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ROLL FOR STORY: TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES
AS A TOOL FOR STORYTELLING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Since tabletop role-playing games (RPG) were first introduced in the late 70s, they've played an important role in gaming culture. *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first commercially-available tabletop RPG, was influenced heavily by Tolkien's high-fantasy world, and has influenced a multitude of video game RPGs since (Gilsdorf). The pencil and paper gameplay of this genre may seem dated in the face of cutting-edge VR, but they still contain a crucial freeform element that video games have yet to replicate.

The creation of an engaging *Dungeons and Dragons* experience requires a certain set of skills from the Dungeon Master (DM), a player who serves as narrator, rules referee, and generator of the story. Through my personal experience with the game and research, I've found that many of the skills required of the DM overlap with the skills necessary for effective storytelling in other media. These skills include, but are not limited to, the understanding of concepts such as pacing, worldbuilding, improvisation, stakes, chance, theme, and character development.

This project proposes that tabletop RPGs have the potential to serve as a pedagogical tool for learning storytelling concepts. The form of the project is a video series, published online, which uses the medium of film and animation to provide developing creative writers with a basis for using tabletop RPGs to improve their creative writing.

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Chapter 1

Discovery Phase

This chapter includes a detailed summary of the research conducted.

Definitions

Tabletop RPG (tRPG):
A tabletop roleplaying game (tRPG) is a form of roleplaying game (RPG) in which the participants describe their characters' actions through speech. Whether their characters' actions succeed or fail is determined according to a formal system of rules, often moderated by a player designated as the Dungeon Master (or Game Master). This player creates the setting and characters that the other players (PCs) interact with. The terms "pencil and paper" and "tabletop" are used to differentiate tRPGs from other RPGs, since these elements are not required-- some tRPGs are even played online (Kim).

Dungeon Master (DM):
In a game of D&D, the Dungeon Master (DM) controls the world that the Player Characters inhabit. The DM acts as a moderator, rules referee, and narrator; the DM is the avenue through which players interact with the world, and decides the outcome of players' actions (as per the rules of the tRPG system). In other tRPG systems, the DM is referred to as the Game Master (GM), and some systems are "GM-less," in which their rules do not include the player role of DM/GM (Kim).

Player Character (PC) and Non-Player Character (NPC):
In role-playing games, the Player Character is the character that the player controls. Non-Player Characters (NPCs) are characters in the game that are not controlled by the player. Since tabletop RPGs are collaborative, multiplayer games, there are multiple PCs, and the DM/GM controls all NPC interaction (Kim).

Storytelling Game:
Storytelling games are a subset of roleplaying games in which two or more persons collaborate on telling a spontaneous story. Storytelling games are differentiated from tRPGs due to their focus on creating a collaborative story rather than a gaming experience ("Storytelling Game").

Background

When discussing the nature of ideas, it is agreed that ideas do not materialize out of thin air, but result from the intersection of experiences. The idea for this project came to me in a similar fashion.

My background is in filmmaking, and subsequently storytelling. Narrative filmmaking demands the mastery of storytelling concepts similar to those needed for fiction writing, adapted to a time-based and highly visual format. The storyteller-- author, filmmaker, or any breed of artist, has an end goal of engaging an audience and evoking emotional reactions.

I was first invited to play the tabletop RPG *Dungeons and Dragons* when I was in high school. I didn't know what I was getting into-- a more complicated board game, perhaps. I played the game as a Player Character for a few years before trying my hand as the Dungeon Master. Around this time, I began to see patterns emerging, where my experience as a filmmaker overlapped with my experience as DM. I described it in simple terms at first, comparing the DM to a fiction writer with no control over the actions of his/her characters, or the author of a choose-your-own adventure novel. As I continued investigating, the connection became more complicated, with some concepts overlapping to various degrees and others being unique to the tRPG medium. Once the topic became my thesis, the question of form was raised: in what way can this idea take shape? It had to be widely distributed, easily digestible, and entertaining. The answer was simple once I considered my own background in filmmaking and video production. Thus, *Roll for Story* was born.

