



# On the similarities of slaying dragons and ordering food: A proposition for using a Task-Based Language Teaching Approach for playing Tabletop Role-playing Games

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## ABSTRACT

Tabletop Role-playing Games (TRPGs) offer great potential for language learning through the heavy focus on language as both character control and dramatic character representation as well as the unique combination of cooperative narration, game mechanics, and drama. As authentic materials that are not specifically designed for language learning, TRPGs need to be implemented using a pedagogic framework. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and TRPGs share several common or comparative elements which qualify for further analysis. Both concepts are compared on how well they align and in which way both TRPGs and TBLT experts can benefit from each other, using theoretical arguments, data from a TRPG student club and examples from three adventures. Through this method, it was found that TBLT and TRPGs share several qualities despite minor differences and qualify for further analysis and implementation into classroom projects.

## KEY POINTS

**Background:** Given their potential for language learning, TRPGs can become effective teaching tools when implemented through a pedagogic framework.

**Aim:** To demonstrate how TRPGs and task-based language teaching could align in theory.

**Methods:** Theoretical comparison combined with script data from a student project and exemplification through three adventures.

**Results:** TRPGs and TBLT align in several aspects theoretically, which few projects and pedagogic plans suggest.

**Conclusion:** To maximize the learning benefits, it is suggested to combine research in a rather fast-headed joint action-research program.

## TWEET

Do you want to know how TBLT and TRPGs could work together? Well first, they are both goal-oriented. Continue reading to get to know more. #TRPG #TBLT

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## 1. Introduction

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) have gained wide popularity in recent years due to their representation in television and media such as *Stranger Things*, *Big Bang Theory* or *Riverdale*. What was formerly considered a niche hobby or in its early days even an occult activity (Etten, 2017), has gone mainstream. Through their collaborative, problem-solving and highly communicative character, TRPGs should also be taken into consideration by foreign language educators. To properly make use of this game format this article assumes that tying TRPGs to a pedagogic concept will accelerate the possible learning benefits as compared to not embedding TRPGs into any educational line of thought. Addressing both these elements of TRPGs and the need for pedagogic considerations, the well-established theory of task-based language teaching (TBLT) is chosen for further consideration. The hypothesis for this article is therefore, that due to major similarities in both TBLT and TRPG, it is possible to combine both for language learning.

The analysis of this hypothesis is done in one step. After establishing the groundwork for both TRPGs and TBLT basic assumptions and key characteristics of components are compared to demonstrate the degree of alignment they share and in which ways they differ. In other words, this article addresses specifically TBLT educators but also TRPG practitioners in terms of *what* both concepts are and how they could converge. Furthermore, reasons are outlined as to *why* both should be compared and used in learning contexts.

A mixed methodology is used to analyze the hypothesis. Since the literature on TRPGs for language teaching is considerably small, both related fields such as Game-Based Learning, Literacy Learning and Drama Pedagogy need to be addressed as well as practical arguments made from TRPG experience. TRPG experience is also used to make the arguments proposed in this article more accessible to both researchers and educators unfamiliar with TRPGs. The data used to do so derives from the Role-playing Games club for German learners in Korea and the three adventures used: *Die weiße Schlange* [The White Snake], *Gefrorene Angst* [Frozen Fear], and *Blutiges Schäferstündchen* [Bloody Lover's Tryst] of the investigative and social horror RPG *Cthulhu* (Petersen et al., 2019. Petersen & Willis, 2011). Due to the context of German as a foreign language (GFL), the data is translated and therefore unable to show learner-specific linguistic characteristics. The objective of providing these translated sets of data is to show communicative patterns, student agency and problem-solving strategies, to exemplify theoretical arguments or provide ideas for implementation.

## 2. TRPGs and how to deal with them pedagogically

In order to provide the groundwork to compare TRPGs and TBLT, both concepts are introduced in this section. TRPGs are described within the context of a broader frame of Role-playing Games (RPG). Then, the issue of how to view them pedagogically is addressed.

### 2.1 What are TRPGs?

In short, the history of TRPGs dates to the 1970s, when the first game *Dungeons and Dragons* was created. TRPGs were combined out of three major components: Games, themes, and play. In terms of a technical framework, early military tabletop games were utilized in terms of terrains, figures and rules, dating as far back as the Prussian general Reisswitz' *Kriegspiel* or H.G. Wells *Little Wars* (Hillenbrand & Lischka, 2014; Schmidt, 2012). In terms of themes, contemporary fantasy literature such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Conan the Barbarian* or *Cthulhu* served as inspiration and major influences (Hillenbrand & Lischka, 2014) whereas fairy tales and different novel genres also had their impact (Herbrik, 2011). Lastly, dramatic methods such as *Psychodrama* and *Theatre Game* also contributed to the unique concept of TRPGs (Schmidt, 2012; Flood, 2006). What these influences specifically contribute to TRPGs is further discussed in sections 2.2 and 2.3.

From a historical perspective, TRPGs serve as a predecessor to more popular computer RPGs (Hillenbrand & Lischka, 2014), of which many exist (Philips, 1994). These games have taken genres such as fantasy, horror, sci-fi, steampunk, history, superhero, and even successful novels and TV or cinema productions (Schmidt, 2012) and turned them into playable experiences.

When observing a TRPG session, a spectator may recognize some of the following aspects. There is a group located around a table, with dice, blank papers, pencils, and cryptic-looking documents

containing information that does seem to be another language and at least somewhat mathematical (see Image 1). Also, the group is primarily talking, and the spectator will likely make out one person who talks more than others, has some books in front or beside her/him and seems to treasure information behind some kind of cardboard screen. After secretive sounds of dice rolling and an occasional snickering, mysterious information about what was going on behind that veil of secrecy is provided or not. Meanwhile, the others talk among themselves in what seems to be some sort of dramatic exercise and also often react to that one person talking too much, hiding behind a cover, telling what “they” are doing despite keeping seated at the aforementioned table, or on rare occasions even contest what was being said by the person talking the most. Another thing the spectator might observe is that in the middle of the table amidst a fine collection of sweets, snacks and drinks some photos, occasionally figures and oddly looking maps are identifiable. Throughout many hours, these people maneuver themselves through what seems to be a story that is initiated and driven mostly by the most talkative person shielded behind their cover.



**Image 1** Depiction of a TRPG session.

## 2.2 Key elements of TRPGs

Before further analyzing the specific concepts of TRPGs, a step back must be taken to clarify what elements constitute the broader sphere of RPGs – that is not only TRPGs but also Live Action Role Play (LARP – fantasy-themed, costumed improvisational theater), free forms and computer RPGs. These related forms bear resemblance to differing degrees towards TRPGs, are in part more intensely researched by pedagogues and thus might support educators seeking to integrate TRPGs into learning contexts.

Hitchens and Drachen (2009) break down the spectrum of RPG into six elements: Every game needs a **game world** in which it can take place and **players** that participate and control their **characters**. Also, there needs to be some sort of **game master** who knows the rules, acts out non-player characters and starts spinning a **narrative** that is influenced by the characters' actions and **interactions**. Due to the vastly different natures of each type of RPG, this definition is rather minimalistic and it is correctly mentioned that there are many exceptions that exceed or do not inherit all those characteristics (Arjoranta, 2010). Yet, they still give a sufficient overview of both TRPGs and other RPG forms.

