

Role-Playing Games

Subjects: **Education & Educational Research**

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Role-Playing Games may be defined as a system for creating stories based on rules. They allow a group of players and a game director (also known as Game Master or Narrator) to participate and interact using their imagination to determine what could happen.

There are different kinds of Role-Playing Games (RPGs) that relate to video games and online video games. The original RPGs, sometimes called tabletop RPGs or pen-and-paper RPGs, were the starting point of their digital relatives, and used mainly speech and imagination; however, technology may be used in some cases for communication. RPGs that are played by writing posts in forums or sending emails are called Play by Post (PbP). Some RPGs even require live interaction, similar to theater representations; these are called Live Action Role Play (LARP).

RPG

active methodologies

gamification

game based learning

role playing games

GBL

1. Related concepts

There are two concepts very close to RPG (Role-Playing Games): gamification and Game-based Learning (GBL).

Gamification can be defined as the use of game elements and mechanics in non-recreational contexts. It is frequently supported by online applications, such as Classdojo or Classcraft ([Figure 1](#))^{[1][2][3]}.

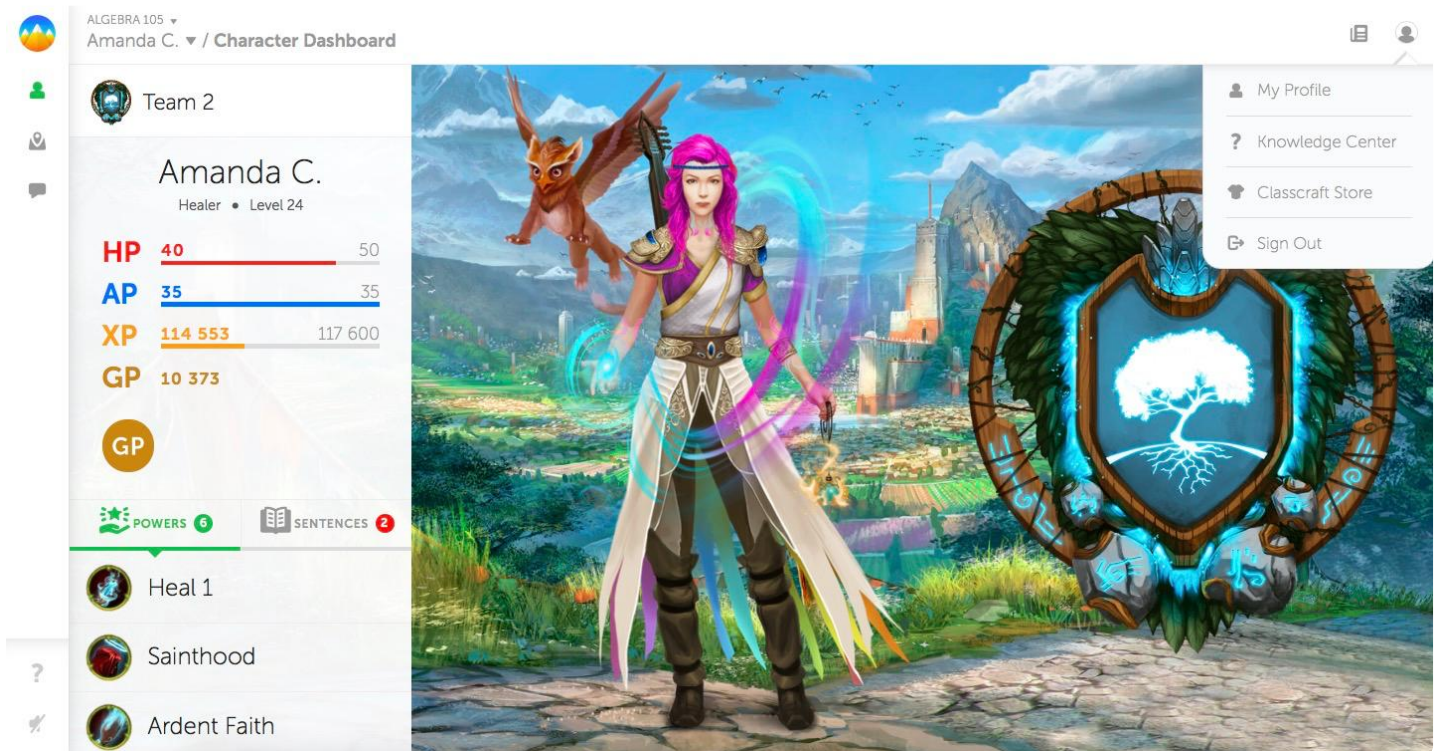


Figure 1. Classcraft, a learning management system (LMS) with a gamification taste and strong role-playing game (RPG) relationship (source: classcraft.com).

On the other hand, GBL takes another approach, incorporating games in the educational process^[4]. Inside GBL, RPGs may play an important role, being one of their main features is interacting using imagination^[5]. This shared fiction has its origins in ancient Greek games, although consensus recognizes the 1974 American game “Dungeons & Dragons” as the first modern role-playing game^{[6][7]}.

It is important to know that there are different kinds of RPGs that relate to video games and online video games, such as World of Warcraft. The original RPGs, sometimes called tabletop RPGs or pen-and-paper RPGs, were the starting point of their digital relatives, and used mainly speech and imagination; however, technology may be used in some cases for communication, such as “Skype”, “Discord”, or “Virtual Table Tops” (VTTs) (see [Figure 2](#)). RPGs that are played by writing posts in forums or sending emails are called Play by Post (PbP). Some RPGs even require live interaction, similar to theater representations; these are called Live Action Role Play (LARP).

