

Teaching English Using Table-top Role-playing Games

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature – Teaching English As a Foreign Language and Hungarian Language and Literature - Communicology

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Supervisor: Dr. Višnja Pavičić Takač, Full Professor

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Contents

ABSTRACT	1
SAŽETAK	1
1. INTRODUCTION	2
2. ROLE PLAY IN THE CLASSROOM	4
3. ROLE PLAY AND ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE	6
4. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ROLE PLAY	8
4.1 DISADVANTAGES	8
4.2 ADVANTAGES	9
5. INTRODUCTION TO TABLE-TOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES	11
5.1 HOW ARE TABLE-TOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES PLAYED?	12
5.2 THE IMPACT OF TABLE-TOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES	12
5.3 GENDER AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMES	14
6 RESEARCH	15
6.1 AIM	15
6.2 SAMPLE	15
6.3 PROCEDURE	16
6.4 EXPERIMENT PROCEDURE	16
6.5 TESTS	17
6.6 DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE	20
7. RESULTS	21
7.1 PRE-TEST RESULTS	21
7.2 POST-TEST RESULTS	22
7.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE PARTICIPANTS IN THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	23
8. DISCUSSION	25
8.1 ANALYSIS OF POST-TEST RESULTS	26
8.2 GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES	27
9. CONCLUSION	29
REFERENCES	31
APPENDICES	33

Abstract

This paper focuses on finding out whether table-top role-playing games have a positive effect on the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) when used to teach English as a Foreign Language, as well as any possible difference between the results of the experiment between male and female learners. After examining the theoretical background of role play and its use in English Language Teaching and explaining what table-top role-play is and how else it can be used aside from entertainment, the paper presents a small-scale experiment conducted in a foreign language school. The research included a pre-test and post-test of one control group which did not participate in table-top role-playing games and an experimental group which did. Finally, the results of the experiment are presented and discussed.

Key words: English as a Foreign Language, role play, table-top role-playing games, experimental research

Sažetak

Ovaj rad fokusira se na pokušaj saznavanja imaju li stolne igre uloga pozitivan učinak na četiri jezične vještine (čitanje, pisanje, slušanje i govor) kada se koriste kao sredstvo za podučavanje engleskog kao stranog jezika i postoji li razlika između rezultata muških i ženskih učenika. Nakon pregleda teoretske pozadine igara uloga i njihove primjene u podučavanju engleskog jezika te opisivanja stolnih igara uloga i načina na koji se koriste osim za zabavu, rad predstavlja eksperiment malih razmjera proveden u školi stranih jezika. Istraživanje je uključivalo testiranje prije i poslije eksperimentalne nastave za kontrolnu grupu koja nije imala pristup stolnim igrama uloga te eksperimentalnu grupu koja jest. Na kraju su predstavljeni rezultati i diskusija o istima.

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of education, teachers and other educators have been on a constant search for new and improved methods of introducing and implementing knowledge into the minds of their students. One such tool was the implementation of role play. Role play, as well as simulation, has proven to be beneficial on a wide scale. It has become a crucial part of the language teacher's toolkit as it provides the means of not just practicing certain elements of a language, but also gives a way of adding context to a situation relevant to the vocabulary and grammar being taught or revised. Role play has seen an implementation not just in primary or secondary education, it has been used from pre-school all the way to professional development training and team building. Even some healthcare educators, such as Jan Woodhouse, have recognized the benefits of role play: "Students have been reported to find role play exciting and challenging, and educators have found it to be a powerful teaching technique. This potency may be the reason why role play is so widely used, as it can be used for messages, expressing or arousing emotion, negotiation and persuasion, or for a variety of other purposes" (Woodhouse, 2014). These other purposes can easily include learning a new language, as role play puts the learner in a position in which they use the language they are learning and adds a layer of emotional connection and verisimilitude to the subject matter.

Role play does not only have a significant role in education, it is also a well-established tool in the field of psychology, such as Gestalt therapy (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1977) and psychodrama (Bell, 1970). They have shown that role play has an increasingly positive effect not just on the cognitive aspects of a person's mind, but the psychological as well. It has been used to gain insight into the lives and behaviour of patients and clients and given them a chance to express themselves in a creative and spontaneous way.

Since the 1970s, another form of role play has emerged – the table-top role-playing game (hereafter RPG). Even though role-playing games have been around for over 40 years, there has not been much research regarding their use in classrooms and in educational purposes, with most research focused on the psychological benefits of table-top RPGs and their use in therapy, as opposed to teaching. This is noted in quite a few other papers on a similar topic, for example, it has been stated that scholars and teachers alike are only now beginning to look at RPGs as instructional tools, works of art and means of self-expression and representation (Cruz, 2008) The main goal of this

thesis will be to attempt to show the benefits of using RPGs as another highly beneficial tool educators can use to improve their teaching abilities.

The first part of the thesis will focus on how and why role playing used in today's classrooms is beneficial, as well as look at some possible disadvantages. Then, the thesis will focus on the differences between role playing and role-playing games, as these two concepts do seem similar, but have immensely different implications and implementation as well as examine different kinds of role-playing games available. Afterwards, the focus will shift towards table-top RPGs specifically – their background, modus operandi and various aspects such games can take. Finally, the research part of the thesis will focus on the details of the research conducted on students of English, focusing on the RPG play sessions and compare their results to the results of other students based on a neutral, third party test.

2. Role play in the classroom

Within the classroom, role play takes many forms. From the simplest pretend shopping and conversation between the salesperson and shopper to entire dramatic re-enactments and dramatizations. In fact, it is in ancient Greek drama that role play has its roots. The very word itself may come from the "rolled-up" script actors used to use over two thousand years ago in Ancient Greece. In time, the script became the part, and actors then were said to play the "role" (Blatner, 2009).

It is nearly impossible to specify the point in which role play was officially introduced to education. It is safe to assume that it was a part of it since the beginnings of education itself in one way or another. However, according to dr. Adam Blatner, Jacob L. Moreno was one of the pioneers of recognizing the benefits of using dramatization and role play, first in psychotherapy and then in education as well. By doing so, Moreno gives examples of the benefits of not just blindly following a role, but embracing improvisation as a way of improving creativity and helping the brain to come up with new solutions (Blatner, 2012). As an educational method, role play has been officially recognized, and has been gaining in popularity and prominence ever since, "being the best way to develop the skills of initiative, communication, problem-solving, self-awareness, and working cooperatively in teams" (Blatner, 2009). Nowadays, role play has become so ingrained into education that the very definition of the phrase *roll play* describes it as "acting out or performing the part of a person or character, for example as a technique in training or psychotherapy." (Oxford Online Dictionary) binding it with the word *training*, connecting it to a form of education.