Hypothesis

Like all good research, this project required the construction of a hypothesis; in this case, "can tabletop RPGs be used to educate creative writers about important storytelling concepts?" My own experience with tRPGs was too limited to confirm their role as a pedagogical tool-- to do that, I would need to find evidence of this hidden potential in the experiences of other players, using other tRPG systems.

Research

I noticed immediately that my shiny, new idea was not as shiny and new as I had thought: an article in the New York Times entitled "A Game as Literary Tutorial" was published in July 2014 by Ethan Gilsdorf, and gave several accounts of writers who got their start by playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. Junot Díaz, a renowned writer, refers to D&D as "a sort of storytelling apprenticeship" (Gilsdorf). The article also pointed me towards a potential interviewee: Jennifer Grouling, an assistant professor of English at Ball State University.

I continued to find support for this idea through online sources. The bulk of the idea's rationale was found in blog posts by writers with experience in storytelling through tRPGs as

well as other media like books or films. Chuck Wendig, a novelist with a blog called "Terribleminds," made a post entitled *Twenty-Sided Troubadours: Why Writers Should Play Roleplaying Games*, which gave his readers the homework assignment of playing a tRPG in order to become better storytellers (Wendig). Reading through other publications, the majority seemed to have observed a similar correlation between the tRPG and creative writing.

Interviews

To further support this idea, I conducted two interviews: one with James Sutter, a writer and co-creator of the tRPG *Pathfinder*, and one with Jennifer Grouling, Assistant Professor of English at Ball State University, who published the book *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*.

James Sutter:

The years of experience James has with writing and tRPGs far outweighs my own. He felt that, in some circumstances, tRPGs can teach creative writing skills better than the act of writing, due to the oral, freeform nature of the medium and the instant feedback the DM receives, when viewing PCs as the audience to your storytelling.

"[Playing tRPGs] qualifies people to tell stories," James continued. He explained that many people aren't comfortable telling stories, but tRPGs can give these people the agency to tell a story in the closed tabletop environment, which may lead them to pursue other forms of creative writing. He went on to list a few other concepts tRPGs teach. Being the DM means knowing how to guide the action and motivations of your characters. A large part of writing fiction involves getting inside your character's head; as James pointed out, the roleplaying aspect of tRPGs demands this.

At this stage in my thesis, I was also still exploring the idea of tRPGs as a tool for ideation. James supported the idea that tRPGs can be used to generate ideas related to worldbuilding and characters that writers could later incorporate, but the resulting narrative from the tRPG session itself is usually not adaptable.

Jennifer Grouling:

I asked Jennifer the same questions as James. Using the terminology of D&D, she agreed that PCs learn character creation and the DM learns world creation through playing. Plotting, however, is a different process:

> "Plot is a little iffy because you aren't developing a plot in the same way you would for a different medium. If you're the DM you have to develop a plot that is flexible for the players to interact with, and that's a skill that could transfer to creative writing for other games but maybe less so for more traditional, less interactive mediums of storytelling."

Jennifer also explained a concept that was unaddressed at this point in my research: authorship and ethics. Following the theory that tRPGs could be used as a tool for ideation, to whom do the generated ideas belong, since tRPGs are a collaborative experience? The assumption was that the DM would be the player with the inclination for writing, but it's easy to picture a situation where a PC would use the character they played in their own writing, and the DM would not be able to ethically use that PC's character in his/her own writing.

This question of ethics influenced the purpose of Roll for Story: rather than purely serving as a tool for ideation, tRPGs are better served as an educational tool for writers to learn storytelling concepts and practice their craft in a different setting, using different media.

Theory

Behind every artistic medium is theory, and tabletop RPGs are no different. However, tRPG theory is harder to find and define than film theory; it exists on web forums and in independent communities, since it is relatively new.

History

The origin of tRPGs can be traced back to wargaming, which were games that simulated military conflicts. The system of rules that governed character creation in wargames was combined with role-playing to create *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first commercially available tRPG, which was published by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 (Rilstone).
As more tRPGs were developed and published, they started to branch out with their rules systems. Some systems such as *GURPS* focused on game mechanics and rules for balancing characters, while others games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade* focused on storytelling and character development (these games are now referred to as "storytelling games").

