you can plan for what is possible without railroading your players, even in a short window. Very importantly, the players have to *agree* to make the choice; it's not pick and choose for each player. This agreement establishes bonds and helps the players invest in their goal.

Create something that is stopping the party from reaching that goal.

Overcoming this obstacle is the core of the game session. You will probably need 3-5 scenes in a 2 to 3 hour session. Assume that one scene will be navigating the big obstacle and choose other scenes that build toward that. If the scene doesn't get them there, cut it. If you are building a fantasy dungeon, this is easy—setting up 3 to 5 rooms is MORE than enough for a compelling night of dungeon crawling!

Start the players as close to the end of the story as you can. Remove the setup, the shopping, the haggling, the justifications. Just say what happened. "You follow an old map to the door to the tomb" instead of "You have a map."

Each tale should also begin as close to the danger as possible and take us from the door to the climatic fight or puzzle quickly. As the game master, think of yourself as the writer of those garish, old pulp novellas. You want to create a story that will throw your characters into the heat of the moment, let them just barely survive, and be worthy of an amazing cover painting!

Don't play until you're tired! Stop when the stopping is good—immediately after the cathartic release of overcoming (or being overcome) by the obstacle. Leave them wanting more.

While the Novella Form is perfect for convention style one-shot games, it also allows for longer stories. When you want to play a series of games with the same characters, each game could be a single "tale" in the larger stories of these characters, just as genre writers would create "fix-up" novels from their short stories and novellas that had already been published.

In the end, a return to the roots of the story-form will help you run shorter, more action-packed game sessions that players are excited to play.

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Playing as Performance

by Angeli Pineda

It can feel like a paradox. Playing is, by definition, about having and sharing fun. Whether in sports, art, or games, playing is often best appreciated and "mastered" (if play can ever really be mastered) when the players are passionate and motivated by joy. After all, without fun, it's not really playing, is it? It's work. And that's no different with TTRPGs.

For that reason, it's important to note that while we often position "work" to be the opposite of play, in this case, "performance" is the opposite of play. Even when you are performing and playing, arguably *serving* an audience, you're not working. While performing, having fun is arguably even more important than when playing in private.

That's because private play is easy. The bounds of what "play" means to a person in this context is malleable. When you play a tabletop game and engage with your imagination, you have the freedom to bend play to your own purposes. It is a tool for relaxation, a means to flex your creative muscles, a way to explore and express yourself, and so much more. Play, when the benefit is to yourself alone, can truly be anything.

Playing for an audience is different. Whether in front of live viewers or for editing into a podcast, performing adds complexity to the purpose of play. It's no longer whatever you want it to be. It's now, at least partially, to entertain a crowd and pull at their emotions. Performance means to bare your emotions to share them with others. While we play for the podcast at *Many Realms*, the emotions and connections we make as characters are very much real to us as players.

To an extent, choosing to perform means that you are declaring that you *enjoy* performing, would like to *keep* performing, and that it would be ideal if other people enjoyed your performance as well. The goal of play changes when you perform. You are not simply trying to explore your identity, but to entertain an audience and encourage them to think within the bounds of your play.

Ask yourself how that changes the dynamics at the table, knowing your words might be heard across the world, four years from now. The real

difference is that, at the end of the campaign when you fold up the board and stow your models back into their boxes, you'll look back and really scrutinize this thing that you have built. Your campaign becomes a tapestry that you build with your fellow party members, each of you weaving your own narrative into it to create a rich set of stories that cannot be separated. A good TTRPG performance allows each character's story to be unique and still engaging, interesting, and coherent.

And beyond that, performance can be beautiful, and forever, and exciting, and maybe just a bit nerve-wracking. Some 12-year-old you don't know in Melbourne might hear you play, and that might spark a love of the game in them too, and maybe your performance will be the reason they pick up their first handbook. Performance means sharing and creating joy and interest in other people—your audience.

In that case, it's natural for your playstyle to change. It no longer makes sense to grope around in the dark trying to guess at your other players' intentions (though that mystery can be exciting in non-performance play). Building a narrative together is less about "discovering" each other as it might be in private. Performing means challenging and collaborating with each other, filling in each other's gaps and learning from each other's strengths. It requires *significantly* more communication, patience, and understanding with each other. It's really the ultimate team-building exercise. Though your story can and should be messy, filled with inconvenient twists and turns, it should also make sense when you look at it all together. You'll need to understand where everyone else wants this story to go, so you are not constantly struggling against each other.

"Ah! That's why they did that!"

The party members require slightly more careful crafting in play-as-performance. In private, you can create your characters to all be the same kind of person, or to make them exactly in your own image and have them all get along like best friends, as the players might actually be in real life. In performance, variety is key. Write characters with great capacity for highs and lows. Write characters whose hatred knows no bounds, write characters without purpose, write characters with strange quirks, but most importantly, write characters who have a capacity to change, and flex, and grow, just like real people.

When you are playing *for* an audience, you are trying to craft a character that others can relate to. Possibly not in situation, but in their grounded,

human emotions. I often try to craft characters that would have a real-life charm despite their imperfections—for example, characters who mean well but don't know how to express those feelings. It can be incredibly effective to aim for characters who audiences are likely to identify with because *anyone* can identify with them.

