Nothing Like a Good Fiasco! Exploring the Potential of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) As Literacy Experiences

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Abstract: Within this position paper, we describe the use of Fiasco, a tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), as it relates to the creation of literacy experiences. Fiasco is a TRPG that utilizes prompts inspired by genre fiction to collaboratively generate, establish, and resolve scenes between a varied cast of characters in several rounds improvisational roleplay. To explore the range of literacy experience opportunities, present in its play, we present our experiences designing and playing a Fiasco session and reflect upon the transformative potential of tabletop games in creating literacy experiences. The position we undertake, in favor of the considered use of TRPGs for learning through serious gaming in classrooms, is reflective of the experiences within our local gaming and learning communities. Based upon this experience and relevant literature, we contend that table-top gaming fits well within literacy pedagogy and explore how they can be used in classrooms. Therefore, our discussion is centered upon the potential of tabletop games experiences to be considered inventive, specifically in relation to the teaching and learning of literacy skills within a serious gaming framework.

Keywords: Literacy, Drama, Tabletop Gaming, Literacy Experiences, Serious Gaming

Sit Down at Our Table: Introduction

The worlds of table-top role-playing games (TRPGs) are as unique as the stories which come out of the minds of their players. Whether they are exploring a high fantasy adventure in the realms of Dungeons and Dragons (DnD) or acting scenes around the table in a noir-film-inspired round of Fiasco Classic, they all share in the process of improvising, acting out, and telling a story together, not unlike improvisational drama (Pascoe, 2002, Marco, 2015). In fact, we would like to explore with you, dear reader, the possibility that TRPGs have potential as a classroom resource to support the development of complex literacy skills as an arts-based semiotic approach (Cowan & Albers, 2006). To do this, we will elaborate on our own lived experience modifying and addressing some pragmatic elements of implementing Fiasco Classic to explore shared literacy experiences in drama or English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. For the duration of this paper, we will refer to this idea as serious gaming: use of a game (tabletop or otherwise) characterized by both its own featured game mechanics, rules, variable outcomes, and entertainment value, as well as an identifiable learning outcome (Abbott, 2019). We will also be referring often to art-based approaches to both literacy and serious gaming as opportunities which allow for "reading, writing, seeing, feeling, moving, acting, and interacting" (Shosh, 2005, p. 72). These opportunities, we contend, create spaces for learners to find "what is real by making believe" (Campbell, 2019) both on the stage and around the table. Over the course of this position paper, we will demonstrate, through an example of a game called Fiasco Classic (Fiasco), how literacy experiences, like those mentioned above, can be enriched through TRPG gameplay.

Readers may be familiar with the iconic Dungeons and Dragons (DnD), which is one of hundreds of TRPGs, a classification of tabletop games that provide variations on a straightforward theme: Let us tell a story together using agreed upon rules and tools (dice and cards, among others) to prompt us along the way. These games can require complex rulebooks and hefty time investments from players to develop their characters before play, and often even larger investments of time and knowledge from Game Masters (GMs), who act as facilitators, conjuring the setting and context of the adventure. These adventures relate well to work done within dramatic settings, as they focus on developing participants' identity and creativity (Daniels, & Downes, 2014) through a back-and-forth collective creation akin to process drama (Lang, 2002; Wells & Sandretto, 2016). While a magnificent elective activity in the classroom, it is a significant logistical challenge to bring DnD to the table for a large whole-class group. An alternative is to consider the exploring lesser-known TRPGs, and even independently published titles.

Several notable TRPGs require little to no setup while still encouraging rich and intriguing gameplay, the rules for which can be established in a space as compact as a single page (Wilson, et.al., 2020). Such TRPGs offer concrete and creative opportunities for literacy experiences in secondary classrooms. These experiences can be focused on the development of the agency, authorship, and identity of the students (Galgut, Border, & Fenwick, 2017) and, most

importantly, will allow for both teachers and students to consider the "life and the activity of literacy rather than its components and mechanisms" (Gallagher, 2015, p. 440). Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and representing are all present within TRPG play, however, through play they can be approached in ways which better allow students to develop emotional and personal connections to content through multiple literacies (Hansen, 2009), challenge students to think about their language learning more critically (Shenfield, 2015), and create a more holistic and social literacy experience in their classrooms (Marco, 2015).