Eventually, an indie roleplaying community formed, which began developing theories for understanding roleplaying games.

GNS Theory

On web forums like *The Forge*, theorists such as Ron Edwards began publishing their models for understanding why people play tRPGs, and what makes for an effective tRPG system. In 2001, Ron Edwards published an essay on GNS Theory that became popular within the community, which describes the three types of tRPG players:

- Gamism is expressed by competition among participants (the real people); it includes victory and loss conditions for characters, both short-term and long-term, that reflect on the people's actual play strategies. The listed elements provide an arena for the competition.
- Simulationism is expressed by enhancing one or more of the listed elements in Set 1 above; in other words, Simulationism heightens and focuses Exploration as the priority of play. The players may be greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of that Exploration.
- Narrativism is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognizable theme. The characters are formal protagonists in the classic Lit 101 sense, and the players are often considered co-authors. The listed elements provide the material for narrative conflict (again, in the specialized sense of literary analysis).

Collectively, the three modes are called GNS. Stating "GNS," "GNS perspectives," or anything similar, is to refer to the diversity of approaches to play. One might refer to "GNS goals," in which case the meaning is, "whichever one might apply for this act of role-playing." (Edwards)

Put simply, this model identifies what makes RPGs fun, and how it differs between players.

Application

Roll for Story takes a narrativist approach to tRPGs. However, it recognizes that tRPGs do not exist solely for the creation of a story. This affected the approach that I took with Role for Story. I had originally argued for tRPGs as a tool for ideation and idea generation; however, the result of these games can be viewed as a narrative experience, rather than a narrative (Grouling). GNS Theory also argues that calling tRPGs "story-based games" is inaccurate since it neglects the gamist and simulationist players (Edwards). Therefore, my thesis became a recontextualization of tRPGs for an educational purpose.

Stigma

Something I couldn't ignore while conducting my research was the stigma associated with tRPGs, especially in the case of *Dungeons and Dragons*. In the 80s, a moral panic spread through the U.S. when D&D was targeted as the reason for a number of teenage suicides. Christian fundamentalists accused the game of promoting demon worship and poisoning easily influenced youth (BBC News).

The real killer in each of these cases was later proven to be mental health problems (BBC News), but even with D&D absolved of blame, the stigma persisted. Today, few believe in the association between D&D and Satanism, but the perception that D&D belongs to the anti-social

nerd culture is still pervasive. The popular sentiment can be seen in the media, caricatured and reduced to the same basic image of misfit males sitting in a basement (Figure 1.1).

       The research conducted on stigmas added a tertiary purpose to Roll for Story: differentiating D&D and other tRPGs from their commonly-associated stereotype. The issue is one of representation; thus, I took steps towards representing D&D as an engaging, collaborative activity that is gender-inclusive when writing the live action scenes for the series. My hope is that the existence of the series itself promotes the idea that D&D is not limited to the stereotyped audience, but can be played by all ages and genders.

Figure 1 The D&D Stereotype

Chapter 2

Planning Phase

Even after conducting extensive research, I was not sure of the exact form the project would take-- what the content would be, how it would be organized, and how to handle the visual components. This section details the process of planning the series and how I made the decisions that led to the final product.

Form

At the start of the project, I knew that the form would be video, but video has its own categories: film, TV, and interactive media among others. In the beginning stages, I was considering the idea of tRPGs as a tool for ideation. This was a proposed recontextualization of the tRPG, as a sort of story-generator rather than just a game. As part of this idea, a system of guidelines for using the games needed to be generated. I knew that I didn't have the skillset or motivation to design my own narrativist tabletop system, so the idea focused on applying existing systems to writing.

When the thesis became pedagogical in its focus, I scrapped the idea of a system of guidelines and adopted the idea of an educational video series. The video series format seemed to best fit the educational purpose through its resemblance to lessons. I also had in mind the format used by tutorial sites such as lynda.com.