In terms of crafting a great performance-ready character, I find it best to come to a session zero with your character around 70% completed, ready to hack and slash your original ideas with little rigidity. Talk to your fellow players and see how you can rub up against each other in unique ways that you'd like to explore. Be ready to cut out that "scrappy orphan" background in favor of making another player your estranged father if it will test your character and raise some interesting questions for both of them. While you may dislike conflict in your personal campaigns, conflict is *key* to entertainment and to performance. This doesn't mean that your goals need to be in direct opposition, but make sure your party is varied not only in personality, but in desires.

After character crafting comes communication. Good communication and playing off your teammates' strengths means multiplying your creativity exponentially. Tell them how you want to be challenged, tell them what you think this story is about, and ask them what they think in return. Always search for narrative spots where your party-mates are hesitant to make mistakes or make choices that would be interesting but difficult, and push them in that direction.

Unlike writing a novel or painting a picture, performing (especially performing with a certain level of improvisation) creates a better narrative when we push up against each other, letting forces win out or give way naturally. Sometimes, that unexpected natural-20 miracle roll is exactly what the narrative needed. Other times, driving other players or characters to make brash decisions, pushing them further into the darkness or out of their shell makes the dynamics of the world infinitely more interesting. In TTRPGs, we cannot plan our chaos. There are too many moving pieces for any one person to know (even the GM). Therefore, we must create it for each other in calculated measures.

Playing for an audience while trying to weave the right environment for your teammates means you are writing. You are actively searching for meaning in this compelling narrative you are creating together. As in life, usually your greatest challenge is not the giant looming dragon/vampire/manticore at the end. It's your own flaws, the people around you,

your immediate and raw emotions in that moment that make you human. Allow yourself to feel those frustrations, all that joy, the heartbreak. Allow yourself to feel what your character might feel, and be vulnerable, and to sometimes do things that are hard or uncomfortable rather than things that are right.

At the end of the day, performing for an audience means crafting something concrete—it means putting that extra effort into tying up any loose ends (both narrative and thematic). When you learn to communicate and push each other for your best performance, you should be able to look back at your campaign and make even the most random choices seem important in one way or another. Still, remember that playing both privately or for performance should be fun. In both cases, engaging in any kind of play without fun is pointless. In performative play, your work will only shine ever the brighter if you're having fun with it.

In the most literal sense, TTRPGs are just a few friends at a table, talking to each other (and occasionally rolling around some shiny rocks). Down to their form, TTRPGs beg you to explore your human connections above all else. Talk to your friends and make your feelings real. Enjoy this imperfect castle you're building and when you are performing, give those imperfections purpose. Appreciate how beautiful and messy your journey has been and will be. Challenge yourself to create something unpolished, raw, and genuine.

Angeli Pineda *(@AngieIKnowYou_) is a Toronto-based writer and video editor. In her free time, she is a cast member of Many Realms, an actual play TTRPG podcast. You can contact her or find some more of her work over at angelipineda.com.*

How to Navigate Challenging Conversations at the Table

by Drs. Elizabeth and Jared Kilmer

A tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) is, at its heart, collaborative story-telling that incorporates imaginary trust falls and a little bit of magic. The key to a fun and engaging TTRPG lies not in the rules, the story, or the party composition, but in the group's ability to effectively communicate, both within the game and around the table.

Effective communication allows parties to create a space where everyone is able to see and be seen, feel heard, and trust the other group members. Being in this space does not mean you and your group members always agree with each other. However, such a space creates an environment that can accomodate healthy disagreement.

Pre-requisites For Effective Communication

Before going on any adventure, the party generally makes preparations by stocking up on supplies, making sure to get in at least one long rest, and gathering pertinent information. Around your table, players have hopefully done the same thing. Effective communication is a complex skill that requires adequate preparation (i.e., rest, nutrition, and practice). Take a couple seconds to take stock of your own readiness to engage in effective communication before attempting to engage in a challenging conversation or resolve a conflict. If you are feeling emotionally charged, tired, or hungry, take a break to grab a snack, water, or a few deep breaths.

Fight, Flight, Freeze

Human brains respond similarly to all perceived threats, whether they are physical, emotional, or social. The threat response is primarily focused on eliminating an immediate threat by fending off the threat, escaping the threat, or freezing until the threat leaves. When involved in a verbal conflict, these responses may manifest in raising one's voice, casting insults, agreeing disingenuously, or changing the subject. The problem with these reactions is that they

rarely resolve the underlying problem or threat, and an aggressive riposte can often serve to engage the threat response and escalate the conflict. To set yourself up for success and to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the body's response to stress, it's important to be aware of this threat response system. One can do this by first making sure their basic human needs are met, and then by engaging in respectful, calm communication. The communication framework below can serve as a helpful springboard for engaging in this type of communication.

Perceptions, Fears, and Hopes

When engaging in conflict, it is helpful to clearly state your understanding of the situation, any anticipated consequences if the situation remains unmodified, and any potential solutions. Explicitly stating your own perceptions and fears reduces the likelihood of a misunderstanding. Additionally, providing potential solutions to the problem at hand can shift the focus of conversation from conflict to pragmatic problem-solving. Expressing your hope regarding future behavior often serves as a "call to action," changing the discourse from blame to collaboration.

I perceive that _____ is happening. "It seems to me that your barbarian has been repeatedly running into rooms after other party members have asked them not to."