Within TRPGs, these elements manifest themselves in genuine forms that might differ from other kinds of RPGs. For the game world, different genres have been mentioned before. Additionally, the degree of fantastic elements varies greatly between different game worlds. Where some are entirely fictional, others blend fantasy into an alternative version of our world. Another factor is the size and constitution of the game world. The system used in the project uses data gathered from Cthulhu (Petersen et al., 2019, Petersen & Willis, 2011), which occurs in a historically accurate alternative version of the real world and is based on the horror novels of H.P. Lovecraft. Most settings are located in the 1920's – as in H.P. Lovecraft's novels. Additionally, the late 1800s and present times are also prevalent. Theoretically, the game world is endless, and all players involved can have a different impact on it, which separates TRPGs from computer RPGs, where the potential game world needs to be anticipated and predefined as code or from LARP, where there are at least some physical and visible limitations. This highlights a possible limitation when trying to draw resources from educational LARP or digital game-based learning. Since TRPGs are co-constructed through shared imagination, the only limit is creativity. A real-life example reconstructed from our own gameplay is shown in Dialogue 1:

*Detective: Then how about we visit a temple together?*  
*Student: When are we going?*  
*Detective: Oh but it is lunch time already. The five of us need to eat lunch first.*  
*Student: I think so too.*  
*Game Master: Exactly! Then you are eating lunch together? Where and what would you like to eat?*  
*Detective: So... we are Germans, but Bai is Chinese. Could you ...?*  
*Game Master: "Yes. I would like to try German food." (as NPC Bai)*  
*Detective: Ah, okay. Then we'll go to the German restaurant.*

**Dialogue 1** An example of co-constructed imagination.

The players figured out they needed a place to eat and plan their characters' actions further, hence they proposed the restaurant, which the game master had to weave into the game world spontaneously. Also, each game system has game mechanics of different complexity, that are trying to put the game world into quantifiable terms (Herbrik, 2011, p.144). Those mechanics must to some degree be understood by all participants (Bowman, 2010), but foremostly by the GM.

To establish the game mechanics, the GM in general relies on books containing rules and heavy game world information. In addition to playing the NPCs, and "animating" (Daniau, 2016, p. 424) or "dominating" (Herbrik 2011, p. 91) the narrative, the GM works also as a translator of non-narrative elements and perspectives into the narration (Herbrik, 2011, p. 105-106; Thorhauge, 2013), which means he weaves success or failure through dice into the plot, using the players perspective. An example would be after a failed dice throw of an attempt to attack a foe: "You try to hit the goblin, but the small creature narrowly dodges the punch and attempts to strike you with his dagger." Farkaš (2018, p. 12) describes the GM's role as someone who provides the players with situations that must be solved by them. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) take a broader view of the term players since they also view the GM as one. All players except the GM usually control a character that has a varyingly complex biography and personality profile and is quantified in terms of game mechanics as they often have different skill sets that give them more hooks to figure out how to tackle the problems placed in front of them. Cthulhu Edition 7 (Petersen et al., 2019, Petersen & Willis, 2011) e.g. has 50 basic skills in its present edition that range from combat, physical and cognitive skills to social abilities such as charming, convincing or threatening. In general, an overview of the skills and information that constitute a character is summarized in what is called a character document. Often players control characters as homodiegetic narrator, using performative acts to react towards the GM (Herbrik, 2011, p.90-91). In practical terms this looks like that of Dialogue 2:

*Game Master: You can see a tall man in a traditional gown choking a woman.*  
*Player 1: "Halt!" I say.*  
*Game Master: The man does not react to your shouting.*  
*Player 1: Then I hit the man with something to stop him.*

**Dialogue 2** An Example for Performative Acts in TRPG

In this scenario, the GM provides the situation where an unknown woman is being attacked by an undead creature in *Die weiße Schlange*. Player one reacts through direct speech, which highlights the dramatic in-game dialogue typical for TRPGs. The player then proceeds by referring to the character as

I, which constitutes a homodiegetic narrator. After this does not work, the player changes their plan of action by using a performative act. What the player says happens in the game world. Highlighting the dramatic elements of some TRPGs, players often act out conversations of their characters using direct speech in a dialogue pattern with other players or the GM.

Another factor is the difference between what the players and their characters know and believe. Reacting upon the nightmare of one character, a player from my group became conflicted and unknowingly described the tough situation players are sometimes getting into:

*"I am S. [player's name] but I am also Tanya [character's name]. So while Tanya believes the nightmare has a medical explanation and is nothing to worry about, I – S. – personally think it is a curse."*

What can be found in this example is the player's knowledge of playing a horror game conflicting with the character's unawareness of being in a game world containing anything supernatural. Separating both of these roles from each other is what Fine (1983) calls pretense awareness.

For the narration, Hitchens & Drachen refer to it as "shared narrative" (2009, p. 16), whereas others call the structure "collaborative" (Daniau, 2016, p. 424) or "co-constructed" (Schmidt, 2012, p. 84). Often the narration is based upon published adventures or self-made plots, created by others or the GM, who usually is the only participant having access to all the information. All of the three adventures being used in this paper are commercially published adventures for the system Cthulhu (Petersen et al., 2019, Petersen & Willis, 2011) that have been tested with GFL students.

As for the complexity, TRPG designer Ulrich (2017) differs between three forms: a linear plot, a complex plot and a clustered plot. Whereas the linear plot transports the characters into fixed scenarios, a complex plot offers different routes of reaching or not reaching the end of the quest – the task or problem to be solved – while a clustered plot structure means that characters are doing a certain number of actions or finding a sufficient amount of clues before being transported to the next chapter. Those plot structures are often connected to each other – different parts of the plot being more or less complex. An example might bring more clarity: The adventure *Die Weiße Schlange* starts linear: Characters gather at a restaurant, drink plenty, forget about the time and walk home into the same direction. Suddenly they hear a scream and see a frightened woman passing by. This was due to an undead creature attacking the house, where she was employed as a maid. From there on, the plot becomes more complex: Characters could head for the house, avoid any action, or contact the police leading to different outcomes. Different possible reactions are also anticipated within the adventure. Dialogue 3 shows what impact players have on the narrative:

Detective:	<i>I would like to go home.</i>
Student:	<i>I want to go where the woman came from, because I am an adventurer.</i>
Art Dealer/Smuggler:	<i>I just want to go home, because it's late and it's dangerous at night.</i>

### **Dialogue 3** Discussion on different Paths within the Plot.

Here, the players created two routes within the plot by themselves that could lead to different contacts, knowledge, and monetary rewards later on. Finally, the player controlling an art dealer opted out and went home, while the detective decided to act as guardian for the student and might earn some favor through her rich parents in return. After that first night, the plot becomes even more complex. To gather information, characters could contact local or international authorities, Chinese acquaintances, mystic accessory traders, temples, or try to track the undead. During this phase, the plot is somewhat clustered, since accumulating certain actions will lead to counter reactions such as the characters drawing the attention of a third party or the plot's villain.

Hitchens and Drachen (2009) propose that characters at least interact through combat, dialogue, and with objects. From a language perspective, interactions between characters, NPCs and the GM might be of more interest. For the latter, players not only use performative acts as a reaction to the narrative presented by the GM, but also negotiate the narration by asking, paraphrasing, suggesting, negotiating or contesting it (Herbrik, 2011). How narration is asked for and suggested becomes clear when looking at Dialogue 4, when the characters in *Blutiges Schäferstündchen* entered an old mine.

Game Master: *You see an old wooden door.*  
 Player 1: *Uh.... Hmmmm....*  
 Game Master: *This old door has an old, rusty lock.*  
 Player 2: *Is it open? Or closed?*  
 Game Master: *It is locked.*  
 Player 2: *Uh.... Hmmmm....*  
 Player 1: *When we use the door, can we enter?*  
 Game Master: *Exactly. When you open it [by force] or find a key, you can enter. And this is a very old door, so you think, you can open it [by force].*  
 Player 1: *Okay. Then strength?*  
 Game Master: *Yes. This is something for strength.*

**Dialogue 4** Asking for and suggesting narrative development.

Players one and two ask for more information about the situation and therefore suggest paths the narration might take. Player two also paraphrases entering by force through asking to conduct a dice roll on strength. An additional factor that is not explicitly mentioned by Hitchens and Drachen is the role of immersion. Balzer describes this process as “plunge into another world” (2011, p. 33), which means that players are experiencing the game world through the lens of their characters and in part being their characters:

“During this experience, they interact with the gameworld in their role, in the same way they interact with their environment outside of the game. They interpret everything they experience according to the gameworld instead of according to their usual lifeworld.” (Balzer, 2011, p. 41).

