Bringing Philosophy to Gaming, Not Gaming to Philosophy

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I. Introduction

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a pedagogical intervention designed to cultivate critical, creative, and caring thinking in its participants. Unlike other pedagogical interventions, such as *The Roots of Empathy* program, which privilege social and emotional learning, Philosophy for Children places a greater emphasis upon its participants' capacities to think and reason (see, for example, Schonert-Reichl., et. al., *Promoting Children's Prosocial Behavior in School: Impact of the 'Roots of Empathy' Program on the Social and Emotional Competence of School-Aged Children*). Practitioners of this intervention attempt to realize these aims by fostering an environment for rational dialogue among a collection of ideologically-diverse individuals called a Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI).

Ideally, practitioners of this intervention would have participants leave CPI's invested in reasoning after experiencing its power in action. Investment here refers to the forming of an internal link between an individual's identity and reason, in the sense that the individual begins to care deeply about objectively justifying significant decisions in their life, and, hence, takes seriously the implications of reason with regard to his or her own behaviour.

However, getting individuals to invest in reason is often an uphill battle for CPI practitioners, especially when the CPI experience does not straightforwardly model decision-making outside the classroom. Intermittently using roleplaying games (RPG's) to conduct CPI's may help in this regard, as it provides individuals with the opportunity to practice applying reasoning to their own behaviour.

This paper will begin by explaining the history and nature of roleplaying games. Afterwards, the paper will explore the various ways in which RPG's have been used as both an educational and philosophical tool to date. The paper will then proceed to outline two game mechanics that can be introduced to RPG's in order to help maximize their philosophical potential: requiring that game characters have names and characteristics similar to the players, and requiring that participants get input from others. It will then be argued that when RPG's are philosophically reengineered to include these mechanics, it may enhance players' capacity to: (a) apply reasoning to their own behaviour; (b) be open to opinions and viewpoints of others; and (c) reflect prior to decision-making. Finally, a practical guide will be laid out for educators interested in using RPG's as a CPI tool in their own classrooms.

II. The History of Roleplaying Games.

Roleplaying games, or RPG's, are a collective story-telling experience in which a group of players take on the roles of characters in a fictional story. In tabletop RPG's, polyhedral dice are used to help determine how various events unfold in the story. During gameplay, players take turns proposing what their characters will do, and then they roll dice to determine the outcome of those actions.

RPG's have been around since the early 1970's, starting with Gary Gygax's famous game *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Dungeons & Dragons* is an RPG that takes place in a fictional medieval setting. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, players generate fantasy characters, such as a wizard, cleric or warrior, and then proceed to collectively tell a story (which usually revolves around their characters exploring treasure-filled dungeons). In order to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, one player takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM) and is responsible for: 1) creating and/or describing the world that the other players explore; 2) making rule judgements; and 3) determining the behavior of NPC's (non-player controlled entities), such as monsters or background characters. Think of the DM as both the referee and the story-teller.

III. Educational Benefits of Roleplaying Games

Since their inception, roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* have been successfully utilized by a number of different educational initiatives. For instance, board-certified psychologist Megan Connell uses *Dungeons & Dragons* therapeutically to help autistic individuals acquire social skills (Dragon Talk, 2018), and to help domestic abuse victims rediscover personal empowerment (Geek & Sundry, 2017). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has used various forms of roleplaying to train their operatives by presenting them with hypothetical situations that they might encounter in the field (Larson, 2017). Moreover, classroom teachers, such as Alexandra Carter (2011) have used roleplaying games to maintain student engagement while teaching academics. In one Houston school, grade 9 students attending their school's *Dungeons & Dragons* club far outperformed their district on a statewide, standardized test. Initially it was thought that this was owing to the fact that the club drew in brighter students; however, after investigating, the school found that many of the students who had joined the club had a history of struggling with academics (KQED, 2018).

Research on the educational benefits contained within RPG's by David Simkins (2008) echoed many of these findings. Throughout his research, Simkins discovered that RPG's were often associated with improved student learning, and tended to increase students' curiosity (KQED, 2018). Simkins and Steinkruehler (2008) further discovered that roleplaying games were successfully being used by a number of schools to assist in teaching science, editing skills, literacy, math, and reasoning.

IV. The Philosophical Potential of Roleplaying Games.

The philosophical potential inherent in RPG's has not gone unnoticed within the P4C

community. In his book *Adventures in Reasoning* (2015), philosopher Jason Howard makes the argument that roleplaying games are an ideal "vehicle for communal inquiry" that cultivate and enhance students' "critical, creative and caring thinking" (p.1, 44). Howard argues that the RPG environment is particularly well-suited for cultivating these qualities in participants because it transports them into hypothetical scenarios, which crucially require collaboration and critical reasoning to traverse (p. 34- 5). He goes on to argue that fantasy roleplaying games hold particular advantages over other philosophical stimuli because they assign players an active and authorial role in philosophical inquiry (p. 35-36).