The first step of this framework is to state your understanding of the situation. Use clear, objective language when possible, avoiding blame or inflammatory language. It is important to note that everyone holds a unique perspective and views the world through the lens of their experiences, biases, and assumptions. As such, you should state your *perceptions* and not claim to speak to the objective reality of the situation.

I fear that if nothing changes, _____ will occur. "I'm worried that if this behavior keeps happening, I'm going to get really frustrated and not want to play with your character anymore."

The second step is to express any anticipated consequences should the behavior continue. These consequences could be an emotional

response, concerns you have for the party (e.g. a total party wipe), or other foreseen consequences.

I hope that if we make _____ change, _____ will happen. "If we could first agree as a party before your barbarian rushes into rooms, I would feel more engaged and excited to play."

The final step of the framework is to clearly state the desired change, as well as the expected consequences of the proposed change. This step is crucial, as it eliminates the need for mind reading from the other person and helps to set the stage for collaborative problem solving.

The Perceptions, Fears, and Hopes framework allows us to clearly state our understanding of a situation, desire for change, and any foreseen consequences, should the circumstances persist. This framework is intended to be delivered all at once - existing as a three or four sentence statement that sets the stage for a targeted discussion. It is possible the other person will agree with the presented perceptions, hopes, and fears, and be willing to carry out the recommended change. However, be prepared to listen and respond to their perceptions, hopes, and fears as well. Successful conflict resolution is dependent on a willingness to listen and negotiate with the other party.

Conclusion

Effective communication and conflict resolution are challenging skills that require practice and preparation to employ successfully. Making sure your basic needs have been met before engaging in a challenging conversation increases your likelihood of success. Furthermore, clearly stating the perceptions, fears, and hopes related to the situation can reduce miscommunications and facilitate successful collaboration.

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How To Share Space While Roleplaying

by Kira Magrann

OK, so, you're playing a tabletop roleplaying game and one of the following happens:

- You're interrupted half way through what you're describing by another player who continues to describe it for you
- You're about to answer a question from the GM but another player answers it for you and everyone else to like their idea better
- Everyone is talking over each other, and unless you shout or interrupt, you don't get a chance to speak
- Someone's describing something that's making you uncomfortable but won't allow anyone to interrupt them
- Someone does something to your character that you didn't consent to ahead of time
- The GM describes what your character is doing without asking if that's what your character is actually doing
- One player is describing what they're doing for about 10 minutes
- Someone explains the rules to you in a condescendingly simplistic way, assuming you don't know what they are

These are (usually) not intentional actions, but arise from lack of social contract among the players (with the GM being a player as well). People have various conversational responses conditioned by our patriarchal, hierarchical, capitalist culture. These responses bleed into social interaction during a roleplaying game with ease. Having a better understanding of the root cause of these conversational missteps is key to its transformation into a more cooperative conversational model.

Conversation

Conversation is at the heart of roleplaying games. Players tell stories and the structure of those stories is mediated by the game rules. Some of these rules are more overt than others. Games that self identify as narrative often address the conversational nature of roleplaying in the game text, explicitly describing things like how and when players can talk, what spotlight sharing is, when the GM will and won't narrate, and who gets to describe

what in a battle sequence. Compare this to games that are more focused on dice rolling than narration, talking, or describing. Those game texts usually lack meta descriptions of how to converse during play.

There's also cultural conversation styles in addition to what's explicit in the text. Some play cultures, especially in D&D and games where the GM guides most of the game play, also assume that the GM does all the talking until the GM explicitly asks another player to participate. The player may not have the freedom to describe anything at all, including their character's own actions! This behavior is often learned culturally through media, convention play, or assumed hierarchical role structure of GM vs player.

Other play cultures are influenced by region, genre, game family, identity and more. Differences coast to coast might include groups who describe player action in first person without their inner thoughts, where others speak in third person with a rich inner monologue. These standards vary widely depending on the game, game culture, and player preferences at the table. There is no standard rule across TTRPGs.

To set expectations, and gain consent concerning the conversation in a game, it's good to discuss ahead of time and ask guiding questions during play. As a player say out loud "Can we describe our character's actions?" or "Can we speak in character and have long conversations, and how long would you like scenes to run?" or "Can we keep combat scenes under an hour? Any longer and I get antsy." These questions set expectations out loud, getting everyone on the same page for the game ahead.

Intersections with Marginalization

Whether or not a person belongs to a marginalized group determines the conversation dynamics in a roleplaying game, and well, in any conversation. People who belong to marginalized genders, sexualities, races, classes, abilities, etc. are statistically more likely to be interrupted, talked over, expected to do more emotional labor, seen as more aggressive for expressing basic needs, and as potentially dangerous for expressing anger or sadness. When roleplaying, it's important that EVERYONE playing watches out for this conversation dynamic. You could be playing with the most woke table of marginalized folx and because people can have multiple marginalized identities this likely will still happen! Our learned biases are strong, and it's difficult to unlearn them. People make this mistake no matter what, and it's important to be able to call it out, have a plan to move forward, and apologize if you've made the mistake.

Some of the best tools for unlearning cultural biases are observation and

listening. Does someone look uncomfortable after a comment? Has a player been quiet for a long time? Does someone keep getting interrupted every time they talk? Is someone's opinion being condescended to or laughed at? Is someone with more privilege repeating what someone more marginalized just said and taking the credit? These are all marginalization-based conversational dynamics.