Fiasco (Morningstar, 2009) is a TRPG characterized by a light "playset" of rules that are conscientiously designed to emphasize and dramatize improvisational character-building and role-playing. Fiasco has a lower barrier to entry compared to the more well-known DnD, because it does not require a large coordination of efforts prior to play or a singular GM facilitating play. For all these features, it offers complex opportunities for literacy skill acquisition particularly through the enrichment of literacy through various multimodal approaches (Albers & Sanders, 2010). Research within the field of literacy education has already taken up the use of serious gaming and dramatic environments such as TRPGs (including Fiasco) to develop numerous skills, including fluency, comprehension, and oral reading confidence (Peck & Virkler, 2006; DiNardo & Broussard, 2019). Building off of this foundation, we contend that TRPGs like Fiasco can assist students in creatively building both their literacy skills and agency within the classroom by centering the learning within an inventive space (Daniels & Downes, 2014).

To explore this concept, we gathered a small group of experienced educators and tabletop game enthusiasts to playtest Fiasco and discuss its potential modification for use in educational settings. For this session, a Fiasco playset was selected and customized that reflected the urban fantasy genre, a favorite genre of the group. The extent of setup for our gathering involved selecting the playset of prompts to use, adapting it to align more closely with the chosen themes, and preparing the group to gather online using the platforms of Roll20 (for the gameplay) and Zoom (video calling software). Once we had gathered it was time for a good Fiasco!

The Session: Tabletop Gaming and Strengthening Theatrical Literacy Stats

Our group's campaign of Fiasco was an over-the-top wondrous misadventure, as most games of Fiasco are. Embracing our chosen genre of urban fantasy, Fiasco's gameplay prompted us along as we developed a story centered upon the trials and tribulations of two novice witches who found a battered, enchanted tome in the woods late at night, and with great deal of enthusiasm (and dangerously little wherewithal of what they were attempting), furthered their desires using magic. Gameplay proceeded into a series of improvisational, role-played scenes (like vignetters), and ended with a climactic showdown between all of the five uniquely generated characters: the novice witches, one of their long-lost siblings, the Lord of The Fae, and a money-hungry bookstore owner who also happened to be the employer of one of the witches. As preposterous as this scenario was, there were a great number of literacy skills at play within the session.

For reference, Fiasco sessions feature four distinct phases:

Phase One – Drafting Key Characters, Relationships, Motivations: The night began, and all players rolled and drafted dice to establish our relationships, key objects we would interact with, and key settings to our story. In order to do this, we engaged in dialogue with one another (speaking and listening) in order to determine the mutual acceptance of each element as they were introduced. We recorded each of these elements in writing in a shared online space (Roll20), which we read and reviewed as we proceeded into the next phase.

Phase Two – Elaborate on the Key Features: Using the prompts drafted in phase one, we named our individual characters and began to establish our own unique backstories and motivations. We did this through dialogue once more, as we negotiated these factors with one another to ensure each other's comfort prior to moving into the roleplay of the next phase.

Phase Three – Acting Out Your Fiasco: The majority of gameplay occurred within this phase. Scenes were established or resolved by each player in turn, and points were scored based on whether the character succeeded or failed to achieve what they set out to do. There are two options for scoring and acting out the scenes, and the authors encourage curious readers to inspect the rules to learn more! Halfway through the game, a plot twist known as "The Tilt" prompted certain players to roll additional dice and select from prompts on the "tilt table", which introduced or

altered elements of the ongoing story. All players needed to adapt to this tilt and continue performing the story as before, through a series of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and representing.