Children often pretend to be someone else, even when left to their own devices. It is very common to see a child spend their free time adopting a pretend role simply as a way of playing. This behaviour is considered an important part of a child's development as well as education cycle. There are many theories on why pretend play is so important to a child's development, some of which include improving emotional security, developing preliteracy skills and even enhancing theory of mind, with theory of mind being the ability "to understand (represent) the knowledge and beliefs of others; that is, that someone else can have a different belief or state of knowledge from yourself" (Pellegrini and Smith, 2004:3), and even though some of these theories are yet to be backed up by experimental evidence, we can say for certain that pretend play and role play have a large impact on the cognitive development of a person.

When it comes to using role play in teaching, there are many ways to go about it, and it can be used in most contexts. However, the most obvious and easiest to set up would be any kind of class with a social element, such as languages, history, etc. The form of the role play itself can vary immensely as well from individual role-playing exercises (forming stories, letters, problem statements, speeches or reports) to interactive exercises, which, in turn, can have different goals such as knowledge acquisition, attitude development or skill acquisition (<https://carleton.ca/experientialeducation/?p=304>).

Role play can be used in the classroom for various reasons, Porter-Ladousse (1987) gives five examples that encompass most reasons as to why role play should be used:

1. Training speaking skills in any situation
2. Building up social skills
3. Experimenting with language in a safe environment
4. Boosting the confidence of shy students
5. It is simply a technique which students often enjoy participating in

She also notes that one of the biggest benefits of using role play in the classroom is the fact that it develops fluency, promotes interaction and increases the motivation of the learner, and also contributes to the sharing of the teaching responsibility between both the student and the teacher, as well as the fact that “role playing is perhaps the most flexible technique in the range” (Porter-Ladousse, 1987:7).

Role play as a classroom activity can be done in many ways. From a simple example such as a simulation in which students must re-enact an interaction between a receptionist and client, all the way to complex assignments with many people which include a lot of improvisation or proper acting such as dramatizations, but there is no doubt that there are many reasons to do so, and it is up to the teacher to decide what the best approach is. It is important to keep in mind that designing a good role play is not an entirely straightforward thing to do. A role play needs to have clear learning objectives, encourage spontaneity, maintain motivation, activate background knowledge and involve all students (Chan, 2009).

3. Role play and English as a Foreign Language

Within an EFL classroom, role play (which could also include simulations, plays, sociodramas, etc.) is usually used as a tool to practice speaking and communication skills. It serves as a means of providing real-life context to specific linguistic elements. Additionally, it is often a welcome way to change the pace of a lesson. Role play, as a means to practice English, is something most teachers implement on a regular basis, since learners find it a lot easier to connect various vocabulary and grammar elements when provided by a real-life situation that calls for the use of said elements. Özdemir (2015) compared the vocabulary recall scores of two groups, one of which participated in a role playing activity after being introduced to new vocabulary (using the Cinderella story as a base, with the students acting out the story after hearing it), and the other simply looking up the words in a bilingual dictionary. Previously, he had given both groups a pre-test which showed that each group had statistically equal vocabulary scores. After the experiment, both groups were given an immediate retention test as well as a delayed retention test, and the experimental group (the one exposed to role play) had statistically significantly higher scores. This is just one example of such research, and many more can easily be found, but it illustrates nicely the effect role play can have on a learner's retention.

In addition to simply improving the learning capabilities of students, role play has the benefit of being an activity which learners enjoy, as well as easily understand and follow, as long as it is presented clearly and with easy-to-follow guidelines. When introducing role play the main thing to keep in mind is to make sure the roles the students will be playing are clear and understandable, and that they have an unambiguous goal outlined for them. This could be done in many ways, from simply describing the situation to the participants to using index cards as Clark presented in *Index Card Games for ESL* (1982). This entire experience could even be further enhanced by the use of various realia or props, which only help the participants get involved in the activity. Throughout the activity the teacher could act as simply an outside guide or helper, or, according to Richard-Amato (1996), it would be even more beneficial if the teacher is also involved in the activity itself, providing help where and when needed as well as observing how the learners use language.

Bell (2014) states that role play in EFL can be divided into has different forms, and each has its use when it comes to EFL. These include:

1. Conflict role play

This kind of role play places the participants in a situation with opposed views or goals, with the aim of testing or practicing language skills under pressure

2. Cooperative role play

In this type of role play emphasis is on requiring the participants to work together to achieve a common goal, and are a good way to slowly get shy students to be willing to participate in conversations or activities

3. Information gap role play

These activities are based on filling in knowledge gaps by having the participants seek information (either from each other about themselves, or by placing them in a fictional situation)

4. Task-based role play

Task-based activities involve having the learners complete varying activities with multiple objectives and are often used to practice real-life interactions and situations in which it is beneficial to boost the self-esteem of the learners, such as realistic survival language skills (asking for directions, ordering meals, checking in at an airport, etc.)

When it comes to designing a role play activity for an EFL classroom, certain things should be kept in mind. Firstly, the activity needs to have clear aims based on which elements of the language the teacher wants their students to practice. Then, the context for the role play needs to be clearly presented to the students. This might simply mean presenting the situation they are pretending to be in, or even using props to help immersion and encourage committing to the role. In some cases, the students might need to be acquainted with specific vocabulary used in the role play. Furthermore, the participants need to be introduced to the roles they will be playing. This can be done through simple verbal explanations to role cards with role-specific details (which should be brief and precise). After a role play activity has been completed it is often a good idea to have a discussion not just about the results of the role play, but also about how the participants felt during the role play. Not all students need to be participants, perhaps the role play is on a smaller scale and there is no need for everyone to be involved or perhaps some students simply do not want to participate in such activities

4. Advantages and disadvantages of role play

Even though role play has numerous advantages, it is not without its faults. There are many occasions where people simply do not enjoy a role-playing activity, all for very individual reasons. Perhaps they dislike pretending they are someone else, or the role play touches on a very personal issue for them. In some cases, they simply do not feel comfortable being part of an artificial, imaginary environment, especially if it is a role they are unfamiliar with. Other times, participants feel like they are going to be judged based on the quality of their performance. There is no doubt that a successful role play requires compromise between all parties involved, otherwise the learning process will take second place to making sure the role play goes as planned. Role play depends heavily on preparation and “knowing the audience”. Conducting a successful role play exercise requires the teacher to be adept at leadership to maintain an appropriate environment and keep the students focused on what they should be doing, while, at the same time, allowing them enough freedom to experiment and freely express themselves.

4.1 Disadvantages

The difficulties of role play can be categorized into two distinct groups: leadership and student based.

