



Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays

Volume 6 *Cohort 18*


Article 2

7-30-2021

New Frontiers in Gaming: Playing with Hope

C. Thumper Ormerod
Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss>

 Part of the Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Sociology Commons, Environmental Studies Commons, Place and Environment Commons, and the Theory and Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

Ormerod, C. (2021). New Frontiers in Gaming: Playing with Hope. *Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays*, 6(1). Retrieved from <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss/vol6/iss1/2>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

New Frontiers in Gaming: Playing with Hope

Christopher Thumper Ormerod, Western Washington University

Abstract

The author, a queer educator, documents how a transformative experience sharing their love of collaborative storytelling games with peers lead to them designing a new game. The author explores the potential of games like Dungeons and Dragons to make space for voices that popular media doesn't offer a platform to. They explore opportunities to use role playing to practice new social skills, build community, and the potential for emotionally therapeutic play. Finally, outlined is an original game entitled Frontiers which aims to help players develop environmental hope.

Keyword: queer eco-pedagogy, gaming, game theory, environmental education, hope

It was May 15th, 2019, when Cara Stoddard sent me an email that set everything in motion. The thread was short, just four messages:

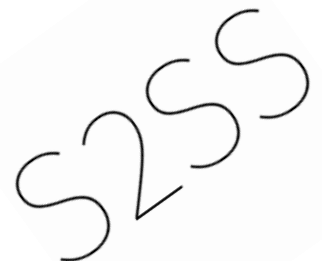
Cara: Take a look at this call for proposals for this conference and remind me at our meeting Fri to talk with you about this. (Link to request for proposals)

Cara: Sept 26-29 in Colorado (Link to LGBTQ Outdoor Summit website)

Thumper: While this seems great, I am scheduled to work that day and the day before.

Thumper: oh wait...I thought it was June

I hadn't discussed any desire to present anything to Cara. In fact, I usually shied away from any extra opportunities that she sent my way. Plenty of trainings, professional development meet-ups, books and podcasts have humored less than a polite raised eyebrow from me, but Cara keeps sending these recommendations my way. I have forgotten what her real title was at the time, she's not even affiliated with the graduate program anymore, but I still tell people she was my academic advisor because she was everything I WISH an academic advisor would be. This includes notifying me about events that would advance my professional development, if I actually showed up to them. I was just as ready to write this idea off, even more than usual. Attending an event like this might mean giving up a weekend of free time (which doesn't come often for a graduate student) AND this was a request for PRESENTERS, meaning the amount of work I would need to do for it would rival the assignments I might be trying to finish simultaneously. Yet...as soon as I realized that the summit was at the end of the summer, giving me enough time to work on



something good, I became consumed with an idea: What if I could show the queer community the untapped potential of table-top role playing games (RPGs)?

If you have never played a table-top RPG, like Dungeons & Dragons, the basic concept is that you sit around a table with some friends and make up stories together. D&D requires a lot (like A WHOLE LOT) of reading in order to understand the rules, and consequently many people never consider trying to play these sorts of games (Mearls & Crawford, 2014). However, there are actually thousands of different types of these collaborative storytelling games, and many of them have rules that are no more than a page long. With very little prep you can start playing, storytelling and becoming much closer with your friends. The games are set in the imaginary, but the players are all really just telling stories about themselves. As progressive as modern media thinks it has become, there are simply too many people whose identities are not properly represented in popular stories. In collaborative storytelling games we have the opportunity to let people tell the stories that matter to them. These inclusive narratives represent the untapped potential of table-top RPGs. With this concept as a guide I wrote my presentation proposal. *Altered Narratives: Centering Collaborative Storytelling* came from my vision of communities practicing listening to each other and getting a chance to talk about what really matters to them without the fear of real world pressures looming overhead. But as I continued to develop my session, the concept evolved.