Phase Four – Every Epic Deserves an Epilogue: Once the final scene was acted out, the game concluded, resulting in a final board state, where each player had a cumulative total of success and failure as points for their scenes. These points dictated one final roll of the dice, provided each character with a score and matching prompt for the tone of their character's epilogue. Each player took turns describing the final fate of their character in the last pass around the table. The "final board state" phase helps to demonstrate how literacy skills, can be used in gameplay to identify more traditional plot progression (introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution) lessons, are also present throughout Fiasco's various phases of play.

As discussed in the introduction, Fiasco is a strong choice for a classroom session due to its flexibility in narrative and character direction, minimal preparation requirements, and relatively short playtime (1.5 to 3 hours, depending on the group). But what also makes Fiasco intriguing for this use is the balance it strikes between a strong need for improvisation skills throughout the game, while also leveraging game rules and prompts to encourage players who may have rarely role-played before to grasp onto and expand on the prompts as they practice their improvisational storytelling skills. Dice are used in predetermined phases of the game, which is positive in the sense that it leaves a lot of room for participant decision-making and creativity in storytelling as they develop their literacy experiences.

Literacy Around the Table

Within such negotiations, as those described above, it is possible to see Fiasco (and potentially other TRPGs), sharing many similarities with theatre sports (Engelberts, 2004) in that it is highly improvisational and collaborative. Fiasco relies upon the players picking a genre playset (i.e., urban fantasy) and selecting a series of relationships, objects, and settings from that same genre. It is then up to the players to collaboratively develop their characters, establish their relationships and decide which objects and settings come into play during the game. Such a gaming environment furthers our claim that language and literacy learning outcomes, enriched and embedded within the context of drama and TRPGs (i.e., characterization in gaming through voice, physical action, and improvisation of a story) can create a rich and shared literacy environment in which discussions of both literacy skills and perceptions of literacy, can be explored.

Literacy, within the context of TRPG's, can highlight the practices of drama, inherent in their play, as "a highly engaging participatory (art) form that (is) capable of generating rich opportunities for learning" (Dunn, 2016, p. 127). The use of drama, as demonstrated within our rousing round of Fiasco Classic, is a way of moving literacy beyond the teaching of components such as phonics and grammar in isolation (Stinson, 2018, p. 92); without having to eschew skills central to reading and writing. Rather, drama, as practiced through TRPG's, is a new, multimodal landscape through which to explore literacy (Whitelaw, 2017, p. 42). When we refer to the use of drama, within our context, we are referring to process drama: a theatrical style grounded in the techniques of collective creation (Lang, 2002), collective creation is a commitment toward equal opportunities for voices within the creative process (Lang, 2002). As the name implies, process drama is collective and process driven as opposed to outcome driven (Pascoe, 2002; Marco, 2015). Improvisation is a key component of collective creation and specifically refers to spontaneous scene work that expands on a loose prompt or theme created within a relational context (Engelberts, 2004). This meaning making process is an essential part of what allows theatrical spaces created in the process of playing TRPGs such as Fiasco to possess a great deal of adaptability and applicability within literacy learning contexts (Medina et. al., 2021). We believe that such creative meaning making positions TRPGs as unique, creative, and flexible to the needs of their players.

Put another way, process drama, as experienced through TRPGs, is the process of working with students to create scenes and vignettes related to a chosen topic area such as literacy (Marco, 2015). Ideally, the topic area should cover an aspect of the shared lived experiences of the students, as all students need to be given opportunities to contribute to character and scene design (Lang, 2002). Historically, process drama has been undertaken as a means of exploring topics of social justice (Alrutz et. al., 2021), authentic storytelling (Laguerre, 2021), and the development of student voices on difficult topics (Sahni, 2021). Due to the nature of these topics, it has always been important, conceptually, within process drama to be adaptable, relational, and responsive to the input from the students and the creation needs

to be driven collectively (Lang, 2002; Medina et. al., 2021). Fiasco supports these commitments wholeheartedly, by merit of the "around the table" structure of the game and creation process.