Leadership based problems pertain to those connected to organizing and carrying out the activity as well as maintaining a positive atmosphere. It is important to make sure the participants do not feel threatened in any way. We need to look for signs of students being stressed by the specific role play we are doing, and make sure that we change things if someone is obviously being negatively affected by the activity, which in some cases, depending on what they are asked to role play as, may not be as easy as it seems. Also, it is immensely important that the activity itself is very well explained, because if the students do not clearly understand what is being asked of them, the activity, in most cases, is doomed to either be derailed or to fail completely.

Student based difficulties would be those connected to how the students themselves perceive the activity, their personal preferences and personalities. Role play is that it is an activity which relies heavily on the student’s imagination, so less imaginative participants may feel left out or inadequate, and even though role play by default helps improve the imagination and creativity of the participants, sometimes it is very difficult to break through the initial barrier of reluctance.

Another possible problem are students who may have enough imagination to participate, but their own, usually shy, personalities stop them from participating freely. In addition to that, some students may attempt to be intentionally disruptive or entirely uninterested in the activity itself, and it is important for the teacher to be aware of those students and approach each problem individually and calmly.

4.2 Advantages

According to Chesler and Fox (1996: 12) “role playing has a tremendous potential for the average elementary and secondary school system”. What follows is a summary of their view of the advantages of role-playing in the learning process as well as my interpretation of what it encompasses, and the examples of ways role play can achieve a desired result:

1. Acting out the true self (Chesler and Fox 1996: 12)

During a role-playing activity, a student has the chance to show their true feelings about an issue, through the guise of being someone else. Because this is merely a pretend role, they do not have to worry about any real consequences of what they do or say, and therefore feel a lot more at ease if required to show how they personally feel, even if they usually have trouble showing their feelings.

2. Discussing private issues (Chesler and Fox 1996: 12)

A role play can be a good way to explore issues of a more private nature. In some cases, students could even see the way others would react in their position and use that knowledge to their advantage. Additionally, this is a good way to get students to open up about serious problems they are facing in their private lives.

3. Understanding the effects of their behaviour (Chesler and Fox 1996: 13)

In a society where bullying and other negative ways of behaviour are common, a role play activity could be a good way to either prevent said behaviour or rectify a situation after it had already happened. Putting oneself in another person’s shoes and having a class-wide discussion about the situation is a good way to solve problems.

4. Paving the way for behavioural change (Chesler and Fox 1996: 13)

This one heavily relates to the previous benefit, as behavioural change will rarely happen without first understanding what the problem is, how it was brought about, who and why they were at fault and how to prevent it from happening again. It is often said that admitting to a problem is the first step towards solving it, and role-playing is a good way to let a person know that there may be a problem worth admitting to.

5. Demonstrating problems between groups of people (Chesler and Fox 1996: 13)

Stereotyping is a concept society heavily relies on, and even though it is often considered a negative one, it is simply the way humanity attempts to categorize the world, but it is important to keep in mind that stereotypes are not inherently good or bad, and that not every person belongs to one stereotype or another. Using role play to focus on these issues can have a beneficial effect on the relationship between students of different ethnic or religious groups.

6. Understanding behaviour (Chesler and Fox 1996: 14)

By putting themselves in the position of others, students get the chance to not just understand how or why someone did something, but also the opportunity to explore the entire reasoning of how they came to that position in the first place, as well as give their own ideas on how something could be done differently and how it would influence the outcome.

7. Encouragement for less verbal students (Chesler and Fox 1996: 14)

Role play is an excellent chance for students who are less prominent and outspoken in the classroom. It gives them the chance to speak out freely and without hesitation. In the case of a student with more kinaesthetic tendencies, this gives them a chance to express themselves in their own way in an environment usually reserved for verbal communication.

8. The active nature of role play (Chesler and Fox 1996: 14)

The simple act of participating in a role play can be immensely beneficial to the learning process. Chesler and Fox (1996) state that the very fact that the students behave in a different way is evidence of gaining new information, and the students must actively decide what to do with the new information they have, how to process it and how to apply it. Also, very often, simply seeing their colleagues participate in the activity can sometimes be enough to pull the more reluctant members of the class in without too much effort.

5. Introduction to table-top role-playing games

Even though for most young people the first thing they think of when they hear the phrase *role-playing game* is a video game of some sort, the name comes from several years before the popularity of conceptually similar computer games. In fact, role-playing games are descendants of miniature wargames with the first proper game with a ruleset being von Reiszwitz's *Kriegsspiel* used to train Prussian officers and later further popularized by H.G. Wells' book *Little Wars* (Wikipedia). The first appearance of a proper RPG was a game called *Chainmail*, written by Gary Gygax and Jake Perren, with the goal of simulating medieval combat. With the addition of Dave Arneson's adaptation for the fantasy world inspired by *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, the first real, modern RPG system was born under the name *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, published by Tactical Studies Rules, Inc.

The game proved to be an immense success, and resulted in several decades of adaptation, legal disputes, piracy, social intrigue and controversy, and, ultimately, many highly popular RPGs which all stem from a common ancestor, with *Dungeons & Dragons* still being the predominant one, currently in its fifth edition, and constantly updated with new additions, rules and guidelines. Some other notable RPGs include *Pathfinder*, *Call of Cthulhu* (based on the Lovecraftian mythos), *Warhammer*, *GURPS*, *Shadowrun*, with various popular films and other media getting their own RPG games, such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *World of Warcraft*, and so on. Nowadays it is much harder to come up with an idea for a role-playing game that hasn't been already done than not.

The biggest appeal of RPGs is the fact that they are highly adaptable. They are not bound by setting or realism in any way. Games can be fantasy based, science fiction based, modern-day, historical, based on alternate history or even based on daily life. They have also evolved since their inception with *Dungeons & Dragons* which was heavily dice-based and can now be played in many formats. In fact, most RPG rulebooks state that they are more guidelines than rules meant to be followed to the letter. The main goal of such a game is always the entertainment of the players themselves, and if the participants are enjoying themselves, and the decisions and actions made in-game make contextual sense, rules are allowed to be bent or broken.

5.1 How are table-top role-playing games played?

In most cases (although this is subject to the game system being used and can vary), the game consists of two main components – the players and their Player Characters (PCs) and one player in the role of a guide who is considered a Game Master (GM). In some cases, the same player can be both PC and GM, but the most common scenario is to separate those roles. This forms the core requirements for an RPG. The players along with the rules of the game gather together, with the GM describing the situations the PCs find themselves in, presenting them with challenges and obstacles while the PCs attempt to solve the problems at hand, and by doing so, the GM and the players create a story of their own making. Often specific ways of resolving conflict are implemented into the game, such as dice or cards and details about characters written on sheets of paper (which is why these games are often referred to as *Pen and Paper Role Playing Games*), but sometimes it is entirely up to the GM to determine the end-result, and as such the GM is not someone who wants to “beat” the players at the game but is simply there to keep the story moving forward. Usually, games take place over multiple play-sessions which can last for several hours and are usually connected to each other in a similar way a television series would be with its episodes. Due to the very nature of the game and how it is played, it is very common for people to develop long-lasting friendships with each other, and, even though the hardships they face are entirely fictional, the time invested, and mutually developed solutions create a very real and persisting relationship.