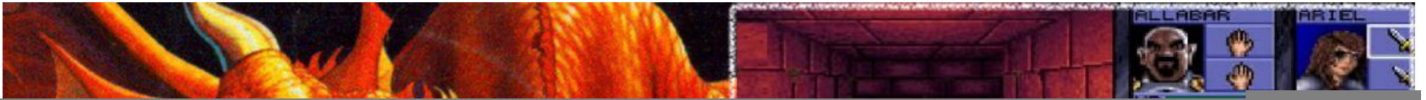


Figure 2. First RPG, Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) © WotC. Image from cover of the red box (left), a D&D based (Computer Role Playing Game or CRPG), (top right) Eye of the Beholder © SSI, image capture from a popular Multi Massive Online Role Playing Game, (bottom right) World of Warcraft © Blizzard.

Role-playing games (RPGs) have a controversial public image in several countries, including Spain. These fears lack a scientific basis: role-playing games may be useful in education increasing student's motivation. Educational trends such as gamification are helping to change this perspective, incorporating elements of RPGs in applications like learning management systems (LMS), e.g., Classcraft or ClassDojo.

2. Introduction

Today's education is developing within a plural and complex society, in addition to being characterized by rapid mutability^[8] in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world^[9]. This implies that at the educational level, the characteristics of a coexistence that requires tolerance, empathy and respect for differences, must be considered. Given this educational reality, it seems advisable to explore methodologies that reduce both individualism and competitiveness among students^[10]. The implementation of active teaching methodologies, such as project based learning, game-based learning (GBL) or gamification, promotes cooperative learning and may be an appropriate strategy to achieve cooperative learning. They promote the autonomy and involvement of

students^[11], social interaction, construction of shared knowledge, as well as the development of a culture based on mutual help and support, which fosters a favorable environment for promoting learning for all students^[12].

Within these methodologies, this study highlights two (gamification and GBL) that are closely related to each other, as well as to role-playing games (RPGs); however, they have certain differences.

3. Role-Playing Games in Classroom

As mentioned previously, RPGs and gamification have several strong bonds^{[1][2][3][13][14][15]}. This is another important issue regarding RPGs and education: how roleplaying games may be used in educational settings, inside game-based learning? The following steps, based on other pedagogical activities^{[16][17]}, are independent of what kind of RPG variation is used: tabletop RPG/pen and paper RPG; RPGs using ICT tools like Discord, Skype or VTT; Play by Post (PbP) RPGs; or Live Action Role Play (LARP).