In his book, Howard presents detailed rules on how to play the RPG that he has constructed. Here I offer yet another alternative, namely a guide on how to reengineer RPG's presently on the market for the purposes of CPI. I also present two mechanics that might enhance participants' tendency to reason about their own behaviour, rather than the behavior of their RPG character.

V. Whose Behaviour Are You Reasoning About?

At the beginning of this paper it was argued that the central aim of a CPI is to have individuals invest in reason. Investment, in turn, was described as an individual's commitment to applying reasoning to their own behavior. At first glance, it may appear that RPG's assist in accomplishing this goal, insofar as players are often forced to reason about their in-game behavior while playing an RPG. That is, RPG's often organically elicit reasoning, because strategizing can help individuals overcome in-game challenges.

However, in roleplaying games, players may only be tangentially reasoning about their own behavior. This is the case because roleplaying games require players to create an avatar or character when they play. Thus, in most out-of-the-box RPG's, players are not really inquiring about what they should do, instead, they are inquiring about what *their characters* should do. The difference here is important. An individual's character might be a bloodthirsty warrior, a pacifist cleric, or a greedy thief; there are a multitude of roles, and accompanying motivations, that a player could represent in an RPG.

Previous research has demonstrated that children and adolescents have a propensity to create digital avatars that differ greatly from themselves (Oulette, 2014, p. 153), such as avatars of a different gender, age, or species. The same heuristic likely applies to the characters youth generate when playing a roleplaying game. The trouble is, under such circumstances, children may be getting more practice at reasoning about their character's behaviour than their own.

Past research in cyber settings has demonstrated that the appearance of an individual's gaming character or avatar can drastically effect their in-game behaviour. Yee and Bailenson (2007) discovered that the appearance of an individual's digital avatar had a profound impact on how they behaved in virtual worlds. They called this the Proteus Effect: the name makes reference to the shape-changing abilities of the Greek god Proteus. What they found was that an individual would adjust their avatar's behavior in order to conform with stereotypes that were associated with their avatar's appearance. For

example, an individual would act more assertively during pay negotiations when controlling a tall avatar, simply because height is stereotypically associated with confidence.

Avatars' appearances also held implications for individuals' out-of-game behavior. A separate study by Fox and Bailenson (2009) demonstrated that if avatars were made to closely resemble the individuals that were controlling them, then they could be used to motivate real-world behavior. For instance, when individuals had look-alike avatars on a Nike App shed weight as they exercised, then they exercised eight times longer than individuals without avatar feedback (McGonigal, 2011, p. 161). A subsequent study found that even watching a short animation of a lookalike avatar running was enough to inspire most individuals to spend (on average) one more hour running over the next twenty-four hours in comparison to a control group. Importantly, this powerful effect on real world behaviour disappeared as soon as the avatars no longer resembled the players in question (McGonigal, 2011, p. 162).

Like virtual avatars, roleplaying game characters can differ in the degree to which they accurately depict or represent the player controlling them. Unlike virtual avatars, which are digitally represented, tabletop RPG characters are typically represented in players' imaginations, or, in some cases by a miniature figurine.

Facilitators ought to be wary of the "deindividuation" caused by avatars or characters that differ wildly from the players they represent.

i. Nudging Characters Closer to Actual Participants

Lipman's original aim was to have youngsters introject philosophical thinking in their own lives. CPI facilitators can raise the likelihood of such introjection by providing their participants with personalized experiences to call upon at a later time.

In one study by Hershfield and his colleagues (2011), the authors found that temporally-based behavior, such as saving for retirement, was often neglected simply because individuals had difficulty "psychologically connecting to," or imagining, their future selves. However, when individuals were able to interact with a virtual reality rendering of their older self, the amount of money that they allocated towards retirement dramatically increased.

In the same way that a lack of imagination may undermine temporally-based behavior, a similar lack of coherence between an individual and their character may undermine the salience a roleplaying game experience will have for them in the future. However, if educators have individuals play themselves in RPG's, participants are then able to recall things *they* have done, and use this as a guide when navigating similar dilemmas in the real world.

A simple mechanic to address this problem is to have players play themselves in roleplaying games (see, for example, Fantasy Flight's End of the World Series, which uses this mechanic). That is, if you are a human, female, named Sarah in the real world, that is exactly who you would play in the game. Likewise, Sarah's peers would play themselves in this situation. The immediate benefit of this design choice is that it ensures that players perceive their ingame choices as their own, and not as

their avatars'. Educators can implement this game-mechanic by ensuring that players' miniatures resemble the player that they represent, or by ensuring that players are imagining themselves in the roleplaying game context.