5.2 The impact of table-top role-playing games

Even though table-top RPGs are a relatively new phenomenon, they have become increasingly popular over the last 40 years. As such they have been given more and more attention when it comes to researching their usefulness, as well as being the target of certain social and religious controversies.

The most famous controversy connected to *Dungeons & Dragons* specifically, as it was the first RPG, occurred after several teenagers’ suicides have been linked to playing the game (specifically James Dallas Egbert III in 1979 and Irving Lee Pulling in 1982). However, both children were facing different mental issues and playing *Dungeons & Dragons* was never scientifically connected to any kind of violent behaviour – “Studies by the American Association of Suicidology, the US Centers for Disease Control, and Health and Welfare Canada all found no causal link between D&D and suicide.” (BBC, 2014)

Further research into playing RPGs has proven to be mostly positive in different areas of life, such as education, therapy, psychology, sociology, recreation and so many others. RPGs have been researched in relation to helping people with different kinds of issues, from people on the autism spectrum, people with ADHD, at-risk youth, incarcerated adults, as well as people with developmental impairments and the gifted and talented. Even though the corpus of the research is not yet large enough to provide specific and precise conclusion, the indications so far have been mostly positive. Hawke Robinson presented varying research results focusing on debunking stereotypes about RPG gamers in a radio interview² for the *Wizards of the Coast* website and presented his web site which focuses on conducting and collecting RPG-related research (37:04).

A good example of such research is a research paper written by Elizabeth Fein (2014) in which she studies the behaviour of people on the autism spectrum in a camp created by a youth group focusing on Live-Action Role-Playing games (LARP is a subgroup of role-playing games in which participants not only imagine the fantasy but also act them out in large groups) and table-top RPGs. The research consisted of participants creating and enacting different stories with various plot-twists coming from the players themselves and in doing so found an environment where the participants felt safe and enjoyed participating. The, so-called, Aspie camp showed that “autism was the catalyst for the creation of a new and generative sociocultural space—motivated not by the impairments that can come with the autistic cognitive style, but by the capacities it brought for shared enjoyment” (Fein, 2014). Even though the research performed by Fein mostly focused on people on the autism spectrum, it would be possible to adapt it to other types of disorders, including those that present issues during language acquisition, in addition to storytelling being a very familiar concept to a foreign language teacher. The addition of acting out the stories only adds additional possibilities and, in some cases, even circumvents difficulties such as not knowing the appropriate vocabulary, as the person participating can simply find other, nonverbal means of presenting what they wish to say.

Previous research shows that even though RPGs are a somewhat recent invention, they already have some proven benefits in different aspects of life including education. What this experiment aims to do is add language teaching to the already lengthy list of beneficial effects of RPGs.

² <http://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/hawke-robinson-rpg-research>

5.3 Gender and role-playing games

When it comes to RPGs, ever since their inception they have been regarded as a mainly male activity, with women being predominantly outsiders and exceptions in the hobby. Unfortunately, there have not been any conclusive studies on the topic, however it is safe to presume that men make the majority of table-top gamers, at least based on anecdotal evidence. A cursory online inquiry is enough to show that this is the case, with women often not just being in the minority, but frequently reporting being either discouraged from playing, looked down on, berated or patronised for attempting to take part in something considered a hobby reserved primarily for men. Naturally, instances of these things happening are generally an exception rather than the norm, but it is important to mention that sometimes women simply are not given an equal opportunity to just enjoy the game. In addition to this, the fact that the image of a table-top gamer is often looked at through a lens of ridicule or childishness does not benefit the willingness of some people to participate, even if in reality it is a deep and fulfilling activity that has the ability to create and maintain friendships, improve relationships as well as settle differences.

Recently, the situation has begun to improve slightly, with more and more female participants in the hobby, especially with some notable celebrities speaking out in defence of the activity (such as Vin Diesel, Stephen Colbert, Stephen King and many others). However, there is still a long way to go for the hobby to reach full equality.

6 Research

6.1 Aim

The main aim of the present study is to see if there is a difference in EFL proficiency between learners who were exposed to table-top role-playing games and those who were not. The study will compare the results of students who have participated in several role-playing sessions to those who have not been subjected to a role-playing game. The study will look at all four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking, but will incorporate additional criteria that comes from the test used to test the students' language competence, including their knowledge of applied grammar, as well as their overall scores.

Additionally, the study will attempt to determine if there is any difference in EFL proficiency between male and female participants in the experiment, due to the stereotypical notion that role-play gaming is a predominantly male activity.

6.2 Sample

The study consists of a total of 40 students, 20 of which were part of the experimental group, while 20 were part of the control group. The students were all enrolled in the Linguapax Language School in Vinkovci, Croatia. They are of various age (ranging between 12 and 22), and gender, but of approximately the same skill level (B2 level according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages - CEFR). To ensure that the students from both the test and control group were of a proportionate skill level, a random set of students with an overall score between 63% and 67% on an FCE mock test were chosen to participate in the experiment. Of the 20 students in the experimental group 11 were male and 9 were female. All students attended their regular classes, with role-playing sessions organized in place of their regular class for the members of the test groups, usually in smaller groups of 4-6 students. All the students volunteered to participate in the study and on the weeks the experiment took place were not present in their regular classes, but instead attended the experimental class.

6.3 Procedure

The first step consisted of determining the current level of the student's language proficiency. This was done through a mock test consisting of sample tests provided by Cambridge and gives a baseline score that would be used to gauge the progress of the learners and show that the students taking part in the experiments are at roughly the same level as the students not participating. This gave a clear starting point for each student as well as individual scores for each part of the test and an overall score which was between 63 and 67 per cent.

At the end of the school year, in the first week of June, the students sat the *First Certificate in English* (hereafter FCE) exam (Cambridge Assessment English), which would be used to compare the results of the test group with the control group.

The test results had been made available via a user name and password protected web-page (access is granted to the candidates themselves and their school).

The experiment was conducted throughout a three-year period (2015 – 2018).