On July 25th I found out that my proposal was accepted. For two months I scrambled to make travel plans and prepare for my presentation. I edited my session constantly, making draft after draft until the morning of my presentation. In fact, I missed out on a significant chunk of the summit because I wanted the session to be perfect. Even the first night I arrived in Colorado, while everyone else was socializing and making friends, I hid behind my computer trying to get more work done. My social anxiety was likely a contributing factor. Everyone else seemed so confident about who they were. Confident socially, confident as outdoor professionals, and confident as queer individuals. I had to remind myself so many times that I was a graduate student studying environmental education, that I was in fact queer, and that I really did belong. I was among peers, but I was far-far away from my home. The support system that I had leaned on the entire time I prepared was in an entirely different time zone. Leaving all of this support behind to fly to Colorado was scary but I didn't need to worry. When people came in and sat down for my session I didn't hesitate. Looking back I can suddenly see that since I was accepted into this graduate program I have been writing a new story about who I am.

The presentation received applause. And I'm not being hyperbolic about this, *people actually cheered*. I have a hard time writing this down because it makes me feel embarrassed, but I did a great job presenting. Many from my audience that day have reached out to me since, to let me know how they are using collaborative storytelling in their projects and communities. I couldn't be happier to have helped so many people find something that they truly enjoy. This is one of the most important lessons that I have learned in studying experiential education: When people learn by experience, they are compelled to share that experience with others. In that one session I was able to reach 30 people with a new experience. Not only did I succeed in telling a new story about myself, but I helped a whole bunch of folks start to tell new stories too.

One of the toughest parts of the LGBTQ Outdoor Summit for people was the amount of focus on addressing difficult conversations. We all agreed that they were extremely important topics, but, understandably, people wanted to make sure there was time to just have fun together. This, I think, is why my session was so successful. This community was in dire need to make something joyful, and I provided them an awesome opportunity to do so. We played a game called *For The Queen* (Roberts, 2019) (which I highly recommend to everyone). It has a fairly standard setting, vaguely medieval with a hint of veiled high fantasy, and a very simple premise: You, the players, are a group dedicated to helping the Queen in a perilous journey. At the end of the game you are faced with one big question: “The Queen is under attack. Do you defend her?” It’s simple to learn, it requires no dice or math, and it is fun to play. The game uses vague prompts to help players fill in a story that they want to tell. But, while it was perfect for the summit, I wanted to do more.

I started out playing D&D casually with acquaintances back in 2010 while I was working on my undergraduate degree. It was fine, for a while, but things changed in 2017 when I found a group of people that really cared. We told stories that took longer than a year to tell, we taught each other how to take care of each other, and we even explored some of our past traumas. In what was perhaps our third session, I found myself bawling about the emotional abandonment I felt from my family while I was pretending to be a seven foot tall elf, who does accidental magic when she has anxiety attacks. It was awesome. It was clear to me that these types of games had huge potential for doing good, so I tried to synthesize and share that potential with the folks who came to my session at the LGBTQ Outdoor Summit. At the session, I outlined four ways that RPGs can help to strengthen our communities:

Creating New Narratives

Allowing people to practice telling stories that are important to them makes space for narratives that might not be shared often (as I already pointed out, this was the original concept for my session). The majority of first-time D&D players I have seen are really telling stories about themselves. The way that our own personal narratives show up in the fiction we write in collaborative storytelling games is referred to as “bleed,” evoking an image of ink on one page seeping down onto the next page. In sharing unique narratives we interrupt the echo chamber of the dominant narrative.

Culture Building

Social skills are a big part of all games. Taking turns may translate to practicing listening skills. Cooperative roles in sports may translate to asking for help or supporting each other. Even competitive games utilize rules that govern fairness which can translate to agreeing on established rules like a constitution. With role playing games, this focus is even more clear as each player is helping to create a narrative about a group of characters who interact with each other, giving the characters opportunity to practice any number of social skills through the player’s choices.