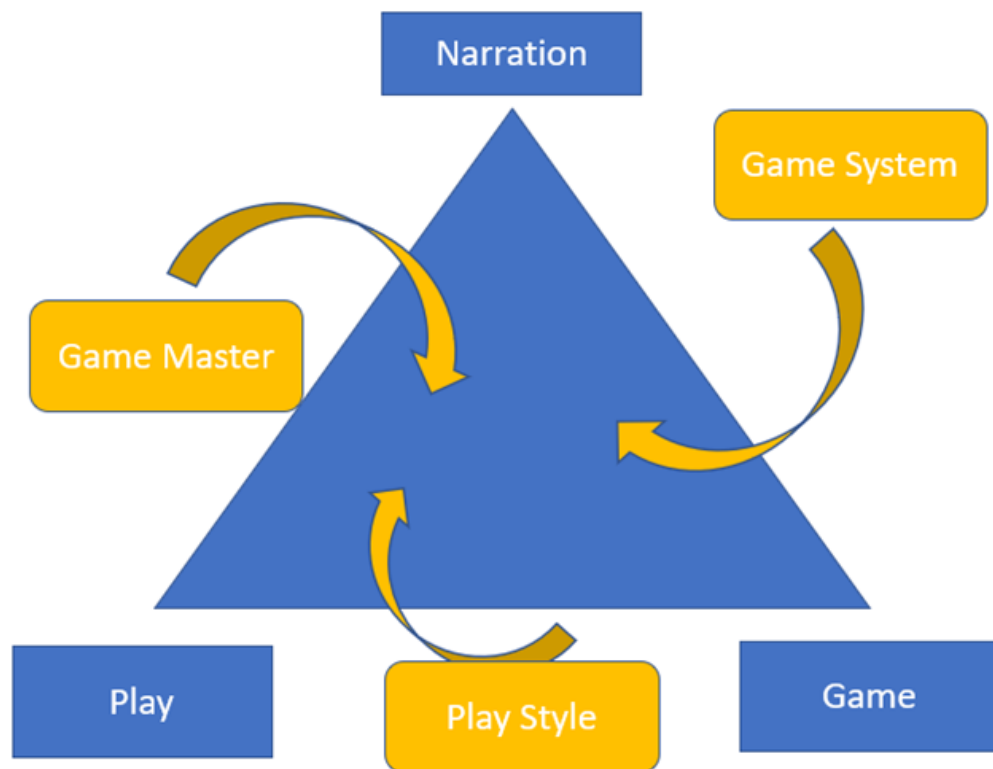
The degree to which players dive into their characters can be compared to professional actors incorporating their roles (Flood, 2006) and might create the emotional state of catharsis (Bowman 2010). Also, there is a link between the narration and immersion. Flöter (2013) describes them as two different spaces in a sociological sense, that are being connected and interdependent: They also function as a driving factor for each other: An interesting narration will lead players to immerse themselves deeper into their characters what in turn will cause the narration to be perceived more interesting (Flöter, 2017; Herbrink, 2011). Reasons for the high degree of immersion are argued to be the detailed description of characters and time invested into creating them, group dynamics and the influence on and imagination of the game world and narration (Flöter, 2017), what can also cause a phenomenon called Bleed (Geneuss, 2019), which describes, that convictions, beliefs, and emotions can be transferred between character and player or vice versa.

Through immersing themselves into the roles, they partake within an adventure, players enter an as-if situation. They must act as if they are their character (Bowman, 2010) and also as if they possess their skill. By doing so they enter a space of safe skill exploration (da Rocha, 2018; Bokhodirovna, 2020). Thus arises the possibility to try out skills, strategies and viewpoints without facing real consequences or as Geneuss phrases it, the only difference between performing within a roleplay or in real life is the awareness of consequences that would only impact fiction for RPG, but real outcomes for acting out in real life (2019, p. 28). Further, the skills and strategies used in-game can be transferred to real life performance (Daniau, 2016). This of course only applies to theoretical concepts: thoroughly describing how to open a locked door might transfer to real life performance in terms of mapping out the action. Still roleplay allows the transfer of abstract learning contents to be perceived emotionally and cognitively and therefore opens up the chance of being experienced in addition to being learned (Balzer, 2011, p. 35).

## 2.3 TRPGs from a pedagogical lens

If it is the objective to implement TRPGs into foreign language learning situations, it is not sufficient to only know what they are. As with all authentic materials, there is a need to make them fit for language learning use through the application of pedagogical frameworks and techniques or borrowing principles from different teaching and learning approaches. Games (York, 2020; deHaan, 2019) including TRPG are no exception to this. So far, not much literature on how to use TRPGs for language learning has been published. In addition to referring to projects implementing TRPGs, a look at what TRPGs consist of, where they come from and what other concepts they bear resemblance to must be taken.

Out of simplicity, it is suggested to break down the complex concept of TRPGs into three elements or pillars to locate the actual play experience. Within previous discourse, often two of the three factors have been mentioned in different combinations (Herbrik, 2011; Flöter, 2013; Flood, 2006; Schmidt, 2012; Bowman, 2010): Game, Narration and Play (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Components of Play Experiences

From a point of TRPG history, the game design was highly influenced by battle board games (Hillenbrand & Lischka, 2014). Also, the importance of rules and the rule system that is often written down in hundreds of pages, has been highlighted although the number and complexity of rules differ between different game systems (Schmidt, 2012). Hence it is a logical argument to consider the large body of research that has been conducted on digital computer games as well as traditional board games. Though, there are limitations that need to be kept in mind: Whereas board games often do not incorporate a comparable storyline and the amount of in-character acting might differ due to the highly complex character designs and biographical information in TRPGs, computer RPGs might have a deep and complex storyline, but lack of players' impact on it differs in addition to the comparatively low verbal output players produce. As was seen in dialogue 1, where players came up with a German restaurant in Beijing, something that has not been anticipated in terms of code cannot be created in a computer game. Computer games differ further in a sense, that they incorporate rules that run in the background, where in TRPGs rules need to be managed by the players, can also serve as a tool (Thorhauge, 2013) and can be chosen or abolished within the group – a variation that is often referred to as house rules or home brew.

Some examples might clarify the varying importance of **rules**: One of my previous GMs was known for enjoying highly complex damage calculations such as including the basic damage, distance, coverage and cover material, close objects and their potential to turn into damage causing projectiles when confronting characters with explosives. Another example can be found in a Das Schwarze Auge group that I participated in: Some of the players spend five hours on conducting sea warfare consisting of about ten actions per each of two fractions. In a computer game, a comparable amount of actions would only take minutes. On the other hand Koerber-Abe (2018) simplified the already rather simple rule system of Dungeons-&Dragons for his GFL players.



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As for **narration**, the other part that historically constituted the creation becomes clear: Fantasy works such as *Lord of the Rings* or *Conan the Barbarian* provided strong inspiration for the TRPGs (Hillenbrand & Lischka, 2014). Herbrink goes further and additionally names the German *Abenteuerroman* and *Bildungsroman* as major influences, specifically in the fight of the character against outer forces, the possibilities of readers to experience the adventure without sharing the risks of the protagonists, the deviation from civil society for the *Abenteuerroman* and in terms of inner development through mastering adventures for the *Bildungsroman* (Herbrink, 2011). Another connection has been established for mythology and myths (Flöter, 2013). Specifically for mythology, the influence of Campbell's hero journey has been demonstrated for computer RPG (MacCallum et al., 2018; Buchanan-Oliver & Seo, 2012), and for RPG in therapy (Enfield, 2007). Said journey describes a typical, often occurring pattern in myths and folk tales that is also inherent to the human psyche (Campbell, 2008). According to Cragoe (2016), further similarities between myths and TRPGs are the structures that are both very patterned but also able to be influenced and dependent on the storytellers' decisions. What differs vastly though is the specific, co-narrated, shared, or co-constructed form of narration, which is not limited to one storyteller but modifiable by the whole group of players. The previous example of players constructing a restaurant demonstrates this, but so does a personal example as a player: After the characters in a medieval fantasy TRPG needed to rest, the game master integrated a tavern located on a large farm. Following a couple of drinks and social play, a noble magician failed miserably to perform and accidentally lit the tavern on fire, which ultimately led to several farm buildings being burned down. In return, after the characters fled the scene, the farmers started a revolt against nobles and their leader became a tougher and worse enemy than the one originally implemented in the plot. Despite the differing impact on the story development the similarities still demonstrate the possible benefits of using projects and pedagogic theory on experience-oriented literacy learning, when trying to implement TRPG.

