Adam Wu

Dr. Gene Melton

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*Hell or High Water* - An Analysis

For my American Literature I term project, I decided to delve deeper into Mary Rowlandson’s Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682). I could have written a traditional literary critical paper to present my research and analysis, but in the end, I decided that creating a board game from scratch would not only be more efficient in presenting my analysis, but entertaining and thought-provoking as well. Mary Rowlandson’s narrative is divided into twenty removes, each of which occurs at a different time and location. This concept of a changing time-space can be seen in a board game clearly, as players move their game pieces through a board where perils await around every corner.

I wanted to focus primarily on the relationship between the American colonials and Native Americans in my board game, instead of the speed at which players reach the end tile (getting saved from their captors). People are often aware of the injustices that European settlers perform on Native Americans, but not the other way around. That is why my goal for this project is to examine more closely the impact of the relationship between American settlers and Native Americans, particularly the atrocities that the latter commits on the former. I think it is crucial to learn from both sides of the story and view history from a full perspective. Of course, not all Native American relationships towards American settlers were negative; I made sure to include positive relationships in my board game as well.

To exemplify the impact of the relationship between Mary Rowlandson and her captors, I created a pivotal factor in the game that ultimately decides the winner of the game- panic points, or PP for short. Panic points are a representation of all the negative emotions that Rowlandson and the other hostages felt during their ordeal- panic, despair, anger, selfishness, and distrust, to name a few. The more panic points a player has, the more negative emotions their game character holds, and a player’s panic points decrease when their game character experiences something positive. The goal of the game is to have the least panic points possible by the time you get to the final tile. I think that panic points are a great way to focus on the impact of the relationship between colonials and natives; their interactions directly cause player’s panic points to increase or decrease. However, it is worth mentioning that not all negative actions result in an increase in panic points. For example, there is an action card where your character stumbles crossing a river and the natives mock you. However, the character reminds themselves of Isaiah 43.2, which says “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee”. This in turn boosts the character’s confidence that God is with them in these difficult times, lowering their panic points. In contrast, not all positive actions result in a decrease in panic points. There is one action card where your game character steals a horse foot from a child and eats it. Although you save yourself from going hungry, theft is a sin and you feel ashamed of yourself for letting your selfishness overpower your virtue. Therefore, panic points are added. Most action cards are straightforward and the magnitude of the panic point directly relates to the severity of the action. Players may gain a hundred panic points for going to sleep hungry, but five hundred panic points when beaten severely by a native.

Through an analysis of her narrative, I can conclude that Rowlandson changes her perspective on her captors gradually. In the beginning, she only saw them as “ravenous beasts” and “murderous wretches” with neither civility nor respect for human life. As she progresses through space and time through her removes, however, Rowlandson begins to see her captors from a new light. They have families and a complex social structure too. They are knowledgeable about the land they use to harvest crops and have a beautiful culture full of dancing and festivals. They can be kind and gentle at times too. I aim to depict this gradual shift of attitude in my board game by having the average net PP per turn be negative. With a total of twenty-three cards and a total PP change of -850, the average net PP per action card is -39.96. This means that over the long run, players can expect to lose 39.96 panic points every time they pick up an action card. Players likely finish the game with fewer panic points than the five thousand that they start with, similar to the way that Mary Rowlandson rediscovers the power of her faith and improves the relationship between her and her captors as her journey goes on.

While simple in design and rules, *Hell or High Water* has been expertly crafted to be as accurate as possible in terms of portraying the captivity of Mary Rowlandson, as depicted in her narrative. Firstly, the name of the board game, *Hell or High Water,* is a play on words. The phrase “come hell or high water” means that you will do something no matter the difficulties or obstacles that are ahead. The game is a perfect embodiment of this phrase, as game characters traverse obstacles in order to be “rescued”, or complete the game. The “hell” part of the game name also refers to the “hell on earth” that Mary Rowlandson experiences not only as a hostage but also as a religious woman, and the “high water” part refers to the river that bisects the board and contains many different game mechanics.

The action cards I wrote are from the perspective of the hostages, which is why I use second-person pronouns such as “you” instead of third-person when referring to the player. I also made sure to call the captors “Indians” in the cards instead of “Native Americans” or “American Indians”, because Mary Rowlandson called them as such in her narrative. Finally, for each action card, I included a supportive quote from the narrative that serves as the source of the action. I didn’t think of these actions on the spot; all of the events seen in my twenty-six total cards (twenty-three action cards and three special cards) are portrayed in some scenarios in the narrative. However, for some scenarios, Mary Rowlandson does not elaborate on her emotions, which leaves room for interpretation. For example, she does not write out her thoughts after stealing a horse foot from a child in the eighteenth remove, so I interpreted that she would likely repent in the future for her sin of theft. Like I said, I wanted to make the action cards as realistic as possible so players can truly understand the point of view of Mary Rowlandson during her captivity.

Finally, I paid attention to some small details when designing the physical layout of my board game. I originally wanted to draw the path of the tiles free-hand, but I decided that my artistic skills would not allow the board to be organized. That is why I decided to divide my board into one-inch by one-inch tiles, so I can easily outline using a template on Excel. I have attached two pictures after this paper to show my planning process for the layout of the board. Through the reading of Rowlandson’s narrative, I understand just how random events can be. Every day was just as unpredictable as the last. For example, in the twelfth remove, Rowlandson and her captors head towards Lancaster, but suddenly one of the natives buckled under fatigue and everyone was forced to turn back. This is why while deciding which tiles to put different instructions on, I made sure to correctly portray the randomness of events. The combination of the scrambled pattern of action, reverse, skip, and roll again tiles, the randomness of the die roll, and the shuffled action cards allow for unpredictable outcomes that accurately portray the environment in Mary Rowlandson’s account. I also did some research on the setting of Mary Rowlandson’s journey. Since her journey took place in Massachusetts, I scattered some pine trees around the board that are native to New England. I also did my best in drawing wigwams on the board, which were Native American houses that are mentioned a lot in Rowlandson’s narrative. Furthermore, I colored the river a light shade of blue instead of a darker one, to represent the white waters of the Banquang River mentioned in the narrative. Finally, it might be difficult to notice but there are three different shades of brown in the paths. This represents the change in location as Mary Rowlandson travels away from her Puritan settlements and residing in different Indian villages.

*Hell or High Water* ultimately achieves my goal of examining the impact of the relationship between Native Americans and the settlers from a settler’s point of view. PP is the focal point in achieving this goal, as its increase or decrease is directly related to the impact of certain actions or events. The negative net average PP also serves the purpose of representing how Rowlandson strengthened her relationship with God and her captors. Despite board games not providing as much raw information as a traditional essay, I still believe that my board game was the best medium in presenting my analysis of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative. If I were to do this project again, I would start much sooner. This is the first time I’ve ever created a board game from scratch and I underestimated how much time I had to put into the physical board itself. If I was not given a time constraint, I think I could improve the game by separating the board into two tracks- a Native track and a Settler track. Players could either split into two teams or compete against each other, but the actions on each track would correspond to the perspective of either a Native American or an English settler. In my current game, all events are from the perspective of Mary Rowlandson, which can cause a negative bias against the natives from the start. With two tracks and therefore two perspectives, I can change the goal of the game from examining the impact of the relationship between Native Americans and the settlers from a settler’s point of view, to examining the impact of the relationship from *both* points of view. However, in retrospect, I am very glad and thankful I decided to create a board game for Rowlandson’s narrative as my term project, as it allowed me to further gain an understanding of the relationship between two conflicting entities in colonial times, not to mention in a fun and thought-provoking way.

