

# BioE 24: Playing well with others

developing teamwork skills through Role Playing Games (RPGs)

Course Format: 1 hour of discussion per week (1 unit, P/NP, synchronous, not recorded)

Instructor: Terry Johnson, 418 HMMB

Office hours: by appointment

You may access the syllabus as a document using [this link](#).



Image by [Raul Figtree](#)

*“If we were always to judge from reality, games would be nonsense; but if games were nonsense, what else would there be left to do?” - Leo Tolstoy*

Role-Playing Games (RPGs) are collaborative storytelling tools wherein a Game Master (GM, sometimes DM for ‘Dungeon Master’) designs and performs the world, while Players take on the role of a character interacting with that world. The story is told through a combination of GM agency, Player agency, and random numbers (typically generated using RPG dice) that determine the outcome of an intended action according to an established set of rules. There are RPGs that operate on different models, too, but the above is most typical.

RPGs are a great way to learn how to lead and participate in a team, to flex your creative muscles, or simply to set aside the week's homework for an afternoon in favor of something exciting and different. This class is designed for folks who are interested in RPGs, but *does not assume that you have experience with either GMing or playing.*

To get a passing grade in this class:

- Be absent no more than **twice**
- Be prepared to participate regularly in class with kindness and respect for your fellow classmates
- Participate in a one-shot RPG (as a GM or as a player)
- Regarding that one-shot, be prepared to discuss (individually, or as a group) on:
  - A decision that you made that you're proud of
  - A decision that you made that you'd reconsider
  - Something someone else at the table did that you appreciated or found awesome
  - A question you have about the game
  - **A lesson about working with others that you took away from the table (mandatory for everyone)**

## When Last We Left Our Heroes

01/20 - Introductions and ground rules



Image by [Elaine Tipping](#)

The answer to the question is always **no**, unless your fun is predicated on withholding fun from others, or otherwise being unkind.

Watch before class:

- [Stephen Colbert's D&D Adventure with Matthew Mercer](#)

Read before class:

- [Owlbears, Rust Monsters and Bulettes, Oh My!](#)
- [The Definition of Play Gives Insights](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- Why did you sign up for this seminar?
- What games do you find engaging and satisfying? Why?

## Role for Initiative

1/27 - Why do we play?



Image by [Guillaume Bonnet](#)

Watch before class:

- [Different Kinds of Players, Running the Game #11](#)
  - The Power Player
  - The Butt-Kicker
  - The Tactician
  - The Specialist
  - The Method Actor
  - The Wangrod

- The Storyteller
- The Casual Player
- The Mad Scientist
- [The Wangrod Defense](#)

Extras:

- [Reckless Endungeonment](#)
- [Bartle Taxonomy of Player Types](#)
- [Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition basic rules, Part 1: Making a Character](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- Why do *you* play?
- What kind(s) of player are you? Characterize yourself according to the types presented in Running the Game #11. (For reference, I'm about 1/3rd tactician and 2/3rds storyteller.)

## 2/3 - Why rules, and what rules? / In-class demos



Image by [Elaine Tipping](#)

Watch before class:

- [Handbooker Helper: Combat Actions](#)

Read before class:

- [Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition basic rules, Part 2: Playing the Game](#)

Extras:

- [How Gaming got its Dice](#)
- [Diceless Role-playing Games](#)

## 'Funny dice' creates Dungeons and Dragons

By MARLENE J. FERRIN  
Press-Citizen Reporter

"We're known down here as the strange people with the funny dice." Bob Waltman, a student at West High, was describing the students, junior high through college, who spend time — sometimes inordinate amounts of time — at the Memorial Union playing games.

The "funny dice" are for Dungeons and Dragons, one of the most popular of five role playing games that can go on indefinitely — and sometimes do.

The game is based on J.R. Tolkien's trilogy, "The Fellowship of the Ring." It has no winners as such. Players take particular roles and wend their ways through dungeons and wilderness encountering a variety of monsters along the way.

"The first objective is just to survive," explained Bob Quinlan, a student

at City High. "The second objective is to gain power." One gets experience points, for example, and more power by killing monsters.

"You want to build up a good character with as many abilities as possible," Quinlan added.

Rules for the game are included in nine volumes, three of which contain the game's basics. The books include tables to calculate odds and give instructions for the results of various throws of the dice. The dice themselves come in 4, 6, 8, 12 and 20-sided varieties. Most of the players, however, don't stick with just what's in the books. They design their own dungeons, their own worlds. Many of them keep their worlds encased in plastic envelopes in three-ring school notebooks.

"The dungeon master creates the world and referees the game," Quinlan explained. "He can modify the rules to suit his purposes. I take more liberties

with the books than most."

He also maintains a card file listing each weapon and armor piece, giving purpose, price and statistics for each. The players agree that reading Tolkien is almost a prerequisite. "I love the books," said Scott Stutzman, a City High student. He had played a version of the game on a computer at the University of Iowa before reading the books.

The books help the players know some of the characteristics of the monsters they will encounter. You can play without reading the books, however. "By far the funnest time is when you won't know what's going on," Waltman said.

Most of the players got interested in the games through friends. Waltman said many of the players "were just walking by one day and stopped to watch. They think it looks like fun and pretty soon they get hooked.

"It's kind of spreads. Like a disease.

"Once you get used to it, you come down all the time. You throw your school work to the winds. When I first learned, I played all the time for three months."

"It's sort of a fantasy thing," said Aaron Liesch, a West High student. "I used to do too much homework. Now I can escape into my own world."