6.4 Role-playing game procedure

Throughout this research, RPGs were used as a in place of regular classes. Once per month, in small groups of 4-6 students, RPG play sessions were organized, which lasted 3-4 hours. On average, each player group had a total of 10 sessions in an 18-month period (around 35-40 hours of playing). The game system that was used was *Pathfinder* by Paizo Publishing., using the standard setting for *Pathfinder*, a fantasy world called *Golarion* (Paizo Publishing, 2013). The students took on the role of the player characters (PCs), and I, as their teacher, was the game master (GM). The experiments themselves took place in the school. During the sessions, the players/students were given various in-game assignments, which were often classroom assignments recreated to fit the gaming context. For example, as the PCs were part of an in-game organization called the *Pathfinder Society*, focused on archaeology and exploration. After specific encounters they had to present reports to their leader in written form (140-190 words). The reports they wrote followed the style used in the FCE exams they are preparing for (Cambridge Assessment English). Based on the report they would write they received an appropriate in-game reward depending on how well they performed during the session. Other times groups would have to take part in a debate, often with dire consequences (for their character) should they perform badly. Additionally, students were tasked with reading sections about the world they are playing

in, various rules sections from the rulebooks as well as certain texts about the characters they were playing. For time-saving purposes, the students did not create their own characters as is the usual case when playing an RPG, and instead were given a choice of a dozen pre-made characters with their own game-system-based statistics and backgrounds. Each character consists of six *ability scores* – Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma, along with various skills (Perception, Climbing, Acrobatics, Stealth, Diplomacy, etc.) and abilities (different attacks and/or spells used in so-called *combat encounters*), all of which use numbers to represent the characters proficiency (see appendix 1). This also gave the opportunity to analyse the behaviour of a person from a different perspective, since they were in a position where they had to choose the course of action for a person with pre-made character traits, goals and aspirations. The sessions were played-out in English, with very few instances of translating certain phrases or words.

6.5 Tests

In order to group the students into equal-level groups (based on CEFR), the Oxford Placement Test was used. This ensures equal footing for all students and provides a good starting point for the experiment.

When it comes to the FCE exam, the test itself consists of five parts: Use of English, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. What follows is a detailed description of the various tasks found in the test taken from the official web-site¹ (Cambridge Assessment English)

Use of English and Reading are presented as one test paper that has seven different tasks (four for Use of English and three for reading) and takes 75 minutes:

1. Multiple-choice cloze – each question has four options with one correct answer. This task focuses on idioms, collocations, shades of meaning, phrasal verbs, fixed phrases etc.
2. Open cloze – a text with gaps, each of which represents a missing word. This task tests grammar and vocabulary.
3. Word formation – a text with eight gaps, each of which represents a missing word, however there is a “prompt” at the end of the line with a gap which has to be changed to fit the sentence, testing the students’ vocabulary.

¹ FCE Sample test: <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/first/preparation/>

4. Key word transformation – students have to paraphrase a given sentence by using a “key” word given while keeping the meaning of the sentence as close to the original as possible. The aim is to test the students’ grammar and vocabulary.
5. Multiple choice – each question has four options, the task tests reading for detail, opinion, tone, purpose, main idea, implication, attitude.
6. Gapped text - a single page of text with some numbered gaps which represent missing paragraphs. After the text there are some paragraphs which are not in the right order. Students have to read the text and the paragraphs and decide which paragraph best fits each gap. This task tests the understanding of the structure and development of a text.
7. Multiple matching - a series of statements followed by a text divided into sections or several short texts. Students have to match each statement to the section or text in which you can find the information. This tests the reading for specific information, detail, opinion and attitude.

Writing consists of two different tasks and takes 80 minutes:

1. Compulsory essay assignment – students are given an essay title and two ideas clearly linked to the title. Students write an essay giving your opinions about the title, using the ideas given. Students must also add a third, different idea of your own linked to the title. The title will be a subject of general interest – there is no need any specialised knowledge. This task tests using language functions, such as evaluating, expressing opinions, hypothesising, justifying, persuading.
2. Situationally based writing task - students write a text from a choice of text types – article, email/letter, report or review. To guide the writing, students are given information about context, topic purpose and target reader.

Listening consists of 4 parts and takes about 40 minutes:

1. Multiple choice - eight short extracts from monologues or conversations between interacting speakers. There is one multiple-choice question for each extract. This task tests listening for feeling, attitude, opinion, purpose, function, agreement, gist and detail.
2. Sentence completion - A monologue (which may be introduced by a presenter) lasting approximately 3 minutes. Students have to complete the sentences on the question paper with the missing information which you hear on the recording. The aim is listening for specific information, stated opinion.

3. Multiple matching - a series of five themed monologues of approximately 30 seconds each. On the question paper, students have to select five correct options from a list of eight possible answers. The goal is to test listening for gist, attitude, opinion, purpose, feeling, main points and detail.
4. Multiple choice - a conversation between two or more speakers of approximately 3–4 minutes. Students have to answer some multiple-choice questions by choosing the correct answer from three options. This tests listening for attitude, opinion, detail, gist, main idea and specific information.

Speaking consists of four parts in which students have to talk with the examiner as well as another candidate on their own. The test lasts about 15 minutes:

1. Interview - conversation with the examiner. The examiner asks questions and the student may have to give information about their interests, studies, career, etc. This tests giving information about yourself and expressing your opinion about various topics.
2. Long turn - the examiner gives two photographs and asks the candidates to talk about them. Candidates have to speak for 1 minute without interruption and the interlocutor then asks the other candidate to comment on the other person's photographs for about 30 seconds. The other candidate receives a different set of photographs and candidates have to listen and comment when they have finished speaking. The question the student will have to answer about the photographs is written at the top of the page as a reminder to what they should talk about. This tests talking on your own about something: comparing, describing, expressing opinions, speculating.
3. Collaborative task - conversation with the other candidate. The examiner gives the candidates some material and a task to do. They have to talk with the other candidate and make a decision. This tests exchanging ideas, expressing and justifying opinions, agreeing and/or disagreeing, suggesting, speculating, evaluating, reaching a decision through negotiation, etc.
4. Discussion - further discussion with the other candidate, guided by questions from the examiner, about the topics or issues raised in the task in Part 3. This tests expressing and justifying opinions, agreeing and/or disagreeing.

6.6 Data analysis procedure

Since both the mock and official FCE exams consist of five different tests based on different language skills, it provides ample data for analysis and comparison. The primary and final test results of both the control and experimental groups were submitted to statistical analyses and were then used to compare the progress of both the control and experimental group on a per-skill basis, as well as an overall score. This is done using independent-samples t tests for comparing the scores between the control group and experimental group when determining the differences in scores for both the mock exam (used as a pre-test) and final exam (post-test).

Furthermore, the results within the control group will be analysed using an independent-sample Mann-Whitney U test to see if there are any statistically significant score differences between the male and female participants.

7. Results

7.1 Pre-test results

In order to assure that both the control group and experimental group had an equal level of proficiency at the onset of the experiment, all participants were tested using a paper-based sample test provided by Cambridge Assessment English. The mock test was done in such a way to closely mimic the conditions of the official exam. This means that the participants took part in all parts of the test one after the other, with Speaking being the only exception, as it is often taken a week after the written part of the test. This test was also used to determine which students would be included in the statistical analysis, and, as previously mentioned, only participants with an overall average score between 63% and 67% were selected at random. The statistical analysis of the 20 random members of each group is presented in table 1.

