

## CHAPTER 3.

# BEYOND GAMEPLAY—USING ROLE-PLAYING GAME CREATION TO TEACH BEOWULF IN A HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASS

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### WHY LITERATURE EDUCATION?

“I guess [we] can cut the arts as much as [we] want...Sooner or later, these kids aren’t going to have anything to read and write about,” said the main character in a gut-wrenching moment from the movie *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, which describes a career of a music teacher who made a difference to thousands of students.

As an English teacher teaching in the current educational environment that privileges STEM education over humanities education, I find myself in an uncomfortable situation of having to defend my discipline more often than not. In California, we now have a special senior English class dedicated to reading only nonfiction pieces to “train” students to write better. After all, don’t students need to learn to write better essays than say, a sonnet?

However, such an approach deprives many students of gaining critical skills that come from being exposed to what Gee called “academic varieties of language” (p. 3) in his book *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. Furthermore, with all the talk about grit<sup>1</sup>, growth mind-set<sup>2</sup>, and improving critical-thinking skills with the recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards, literature education that encourages open-endedness, imagination, and empathy is needed more than ever before.

By reading great works of literature, we enter what Northrop Frye describes as the limitless world of human imagination. In his essay “The Motive for Metaphor,” he argued how reading literature could help humans transcend the boundaries of our physical world. He declares, “What’s produced the aeroplane is not so much a desire to fly as a rebellion against the tyranny of time and space” (p. 14).<sup>3</sup>

1. To learn more, watch Angela Lee Duckworth’s TED talk “The Key to Success? Grit.” [http://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_the\\_key\\_to\\_success\\_grit?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit?language=en)

2. More information can be found in Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Random House.

3. Frye, N. (1964). *The educated imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

If we were to help our students devise solutions to the problems that have never been identified or imagined, literature education is essential in situating our students in the complex world where such rebellion is highly encouraged.

Tragically, today's students in a conventional classroom often don't get the awesome benefits of literature education. Think back on your high school English class experience. What did you do? Your teacher probably assigned the reading and then asked questions about it in class. You might have had a pop quiz or two just so your teacher knew you were reading. You probably wrote an essay about a character or theme after you were done reading. You might have watched a movie after reading a tough text as a reward for your hard work. If you were lucky, you might have performed a scene from a play you were reading. You might have written letters to the characters or made a poster of the most important scene. No matter what you experienced, however, I bet there were students who called the experience utterly "boring."

If you are a teacher reading this, you might say, "Hang on! I do more than that. I have them create a digital book trailer. And I do other things such as..." Bravo! Please keep doing what you are doing to engage your students. I know you are doing everything you can to make sure your students learn. And please allow me to be crystal clear. I am not saying that you should stop doing what worked for you. You should continue doing what you have done as long as it works for your students. But I assume you are reading this because you want something more. Something different. And it is my hope to provide an alternative pedagogical strategy for you.

#### USING RPG CREATION AS A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY

In September of 2013, I decided to use role-playing game creation as a pedagogical strategy after attending a presentation by Dr. Trent Hergenrader at the 2013 Games, Learning and Society Conference. In his presentation, Hergenrader described how he used role-playing game creation to teach creative writing. According to Hergenrader,<sup>4</sup> teaching fiction writing using a traditional workshop model is highly ineffective for aspiring fiction writers because it tends to limit students to simply imitate obvious literary techniques in other works. He argued for using the role-playing game catalog as a viable solution to teaching creative writing because of its affordance of creative flexibility for the participants.

While listening to his presentation, I realized that I could use a similar process to teach my students to interact with great works of literature in a new way. It became clear to me that I could use his process to teach my students to read classics and produce better writing products. With his mentorship and support, I developed the following instructional steps.

Because I was not familiar with the role-playing games, I enlisted my students as helpers every step of the way. I also connected with local board gamers and role-playing gamers. Capitalizing on the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*, I chose *Beowulf* as my first text, which turned out to be ideal (see Appendix A for the lesson plan). Eventually, I tried the method using *1984* and *Frankenstein*. That was when I realized the true power of this strategy for teaching literature. When asked to choose just one

4. For more information, please read Hergenrader, T. (2011). Gaming, world building, and narrative: Using role-playing games to teach fiction writing. In GLS 7.0 Proceedings (pp. 103-108). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press; and Hergenrader, T. (2013). The narrative potential of tabletop role-playing games. In GLS 9.0 Proceedings (pp. 168-174). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press. Retrieved from <http://press.etc.cmu.edu/files/GLS9.0-Proceedings-2013-web.pdf>

piece to create a new game, a group of students argued for combining both stories as the source for their game. Rather than seeing it as a hindrance, students reveled in the idea of creating a mashup of two stories. If you are a high school teacher, you know how amazing it is for your students to want to do more work than was asked of them.