As for the third factor, the role of **play and acting** out as characters has been established previously when focusing on the role of immersion. Thus, incorporating the vast body of knowledge conducted through research and teaching experience on classroom role-play, drama pedagogics and related more well analyzed RPG forms such as LARP come to mind. Especially when considering the effects of immersion, bleed or even techniques of Drama Pedagogy for language learning and use, these theories prove to be highly beneficial for incorporation into learning scenarios using TRPGs. Nevertheless, the limitation must be kept in mind: Classroom Role-Play is shorter than TRPGs which often takes several hours weekly for weeks, months or years (Daniau, 2016). Drama Pedagogics – where techniques from drama and theater are incorporated into the language learning situation – differ in a sense, that the characters are often either not self-created or lack the depth of TRPGs characters. Also, the plot can but not necessarily has to be scripted. The lines between LARP are closer, but a major difference is the degree of imagination: Whereas LARP visualizes most fantastic processes through costumes and props, TRPGs rely on players' construction and sharing a fictional world in their mind. What all differ from TRPGs is the aspect of character control through speech. Still, if looking for how to incorporate the dramatic aspects of TRPGs into the language learning classroom the aforementioned disciplines and methods are nonetheless useful.

To sum up, various other methods or pedagogic theories might help in the design of TRPGs for language learning, but this short comparison also highlights the unique elements and factors of that specific kind of RPG. Referring to these somewhat related theories of teaching can benefit educators who seek to implement TRPGs. Another importance of the separation of these three driving elements is that it allows educators to focus on what they would prefer to make their TRPG project look like and what their learners need. For instance, while in a traditional learning setting, educators might focus on play for high verbal output or narration for meaningful input or content delivery, one might also consider some of the more technical elements to allow students with high strategic or problem solving knowledge to demonstrate their skills in an area not traditionally associated with language learning. This distinction is not only important in terms of how to implement TRPGs, but also for where to locate the TRPG experience.



Every TRPG session is located somewhere between those three elements. Factors that are responsible for locating the experience are the game system, the playing style, and the game master. As for the game system, it already suggests a certain style, although variation is possible, many different modes such as investigative, social, action focused or strategic ones can be identified (Bowman, 2010). *Cthulhu* (Petersen et al., 2019; Petersen & Willis, 2011) for example is investigative and therefore needs rigorous playing, asking and also social elements in order to attain clues. *Dungeons & Dragons* on the other hand is more oriented towards combat and skill using, while the modern cyberpunk game *Shadowrun* is focused on so called runs – heists that need to be carefully laid out with a relatively short phase of conduction and *Vampire The Masquerade* often circles around carefully woven intrigues within vampire society. Although the game system does not determine the play experience, it certainly influences it and also raises expectations among seasoned players who know what the system stands for. Additionally, not only systems but also players and GMs tend to have preferred styles. They could be interested in the active or passive development of the plot (Narrativism), in-game challenges (Gamism) or exploration of the game world and its mechanics (Simulationsm) (Ulrich, 2019). Knowing about these factors is important to first identify which TRPG experience an educator feels comfortable with and second what players might anticipate or enjoy about a TRPG. On another note, this is also vital for the GM who is responsible for choosing the game system and the adventure to be played. Thus, being aware of the three elements game, narration and play plus the three dimensions of the game systems, playing styles and the GM supports catering the TRPG experience to all parties involved and designing a beneficial TRPG session.

### 3. Task-based language teaching

Following the description and pedagogical handling of TRPGs, the pedagogic theory to which it is to be compared needs to be described. Since in section four, TRPGs and TBLT are compared in-depth, the following description is kept rather short as an overview to avoid unnecessary redundancy. It must be noted that within the discourse of TBLT stretching over decades, different approaches including the definition of tasks in terms of scope, the perspective, authenticity, skill use and the function of outcomes exist (Ellis, 2003). For the sake of simplicity, this section adopts a narrow view of tasks.

task-based language teaching or teaching is considered as a central theory and approach to second language teaching (Ellis, 2009). As the name suggests, the primary unit of analysis are tasks which could briefly be described in the following way:

“[A] task is taken to be an activity in which meaning is primary, there is some sort of relationship to the real world, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.” (Skehan, 1996, p. 38)

In addition to being meaningful and authentic (Ellis, 2009), tasks must also be oriented towards a goal and achieve real world outcomes (Willis, 1996). In other words, a task must not only be realistic, but must also target to achieve something that is applicable to contexts outside of the classroom and therefore follows the assumption that languages are learned best if possible real-life situations are simulated within the learning and teaching process (Lynch & MacLean, 2000).

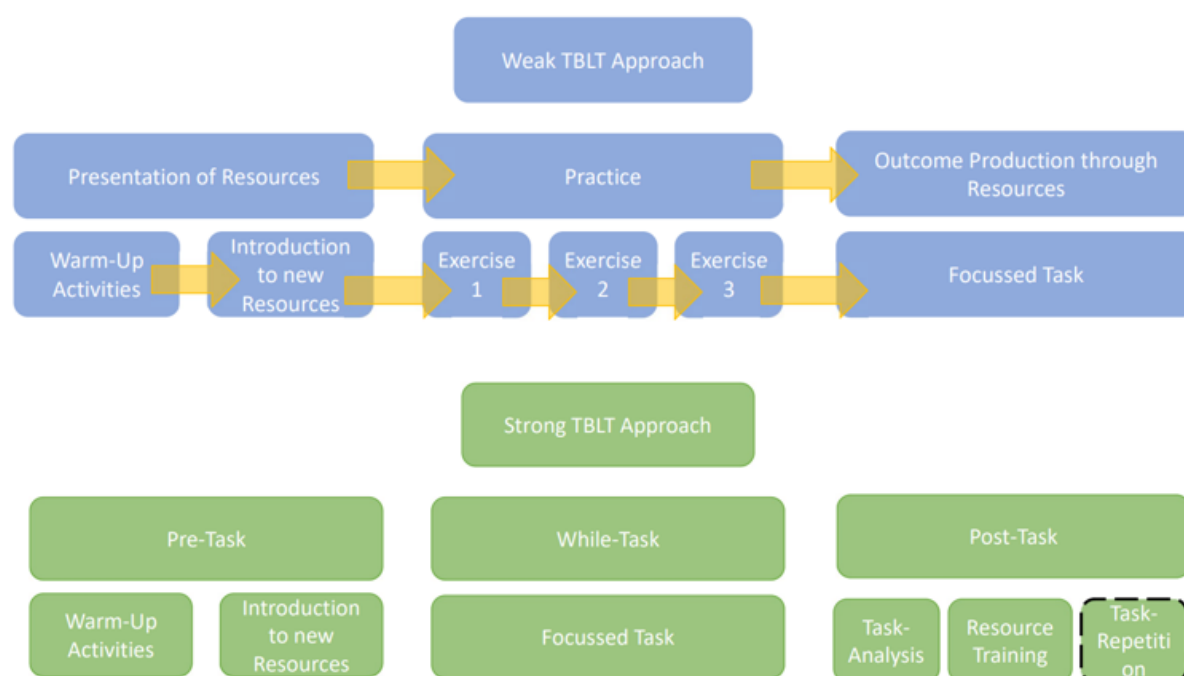
As the primary unit and driving force of educational design and analysis, it is therefore the task that determines the learning materials, exercises, and overall progression of a learning sequence (Funk et al., 2014). Several differentiations of task are possible. Ellis (2009) distinguishes between unfocused and focused tasks – the first meaning that they provide opportunities for general authentic language use, while the latter is more sharply designed towards specific linguistic elements. An educator could for instance rather provide a general situation of ordering food and beverages or even a restaurant scenario or narrow down towards focusing on ordering through using “would like to” for EFL beginners. Hence, whereas an unfocused task promotes the goal of communicative language use, focussed tasks go further and also add the use of a “particular predetermined target feature” (Ellis, 2003, p.16) or in other words a specific linguistic element.