As we can see from Table 1, there is no statistically significant difference, with a 95% degree of confidence ($p > 0.01$) between the overall scores of the two groups at the beginning of the experiment. The same is true for almost every part of the test, the only exception being Use of English.

In the Use of English test, the Control group fared statistically better ($p > 0.01$). However, due to a somewhat smaller sample size (20 participants per group) and the fact that participants were randomly selected, this could be considered an anomaly rather than a significant difference between the two groups, especially since the main aim was to test the overall difference between the groups. Additionally, this will present an interesting point of analysis when the time comes to look at the final exam scores and whether or not the experimental group manages to negate the difference in this part of the test.

Table 1: *Statistical analysis of the first test*

Skills	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Reading	Control group	59.85	5.58	1.08	38	0.287
	Exp. group	62.6	9.94			
Writing	Control group	62.4	15.21	0.82	38	0.420
	Exp. group	65.45	6.95			
Use of English	Control group	66.3	9.67	2.95	38	0.005**
	Exp. group	58.05	7.91			
Listening	Control group	65.7	9.60	1.54	38	0.133
	Exp. group	70.3	9.35			
Speaking	Control group	71.05	6.49	0.42	38	0.678
	Exp. group	71.95	7.10			
Overall	Control group	65	1.78	1.24	38	0.221
	Exp. group	65.7	1.78			

7.2 Post-test results

When it comes to the analysis of the final results, we can see that there are several differences between the two groups.

First of all, the three of the five parts of the test have turned out to have no statistically significant difference with a 95% degree of confidence ($p > 0.01$). These include Reading (Control group: M: 92.85 SD: 5.01; experimental group: M: 93.85 SD: 4.34), Writing (Control group: M: 89.35 SD: 4.91; experimental group: M: 91.75 SD: 4.98), and, surprisingly, Use of English (Control group: M: 93.5 SD: 4.71; experimental group: M: 95.2 SD: 5.01).

Table 2: *Statistical analysis of the final test*

Skills	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Reading	Control group	92.85	5.01	0.67	38	0.504
	Exp. group	93.85	4.34			
Writing	Control group	89.35	4.91	1.53	38	0.133
	Exp. group	91.75	4.98			
Use of English	Control group	93.5	4.71	1.11	38	0.276
	Exp. group	95.2	5.01			
Listening	Control group	92.55	4.74	3.62	38	0.001**
	Exp. group	97.2	3.24			
Speaking	Control group	93.85	3.91	3.14	38	0.003**
	Exp. group	97.25	2.86			
Overall	Control group	92.4	2.76	3.27	38	0.002**
	Exp. group	95	2.25			

On the other hand, the rest of the scores have shown a statistically significant difference with a 95% degree of confidence ($p > 0.01$). Both Listening (Control group: M: 92.55 SD: 4.74; experimental group: M: 97.2 SD: 3.24) and Speaking (Control group: M: 93.85 SD: 3.91; experimental group: M: 97.25 SD: 2.86) have proven to be better in the experimental group, along with the Overall score (Control group: M: 92.4 SD: 2.76; experimental group: M: 95 SD: 2.25).

7.3 Differences between male and female participants in the experimental group

Even though female participants were in a slight minority during the experiment, according to the test results, there was no statistically significant difference between male and female participants (see Table 3).

Table 3: *Statistical analysis of the final test scores based on participant gender for the experimental group (Mann-Whitney U test)*

Skills	Sig.
Reading	0.824
Writing	0.766
Use of English	0.131
Listening	0.331
Speaking	0.552
Overall	0.941

8. Discussion

Because table-top RPGs have only existed since 1974, and have since had a mostly niche audience, there has not been much research done attempting to connect them to the language learning process. There have been few attempts to utilize RPGs in teaching, let alone in teaching English, one such example being done by Phillips (1993), but without offering any specific data or measurements to show the effectiveness of using such methods in relation to traditional ones. Because of this, and a small sample size of the participants, it is difficult (and possibly unrealistic) to try to determine if this style of teaching could ever be used to completely replace more standardized teaching techniques. In fact, the point of this experiment was not to replace the current teaching methods but supplement them with something that would be more engaging and interesting for the EFL learner.

There is quite a fair amount of anecdotal reports that talk about using RPGs (*Dungeons & Dragons* mainly) as a tool that helped players become more proficient in a language, sometimes even helping people get through a difficult period of readjustment to life in a different country. This is what conceived the idea that RPGs could be used to enhance teaching English. The reason for this is that RPGs are, first and foremost, language-dependent activity. As there is no screen as in video game-based RPGs or boards like in boardgames (maps and grids can be used, but only as a supplement, they are not a key part of the game), everything that happens in an RPG must first be heard, then mentally processed, and then verbally expressed for the game to function. This means that the two base skills used in a language – listening and speaking, are the main tools players use to participate in the game. Additionally, because these games have no elements that can be rote learned and re-used to achieve success, the players need to constantly communicate in order to be successful. Even the idea of success in such games is subject to discussion and personal preference. These are not (usually) competitive games, the goal tends to be the story the players create together, and the experiences they share while creating it. As such, it lends itself to the idea that learning about the world, creatures, items, and events they encounter in this imaginary world is a crucial part of playing the game. If one can attach linguistic elements to the “success” parameters of the games, since learning is a significant part of the activity, it is possible to make language learning an integral part of the gameplay process and mechanics.

Additionally, since RPGs are not limited by setting, timeline or realism in any way, they can be used to incorporate any part of learning a language. As an example, a group of players could find themselves in a world in which every person speaks a language that is completely unknown to them, and they slowly piece together elements of that world’s language and slowly start using

them to survive and thrive in that imaginary world. If the person leading and narrating the story (the thesis previously mentioned that these people are usually known as GMs or DMs in Section 5.1: How are table-top role-playing games played?) is able to design the in-game encounters in such a way that they are constantly forced to learn new elements of the language used in that world, focusing on the challenges constantly being a step beyond what they are already capable of, it is easy to approximate this experience to that of finding yourself in a country whose language is new to the person.

Another benefit this has is the fact that when coupled with various in-game consequences of the actions their players have the potential of facing, RPGs provide an extremely engaging experience for participants. This level of engagement can greatly increase the motivation of a person to become proficient in a language, and as such can have a remarkably positive effect on a language learner.