Based on my experience, I can see this strategy being used for typical high school texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or even *Romeo and Juliet*. I believe that any complex literature piece that allows layered behaviors for the characters, which covers pretty much any great work of literature, can be used as the content for the game. Furthermore, because of the power that comes from enlisting students to become problem solvers and creators of new content, I believe in this strategy's being used for additional subjects such as history and science.<sup>5</sup>

## GAME CREATION

Although there are many substeps, students underwent two distinctive phases: game creation and gameplay. During the game-creation phase, students created the role-playing game pieces while reading *Beowulf*. It began with research on the geography and historical facts about the poem. This step worked as a solid scaffold for the students to gain background knowledge of the poem, which contributed to their understanding of great literature as a byproduct of its time. Once they had enough background knowledge, they began reading the piece to write about the worlds or the setting of the poem. Students continued to write and even created several drawings of the various characters. They also created the game board. In the beginning, I had one of my artistic students create a single board for the whole class to use. But by the second iteration, I required every student to participate in the board creation (see Figure 1) because I realized its potential as an assessment tool. Listening to my students argue over how best to construct the game board gave me an idea as to whether they understood the entire story or not.

5. Some might question how it would work in other subjects. I did not have the space to describe the plan in this chapter; however, I am working on developing lesson steps for such subjects and plan to write about them in the future.



*Figure 1. Examples of game boards.*

Once students demonstrated their understanding of the setting and characters, they were tasked to write about the possible adventures of their chosen characters, both for the characters in the poem and any imaginary characters based on the poem. Although this step allowed the students to gradually move beyond the text into the world of their own creation, I continued to evaluate both the quantity and quality of their writing to gauge whether my students understood the piece, and whether they were able to apply what they had learned in their own writing. Once I thought that they had gained sufficient knowledge of the poem, I asked them to create their own game rules. The process was designed to personalize the game for each class to increase student buy-in. In addition, I made my students write reflections every day and discuss what they liked or disliked about what we were doing in class.

#### GAMEPLAY

Once we had everything in place, we had to choose gamemasters to run the game in small groups. In a role-playing game, a gamemaster typically provides a basic storyline for the game, guides the players by providing additional challenges throughout the game, plays additional characters as needed, and administers the rules for the game. Because I had more than 30 students in each of the two classes I taught, each group had five to eight members, which meant that I needed four to five gamemasters to run the game. At first, boys who were used to volunteering for leadership roles were tasked to run the game; however, many groups soon realized that it was better to have a gamemaster who was skilled in storytelling. As a result, many of female students ended up taking over as gamemasters, which led to an opportunity for them to demonstrate their leadership skills. This certainly was one of the most delightful tangential benefits.

After the first iteration, I asked students about their experiences in a survey. Part of the survey and results are included in Appendix B. The survey results showed that many students reported positive feelings toward both the game creation and gameplay.

I also asked students to describe their favorite part as well as least favorite part about the process. My intent was to gain additional insight from the students' experience to improve my instructional practice. Many students reported that their favorite part about the game creation was being able to use their imagination. One student said, "I liked making up characters and using my imagination because I don't feel like I could do that as much in my previous English classes."

What was more interesting to me as an experienced classroom teacher, however, was what the students identified as their least favorite part about the game-creation process. After being required to describe their least favorite part, many of the students indicated that the amount of writing they had to produce was their least favorite part about the whole experience. One student said, "[The least favorite part about creating the game] was trying to solve how detailed the world that our character live through must be described with the adventures that might occur during their journey." Another complained, "My least favorite part about creating this game was how time consuming it was. It required a lot of research and time spent reading the story and searching the Internet." Time and time again, students described how time consuming the process was because the creation process required them to be extremely detailed in their descriptions. One student said, "It was very time consuming, and I had to think a lot of ideas to make my worlds and characters very interesting." Such statements indicate that the students were encouraged to think deeply about the literature piece and develop metacognition skills and writing skills through game creation, illustrating that game creation is a powerful pedagogical strategy that engages students in deep thinking and descriptive writing processes.