The same author divides even further into input-providing and output-prompting tasks (Ellis, 2009), which are known more commonly as receptive and productive or even simpler listening or reading and speaking or writing tasks. For the latter – output-prompting tasks – Oxford established two factors on which such tasks can focus: accuracy and fluency or a combination of both (Oxford, 2003). To phrase differently, a task would rather focus on having learners provide detailed solutions, taking their time to

do so or have them demonstrate language survival skills under time pressure without much time to plan or focus on correct or complex answers – and of course tasks located somewhere in-between.

As for task design and completion, it is necessary that 1) tasks contain a gap, 2) the learners' own resources must be used to complete the task (Ellis, 2009) and 3) these resources are in general considered to be means to complete the task (Willis, 1996) although in specific cases a task's goal can also be directed towards the discovery and conceptualization of resources (Ellis, 2003). In other terms, while learners might address the internet, dictionaries, the course book or peers is legitimate since they use their skills to achieve new information resources in order to bridge the gap and solve the task, having another person or source use their resources is not considered within the use of their own resources unless the task's goal is to convince another person to perform an action. Specifically focussing on task design, variables to consider further include while not being limited to 1) whether a gap needs information exchange, 2) which participants are in need of exchange, 3) whether the outcome is open and 4) what categories apply in terms of topics (Ellis, 2003). Again, the complexity of how to define and describe tasks which was described above becomes clear.

This complexity also applies to task implementation which highly differs depending on factors such as the task type, design, the setting, curricular, group and others. For the sake of simplicity, Skehan's division into two ways (2003) is sufficient and covers enough possibilities.



**Figure 2** Weak and Strong Approach to TBLT.

A weak approach might be considered the rather impure version of TBLT due to the reason, that for the most part, it simply uses the task without the framework common in TBLT. Thus, this approach can easily be combined with the more traditional sequence of presentation, practice, and production (Skehan, 1996). Generally, a sequence could start with warm-up activities for the overall topic, vocabulary, grammar, and phrases before the phenomenon to be learned is introduced. What follows is practice through several exercises that lead to using it within a task at the end (Ende et al., 2013). There are different possible variations such as foreshadowing the learning objective within warm-up activities, but it usually works as described. Combining a PPP sequence with a task during the production phase is common practice in most language learning books.

Common for teaching through a strong approach to TBLT, on the other hand, is to separate a lesson or teaching sequence into pre-, while- and post-task (Skehan, 1996). In general, the pre-task can consist of warm-up activities for vocabulary, grammar and communicative patterns or introduce the problem to be solved. The while-task phase deals with the actual act of solving the problem or task and the post-task-phase usually incorporates task analysis, resource training and potentially task repetition.

#### 4. Interlude: How could TRPGs and TBLT benefit from each other?

TRPGs and TBLT are successful in their own ways. Whereas the first not only gave rise to Computer RPGs which are among popular computer games, TBLT and its principles are well established among language educators. The question arises, how both could benefit from each other.

One quality among both is standing out explicitly. As computer games and TBLT (Franciosi, 2011), TRPGs also share a constructivist basis (Henriksen, 2006) and a problem-solving character (Bowman, 2010). TBLT can profit from incorporation of TRPGs in many ways, summarized under the unique combination of game, narration and play combined with a highly communicative character, in which narration, game dynamics and character control are all regulated through verbal output. Whereas the game system provides reference and stability, on the other hand together with narration it can cause instability in form of surprising turns or dice failure, which leads the character acted out by the player into what Tselikas calls a "Sprachnotsituation" (1999, p. 29 & 41) – a situation, where language users are in need of emergent use of language without much time to organize, structure or gather resources. It therefore simulates real-life or real-life like situations, in which players need to improvise as their characters. Going back to the main assumptions of TBLT on how languages are learned in the best manner, not only using authentic materials but also simulating real life situations are vital.

Additionally, TBLT already makes use of classroom role-play (Richards, 1985; Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2011), drama (Sinisi, 2009) and computer Games (Vegel, 2018), hence a basis is already established. Incorporating TRPGs is not a huge gap to close, especially when considering how well the former theories blended into classroom scenarios using TBLT. TRPGs on the other hand are in their authentic nature immersive and pull players into the narration (Herbrik, 2011). While this may be positive as a play experience, only engaging in a continuous flow activity (Richards, 1985) is not sufficient for language learning. Drama pedagogue Manfred Schewe (2016) called upon his colleagues to avoid blind acting when organizing drama projects, which holds true also for TRPGs. TBLT already offers the strands of meaningful in- and output (Nation, 2007), is highly situated, communicative and pays attention to task analysis which in turn could from a learner's perspective add structured language learning experience to co-constructed narration and improvisational theater.

To summarize: While TBLT could profit from the immersive experience for deep learning and motivation and other than that the huge amount of language use that is genuine to TRPGs, the latter must be considered a raw diamond from a language pedagogic perspective. Although used successfully in therapy (Kaiser, 2016; Enfield, 2007) and transmission of cultural information and attitudes (Philips, 1994), an authentic approach to TRPGs lacks the part of detailed performance analysis that TBLT offers in post-task phases and which also – again – successfully made use of other dramatic forms.

5. Convergencies between TBLT and TRPGs

With the purpose of demonstrating the compatibility between TBLT and TRPGs, ten characteristics of TBLT are chosen based on the three common aspects: 1) authenticity and meaning, 2) task performance including assessment and 3) finally task design. The characteristics are then compared on how well they align with TRPGs. Since TBLT is the common concept, its viewpoint is taken for this comparison.

	Task-Based Language Teaching	Tabletop Role-playing Games
Authenticity and Meaning	1a) Focus on Meaning, Link to Learners' Reality	Players control the Narrative; Meaningful Quests as aesthetic Expression
	2) Form follows Function	Quest Strategy follows Quest Completion
	3) Real World Relation; Context	Real World Relation of Narratives; Real World Simulation; Applicability to Real World; authentic Contexts through Drama
Task Performance and Assessment	4) Task-Completion central	Quest Completion central
	5) Goal Orientation	Quest Orientation
	6) Assessment of Task Performance	Assessment through immediate, medium-term and long-term means.
Design	7) Focus on Learners	Strong Impact on Narration; Closeness of Themes and Situations to Reality; Free Choice of Resources
	8) Tasks must contain Gap, 9) Use of own Resources, 10) Resources as Means to Task-Completion	"Boon of Light"; Use of own Resources, Resources as Means of Quest Solving

Table 1 Similarities between Task-Based Language Teaching and Tabletop Role-playing Games

5.1 Why slaying a dragon is meaningful and authentic.

It has been previously mentioned that for tasks, meaning is primary (Skehan, 1996). For a task to be meaningful, it needs to be "seated in life" (Funk et al., 2014, p. 11). When regarding meaningful input and output, high amounts of perception and production are necessary and in addition to this, learners are interested in engagement and want to convey their thoughts to others (Nation. 2007). It is due to this, that a meaningful task needs to be linked to the learner's reality (Funk et al., 2014). TRPGs can be characterized as meaningful since they exercise agency (Cragoe, 2016). An example for this is the different skill sets of each TRPG system that are summarized on the character sheets or documents and quantify the imagined game world. Regarding the narrative elements, actions are the primary element that shapes the co-constructed story (Herbrik, 2011). Therefore, TRPG adventures in general offer different ways of agency to drive the plot further. In Blutiges Schäferstündchen, characters are cut off from civilization through a landslide. An initial reaction could be to search for an emergency station. After finding such, the adventure anticipates different courses of action: Characters would rather try to pick the station's door lock or enter by force (Eckes & Ziska, 2017) – both actions that are quantified as lock works or strength. Additionally, conveying a message is a standard procedure in TRPGs. Since TRPGs are shared and co-constructed imagination, beliefs and inner pictures are transported from players into a shared outcome. In other words, everyone involved needs to understand what imagination is being talked about.