8.1 Analysis of post-test results

When it comes to the results of the experiments, they proved to be within the bounds of what one could expect from a speaking- and listening-based activity. As we can see in Table 2, the only statistically different results, using an Independent-Samples T test, when it comes to language skills, were for those two – skills that were used the most during the activity. This, in and of itself, does not necessarily mean that the results of the test would increase by default, especially when it comes to the Speaking test, because the test the participants took has specific rules. They are required to talk about certain things in a specific way (as explained in Section 6.4: Instruments) and as such, the RPG play sessions had to be designed around that fact. At times players had to compare and describe things and were guided into doing it in a way that would help them gain and practice the vocabulary they would need later on. Also, even though the students volunteered to participate in the experiment, some of them showed reluctance to speak. However, usually within the first session they would open up and show enough self-esteem to openly participate in discussion as they noticed that even when they made mistakes there was never any judgement or in the worst cases would simply be disregarded in a humorous fashion.

Additionally, even though the results for Reading and Writing had no statistically significant difference in either test (see Tables 2 and 3), they were, according to the mean score of the final exam, slightly better than the control group's. This could be attributed to the fact that the in-game situations when they had to read or write something, they were more emotionally involved in the

action because they knew that failure would have consequences for that character, and therefore took the activity more seriously. Often the students would have to scan a text for details and clues on a specific quest they were trying to solve (see Appendix 2) or simply rules explanations or lengthy item descriptions. Other times they would have to write a detailed individual report of events that happened on a previous session and would then compare them and comment them between each other. It is possible that the additional layer of immersion gave further motivation and therefore yielded good results, even though not statistically significant ones.

Even though the Use of English scores have no statistically significant difference, the fact that the control group started out with a higher score and the experimental group managed to reduce a statistically significant difference down to an insignificant one (even more so if we consider that the experimental group's mean value for this part of the test is slightly higher than the control group's score) already shows that the experiment has made some difference. Additionally, Use of English is not the only part of the test with a higher mean score in favour of the experimental group, in fact, all parts of the test show a higher mean score, even if half of them are statistically insignificant (see Table 2). None of the activities during the RPG sessions focused mainly on those tasks in their test form, but in the end it is possible that the frequent use of language, grammar, phrasal verbs, phrases and expressions helped them significantly improve their scores in the end, especially since the Use of English test focuses more on grammar proficiency in general rather than focusing on one specific part of it.

8.2 Gender-based differences

When examining the difference between male and female participants, no statistical difference between scores of the two groups (see Table 3) was determined using a nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test. As previously mentioned, the reason this was looked at was because of the stereotypical demography of the people who are usually involved in RPGs. Throughout the experiment, both male and female participants had no problems taking part in the various activities included in the experiment, and showed no problems working with each other. This could be because all the participants have had zero experience with such activities and had no notion of the stereotypes involved in the hobby, however this does mean that, as a teaching tool, table-top RPGs are just as effective with both genders. Furthermore, the gender disparity within the experimental group was a lot lower than would have been anticipated based on stereotypes related to the activity. 9 out of 20 participants were female (45%) and there were no real differences when it comes to

the effects of the experiment. Also, none of the participants of either gender group had issues with each other during the experiments that were in any way related to gender.

9. Conclusion

Even though the experiment was performed on a somewhat small group of students, the results have shown that using table-top RPGs does have a positive effect on EFL learners. When it comes to answering the two main research questions, the answers seem to be mostly positive, with some caveats.

Firstly, is there a difference in EFL proficiency between learners who were exposed to table-top RPGs and those who were not? The answer for this one seems to be twofold. According to the test results, the difference does exist, although not a statistically significant one for all skills. Reading and Writing seem to be equally affected when employing both traditional and RPG teaching, whereas Listening and Speaking seem to have benefited greatly from the RPG experience. This does make logical sense as well, as these are the main skills used in these activities, but with careful planning it appears that other skills did benefit, although not necessarily more than they would otherwise.

This is something that does warrant further research, however the results so far have been positive, and using table-top RPGs could be seen as a useful tool to incorporate into teaching English. However, there are some negative sides that need to be mentioned. RPGs are not simple to prepare and incorporate in a lesson. Playing an RPG requires the person in charge to have a substantial knowledge of the rules, setting and potential storyline, as well as have the ability to adapt them to EFL learners. Also, they are often time consuming and do not resonate equally with everyone. During the experiment students happily participated and their participation was always voluntary, and would rarely miss the play sessions, however there are always learners who simply do not find the activity engaging. In addition to that, the lower the proficiency level of the learner is, the more it is required to adapt the way RPGs are implemented, due to their reliance on language. That being said, the simple fact that while using RPGs, the students participating in them were willing to spend several hours continuously speaking English, which is something that should be regarded as a benefit, since it is often very difficult to get learners to open up and speak freely.

In conclusion, table-top RPGs do have a positive effect on Listening and Speaking, with an at-least-equal effect on other skills as more traditional teaching techniques. Further research would certainly be beneficial but so far they have shown to be an effective, if time-consuming, addition to the teacher's toolkit.

Secondly, is there any difference in EFL proficiency between male and female participants in the experiment? The final exam scores show no statistically significant differences between the results

of the male and female participants. Not only that, but there were absolutely no tensions of any kind based on gender. Furthermore, several of the participants of both genders still play RPGs with each other and have formed a close friendship over the time they spend participating in the experiment. This shows that when done properly, not only will there be no difference in the scores, but that RPGs do seem to have a positive effect on the personal relationships of the people who take part in them.

As a final word, I would like to state the effect playing RPGs has had on me, personally, as a teacher. I have gotten into the hobby at the age of 21 and have been an avid RPG enthusiast ever since. When the time came to try my hand at teaching, I quickly realised how similar running an RPG game to a group of people is to teaching, the biggest difference being the number of people involved. In both cases the person in charge needs to guide a group to a common goal, present them with obstacles they need to overcome that are challenging enough to remain interesting and engaging, yet not too challenging to intimidate or so easy as to become trivial. Experience as a Game Master has taught me how to keep track of timing, how to keep the attention of a group, and how to solve problems both of a technical and interpersonal nature. RPGs have also given me the self-confidence needed to feel comfortable speaking in front of groups of people, to improvise when needed, as well as admit mistakes and improve on them when possible. As such, I can not recommend RPGs enough to people as both a leisure activity and a way to improve oneself, regardless of their age, gender or profession. This is an activity anyone can enjoy, learn from and share with their friends, family and colleagues. It is my hope that RPGs as a hobby continue to grow, and that they are appreciated for their benefits not just as something done for fun but as a tool for other things as well, and that some day more people will have the opportunity to experience what I have thanks to Role-Playing Games.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:

RPG Character sheet (Pathfinder role-playing game – page 1)