Furthermore, the use of process drama within English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms has been shown to lead to the development of essential literacy skills, while also expanding the capacities of students to understand complex "ways of knowing" (Vicars & McKenna, 2015, p. 421). For these reasons, process drama is seen as a rich area of possibility for literacy learning (Perry, et. al., 2013), so long as the roles of both teacher and student are well defined (Estes, 2004, p. 142). Within this paper, we are contending that this same possibility, inherent to process drama, can also be attributed to TRPG gaming since the learning environment is lived, responsive, and reflective of student experiences (Hooks, 1995; Springgay & Irwin, 2005). Additionally, many indie TRPGs such as Fiasco are not resource intensive and can be engaging with resources as light as dice, writing supplies, and the rules of play. In theatrical terms, this means that TRPGs often occur in the "theatre of the mind" (Ingram, 2005); imagined spaces that are created when one is able to conjure vivid imagery through sound and speech alone, without the need of large-scale theatrical equipment. Despite being resource light, such experiences can still provide unique opportunities for the growth of student agency within literacy classrooms (Daniels & Downes, 2014).

Now, dear reader, it should be clear to you how tabletop games such as Fiasco are viewed as highly social and promoting skills common to literacy learning environments, such as collaboration, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication among players (York et. al., 2019). For example, as players attempt to influence the outcome of the game in their favor, they interact and react with each other as play is negotiated through different phases (Jesper, 2003). Elements of this negotiation include discussions surrounding the rules of the game and how they are interpreted by players as they work toward their desired outcome (York et. al., 2019). So, wait, it is the design of game itself that promotes engaged learning?

Beyond Gamification, into Serious Gaming

Regardless of profession, in the past decade you have likely encountered the concept of "gamification" (Hayse, 2018). At first glance you may assume that our article also falls within this concept, however, we wish to approach it differently through serious gaming (Gee, 2007). Gamification cannot relate to the use of TRPGs in classrooms because it refers to the adapted use of game-like qualities in driving repeated interactions, be that in the classroom setting or a mobile application (p. 290). This essential difference is that gamification does not encompass the wholistic use of a game or modified game, rather, it applies design elements first concocted through play in outside contexts such as employee training platforms (Gee, 2007). If our educational goal, as outlined in this paper, is to create authentic literacy experiences, gamification strategies are limited by their tendency to drive the focus of the activity toward extrinsic motivational factors (i.e., achievements). In comparison, serious gaming is more concerned with holistic play alongside learning by creating gaming environments that promote both play and learning (Söbke et. al., 2020).

It is also important to note that serious gaming within classrooms is more likely to lead to the development of literacy skills such as characterization, improvisation, and action/presentation of characters when compared to gamification alone (York et. al., 2019). This is because TRPGs, explored through a serious gaming lens, afford opportunities to develop students' abilities in reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing whilst being responsive to the interests, backgrounds, and creativity that students bring into their ELA classrooms (Lenters, 2018b). Such thinking is revolutionary in literacy spaces since curriculum tends to privilege traditional print-based literacies or mental conceptualizations of reading, writing, and teaching (Dernikos et al., 2019). Such considerations exclude elements of literacy learning within the personal, reflective, and emotional realms and do a disservice to our overall understanding of what it means to be "literate" (Nichols & Campano, 2017). Practices within both process drama and serious gaming (Pascoe 2002; Marco 2015; Gee, 2007) challenge these understandings by approaching literacy in such a way that creates opportunities for embodiment, critical engagement and humanized/ing action (Beucher et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2019).

Work such as what we have highlighted here using TRPGs within ELA classrooms can, and does, occur through performance, play, and humor; all of which are integral to expanding the view of what it means to be literate to include new avenues of understanding (Lenters & Whitford, 2020, p. 466). Importantly, however, we contend that the use of gaming in the classroom needs to move beyond "gamification" (Hayse, 2018) and into the "serious gaming" (Gee, 2007) realm in order to present new and holistic, opportunities for literacy within the classroom context through

repeated, iterative, and wholly engaged gaming sessions (York et. al., 2019). Furthermore, TRPGs present a unique opportunity for acknowledging relationality and contextual responsiveness within the literacy classroom (Lenters, 2018a). "Serious games" can achieve this balance well by approaching literacy through a routine, iterative, and collaborative practice between students and teachers in order to have greater impact on literacy learning (York et. al., 2019).