The longest game that the players interviewed knew about was a marathon session lasting from noon Saturday to 9 a.m. on Sunday.

The players agree that fantasy is the big attraction. "It's hard to explain," Waltman said. "You have to play it to understand it. It puts you onto different kinds of adventures."

"It's heroic," Stutzman interjected. "It's a totally different kind of game," Waltman continued. "You don't win, but you don't lose either."

The other role playing games now

gaining favor are Chivalry and Sorcery, set in medieval times; Traveler, set 300 years in the future with space ships traveling among the stars; Boothill, set in the Old West, and Bunnies and Burrows.

Chivalry and Sorcery is more complicated than Dungeons and Dragons, the players said, and is starting to take over in popularity.

Many of the players are members of a UI club, the Iowa City War Games Confederation. The group puts out its own newspaper edited by Phil Bent, a West student, which carries articles about the intricacies of Dungeons and Dragons and other games.

Meetings are held on Saturdays, which are devoted to game playing.

"Until three or four months ago, the club was mostly college students," said Dennis Waltman, a university student and Bob's brother. "Now the high school and junior high students play the

role playing games, and the college students play mostly board games."

Conventions are held across the country almost every month of the year, he said. A big one in the fall is the Lake Geneva, Wis., convention. Dungeons and Dragons was invented in Lake Geneva.

Some of the game players almost specialize. A university student, Bob Hartwig, is currently running for president of the International Diplomacy Association. Diplomacy is a game in which players try to control half of Europe before World War I.

Hartwig plays the game by mail — writing letters to other players to explain moves. To promote the mail game, he publishes a newsletter, "The Podank News."

Another university student, John Kiser, has designed and sells his own board game, Crows and Owls, set in ancient India.

Come prepared to discuss:

- What (if anything) confuses you about D&D 5E's rules?
- Why use rules? What problems do they solve? What problems do they cause?
- Why use dice? What problems do they solve? What problems do they cause?

## Top of the Round

2/10 - Setting the table / In-class character creation

### SADNESS REPRIEVE FIG.E.



MIGHTY WARRIOR DISCOVERS ADVENTURES THAT DON'T REQUIRE HIS BLADE

tragedyseries.tumblr.com • benjamin dewey 2013

Read before class:

- [Onboarding/Session Zero document](#) (this is the one I use, as an example)

Watch before class:

- [Forget the pecking order at work](#)

Do before class:

- Create your own D&D 5E character
  - Make an account on <https://www.dndbeyond.com>
  - I'll send out a link that you can use to join this course's campaign, which will give you access to all of the classes and options (**courtesy of D&D Beyond!**)
  - Use *Standard Array* for stats
  - Choose a single class at 3rd level
  - For equipment, choose "Equipment" or "Gold" (your choice). If the latter, go fantasy shopping for any [basic items](#) with that gold.
  - Don't add any magical items! Those are for your GM to grant.

Extras:

- [Adventuring Academy: Playing in a Safe Space](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- Would you like to GM a one-shot, or play in one?
- In what system (or type of system)?
- What would you include in your session zero (or session zero document)?
- What would your ideal game (as GM or as a player) look or feel like? Comparisons to other games, fiction, movies, etc. are fine.

## 2/17 - Backstory / In-class demos



Images by [Sam Key](#), Dong Cheng, and Joseph Meehan

Read before class:

- [Xanathar's Guide - This is your life](#)

Extras:

- [100 questions to ask about your roleplaying character](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- Create your own backstory, including their character class, for one of the characters in the three images above
  - You can use a guide, or invent a backstory from scratch
- Choose one thing that they are good at, and one thing that they are bad at
- Be ready to name three of their most important relationships (with other PCs, NPCs, deities, concepts, nations, etc.) and what they are based upon (love, hate, fear, rivalry, beauty, etc.)

2/24 - Failing / In-class demos



Image by zetrystan

Read before class:

- [Making Failure Awesome](#) in the Fate system (which rewards experience points for meeting narrative goals and for *failing* rolls)
- [GUMSHOE 101: for players](#) (designed for investigative games, to *guarantee* that the players uncover clues necessary to move the story forward)
- [Honey Heist](#) (which requires a balance of success and failure to keep a character in the game)

Extras:

- [Catastrophic Failure, Running the Game #32](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- What are a few of your favorite examples of making failure awesome from fiction? (Movies, books, etc.)
- Terry's favorite example: [Han Solo rolls a Natural 1 on a Deception check](#), and it's *so much fun*



# Bonus Actions

## 3/3 - In-class demos / Group formation / Session zeros

Come prepared to discuss:

- Are you interested in GMing a game?
  - If so, be prepared to give a 30-second pitch for the game that gives potential players an idea of what they're in for
- What kind of game do you want to be a player in?

## 3/10 - The Haunting of Benthem Manor

Read before class:

- [Relics and Rarities: The Haunting of Benthem Manor](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- One choice that the GM or a player made that you particularly liked
- One question you have about a choice that the GM made
- One question you have about a choice that a player made

## 3/17 - The Beginning Begins

Read before class:

- [Fantasy High: The Beginning Begins](#)

Come prepared to discuss:

- One choice that the GM or a player made that you particularly liked
- One question you have about a choice that the GM made
- One question you have about a choice that a player made

## 3/24 - *no class session* (Spring Break)

# Trigger a Reaction

3/31 - TBD

4/7 - TBD

4/14 - TBD

4/21 - Last class meeting / evaluations / lessons learned