1. Before bringing it up to the classroom. The first thing to do is to get to know the game and its settings. A record in our database should also be prepared, which will be filled up at the end, since we have to add both progress and real circumstances once the game has finished. It is also advisable to make other preparations, such as creating a conceptual map of the most important contents and concepts, planning the previous and subsequent activities, thinking about the aim, estimating the time required for the game, having a content scheme, preparing materials, creating a favorable atmosphere, understanding a simple and efficient game system (there are a lot of free games nowadays, as well as generic systems developed at the commercial level), and understanding some of the narrative resources used in RPGs (these are available in many web pages and almost in every RPG manual).
2. In class, but before playing. Several strategies might be chosen according to pupils' age, skills, or knowledge. For example, collecting information from their previous knowledge; doing activities prior to beginning game play, e.g., reading or watching videos; introducing pupils to general game rules; forming game groups, including observers if necessary.
3. During the game. Students may apply previous analyses to comment or detect relevant aspects or mistakes, which can be analyzed in depth.
4. After the game. The teacher may look for analogies, going back to quandaries or covered topics, and asking the pupils about their sensations during the game, e.g., what attracted their attention, and may propose later brief investigations or treasure hunts to settle doubts, among other possibilities.

These ideas summarize an appropriate structure for using RPGs in the classroom. Beyond these recommendations, there are more questions about RPGs & education. Most of the articles are about educational games (purpose-built), in a similar way to serious games, but there are many RPG games that can be used for educational purposes, for example in literature^[18] or history^[16]. Gamification can easily be introduced to the classroom, but the use of games (commercial or self-made) has a more complex nature^[16].

4. Benefits of Role-Playing Games

Ortiz Castells^[19] defended RPGs as an active educational methodology and showed several benefits of RPGs in contrast to traditional education. Giménez^[20] indicated several educational benefits of RPGs:

- They allow access to knowledge in a meaningful way.
- They are considered useful for memorizing tasks.
- They improve mental calculation capacity.
- They promote reading in a playful and recreational way.
- They extend vocabulary.
- They contribute to certain attitudes like development of empathy and tolerance and socialization.

Nowadays, some researchers and teachers around the world have shown deep interest in RPGs as an educational tool^{[16][21][22][23][24][25][26][27][28][29][30][31]}

Some possibilities of RPGs in education are:

- Promotion of reading and literature^[32].
- History^[22].
- English learning^[26].
- Physical education^[21].

In all these cases (from a GBL perspective), the main strength of RPGs is motivation. RPGs are interactive stories, and students maybe feel better engagement when they feel like the characters of a film or a book. This works for video games, books, films, RPGs, etc., and learning (experiential learning, or learning by doing).

Additionally, one of the most important advantages of RPGs is their capacity to help us think about morals, ethics and values from a global point of view^[33], or more concretely, to think about energy resources, sustainability, and the environment^{[25][34]}.

5. Role-Playing Games in the Ibero-American context

Given the increased research interest in this topic, this paper (see for more information, below) presents a systematic literature review (SLR) report on the state-of-the-art related to RPGs in an Ibero-American education research context. In the study, a comprehensive search is carried out for the most relevant research papers indexed in Latindex, founded through the virtual repository Dialnet for papers between 2010 and 2019 in the field of education. The search chain was 'role-playing games', erasing those topics not related. Results show that there are several relevant references, even though they do not seem to have had a great impact. It can be concluded that there is an interest in RPGs in education, especially in Spain, but their potential is still to be developed.

(For more information: Grande-de-Prado, M.; Baelo, R.; García-Martín, S.; Abella-García, V. Mapping Role-Playing Games in Ibero-America: An Educational Review. Sustainability 2020, 12, 6298. DOI: [10.3390/su12166298](https://doi.org/10.3390/su12166298)).

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