While TRPGs with larger rulesets such as DnD may seem overwhelming to educators less familiar with TRPGs, there exists a plethora of games, such as Fiasco, which can facilitate novel and interactive learning through play (Wilson, et.al., 2020). The challenge to educators is locating games that support their desired outcomes, becoming comfortable utilizing them in their instruction, and ensuring that their intentional usage, up to and including modification, elevates them from recreational play to serious gaming (Abbott, 2019). Since serious gaming has a relational view of literacy, related to the context of the learning environment and the participant, this allows us to expand our understanding of literacy into the space of a transformative encounter (Lenters & Whitford, 2020, p. 466). What this means is that improvisation, as fostered through TRPGs, with its open "yes, lets" structure, constantly embraces difference as a pedagogical opportunity rather than a limitation or divergence from curriculum. Therefore, by using TRPGs, teachers can approach their curricular outcomes, in relation to literacy, in a flexible and responsive way within the classroom (Burton, 2017). TRPGs add further depth to such conceptualizations by creating opportunities for ongoing aesthetic encounters (Bennett, 2001). Meaning that both teaching and learning within the classroom are relational to one another (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) and this allows for instances of genuine student wonder within the classroom.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Teachers and Researchers

Literacies developed around the table have value beyond success in school and tabletop gaming is and should be seen as "a purposeful social activity" (Lenters & Whitford, 2018, p. 122), akin to work being done within dramatic improvisation (Engelberts, 2004). It is our position, therefore, that the use of TRPGs should be further explored within K-12 classrooms, due to their strengths in enriching pedagogy and learning outcomes. These strengths reside in a space similar to work within theatre spaces, as TRPG gaming can support the development of complex literacy practices within the social network of the classroom while both developing and supporting the identity and creativity of students (Daniels & Downes, 2014). Conventions from within TRPG gaming possess elements of collaborative process drama (Wells & Sandretto, 2016) and, importantly, can generate genuine opportunities for the development of student wonder within the classroom (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). Both TRPG gaming and the practices of process drama can meld together in order to re-imagine more traditional literacy approaches in such a way as to encourage an ongoing dialogue between teachers and students working in a mutually supportive relationship (Pascoe, 2002; Marco, 2015).

Such an environment is also beneficial in that the use of process drama in this capacity, as well as TRPG gaming, does not always demand large scale productions or heavy expenses. Rather, such work can be taught through smaller scale activities such as theatre sports (Engelberts, 2004) and table-top serious gaming (Gee, 2007). The literacy skills and strategies fostered within such activities are also transferable across various curricula which helps to challenge existing views of the overall curriculum as being overcrowded and prescriptive (Klein, 1989). Furthermore, we believe that TRPG gaming creates unique pedagogical opportunities that offer sanctuary to drama within the curriculum. TRPG's, as a less intrusive avenue for creativity, compared to traditional drama, can also offer opportunities in helping teachers feel more comfortable with arts integration, infusion, and immersion within their classrooms which is an area of growth needed in professional development.

When teaching literacy skills through TRPGs there are also a few of key takeaways to keep in mind, as a classroom teacher. Firstly, it is important to know your chosen source material and game well and in such a way that you can keep it simple. Simplicity is a strength in this setting, given time restrictions in classrooms and other similar factors (Hayse, 2018). Secondly, it is important to prime students before, during, and after play to emphasize connections to learning outcomes such as developing decoding skills, learning context specific vocabulary, or improving their reflective abilities (DiNardo & Broussard, 2019; Tassi, 1995). Finally, consider integrating TRPGs into your teaching in an iterative way as only through ongoing use and application can they be used to continuously strengthen learning (York, et al., 2019). We hope that this article inspires you to try a TRPG session, in your classroom or research site. Don't be afraid to try something new, since there is nothing like a good Fiasco in the classroom!

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