It's important to take action when these things happen. Marginalized people are exhausted from doing the emotional labor of calling it out, and we often are victim blamed in the process. Try pointing out the bad conversational behavior, without singling out the affected marginalized person in the process. Say, "Hey, let's try interrupting people less," or "You've been talking for 10 minutes so let's give someone else a turn." Consider also talking to the folks involved separately after the game about the dynamic you've witnessed, and ask what you can do to help or suggest how they could change their behavior. Most of the time these actions aren't intentionally malicious but rather the influence of a person's privilege, bias, excitement, or understanding of social cues. A mistake is a teachable moment! If this behavior persists over several sessions though, it's time for a more serious conversation with that person about changing their actions or leaving the game. Don't be afraid to set boundaries, and unlearn your "geek social fallacy" forgiveness bias too. Keeping a person in the game who's not respecting boundaries hurts everyone else.

Checking In and Asking Consenting Questions

Using tools to moderate the conversation helps keep games running smoothly. Safety tools work when obvious tresspasses happen with people's comfort levels. The X-card and Lines and Veils are great examples of these types of safety tools. There are other strategies we can use to help moderate more subtle and often meta-level interactions within the conversation. Consider using check-in and consent tools, and explain these to all players beforehand.

Check-in by saying "Did you want to say more about this?" or "I noticed you haven't had a turn in awhile, was there something you wanted to do in this scene?" These check-ins can relieve the pressure of someone needing to advocate for themselves in a conversation. A person might still feel too singled out to answer these questions honestly, but with continued check-ins, trust can develop over time.

Gain consent by asking a question before doing or discussing something. It might sound like "Can I bring up something kind of serious here?" or "Is it alright if my character goes on ahead or would you prefer they stuck with

the group?" Consent questions act as a way to talk about what's happening in the fiction from outside the story. In this way, everyone can negotiate their boundaries and expectations before the conversation continues.

Yes, And...

While traditionally used in roleplaying games with an improv style of play to encourage people to build on each other's creative ideas, "Yes And" can also be a powerful conversational tool. This is especially useful to acknowledge you heard what someone said, and ensure that person's idea doesn't get talked over or shunted aside in favor of someone else's. Say a player is taking their time figuring out what action they want their character to take. Often in this situation other players might take this pause to mean the player might need help. So another player jumps in offering many ideas! Sometimes without waiting for the original player to agree, the group agrees one of these directions is way cool and the first player just goes along with it. This takes agency away from that player to come up with their own idea. In these situations, a strategic "Yes And" can support that player's original idea. The player says "original idea" then other players all say, "but what if it was this, or this other cool idea I had, or something completely not related to the original idea but I like it!" Once the frenzy is over, you can say "YES, player's ORIGINAL IDEA, AND also my character does this in response to it!" This "Yes And" confirms the reality of the player's original idea in the narrative of the game, and makes the other ideas just other ideas.

Keep in mind that there are multiple levels of conversation happening when you are playing roleplaying games! Many things can influence these conversations, and they are mostly socially driven by factors from outside of the game itself. Most game texts give no direction in how to deal with these conversational speedbumps, so it's up to us as players to help moderate them as much as possible. The more all players in a group are able to recognize and move past these issues in conversational structure, the more easily a group can share space while playing together.

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How to Flirt—or—Games, Improv, and the Nature of Play

by Jay Treat

Disclaimer: By definition, the consequences of a game are trivial, so any activity you engage in that can really hurt people is no game. Play is necessarily consensual.

A game is defined not by its rules or components, but the play itself. And play is everywhere.

In improv, the game of a scene comes organically out of the actors making offerings to each other as they create and discover the unique truth of their world. It's not the plot, the setting, or the characters. It's not the tools or guiding principles that make improv work. Rather, the game of a scene is the play happening in the players' interactions.

Given the suggestion 'local history,' I step on stage with "Welcome to historic Waynesborough!" Emily pulls Yash in with her, air guitaring "Wayne's Borough! Wayne's Borough! Party Time! Excellent!" He supports with "Party on, Wayne" and she with "Party on, Garth." Now it's up to me: "Actually, gentlemen, parties were abolished here in 1816." And here we have the first move of a game we can play. Wayne and Garth will continue to be joyful and my character will keep pooping on their party.

You can improvise well without ever learning the concept of a game. But after you have, you can look for games explicitly, you can think about it intentionally, and you can support it more effectively.

You might think that the game of that scene was established as soon as Garth and Wayne appeared, but that's just the who—an important part of the scene's premise, and a strong bound for the kinds of game still available to us, but not a determiner. If I had responded instead with "Thanks so much for coming, guys. We need you to throw the most wicked party ever or they'll demolish the whole town," the game might become brainstorming absurd party ideas, or using local features to inspire them.

This concept is exactly the same kind of play that we experience in the medium we call games: Board games, video games, RPGs, etc. These games have a set of rules laid out by a designer who has already figured out what

kind of play they're trying to foster, and all their work aims simply to enable us to play it. If you look for a game in the improv sense in a board game, you won't find it in the rules, theme, or components, because those are predetermined. The game of a board game isn't necessarily what the box told you it is, but the heart of its interaction: It's what players can do to interact playfully with each other.