The question might arise, how acting out as other characters can be considered as referring to a learner's reality. Immersion is the answer. Through immersing themselves into their characters, acquired contents by the characters can be transferred to the players (Bowman, 2010) through the emotional components attached to the learning experience (Balzer, 2011). Especially the leaking of

beliefs or attitudes from characters to players or vice versa is coined as bleed, a common phenomenon among different types of RPG (Geneuss, 2019). Further, identification does not only take place between the player and the character, but also between the player and the narrative (Herbrik, 2011). Flöter goes further and connects both: Identifying with the narration motivates players to immerse themselves deeper into their characters, which in turn results in stronger identification with the story (2017). Keeping the key factor of immersion in mind, TRPGs are meaningful, since 1) players perceive them as meaningful through character and narration identification, 2) contents can be transferred between players and their characters and 3) the story development relies on agency.

A second key assumption related to meaning within TBLT is that form follows function (Skehan, 2003). In general, solving the task and being understood is much more important than using a perfectly correct form, thus this does not mean that function is not considered at all. All major authors in the field consider a focus to form within a task-based structure (Ellis, 2009). But as Skehan phrases, form is only “one element or pressure in native-speaker communication, where the major emphasis will be on the satisfactoriness of the flow of the conversation, not the correctness, or completeness [...]” (1996, p. 40). TRPGs can relate to this assumption, since solving the quest is primary to the form or actions used to do so (Herbrik, 2011). As for TBLT, the actual path of action that was chosen by the players is not meaningless: It is often the case that different paths of action leading to minor achievements within the storyline are rewarded differently. For *Cthulhu* (Petersen et al 2019; Petersen & Willis 2011), the primary objective is to survive against the supernatural extraterrestrial horrors that are posed against the players. Doing so gives the highest number of rewards: Character survival, but also gaining back mental stability and in other systems experience points that can be invested into the characters skill development. In *Die weiße Schlange*, the easiest way to sustain character survival would be to leave Beijing. Choosing this form will nevertheless lead to stability loss due to the feeling of leaving acquaintances to possibly be murdered by supernatural creatures. Different actions, such as not killing the characters' love interests or saving the first NPC to be attacked results in stability gains (Franck, 2012).

A third assumption in terms of meaning is the need for tasks to be related to the real world (Skehan, 2003). In Skehan's initial definition of tasks he uses the phrase “some sort of relationship to the real world” (Skehan, 1996, p. 38) which suggests that there is some flexibility in terms of authenticity. Despite arguments about how real a task has to be, it is generally accepted that when trying to integrate real-life situations into the classroom, some adaptations need to be made (Nunan, 1989; Ellis, 2003). In some way, this assumption is a different perspective on the previously highlighted need of tasks to address the learner's reality. In part, this assumption therefore has already been compared through players' perceived meaningful action and the possibility of learning contents to be transferred. But also when viewing the game world itself, further arguments can be made.

For traditional narratives upon which TRPG adventures rely, Cragoe (2016) claims that they bear resemblance to the real world, at least in terms of social issues and constellations such as relationships. Looking deeper into the game world and how characters interact within it, convergencies arise. For the TRPG *Das Schwarze Auge*, it has been established that the game system at least in part relies on principles and mechanics of medieval warfare (Karpienski, 2017) and refers somewhat to elements of European cultural history (Walter, 2017) and linguistic elements rooted in the real world (Berron, 2017). *Cthulhu* (Petersen et al., 2019; Petersen & Willis, 2011) – as it is based on H.P. Lovecrafts novels and short stories – are located rather in the real world or create fictional places within it. In addition, the publisher has created numerous publications on regions spanning from countries to even cities and local regions. Take for example *Gefrorene Angst*: The adventure starts in Weimarian Berlin and possibly leads to Munich, the industrious Ruhr region, and the agricultural Lüneburger Heide (Bader, 2011). Fatland (2006) addresses the issue of communication further and assumes that players use their knowledge of historical social contexts, fantastic contexts, pop culture and experience to interact with others. It can therefore be stated that players use real world knowledge to interact with the game world.

The premise of real world relation further presupposes that educators must provide and embed tasks into contexts. Keeping in mind the previously established connection of drama and TRPGs helps create another similarity. As for using dramatic elements in language teaching, thus, using these can provide authentic contexts in which language is learned (Wittal-Dürkop, 2019). Together with the real-world factors that are used in game world design and interaction, it can therefore be stated that TRPGs provide real world simulating, authentic contexts, where language use can take place.

## 5.2 The performance of dragon-slaying and its assessment.

When looking more closely at tasks, two closely related factors stand out in TBLT from a learning and performance perspective. Already hinted at within the quality of form following function, was the importance of 1) task completion (Skehan, 1996). Leaving this student-centered view and taking on the role of a task designer, it becomes obvious that 2) goal orientation is a major principle in task construction. Again, TRPGs are comparable. In both TRPGs (da Rocha, 2018) and computer RPG (Franciosi, 2011) it has been argued that quest orientation is central. The quest must further be considered as a large task – the goal that the game master wants its group to reach after hours, days, weeks, months, or years of playing. Therefore, from the perspective of the game master, quest orientation is central to planning and conducting an adventure.

As the game master, it is genuinely important to get players to complete the quest. While there are often wrong turns, false clues and cold leads that might confuse players and shift their interests especially when figuring out how to solve the quest too early, it is not of anyone's interest within a collaborative, co-constructing game setting to entirely derail the group from the plot. In *Die weiße Schlange*, the housemaid screaming "Jiang Shi" can only be translated through outstanding Chinese skills, revealing the word "stiff corpse" (Franck, 2012). Even a normal success will only lead to a variety of possible interpretations. Somewhat later in the same adventure, there are several cold leads – contacting the Chinese police or looking for a Chinese charm trader to get information will most likely not develop the plot further, but at least provides hints and small bits of information to get the characters looking for more viable sources of information (ibid.).

Additionally, players are often highly motivated to solve quests. Especially for those preferring the playing style Ulrich described as *Gamism* (2019), having hard tasks to crack is the major objective to play in the first place. This straightforward motivation is clearly visible in Dialogue 3, where the most incapable character in terms of skill seeks to follow the Chinese house maid, because of her being an adventurer, while both more skilled players wanted to avoid confrontation. What could be seen in that example is the conflict of one player trying to solve the quest, while the other took on her character's very plausible character trait of avoiding unnecessary trouble. The latter could later be motivated through clients cutting off business deals, when leaving the country due to fear of violence against foreigners.