Bypassing Fragility

Fragility is a term that helps to describe the way that people may shut down in the face of hard conversations. Specifically, it helps to describe those situations where one individual's words or actions cause unintended harm to another person, and that individual is then asked to take responsibility for that harm. Consider if you used a word that you intended as a compliment only to learn that it was taken as offensive, and the person you were trying to compliment asked you to apologize to them. Being asked to take responsibility for unintended harm can be a jarring experience and often leaves both individuals feeling attacked. By practicing having hard conversations inside of a fictional story, people feel that it's okay to mess up as the stakes are lower and the subject is less personal. A fictional Elf's hatred of Orcs is a lot easier to discuss than actual racism. Players who engage in these conversations while role playing can still practice all of the same social skills. By practicing bypassing fragility in a fictional world, it makes it easier to do in the non-fictional world.

Play Therapy

Perhaps the biggest potential I see in collaborative storytelling games is in people exploring, discovering, and healing from unresolved emotions. As with bypassing fragility, people feel somewhat removed from the reality of the situation while telling a fictional story. For some people, and I must stress not all people, this may make exploring emotions easier. If we couple that with guiding players in being emotionally supportive, then we have a winning combination for doing some real healing. Keep in mind, I am not suggesting that we encourage people to tell stories about trauma in these games, but it might happen. Players tell stories that matter to them, and if you make them feel loved and supported, their very personal stories may bleed into the game. The most surprising part is that you might not even know that it's happening.

Conclusion

When I was young I had a very difficult time having my voice heard. My family is quite loud, and I am the youngest by six years. Try as I might to be the loudest, to interrupt, or even to be the one to start a conversation, I was met with little success. This lack of feeling heard, I believe, is what drove me to games. On our first date, I insisted that my fiancé and I play a game. For each turn, we posed a "get to know you" question to the other person. They have never neglected to tell this part of our story when asked how we met.

Games help me feel safe in social situations. Games have helped me practice my social skills. Games have helped me explore my emotional traumas. By any standard, games have done a lot of good in my life. I shared something very personal about games at the

LGBTQ Outdoor Summit, and now it is time to take what I learned and adapt it to serve something bigger than myself. Figuratively and literally speaking.

For a student studying Environmental Education I will admit that my focus on the environment has always felt lacking (yet another point of imposter syndrome for me). Environmental Education practices attracted me because they were so well suited to teaching social and emotional lessons like those which I highlighted at the Summit. I have historically argued that people need to be able to connect to each other before they will be able to connect in a meaningful way with their planet, their home, their environment. I stand by this, but I also recognize that this doesn't mean we need only focus on one aspect at a time. With a well-crafted game, we could effectively give people the opportunity to work on their connection to each other as well as their connection to the planet.

Frontiers is a game that I carefully crafted to meet this goal (see appendices for some of the rules and artwork). I took great mechanical inspiration from *For The Queen* in designing it. The game uses simple prompt cards, no dice rolls, and almost no math (is counting actually math?), and it gives people a chance to explore what environmental hope looks like for them. Just as the dominant narrative in popular media leaves many diverse narratives on mute, it also overwhelms us with environmental stories of doom and gloom. By encouraging players to tell a story about a world in environmental peril and what solutions they want to see, we can spark dialogues that could inspire action and shift how people view their world. These discussions can be extremely difficult for people, so to bypass this emotional obstacle, I have set the game on a fictional planet named Pluralia. Could I have picked an easier word to pronounce? Certainly. But I really want players of this game to wrestle with pluralism, and pluralism is never easy at first.

Pluralism is a practice which requires holding space for many different truths, ideas, people, or outcomes at once, which can feel overwhelming. Even two conflicting feelings at once can cause discomfort. Picture a tray of muffins. Now imagine living with the feeling that you already ate two muffins, and while you certainly shouldn't have any more, you desperately want to eat three more double-chocolate-chip muffins, still warm from the oven. Struggling to hold these two conflicting ideas at the same time is a taxing process, which explains the relief we feel when we become resigned to a decision we really believe in and eat all ten muffins in one sitting. We have done away with the bothersome task of thinking it through but we have also ignored many other tantalizing possibilities. What if we had considered serving the muffin with a big scoop of ice cream? Picking the easy solution, deciding to ignore the conflict entirely, or trying to pretend like you never wanted those muffins in the first place are all unprofitable choices and in reality, there are so many more options that seem to be in competition. Pluralism asks us to build our worlds around all of the competing ideas instead of just one. *Frontiers* asks players to take the first step and cooperate in the face of two unique goals that may not be able to align: saving the planet, or escaping it.