For example, social deduction games like *Werewolf* and *Resistance* promote suspicious conversation, wild accusations, betrayal, and lots of lying. Shooting games like *Quake* and *Battlefront* promote frenetic running and shouting, sneaky camping, and lots of shooting. Roleplaying games like *Monsterhearts* and *Star Crossed* promote characterization, drama, sexual tension, and lots of feelings.

Games are present in the playful conversations of our daily lives as well; they are the heart of flirting, for example. The purpose of flirting is negotiating intimacy, vulnerability, and consent, but the game is: How can I express how neat I think you are without embarrassing myself; How can I tell you I'm really into you, without bluntly saying "Hey, I'm really into you;" or How much of my feelings can I share before it's clear your feelings don't run as deep or as hot? There are other flirty games. Sometimes it's: I'm hinting at how I'm a sexual being; Just how much are we on the same wavelength here; or Is your love of *Steven Universe* deep like mine?

Unless you outright say, "Hey, I'm attracted to you. If you feel similarly, let's figure this out," that conversation is going to be a game: A back and forth of moves, a negotiation intended to push the conversation forward in the direction we hope it can go, without tipping our hand, without being so explicit that we might be hurt if we express our true feelings and find them unrequited.

Every game has tension. How close can I get to 21 with these cards without going over? In flirting, it's a slow build that navigates cultural, social, and personal boundaries. How can I remain in bounds when the boundaries are invisible? "Your shirt is awesome" is a safe starting place and makes the return move "Your haircut is killer" reasonable, which makes room for "Do you read much? You seem knowledgeable," which paves the way for "You want to get some ice cream with me?"

This kind of play is possible in all conversations, in all interactions, even by ourselves. Any time a person is willing to discover an interaction—or a set of moves, possibilities—and they're willing to alter their behavior in order

to participate in that fun, they are in a playful state.

When we sit down to play a board game, we know we're agreeing to play a game together, and we probably have a pretty good idea what kind of game to expect. But in life, no one announces, "now we're going to flirt," or "now we're going to one-up each other with funny secrets about ourselves," or "now let's have a conversation solely in *Simpsons* quotes." Games develop organically and we play them without ever labeling them and often without even realizing we're playing at all.

Humans—and indeed a great many animals (at least mammals and cephalopods)—are naturals at play. It's instinctual as long as we're in a relatively safe and happy place. We're so good at it, we do it unconsciously all the time. It's usually social. Sometimes it's competitive. Often, it's how we learn and grow. But it's always worthwhile and satisfying.

Play is the happy willingness to discover and engage. The next time you're bored, try to find a pattern in what's happening, and continue it; heighten it, if you can. Someone's tapping their fingers? Tap in time with them. Someone used a couple ten-dollar words? Use more ten-dollar words. Sometimes people will notice. Sometimes they'll join in. Sometimes they won't. That's a game unto itself. You might find the world's a more magical place when you're looking for the games happening all around us.

Go play!

Jay Treat *(@jtreat3) is making games in Philadelphia: board games from Wizkids, Mayday, Daily Magic, and Buttonshy Games; story games and LARPs on DriveThruRPG; and a mobile game from Aconite. He is also involved in improv, puppetry, activism, and inclusive church. Jay believes play can heal a divided world, and creates games meant to broaden perspectives, illuminate new paths, and create bonds between us.*

Why Gameplay Therapy?

by Dr. Brian Carl Quinones

As a licensed professional counselor, I use board games, tabletop roleplaying games, and storytelling games to help clients in their homes and communities. Initially, I met with resistance from parents and professionals, for a variety of reasons. For *Splat* I will describe my career growth and how it enabled me to push past those barriers.

Starting Out

"Why are we just playing?" "How is this therapy?"

Over the years, I have heard those types of questions frequently. When I first started working in the in-home therapy field, it was as a mentor and behavioral assistant, so it was easier to incorporate play in my work. As a mentor I was looking for positive ways to interact with my clients in the community and as a behavioral assistant I could do what I wanted as long as I was following the therapist's behavioral plan.

Back then I could always fall back on, "I'm playing with your kids to build rapport." Monopoly, Connect Four, and Uno became standard fare. The first time I entered a client's home, he wanted to show me his Yu-Gi-Oh! card collection and play with me as well. By that time, I had played Magic the Gathering all through high school and college, so I wasn't intimidated by Yu-Gi-Oh!. He found someone who not only was listening, but who also could speak his language. I am a gamer and so are my clients. Looking back, thank God we were a perfect fit, because burnout is high for the in-home practitioner.

As a master's level therapist, things became more difficult. I would get questions due to my age, experience, and lack of a license. I no longer had the excuse that I was following someone else's plan; I had to make my own plan and one for my assistant while getting both approved by the state. You can bet that game play did not appear in my treatment plans, although I was in client homes playing Lego Star Wars, Call of Duty, Marvel Vs Capcom 2, and other video games. At the time I did not know how to explain why play was therapeutic—all I knew was that it gave me and the client a common language, it allowed me to listen, it was person-centered,

and it worked. In those early years that was true for every type of game except for one: chess. I love chess because it taught me how to dream my way out of puzzling situations. When I was 12 my dad told me that he would not teach me how to play chess, I would have to teach myself, and he would not play against me until I was good enough. I studied chess for years, and then used it to study Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. During my Educational Specialist degree, I learned how to connect thoughts, feelings, and behaviors using a chess board. As I was drafting my dissertation I came across "Chess Therapy," by Fadul and Canlas, and their work inspired me to make distinct aspects of gaming reflect diverse types of therapy. I finally found support in the idea that gaming was for more than just rapport building, and it can connect to a person's therapeutic style.