After task completion, task assessment is crucial for TBLT (Skehan, 1996). Since problem-solving is genuine to TBLT there must be at least some analysis on how well the task was solved. After all, task assessment is necessary to determine what learners need to further achieve in order to perform better next time. Performance assessment is also crucial in TRPGs. I propose that assessment takes place on four different levels:

1. Surroundings
2. Mechanics
3. Narrative
4. Rewards and penalties

Especially within character interplay, the first form of assessment is within the **surroundings**. Plans are contested, or the resources players chose are either rewarded by peers and NPCs or not. The second level deals with the game **mechanics**. Scoring a success using dice also results in the plan of action succeeding, while failing can lead to negative consequences or the need to switch to alternative actions. Although this might not be of interest to language educators at first sight, especially failing forces players to improvise. As one student stated after the game: "And the interesting plot and throwing dice made the game more interesting, because our plan could have failed due to the dice. [translated by author]". A third level that is closely related is **narrative**. Every decision a player makes and therefore every course of action chosen impacts the story development. In *Die weiße Schlange*, successfully saving the first victim of undead attacks results in having a powerful ally that is well connected within the Beijing high society and which can provide much help through knowing the right contacts (Franck, 2012). In *Blutiges Schäferstündchen*, convincing the old hermit to help the characters will allow players to enter the final act (Eckes & Ziska, 2017) and in *Gefrorenes Blut*, deciding not to pursue the enemies drug addicted ally will leave the characters with less information on what to pursue next (Bader, 2011). A fourth level that has been previously mentioned is the role of **rewards and**

**penalties** after quest completion, that are also genuine to other TRPGs than *Cthulhu* (Bowman, 2010).

Compared to classroom interaction, assessment also takes place on several layers: A learner might get direct feedback for using inappropriate grammar or words, the task performance itself is evaluated in terms of whether it was successfully completed or not and during the post-task phase, corrective feedback and performance analysis is provided. What TBLT lacks in case of simple and non-connected tasks is the lack of the third layer of assessment which means the impact on the narrative. Also, the form of assessment differs between TRPGs and TBLT as there are usually no rewards or penalties except for critique or appraisal.

### 5.3 Design principles for the fine art of dragon-slaying.

Closely related to the previously mentioned necessity that tasks need to address the learners' reality is the more general notion within task design to consider the learner as playing a central role (Willis, 1996; Funk et al., 2014). What Nunan (1989, p.19) briefly summarizes as including the information "by and from" the learner "into every phase of the curriculum process" means that when designing a task, choosing the right materials and progression, the learners' profiles in terms of needs, competency, and already known resources among other factors need to be considered in addition to also recycle learner products. A task should neither be too challenging nor too easy and should further address the learners' needs in terms of whether the exercises or tasks are beneficial to them. Using a task in which learners need to be able to hold an instructional dialogue between a doctor and nurses is likely to be only relevant to students wishing to enter these two professions.

For TRPGs, as Daniau (2016, p. 424) states, players take on "a main role", which becomes clear through the strong impact they have on the story design (Schmidt, 2012). It is not only this, but in addition, the Game Master needs to cater to the players in terms of what information to share, to set the difficulty and to meet the players' needs as co-designers of the overall narration. If these are not met, conflict within the group might arise, the narrative might be contested (Herbrik, 2011) or players simply cease to play. Another argument – again – can be made through taking on the perspective of drama pedagogy. On top of the links between real-life and the game world, for drama pedagogy, Birnbaum (2013) states that situations and themes of plays are related to real life and that learner orientation is further provided through learners being able to choose their own resources. While this argument might seem somewhat odd when thinking of historical plays, archaic language, or the somewhat medieval-like speech patterns of fantasy TRPGs, it becomes clearer when taking on a more abstract position on communication. Although it is true that specific linguistic elements might be outdated or not attending to the learner's reality, the communicative situations and strategies arising in both plays and TRPGs are also common in real life: Convincing, arguing, bribing, confessing, flirting, asking, referring, defending a position and many other actions are genuine to both fictional and daily life communication. Like Geneuss assumes as well, the strategies used in RPG – LARP in her case – can be used to tackle future real, social, or inner conflicts (Geneuss, 2019).

When analyzing the objectives, a task in general must meet as well as how it must be solved, three further characteristics come to light. A task must 1) contain a gap, 2) the act of problem-solving must be done through the learner's own resources (Ellis, 2009), which 3) need to be viewed as a means to complete the task (Willis, 1996). As tasks must be challenging enough, they also need to give the opportunity to learn something new, which can be described as a gap. Nunan (1989) differentiates between three forms: information-gap activities, where existing information is transferred; reasoning-gap activities, where participants create new information out of existing information and opinion-gap activities, where emotional states, wishes or positions are expressed. Using their own resources in turn describes that students must use the skill sets they already have to solve the task, which is not limited to vocabulary, phrases, and grammar but also the strategies to attain the missing knowledge needed. Those resources are not the course objective – which is solving the task – but rather need to be considered as tools for problem solving. To depict the difference more clearly, an approach whose objective is to fully master the use of would + verb would teach all possible functions including recommendations, polite orders, and suggestions, whereas within a task-based approach, would + verb is considered to be a tool to solve a task such as ordering at a restaurant.

Gaps are also a typical element of TRPGs. As mentioned earlier, TRPGs are closely related to Campbell's Hero Journey (MacCallum et al., 2018; Enfield, 2007). For Campbell, a typical characteristic of the Hero's Journey is to attain what he phrases the Boon of Light (Campbell, 2008). In more general



terms, this refers to the hero attaining knowledge, power or tools often given by supernatural beings to solve the quest he was called upon (Campbell, 2008). It is logical that an investigative TRPG such as *Cthulhu* (Petersen et al., 2019; Petersen & Willis, 2011) integrates the gathering of information to collect enough resources to solve the quest. But often, even more direct boons are used. In *Die Weiße Schlange*, characters should organize a magic mirror that works as the only powerful weapon against the undead (Franck, 2012), while in *Gefrorenes Blut*, the investigators need to 1) find one of two ways to enter another dimension and 2) need to know the ritual necessary to destroy it (Bader, 2011). Transferring existing information, rearranging clues to solve mysteries and voicing opinions has been covered throughout several examples within this article and demonstrates that all gap activities common in TBLT are also natural to TRPGs.

Attaining such knowledge or items is only possible through the skills, information, and items, that are found on the character sheets and through clever planning and reaction by the players – in general there is no NPC simply solving the quest for them, since it would vastly reduce the impact, players have on the narrative. Skills must further be considered as means to solve the quest, due to the quest and solving it being central to TRPGs. Therefore, skills serve as different ways or strategies to tackle the problems occurring within the narrative. Though it is possible in some systems that the skill becomes a temporary objective – such as a player specifically seeking for situations or items to raise a certain skill – the overall motivation is to further weave the plot and complete the quest.

#### 5.4 Challenges in applying dragon-slaying skills for food orders.

While both TRPGs and TBLT are based on constructivist assumptions and focus a lot on creating content and solving challenges, one is obviously a game and the other a pedagogical approach to language teaching. Their primary goals differ in a sense that one tries to create collaborative meaning through storytelling and the other intends to establish real-world language skills through emphasizing on real-world scenarios. Hence, throughout the different aspects in which both concepts differ, the difference on whether language learning or use is a primary objective or not shines through.

As for meaning, TBLT tries to bring real-world elements into teaching contents, whereas TRPGs try to simulate real worlds, meaning functioning simulations depicting worlds that could work. Also, despite the links of fantasy worlds and interaction within them towards the real world, they are still fantastic and contain elements that could never be true for reality. It therefore needs to be stated that TRPGs are not depicting real worlds, but worlds containing real world elements and interactional patterns and therefore offer the opportunity to practice real world skills.

Whereas task-completion is vital for TBLT, quest orientation needs to be understood in a looser fashion when addressing issues related to performance or assessment. Since there is usually no time pressure for TRPGs and considering the different playing styles (Ulrich, 2019) and systems (Bowman, 2010) exploring the game-world and human psyche and developing one's characters are also parts of TRPG experience that are not to be ignored. Also, assessment bears certain differences. While the point of time and the roles through which assessment is conveyed and the fact that performance is evaluated might align, the kind of performance being assessed is crucially different. Instead of evaluating language use, in TRPGs the choice and implementation of actions are evaluated, mostly regardless of linguistic factors. Furthermore, assessment often takes place in attaining experience points or valuables that can be invested in character development unlike in classroom scenarios in which assessment takes place comparatively more implicitly. Additionally, the hierarchy between players and the GM is much flatter compared to students and teachers since the former ones are both players and are not involved in institutional power dynamics. These flat hierarchies might further be the reason why the GM's narration is commonly contested while a teacher's curriculum is less often so by the students.