As an aside, although the individuals playing the game will never encounter an angry ogre, a horde of magical artifacts, or a flame-breathing dragon in their real lives, they will leave the roleplaying experience being able to recall how they responded to the moral dilemmas surrounding these events, and perhaps similar principles will help guide their future behaviours.

ii. How RPG's Can Nurture Authenticity

In their paper *Authenticity: It Should and Can Be Nurtured* (2015), Gardner and Anderson argue that despite evidence demonstrating that Philosophy for Children enhances one's thinking skills and cognitive capacities, the ultimate goal of P4C should be to see these skills practically applied to individuals' identities and actual behaviour –in the service of who they are becoming as persons. In other words, one ought to practice philosophy in order to cultivate authenticity. According to the authors, authenticity requires that individuals learn to take responsibility for their decisions. This, in turn, crucially requires that one is capable of justifying one's actions to other individuals. Under this conception, the primary goal of P4C should be for individuals to become adept at making their own choices the object of critical inquiry, so that they gain control of their own behavior and begin to take an authorial role in shaping their identities.

Becoming authentic and taking responsibility requires that one be exposed to the viewpoints of others. In his book *Responsibility and Moral Sentiments*, R. J. Wallace (1994) fleshes out Peter Strawson's original notion that to *be* morally responsible, one must also be *held* morally responsible, i.e., open to the intersubjective judgements of others (p. 159, 231). This is the case because to be morally responsible, according to Wallace, is to possess something akin to normative competence, which, in turn, crucially depends upon one's ability to "grasp and apply moral reasons" (p. 1). It is important to note, however, that the act of merely exchanging reasons with others is insufficient; one must also be adept at *hearing* the reasons of others, judging the strength of competing reasons, and following reasons wherever they lead (Gardner, 2008, p. 19-20).

By having players play themselves in RPG's, and hence forcing them to justify their behaviour to other players, facilitators can help cultivate authenticity in their participants and ensure that participants feel the weight of personal responsibility when they make in-game decisions. For instance, one could imagine an in-game scenario where a player named Sarah decides to abandon her friends into captivity in exchange for a large sum of gold. If it were only Sarah's character making the decision, then it would be unreasonable to hold Sarah responsible. After all, perhaps that's what her character would do. However, when Sarah is representing herself in the game, and has to explain to other players why she abandoned them for gold, the situation more closely represents real world instances in which Sarah will have to justify the decisions that she makes.

VI. Input Requirement

When using an RPG to conduct a CPI, the facilitator is tasked with deciding when to interject philosophical discussion into gameplay. One approach would be to have players reflect on their in-game decisions *after* they are made. This might look like holding a CPI once the game is finished, and discussing some of the events that transpired during gameplay. Alternatively, it might look like presenting an in-game challenge that requires players to discuss their earlier in-game behaviors. An example of this can be seen in one of Howard's (2015) missions called *A Quest for Justice*, in which players encounter a sentient mountain who offers to grant them safe passage inside if they can first correctly answer a question: whether or not the questing party was courageous for previously killing a monster (p. 75).

Another approach, however, is to intersperse discussion throughout gameplay using a simple *input requirement rule,* which is as follows: *before* a player can finalize an action on their turn, they must take advice from a minimum of three other individuals who are playing the game with them. For instance, if a player named James is about to attempt and knockout a guard in order to gain entrance into a facility in the game, then he needs to first consult at least three other players about the decision he is about to make. In practice, this simply ensures that James is discussing the reasons for, or against, his proposed idea with other players. Once all the inputs are taken, James is then free to make a final decision, which may or may not be different from what he was originally planning to do.

i. Input Requirement Allows for Reflection Prior to Action

When participants are only given practice at philosophically evaluating their own or others' past behaviors, one misses the opportunity to train them to philosophically reflect prior to action (i.e., consider other perspectives during live decision-making). The input requirement rule may teach participants how to pause, consider other perspectives, and then to make an informed decision.

As well, in contrast to the ponderous, often time-consuming reflection that takes place in a typical CPI, the "on the fly thinking" characteristic of input is arguably a more accurate representation of individuals' daily experiences. As such, it may raise the likelihood that these experiences will influence decision making outside of the game/philosophical context.

ii. Input Requirement Allows Participants to Listen to Others

A second upside of the input requirement mechanic is that it helps model to participants how considering alternative perspectives can elucidate and potentially counteract their own blind spots, biases and impulses.