Seven Years Later

"Why are we just playing games?"

Because play is a language that we can all understand.

"How is this therapy?"

We are using play to build up the coping and social skills you wanted to work on.

Over the years I worked from the perspective of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, but to specifically help the autism population, I began shifting more towards the use of expressive arts and gaming. As an Autplay certified registered play therapist supervisor (RPT-S), I now look at things slightly differently. I now have the words to describe what I am doing a little better. With that in mind, here are some examples of client or family target goals and the games we use in session.

Target Area or Goal	**Client's Playstyle**	**Therapy Style**	**Recommended Game/Activity**
Emotional Regulation	Peer Play, Cooperative Play	Gameplay Therapy, Autplay (Follow Me Approach)	Star Wars Imperial Assault
Social Functioning	Peer Play, Cooperative Play, Sociodramatic Play	Autplay, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Gameplay Therapy, Expressive Arts Therapy	The Quiet Year

Relationship Connections	Cooperative Play, Sociodramatic Play	Autplay, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Gameplay Therapy, Marriage and Family	Kintsugi
Anxiety	Cooperative Play, Sociodramatic Play	Autplay, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Gameplay Therapy, Marriage and Family	Lasers and Feelings
Sensory Processing Improvement	Parallel Play, Constructive Play, Representational Play	Autplay, Play Therapy, Sandplay Therapy	Kinetic Sand
Behavioral Change	Peer Play, Cooperative Play	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Gameplay Therapy	4 Player Chess or Checkers

Summary

There is a refinement process involved when one grows as a therapist. You ask yourself what to bring into the room with the clients. The answer is not just what board game, roleplaying game, video game, or even therapeutic approach. It is the parts of you: the skills and interests that allow you to connect with others. For me it was art, anime, manga, comic books and gaming—everything from board to video games. When it comes to gaming and therapy, you need to find that common ground between what excites you and your therapeutic style. Get your maps and outlines ready, and then when you know everything inside and out, throw it away. Because therapy is just like being a game master in any good tabletop roleplaying game. Your clients will go off script and they will bring you to places both scary and wonderous. And as professionals, we are all the better for it.

Dr. Brian Carl Quinones *is a licensed counselor that has been working with youth ages 4 to 21 for over 15 years. He focuses on studying game theory and design and how play affects the therapeutic process through socially emotional learning and skill development. Dr. Quinones is a therapist/co-founder of Gaming Approaches Towards Education, located in Edison, New Jersey. You can find him at GATE's website, where he writes a weekly blog.*

A Matter of Choice

by Jabari Weathers

Agency is the capability of players to act independently and make their own free choices. When I am gaming with a group, I make agency an explicit conversation within and outside of the narrative. To me, agency isn't about control as much as it is about choice. Control allows us to dictate all of the terms and consequences of our actions, which we do as authors of our own stories. Choice is about iterating on a mutually built context shaped by our own perspectives and those of others who share that same power, so that the space we invest in comes alive.

Often, when talking about player agency, we speak as though choice makes us feel empowered in the players' possibility space, but I would argue that being narratively 'powerful' is different from playing an 'empowered' role. Being 'empowered' is a designation that points to the feeling of control which playing a game (or writing a piece of fiction) provides through an escapist lens. Empowerment often speaks to the cool, assertive things that we can do in a game which we can't actually do in real life (at least not easily). These junctures are crucial to the medium, and can act as a valid motivator for many players. However, roleplaying has evolved into a genre of game built on narratives. Narratives have stakes, and stakes cannot exist without consequences. Being 'powerful' in a narrative sense means being consequential. That lesson is instrumental within and beyond the context of a game.

A choice made in a mechanics-driven game doesn't have the same stakes as in a story-based one. However, meaningful choices within the systems of a mechanics-driven game can build to meaningful consequences in a similar way to that of a story. Without any meaningful choice at all, games are simply systems linguistically disguised as games of chance. Tetris, for example, may not hold the kind of stakes that a deeply political LARP has, but it does contain meaningful, eloquent choices for the player to make on its terms. The result is an addictive loop—place blocks in a way to keep your score climbing and your rows disappearing. Missteps fill up the space until your blocks touch the top. Creative and quick thinking and placement have the power to clear whole rows. For a game seemingly so abstract, Tetris can generate a remarkable amount of investment and tension! This

loop holds many lessons for pushing forward player choice in a roleplaying context.

Tetris does the following five things extremely well: communicate with the player what it provides and why they are there, follow up on that contract, offer meaningful choice through digestible ingredients, telegraph its consequences, and repeatedly teach the player. The result is a game that players easily lose hours to and sink plenty of investment into. As role players—and storytellers—we can provoke that same excitement and same series of choices, though playing in a social and narrative space adds a few crucial considerations.