## CONCLUSION

James Patterson once said, "What are we but our stories?" For our civilization to continue, we must ensure that our future generations are able to not only read great stories of our past but that they are also able to create their own stories. Literature education matters now more than ever before, and it is important that we continue to develop ways to improve it. By providing authentic opportunities for students to create their stories based on great works of literature and act them out through gameplay, we can improve literature education. By experiencing the horror of one's hubris as they read about the errors of Dr. Frankenstein, students can learn the peril of science without soul. By experiencing the horror of totalitarian government through the experiences of Winston Smith in *1984*, students can be empowered to devise solutions to combat such atrocities. Most important, by creating their own games and controlling the universe that they created as active participants, students can now see themselves as the builders of the future that they want to live in, rather than passive occupants of an unimaginative past. That alone is worth the time and effort spent in using this process as a pedagogical strategy.

## APPENDIX A

### **Sample Lesson for Character Creation**

#### Beowulf Character Creation<sup>6</sup>

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*Standards Addressed*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3	Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10	By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently. / By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.5	Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.6	Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.10	Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

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*Lesson Objectives*

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|----|---|
| #1 | Students will be able to read and understand the historical background in the epic poem <i>Beowulf</i> .                  |
| #2 | Students will be able to reproduce the descriptive languages in <i>Beowulf</i> .  |
| #3 | Students will be able to synthesize information from <i>Beowulf</i> and create their own descriptions of characters.      |
| #4 | Students will be able to evaluate each other’s writing and provide feedback on syntax and the use of figurative language. |
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**Task**

You are to create a detailed written description of a characters based on *Beowulf*.

*Step 1: Character Description (1,000-plus words)*

Your task is to describe two characters from *Beowulf* and two imaginary characters who could appear in *Beowulf*. Each character must have:

1. A detailed physical description—Starting with the color of his/her hair to what kind of shoes he/she is wearing. If the character is barefooted, describe how his/her feet look.
2. A detailed mental description—Is the character intelligent? In what ways? What kind of knowledge would he/she possess? If the character was not very intelligent, why would that be? Based on what?
3. A detailed physical strength—How strong is the character? Based on what?

4. Special talent, tool, or abilities—Does the character have any special abilities? If so, what are they?

### *Step 2: Small-Group Feedback*

Share your writing product with your small-group members in class. Check to see whether all of your descriptions have the components listed above. Please pay attention to whether the character descriptions are based on the historical background of the poem. Evaluate each other's description and provide written feedback.

Discuss<sup>7</sup> what you liked about the description and<sup>8</sup> what the author should add or subtract. Consider whether the imaginary characters are likely to appear in the poem. Be sure to consider the plausibility of the relationship to the existing character(s).

### *Step 3: Revise and Post*

Based on the feedback you received from your small group, revise your description. Once you finish, please post your descriptions online. Please create four different posts to facilitate replies and additional comments from your classmates.

Each entry should include:

1. Character name. If you created a character using your imagination, you should say what the character name is and what title that character has.
2. Descriptions—As always, please write them using complete sentences. No bullet points allowed!

### *Step 4: Read and Provide Feedback*

Read at least three “real” character posts from the poem and three imaginary character posts. Provide feedback as to 1) whether the writer added all the required components, 2) what you liked about his/her descriptions (As always, please refer specifically to the figurative language and syntax. For example, instead of saying, “I liked it,” you should say, “I liked that you chose ‘brawn’ to describe Beowulf.”), and<sup>9</sup> what he/she can do better (For example, instead of saying, “Be more descriptive,” say, “You can use phrases such as ‘the archer was as nimble as an acrobat who could tumble on a high wall without any trouble. She was, in fact, an acrobat who could shoot while standing on a rope that connects two watchtowers at the top of the 100-foot-tall fence surrounding Hrothgar’s kingdom.’”)

### *Step 5: Grade Another Group's Descriptions and Choose the Winner.*

Please look at the grading schedule and grade four members of your assigned group using the student rubric. Please refer to the group-grading schedule.