The input requirement rule provides participants with the opportunity to sometimes have their own decisions, values and assumptions questioned and contested within a light and playful environment. In a typical CPI, setting up such an experience might provoke anxiety, and it almost always certainly does in reality. However, within the context of a well-designed game, individuals are often more willing to fail, socialize, and be teased by others (McGonigal, 2011, p. 64, 85).

iii. Input Requirement Allows for "Short and Sweet" CPI's

The input requirement rule functionally replaces larger CPI's with a series of "mini-CPI's," i.e., short and compact philosophical discussions. Thus, using this strategy often makes academic philosophizing imperceptible to players i.e., they do not realize that they are philosophizing. This provides the facilitator with the opportunity to "take the pulse" of their participants and discover where they disagree with one another, where there is consensus, and what topics could use further problematizing in the future, etc. This is only made possible by the sheer number of issues that get fielded over a short period of time during RPG gameplay.

For younger participants, these games may hold an advantage over classic CPI's insofar as they are not required to sit quietly through a lengthy discussion. On certain occasions, younger children can sometimes have trouble following the thread of a conversation, become confused with the topic, or simply become bored or distracted. By using "input" to break down a CPI into small discussion chunks, facilitators can help ensure that their participants stay engaged during inquiry.

iv. Input Requirement Helps Idle Players Stay Focused

A welcome consequence of the input requirement mechanic is that it helps idle players stay focused and invested while others are taking their turns in the game, thus allowing for the game to engage between fifteen and thirty participants at a given time. This is mostly because idle players have the chance to influence what happens in the game using the input they submit to active players. If their reasons are good enough, they might be able to change what happens in the story!

VII. A Guide to Using Roleplaying Games for CPI's

RPG's have been around since the 1970's, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel. In fact, in many instances, trying to reinvent the wheel simply results in a worse wheel. Instead of designing philosophical games, I encourage educators to tinker with games already market-tested and simplified for optimal user experience. For those who are less game-savvy, all you have to do is make some rules adjustments to RPG's currently on the market. These five simple steps below are offered to help with this process:

Step 1: Select a simple and intuitive roleplaying game system to master and tinker with. There are plenty of easy-to-understand RPG systems to choose from: *FATE Core, End of the World, Dungeons & Dragons 5th Ed., Index Card RPG, Hero Kids* to name but a few. Some of these systems even have simplified rules sets for younger participants (see Carter, 2011).

Step 2: Choose a story you want to tell. Some roleplaying systems, such as *FATE Core*, are setting agnostic. This means that they are a simple rules set that can be used to tell practically any story. Other systems take place in a particular setting, such as medieval fantasy, or a modern-day analog.

Step 3: Familiarize yourself with the dice system used in the game. Dice systems are used to help players and the DM determine how events unfold in the story. Some games require that you purchase

a set of polyhedral dice, which are dice that typically range from four sides to twenty sides, while other games just require you to have some standard six-sided dice.

Step 4: Start reading through the rules of the game that you have chosen. These rules will explain how to resolve possible events or how to handle situations that inevitably arise during gameplay. There are tons of resources online for each system, simply look up "how to play" videos for your chosen system on *Youtube* or browse through the publisher's website.

Step 5: In order for a game to have philosophical merit, you will likely need to inject a few rules into the game in order to ensure that it facilitates philosophical discussion during or after gameplay. In the last section, two such rules were suggested: having players play themselves and requiring input *before* in-game actions are taken. You may need to engineer other, similar adjustments in order to accomplish a specific goal that you have in mind.

In summary, by injecting philosophical mechanics into already tried-and-true games, one is provided with a plethora of material that was designed to actively engage individuals, as well as an immersive setting for conducting a CPI within. Most importantly however, roleplaying in this manner may help solidify the link between reason and one's personal behaviour, which is core to practical reasoning.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been suggested here that roleplaying games can serve as a new and exciting way to conduct CPI's in the classroom. It has further been suggested that the philosophical impact of RPG's can be maximized if players are required to play themselves and if the facilitator of the game requires players to seek input *prior* to making in-game decisions. Since most CPI facilitators are experts in pedagogy or philosophy and not in gaming, this paper presents a way by which philosophy can be brought into games rather than the other way around.

It should be stressed, at this juncture, that none of this suggests that RPG's should outright replace traditional CPI's. Rather, the model proposed above is meant to provide facilitators with a novel tool that may assist in reaching disengaged participants, or even serve as a welcome change when philosophical discussions become too tedious or reach an impasse. In short, this model can serve as either a classroom staple or as an occasional departure from the classic CPI method, which is likely how it will most frequently be used.

Philosophy often carries the stigma of being a discipline that is inaccessible, impractical and boringly disconnected from everyday life. This notion can be countered by ensuring that philosophy is positively associated with the spirit of adventure, comradery and play. Ultimately the inclusion of roleplaying games in the discipline may not only enhance the impact of P4C, but may also reflect glowingly on its parent discipline.

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