I wanted players to carefully consider how they would spend their efforts in securing a bright future for their communities, so I centered the game around the classic science fiction trope of homeworld evacuation. As an environmental educator, I don't feel I have

the answers to the biggest questions of our lifetime, but I know that if we treat those questions like a tray of free muffins at a buffet, we could be in trouble. We are at a time in human history where solutions for addressing our changing climate are quite divided. Many of us look to reinvesting in our relationship with the natural world, while many look to improving technology as our best path to a sustainable future. In *Frontiers*, players are asked to tell a story as a small crew of people tasked with securing a bright future for a rapidly changing world. A spaceship is being built to take the crew to find the solution among the stars, but other forces urge the crew members to invest in the planet itself. At the end of the game they are confronted with one big question: “The shuttle is ready to depart. Do you board it?”

In all honesty, deciding what game to play with friends is already a big question. RPGs simply aren’t for everyone, and neither are muffins, but there are lots of games we could play with each other to grow closer as people. Games aren’t just for kids, and they certainly are not just for fun. When I played RPGs I found healing. When I brought RPGs to the LGBTQ Outdoor Summit my audience found joy and hope. So next time you are stuck indoors with people you love, and you see that copy of monopoly on your shelf, take a second to really consider it. Then throw that game away, purchase one that doesn’t aim to teach people a competitive lesson in capitalism, and spend time growing closer to the people you love. In making this game I wrote a new narrative about myself, in playing it I hope we all can write new stories about our future.

A handwritten signature "S2SS" is written in black ink. The signature is enclosed within a faint, light blue circular stamp that has a slightly textured or grainy appearance.

References

Roberts, A. (2019). *For the Queen*. Silver Spring, MD. Evil Hat Productions

Mearls, M., & Crawford, J. (2014). *Dungeons & dragons player's handbook*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast.

Appendix A: Frontiers Instructions (first 13 cards)

1. *Pass the deck around the table. Pick up the top card and read it out loud when the deck gets to you.*
2. *This game is an invitation to play a fictional character living on the planet Pluralia. These cards will tell you a little bit about the planet, but all of the other details are up to you.*
3. *The planet you live on, Pluralia, has changed drastically since you were all born.*
4. *Some traditional crops have died out leaving many communities desperate to find new sources of food.*
5. *Many species of animal have proven hearty enough to adapt and thrive with the changes, though some experts say that humans won't be one of those animals.*
6. *Experts can only agree that the changes on Pluralia won't stop anytime soon.*
7. *In an unprecedented move, the international institution known as the Coalition of Governments has pooled resources to fund a mission in order to secure a bright future for the people of Pluralia.*
8. *Believing that the answer lies among the stars, the Coalition of Governments has chosen you as the only crew for a shuttle taking a journey into space.*
9. *While the building of the shuttle has already begun, there are those in the Coalition who disagree with this mission, and urge you to use your expertise to focus efforts back on Pluralia instead.*
10. *Without collaboration neither the mission to space nor the efforts put into Pluralia will be able to amount to much.*
11. *Separate the Prompt cards by their phase numbers into (3) shuffled decks. Set all cards and decks in their proper places on the game mat, face down.*
12. *After reading all of the cards in this deck, set it aside. Continue taking turns drawing cards, reading them out loud and responding to them as if you are speaking with the other fictional characters represented around the table.*
13. *Move through the "Phase" decks in numerical order.*
14. *During the game other players may also respond to what you say. Players should work to share the spotlight.*

. . .

Appendix B: Frontiers Artwork