When setting up a game, communicating to your players about what kind of game you intend to collectively experience is important. Tetris does this within seconds of play. Make a row and watch it clear. Minutes later, you will see the consequences of filling the screen: a game over. Its work is simple because the system and what it asks for is simple. Few RPGs and storytelling games are so simple to be able to do this, even while they may be incredibly eloquent, because they are always filtered through the perspective of not just the designers, but also of the players at hand. Identifying why your group is here and what kind of choices and level of consequence you want to grapple with and hold through them allows for players to harness their agency quickly when there is an explicit and mutual understanding and buy in about what their game is about. The identification of narrative interests is the game's contract. Safety considerations—being clear about what kind of content is in(and left out of) a game, especially what is explicitly mechanized and what each player hopes to bring to and get out of it—are the ink.

From there, the game has to follow up. Tetris does this drop by drop and line by line, but a roleplaying game or storytelling game is much more complex and subjective in how its players see through the promise of their initial contract. I use the following broad touchstones to affirm and encourage player choice. First, failure is not the end, and trouble is to be embraced. A story is not exciting without stakes—however internal or external they are and watching the failures of a group come into focus makes for both powerful storytelling and powerful motivators of future choice. Second, not making a choice is itself a choice. When players don't act, they let the events of the world around them unfold unimpeded. Doing nothing is watching something, and if watching something is a choice we make in our entertainment, then having our characters watch the world unfold around them is a choice as well.

How do we offer meaningful choice and make those choices digestible? Tetris offers meaningful choice on its own hyper-distilled parameters, but in a roleplaying context, 'meaning' carries a lot of varied definition. When in doubt, present players with choices that reflect the established contract. Mechanics are just one part of the game's tools to let players express their choice, but the game doesn't stop at the codified mechanics in the way Tetris does. If a player botches a roll, let them narrate how things go awry. Collaborating with and even letting players own failure holds a kind of special power, and it fosters an accountability reflected in every choice at the table.

Telegraphing the consequence is a matter of foreshadowing in fiction, whether in a macro sense through theme, or the micro sense of confronting players with immediate threat or a more distant problem. Even if the exact impact is not defined, highlighting that something is significant makes it available to the players to make a choice about (whether that choice is sufficiently informed or not). Working all of these angles into your game helps your group digest that while they as individual players don't have all of the control over the world and circumstances, they can control and assert how they meet the consequences of those circumstances

Finally, there is what the game teaches. This operates on two levels in a role-playing game, rather than the single one that Tetris immediately shows when it teaches its loop and the nuances that the player has to sustain it. Players like to learn and RPGs teach on multiple levels rather than the near purely mechanical one that Tetris does. RPGs teach their mechanics through play, teach their themes through fiction, and teach the group's dynamics in the social exchange.

The best way to harness control of our agency at the table is understanding that we can't control everything, and that's something to be excited about. We can, however, influence everything, and that ability is a powerful thing to hold.

***Jabari Weathers** (@GoblinPrincete) is a Black illustrator, writer, and narrative game designer who works with a gothblin flair from Baltimore, Maryland. They love the strange, unsettling and heavily existential, and often try to provoke these feelings in between moments of beauty in the artifacts they make, and are drawn to these tensions in the media they seek out. To kick off the new decade, they have been hard at work in resolving their first tabletop RPG; an epistolary game with a nasty edge called A Dire Situation. You can find their illustration work at http://jmwillustration.com and their design work at http://lunarveil.press.*

Designing Long-Form LARPs for Schools

an interview with Jacob Jaskov and Dana Russell

Sam: How did you start creating games that are used in schools?

Jacob: In the late '90s, I moved to Copenhagen and got a job as a research assistant at the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies. We had many projects with games because games were seen as a futuristic teaching tool at that time. Most of the educational games at the time had little connection between the subject matter and the game mechanics, which I didn't think was a good way to teach. For me, it was very important to create interactions that were actually meaningful in terms of what you had to learn.

For our first game, students had to develop an AI for a Mars mission. We broke up students into teams representing different design philosophies. Each team had to read about AI and then argue why the group should follow their philosophy when creating the AI. For example, should the AI use human-readable representations of knowledge, or should it be more like a neural network? The group had to make a series of these choices and defend those choices to a facilitator and a teacher. The game worked extremely well in terms of teaching the subject matter, but it was highly dependent on the facilitator; teachers couldn't run it by themselves. We did a lot of really good work in terms of designing a learning game that had meaningful choices, but requiring a facilitator wasn't optimal.

We showed our game to a top research institution called Learning Lab Denmark. They had a lot of funding and were interested in games, but they didn't know how to make them. They thought that our game was great, but it was difficult to scale up, because we depended on the facilitator. When Learning Lab Denmark won a bid to make a new educational game for the Danish government, they brought in my team and I to make it. One of our goals was for this new game to work without a facilitator, because we wanted this to be used in all schools in Denmark.

Sam: Can you talk about what kind of training the facilitator had to do for the original game?

I think if you know how to play role playing games, you can learn it in two hours. But to be a good facilitator, you need to know how to facilitate role

playing games and also how to interact in a classroom setting. And not all game masters can do that. In fact, how to facilitate the game was not so big of a problem, because we were quite good at designing it so it was easy to run, but you still have to have some good skills, both for classroom management, and for game mastering. This was the problem in trying to scale this up, because you could book a facilitator, but then somebody needed to have a list of facilitators and organize bookings, which would be a lot to manage and also quite costly.