CHARACTER

Name: **Morgrym Ironoath**

Race: **Dwarf**

Size: **Medium** | Size Modifier: **0**

Gender: **Male**

Age: **0**

ABILITIES

	Score	Modifier	Temp Score	Temp Modifier
STR	15	2		
DEX	11	0		
CON	15	2		
INT	12	1		
WIS	20	5		
CHA	11	0		

CLASSES

Class	Level	Hit Die	Level Adjustment	Effective Character Level
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cleric	1	d 8		1
<input type="checkbox"/> 2		d		
<input type="checkbox"/> 3		d		
<input type="checkbox"/> 4		d		

Favored class: +1 hp or skill rank per level

VISION

- Normal
- Low-Light
- Dark Vision: **60ft**

Favored class bonuses:

Hit Points	Skill Ranks
	1

EXPERIENCE

Current: **Medium**

Next Level: **2,000**

FEATS & SPECIAL ABILITIES

SKILLS Ranks Used: 4/4

	Usable Untrained	Skill Bonus	Class Skills +3	Ranks	
				Ranks	Misc.
Acrobatics*	-4	D O X			
Appraise	1	I I T			
Bluff	0	C O A			
Climb*	-2	S 2 R			
Diplomacy	0	C O A			
Disable Device*	n/a	D O X			
Disguise	0	C O A			
Escape Artist*	-4	D O X			
Fly*	-4	D O X			
Handle Animal	n/a	C O A			
Heal	9	W S S		1	
Intimidate	0	C O A			
Linguistics	n/a	I I T			
Perception	5	W S S			
Ride*	-4	D O X			
Sense Motive	5	W S S			
Sleight of Hand*	n/a	D O X			
Spellcraft	5	I I T		1	
Stealth*	-4	D O X			
Survival	5	W S S			
Track <input type="checkbox"/> Trained	n/a	S U T 5 V A L			
Swim*	-2	S 2 R			
Use Magical Device	n/a	C O A			
Knowledge: Arcana	n/a	I I T			
Knowledge: Dungeoneering	n/a	I I T			
Knowledge: Religion	5	I I T		1	
Knowledge: Nature	n/a	I I T			
Knowledge: The Planes	n/a	I I T			
Knowledge: History	INT 7	1		1	2
Knowledge: Nobility	INT n/a	1			
Profession: Miner	WIS n/a	5			1
Common, Dwarven					

Appendix 2:

RPG reading assignment

AMBUSH SPECIALISTS

A Pathfinder's wits make the difference between living and dying when faced with an unexpected attack. While any organized foe can arrange an ambush, some are specifically tailored to launch surprise attacks. When chests, plants, statues, or even tables animate into a surprise assault, it is the prepared explorer who most often lives to tell the harrowing tale.

Constructs: Animated objects, golems, and similar guardians are common threats in many old ruins. Not only are they loyal guardians that have no need to eat or even breathe, but they hide easily in plain sight, and are often mistaken for mundane objects, only to ambush trespassers. While these mindless automatons lack the intelligence to plan assaults, those behind their construction do not.

Mimics: Ask a dozen adventurers where the creatures known as mimics come from, and you're likely to get as many different answers. Most legends of mimic genesis share a similar theme, though—a bizarre experiment that resulted in the creation of an amorphous creature with the ability to change its shape to mimic mundane objects. Mimics dwell in the broken chambers of lost ruins, far underground where they can avoid sunlight. While not inherently evil, mimics take pleasure in their hunts, and seek to ambush their prey for sport as well as to feed. Thus they prefer to lure their quarry close before they reveal their wicked teeth and sticky slime.

SOCIETY SUGGESTIONS

Many ambush specialists lack intelligence—they use these normally sophisticated tactics out of instinct, or because they've been “programmed” to do so. When confronting such menaces, it's usually best to avoid using spells that assault the mind, as these creatures are immune to mind-affecting effects. Furthermore, attacks that rely on poisons, paralysis, stunning, or putting these creatures to sleep prove futile. Against constructs, adamantite weapons or magical items like *golembane scarabs* are invaluable tools. Many constructs are immune to magic, so spellcasters facing such creatures should not attempt to directly assault these foes with spells. Rather, spellcasters should look instead to the environment for aid, or conjure magical effects and creatures that are not in and of themselves magical in order to more effectively combat powerful constructs.

Characters with high Perception, Knowledge (nature), or Survival skills can often notice an ambush predator like a carnivorous plant, wild animal, or mimic before it lashes out with its hungry creepers. Mimics present an unusual additional complication in the powerful adhesive they secrete—adventurers who suspect mimics in their future are well advised to carry strong alcohol or *universal solvent* to aid in escaping from such a tenacious grip.

BUREAUCRATS

Pathfinders often have to operate within the gray areas of civilization, and sometimes the Society must answer for the actions of certain undiplomatic or brazen agents. Often Pathfinders find themselves in complex social situations where revealing their mission or even their affiliations and identities can jeopardize them. In addition, the relics the Society seeks must often be exhumed from resting places within the territories of non-allied groups, or may sit amid an ignorant collector's cache. Pathfinders must walk the line between avoiding scandal and providing results.

Government Agents: As many opportunities to vex government agents exist as there are governments themselves, but some official agents bring with them added complications. In the case of the Eagle Knights, Hellknights, the Risen Guard, Qadiran merchants, and the Lion Blades, direct conflict could jeopardize the delicate alliances the Pathfinders have managed to forge over the years. Violence against one of these organizations could result in an unfortunate series of confrontations, or even war, between the Pathfinder Society and the agency's government.

Merchants: Ancient relics sometimes sell for a king's ransom, and while both legal and illegal methods for purchasing artifacts exist, the various mercantile leagues behind these auctions can prove both stiff competition and a valuable resource to Pathfinders. Examples of these merchants include the relics auction in Cassomir, the Osirian mummy dealers that supply the Inner Sea's museums, and the information-mongers that dwell amid the famous Qadiran markets and Katapeshi Nightstalls.

Nobles: Bored or curious aristocrats often find relic hunting fashionable, either mounting expeditions themselves or purchasing the spoils of other hunts. Whether hoping to show their prizes off at their next banquet or collecting out of genuine interest, nobles often acquire relics that hold more power than they know. In addition, the circles of upper society produce fantastic rumors and gossip detailing the whereabouts of expeditions and the relics they seek.

SOCIETY SUGGESTIONS

Subtle solutions are best when dealing with bureaucrats, and those agents practiced in the skills of Appraise, Bluff, Diplomacy, Disguise, Intimidate, Knowledge (nobility), Linguistics, Sense Motive, Sleight of Hand, and Stealth should find many opportunities to practice their expertise here. When in doubt, a hefty bribe often helps to bypass these encounters. Furthermore, beguiling spellcasters who can charm, dominate, and modify the memories of their adversaries excel at such missions. Those able to hide their affiliation as Pathfinders during any unfortunate altercations please the Decemvirate.