For design matters, again, there is no consideration of linguistic factors in TRPGs such as complexity or previous introduction to linguistic features as design principles focus on performance issues, the right degree of solvability and very importantly story elements. Unlike TBLT that does not necessarily have to captivate learners through any means of storytelling, in TRPGs a good plot is one if not the most important factor for creating a convincing play experience. In addition to elements of myth (Cragoe, 2016; Campbell, 2010) classic elements of certain novel types (Herbrik, 2011) exercise large influences. Therefore part of creating a successful adventure is to incorporate classic elements of storytelling such as building tension, plot twists and a great finale. In contrast to TBLT which highlights

transparency of goals, surprises and withholding information in order to build up tension are commonplace in TRPGs.

## 6. Conclusion

In brief words, while there are noticeable differences in dragon slaying and food ordering, there are a lot of comparable features. For foreign language educators in general and specifically those using TBLT, TRPGs offer great potential for language learning and use. From a more pedagogically unspecific point, the unique combination of game, narration and play inherent to TRPGs allows educators to integrate the surprising and challenging aspects of games, the captivating elements of story-telling and social, personal and emotional features of dramatic play. TRPGs can be a powerful tool in the quest of language learning and use, but as Uncle Ben urged Peter Parker that great power must come hand in hand with great responsibility, educators should implement TRPGs pedagogically to not only create gaming experiences but to actually boost language acquisition and performance effectively.

For TBLT educators TRPGs provide the potential to embed tasks into connected scenarios spanning over theoretically countless time to engage their students in collaborative acts of problem-solving while being exposed to the factor of chance through dice and decisions that again forces them to apply different strategies. TRPGs simulate somewhat authentically meaningful encounters of human behavior and interaction that allows learners to try out different social and communicative strategies without facing any real world penalties. In terms of performance, both TRPGs and TBLT are focussed on quests or tasks and breaking down a more complex storyline into tasks to be solved allows educators to implement task sequences that lead up to the importance of saving the world - virtually that is. Matters of task design also bear resemblance since the learner or player is one of the key factors to consider in both concepts in terms of difficulty, motivation and others. Also, the game characteristics and storytelling elements join forces with TBLT philosophy when implementing different gaps to be overbridged in order to achieve the objectives at hand.

While there are some differences between the approach, often linked to the obvious differences in one focusing on language achievement and the other on collaborative story-telling and dramatic experiences, they should be seen as challenges to overcome or minor dragons to slay along the way. Also, despite the fact that there is an increasing body of implementation attempts and projects using TRPGs (see e.g. Reed, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Koerber-Abe, 2019; da Rocha, 2018; Farkaš, 2018) as of recently, the use of TRPGs and more so the theoretical and systematically analytical spheres of research remain relatively thin.

In addition to asking how to implement TRPGs e.g. through a weak or strong TBLT approach (see York, 2019; York, 2020 for considerations and examples of non-TRPG games), the question on how to analyze and optimize that implementation arises. One answer could potentially be found in action research. With the intent to optimize teaching conditions including learner performance, curricular and methodological aspects, action research draws resources heavily from involving other teachers and researchers in one's projects and additionally provides a vast body of research methods that are easy to apply and analyze (see e.g. Altrichter et al., 2018; Burns, 2010; Elliot, 1991).

Finishing this article through the language of TRPGs, there are mighty dragons to be slain in order to save the kingdom. And dragons are rarely slain alone: It takes the unique skills of warriors, wizards and wicked tricksters and, even more than that, courage. Using the words of Bilbo Baggins: "I'm going on an adventure." Would you care to join?

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## Appendix 1: Summary of the three adventures

### Die weiße Schlange

The adventure starts with a common contact inviting the characters for a large, festive gathering in 1920's Beijing. After a couple of drinks, they recognize that they are the last guests and decide to go home. On that trip, they meet a shocked house maid who points them toward her mistress's house, which is being attacked by a JiangShi – an undead human being of Chinese folklore. From thereon, the characters can decide to help or leave. Afterwards they can decide to investigate on their own or get hired by e.g., the German consulate. Several routes are being offered: Through rich or poor Chinese acquaintances, the police, mystiques, traders, priests or by trying to track the undeads' foot prints. Simultaneously, another plot structure emerges, when one character suddenly falls in love with a – not known to anyone – mystic snake demon, who presents herself as a young Chinese woman. This character, known as Bai Shezhen can rather support the characters and provide certain access or draw their attention on a false lead. She also gets recognized by a Taoist priest, who tries to capture or ban her. While the two stories merge together and might get characters on the wrong track, the real enemy – a bitter Kung Fu Master from Boxer Revolution Times – keeps hunting foreigners through controlling the undead. In the final face-off, the characters fight the Kung Fu master and his undead creatures, while their support – Bai Shezhen – is being tracked and eventually attacked by the monk's disciples. Eventually, the snake demon is likely to be turned into her original form which leaves the group with the decision on continuing their relationship with an innocent demon or fight against all supernatural.

### Blutiges Schäferstündchen

This modern day adventure brings a group of pre-generated teenage characters into the wild. It adopts the general plot structure of typical cabin-in-the-woods-style movies and literature and starts in an old rural town from where the characters get to the forest cabin, one of their own booked for a long weekend vacation. After a typical college party in the evening, a landslide cuts off the characters from even the remotest kind of civilization. To make things worse, during some outdoor activities, one of their own – an NPC – gets kidnapped by what is later to be identified as human and goat hybrids. Characters are offered a limited amount of research areas based on a map of the region. Among those are several natural sights, an old mine, an abandoned lodge holding information about the origins of the goat-human hybrids and a grumpy but possibly supportive old hermit living nearby. After discovering the monster's lair at the old mine, the characters must forge a plan on how to save their friend. One way that is suggested by the adventure is to use dynamite that can be found within the mine or challenge the monsters' leader to a brawl. Other than that, the players have many possible options only limited to their own creativity. My own group used several tactics: The group's stereotypical nerd and glamor girl joined forces and created a diversion through attaching a v-log playing mobile phone on a flying drone. One athletic character and the rather intelligent wallflower also

combined their skills, built a Molotov cocktail out of party booze and created a wall of fire by throwing the explosive between the diverted monsters and the place, their friend was held captive. Another athletic character then freed the kidnapped and was by chance challenged by the pack's leader, who got struck down from behind by the jock who threw the Molotov cocktail. While running away, the group's nerd used the explosives to cut the monsters off from the tunnels leading to hills. All characters managed to escape.

### Gefrorene Angst

In this 1920's adventure, characters start by waking up amidst a battlefield in world war one. Briefly after orienting themselves, a tentacled eye appears in the sky, attacking them only to be saved by some German soldiers in a bunker who then task them to find their leader's father – a leading scientist on chemical warfare and medicine. The characters then wake up in the middle of the German financial crisis and hyperinflation and find out they fell unconscious during a movie presentation in Berlin, where several people froze to death. As an apology to the “shockingly interesting” movie, all viewers are invited to the directors’ party. Before that, they can investigate the theater to discover that the official explanation of a gas leak is wrong and to find a possible ally in a French soldier who also escaped the dream world. Through investigating the director and his acquaintances, the characters discover a group of soldiers plotting to merge both worlds to destroy the “real” world. Their search for clues leads them to the Hitler-Ludendorff-Uprising in Munich, a haunted mine in the French occupied Ruhr area and an impoverished nobles estate in Lüneburger Heide in northern Germany. Not only is their goal to stop the sinister plan, but also to have the old scientist, they were initially looking for, solve the problem of a drug used by the band of soldiers, turning them into raging beasts. After surviving several obstacles and defeating some foes, characters are then able to enter the dream world again via a magic film roll or documented ritual. Upon arriving, they need to dissolve the different reality by destroying three cornerstones that hold the dimension together. After doing so, they end up in 1920's France, where the dimension was created.