For the new game, we decided the teacher would be the facilitator by themselves, but mainly have a computer run everything. And the teacher would then be the one to approve that the tasks were done correctly, using an interface where they could check off tasks, which would then open up a new section in the game for the students.

The theme for this game was crime scene investigation. Our goal was to create something that was cross-disciplinary and could be played for five school days. For example, we had some fake corpses created with the help of the best makeup artist in Denmark and then we shot videos where we put worms or maggots into the corpses. Then we asked the students to determine what kind of insects tend to live in bodies, how do they grow, and which are specific for dead bodies and which aren't. By understanding this, they can calculate the time of death, which gave them some important clues. We also got some professional actors to play suspects and witnesses. The students interviewed them, took notes, and learned how to analyze and collect information from different interviews on a whiteboard.

Initially, some of the suspect interviews were not available to the students, because they did not have the right clues. But as they found clues, they would identify new suspects, which opened up new video scenes. So they didn't get all the information at once, but as they analyzed clues, they gained access to more and more information. That was managed by the computer, but it wasn't a computer game. It was a game that was in the physical room, where they play and talk with each other.

Sam: So the computer is a digital version of the secret envelopes in a legacy game, where you unlock more content over time.

That's exactly it. The teacher just had to understand the subjects and the tasks. The scene setting was also handled by the computer, so the teacher didn't have to understand how to gamemaster or how to roleplay. That meant we were able to scale it up, and it was used in 25% of all schools in Denmark.

We heard from teachers that the students didn't want to take breaks for

lunch. They just wanted to continue with the game because it's so fun. And teachers were like "No no no, you have to stop!" We had two PhD students following both our development process, but also documenting how it worked in school. Their conclusion was that the students actually learned more during a week of playing the game than they would have during a normal week of classes. And the retention was much higher.

We also tried to export the concept to the US and UK. But we couldn't do that, because there wasn't an opening for so much cross-disciplinary education. That's one of the big challenges, you need to have an educational system where there's openness to play around with the subjects and the classes and then still get the credit towards the exam. Because if it doesn't count towards the exam it's difficult in many countries.

Dana: There's a huge movement right now in American education called project-based learning, where you run interdisciplinary experiences and kids learn real world skills. But the issue with project-based learning in America is that I, as one teacher, would design that entire learning experience and run it with no help.

Would it be possible to run a game like this for a full week in American schools? It takes six hours a day for five days.

Dana: I could run it in my class, but I probably couldn't convince the school to spend the whole week on it.

So in Denmark, all schools plan one week for projects where all subjects are mixed. That was already there when I was in school, we just took this cross-disciplinary learning week and infused it with play. We didn't have to convince anyone that it was smart to do cross-disciplinary teaching—they knew this, but they struggled to do it the right way, because there's a lot of planning involved. And then they got this game that works extremely well, and of course they were happy with it. But that's also why it's so difficult to get it abroad, because it's not just one teacher deciding to use it. It's all teachers for one class.

Sam: It sounds like we need institutional changes, not individual ones. Dana, did you have any other questions about the game?

Dana: I'm mostly just sitting here being mad about the school system. (laughs)

Sam: Most of our readers know you as the designer of Fog of Love. How did your work with educational games influence your design for a general audience?

One of the key lessons from the crime scene investigation game was that, in order for it to work, we couldn't have a game master. We had to

automate it somehow. For *Fog of Love*, I wanted to create a rich narrative experience, and I knew from experience I could do that without a game master. It's done in a completely different way in *Fog of Love*, but it's still about automating the game mastering function while maintaining a strong roleplaying experience.

It's also important to structure it very tightly, because if you want to make people do something themselves, they need to really understand what they're doing. The crime scene game uses tropes that people know very well. People have seen *CSI* and crime movies, so they know how to behave. They can actually speak in-role in a way that feels natural, because they know how cops talk in these shows.

Using a setting that isn't fantasy, one that is very normal and very popular, can be very helpful. And that also works for *Fog of Love*: it uses tropes and stories and narratives that people know, so even people who have never played a roleplaying game have a huge repertoire of tropes they can use. There are lessons there about how the universes you work with can help people to play games. A lot of roleplaying games traditionally have been based on fantasy, and although fantasy has become mainstream, specific subcultures know more about it than others. So if you want to broaden the appeal, it's important to think about how to go beyond traditional game settings and play around with other settings that can still be a lot of fun.

It's also good for diversity's sake. If you only use one setting, you'll push some people away. And if you say up front that you're playing an RPG, then those who already play RPGs have an advantage and those who don't play have a disadvantage. If you also use a setting that is popular with those who already play RPGs, they will be more likely to understand how this setting works, so that they would have a double advantage, while the others would have a double disadvantage. I think it's important that, if your game mechanics are heavily skewed towards a subculture, it's good to skew away from that subculture with the game's content, so you can be more inclusive. And then everybody can play, and say "Wow, roleplaying games can be fun! You actually play with orcs? Why do you do that?"

Jacob Jaskov *(@jacobjaskov) is a game designer from Denmark focused on games that tell human stories. His works are based on psychological insights and innovative narrative mechanics. He has also developed a couple of learning games. One of these has been used in 20% of all Danish schools for 10 years. He's also consulting within innovation, strategy and behavioral design. Recently he designed a novel user interface to library systems that has been rolled out nationally in Denmark.*