7. To learn more, watch Angela Lee Duckworth's TED talk “The Key to Success? Grit.” [http://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_the\\_key\\_to\\_success\\_grit?language=en?](http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit?language=en)

8. More information can be found in Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Random House.

9. Frye, N. (1964). *The educated imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

### *Beowulf Character Description Student Rubric*

1. Writer's last name:
2. Writer's first name:
3. Writer's character name:
4. Vividness of the description: (Circle one)      5      6      7      8      9      10
5. Why did you give the points above?
6. Character development: (Circle one)      5      6      7      8      9      10
7. Why did you give the points above?
8. Creativity: (Circle one) 10      12      14      16      18      20
9. Why did you give the points above
10. Your last name:
11. Your first name:
12. Your period:

*I suggest using a Google Forms-like platform that allows all questions to be required.*

### *Beowulf Character Description Winner Selection Form*

As always, completing the form indicates whom we should consider to have achieved the "boss" level on this assignment. Choose top four contenders and explain why you think the person should win. You may nominate yourself and explain why you deserve the honor.

1. Who do you think has the best description of a real character?
2. Why? (Remember to cite actual text from the writer whenever possible.)
3. Who do you think has the second-best description of a real character?
4. Why? (Remember to cite actual text from the writer whenever possible.)
5. Who do you think has the best description of an imaginary character?
6. Why? (Remember to cite actual text from the writer whenever possible.)
7. Who do you think has the second-best description of an imaginary character?
8. Why? (Remember to cite actual text from the writer whenever possible.)

### *Teacher Rubric*

You will be graded on:

1. Vividness of the description (A+ = 10 / A = 9.9-9 / A- = 8.6-8.7 / B+ = 8.5 / B = 8 / C+ = 7.9-7.1 / C = 7 / D+ = 6.9-6.6 / D = 6.5 / D- = 6.4-6.0 / and F = 5.9=0)
  - I will consider: Level of vocabulary / Complexity of syntax / Use of poetic language.
2. Character development (A+ = 10 / A = 9.9-9 / A- = 8.6-8.7 / B+ = 8.5 / B = 8 / C+ = 7.9-7.1 / C = 7 / D+ = 6.9-6.6 / D = 6.5 / D- = 6.4-6.0 / and F = 5.9=0)
  - Character development = the character must be "playable."
3. Creativity (A+ = 20 / A = 19.9-19 / A- = 18.6-18.7 / B+ = 18.5 / B = 18 / C+ = 17.9-17.1 / C = 17 / D+ = 16.9-16.6 / D = 16.5 / D- = 16.4-16.0 / and F = 15.9=0)



1. I will look at how well you blended the information from *Beowulf* and your own imagination. Cleverness counts a lot here!

## APPENDIX B

### *Survey Results*

The following questions relate to creating your game.

*1. After creating the game on Beowulf, I feel that my understanding of the time period and Beowulf's world has increased.*

- Strongly disagree: 1.6%
- Disagree: 8.2%
- Agree: 57.4%
- Strongly Agree: 32.8%

*2. How challenging was it to create the game?*

- Extremely challenging: 6.6%
- Challenging: 52.5%
- Somewhat easy: 37.7%
- Too easy: 32.8%

*3. While creating the game, I consulted my classmates often on the content of the poem.*

- Strongly disagree: 6.6%
- Disagree: 24.6%
- Agree: 49.2%
- Strongly agree: 19.7%

*4. While creating the game, I had to write often.*

- Strongly disagree: 1.6%
- Disagree: 3.3%
- Agree: 29.5%
- Strongly agree: 65.6%

*5. While creating the game, I had to edit and rewrite various texts.*

- Strongly disagree: 1.6%
- Disagree: 6.6%
- Agree: 52.5%

- Strongly agree: 39.3%

6. *While creating the game, I got ideas from reading my friends' texts.*

- Strongly disagree: 1.6%
- Disagree: 18%
- Agree: 49.2%
- Strongly agree: 31.1%

7. *While creating the game, I feel that I had to use my imagination often.*

- Strongly disagree: 3.3%
- Disagree: 0%
- Agree: 8.2%
- Strongly agree: 88.5%

8. *Would you say that you learned a lot about Beowulf by making the game?*

- Yes: 91.8%
- No: 8.2%

The following questions relate to playing your game.

9. *While playing the game, I consulted my teammates often.*

- Strongly disagree: 0%
- Disagree: 3.3%
- Agree: 47.5%
- Strongly agree: 49.2%

10. *While playing the game, I often thought about how to manage my points.*

- Strongly disagree: 1.6%
- Disagree: 8.2%
- Agree: 37.7%
- Strongly agree: 52.5%

11. *While playing the game, I feel that I had to use my imagination often.*

- Strongly disagree: 3.3%
- Disagree: 1.6%
- Agree: 18%

- Strongly agree: 77%