Once identifying the form as a video series, I had to determine the structure. To make the episodes digestible, I decided to devote each episode to a singular concept of storytelling. Using the research I conducted on tRPGs and my own knowledge of storytelling, I then decided which concepts were worthy of their own episode.

Pinpointing Concepts

When pinpointing concepts shared by D&D and creative writing, some concepts were obvious from the start, while others proved more difficult to define. As I began generating lists and referring to my research, it became clear that these concepts were part of a system of inputs and outputs: the DM/writer uses the concept to create something; the inputs could be viewed as the "what" and the outputs as the "why." In addition to this, I identified a "how" for each concept: what are the specific methods through which the input causes the output? Table 1.1 shows the resultant chart: the final list of concepts as inputs, the mechanics through which these concepts are applied, and the reason for employing the concepts as outputs.

As James Sutter and various other bloggers pointed out, D&D can teach a writer how to pace their story in order to hold the attention of their audience. In film, pacing is a highly important concept since the medium is time-based, and the compression or expansion of time

affects the way in which the story is perceived ("How to Write a Narrative"). Pacing as a concept seemed important enough to earn its own episode. Mechanics for pacing are also built into D&D in the form of rests and encounters. Rests are a mechanic that simplifies the act of sleeping or recovering from physical exhaustion or conflict; effectively, rests compress time and quicken the pace. Encounters are a mechanic that slow the pace of combat, splitting the actions of each character into turns and expanding time.

      Another concept that stood out was worldbuilding, which can have different definitions depending on the context. In this context, I defined it as the work done to establish the setting and characters, or the world, in which the PCs exist. This encompasses description, which is fundamental to creative writing, as well as knowledge of the rules of the world. D&D has its own pre-generated world, as well as publications that expand on the rules of the world-- its geography, ecology, politics, religions, etc. For those that need a basis for their stories, the tools are supplied (Hamilton).

      Next, I identified tension as a concept-- after all, effective stories incorporate tension in order to keep audiences on the edge of their seats. But when applying this concept to the system of inputs and outputs, it fit better as an output. What I later identified as the input was stakes, since high stakes in a narrative generally lead to higher tension (Morrell). D&D has ways of adding stakes to stories by instituting mechanics for taking damage and dying, in the form of "hit points" and "death saving throws."

      Character development was a concept that jumped out immediately, but the difficult part of applying this concept to the series was differentiating it from worldbuilding, and framing it from the perspective of the DM, since the other concepts were tailored to this perspective. Rather than defining it as the formation of characters, I defined it as motivating change in characters. This stems from the concept of the character arc, which is essential to fiction writing. Characters in a story must change. The output for this concept would be an interesting, three dimensional character to whom the audience can better relate. Mechanics such as level ups, where your character grows in strength as they progress through the story, demonstrate this concept in play ("Character Development").

      It was at this point that I started to encounter concepts that did not seem obvious, or seemed to have a closer tie to the tRPG medium than creative writing, but were still worth including. One of these was improvisation, a way of capturing the roleplaying aspect of tRPGs. Improvisation is necessary for games like D&D, where the freeform method of play generates new experiences with each game. Like the players, the DM must improvise character interactions (NPCs). The DM must also improvise the story when the PCs make decisions that the DM failed to anticipate. In the tRPG communities, the discussion of "railroading" surfaces: some players feel that the DM should plan a story and guide PC motivations to follow the story, while other players feel that the DM's story should be purely improvised; causing the resultant narrative to be a collaborative effort led by the PCs. Relating improvisation to creative writing is more difficult, since media such as films and novels are purposefully constructed. For the tRPG, the output of improvisation is immersion and player agency, the result of character interaction. For other writing, improvisation serves as a tool for brainstorming and fostering creativity (Mancuso).

      Another concept I identified was theme. Effective stories have a theme, or something they are about. This concept was an example of something closely tied to creative writing, but missing in most tRPGs. In creative writing, theme can manifest itself through the setting, symbolic relationships, dialogue, and action. In D&D, theme is not built in as a mechanic, but

the DM can incorporate theme through determining the consequences of the PCs' actions. For example, if a PC committed a crime and the DM played out an interaction where their character was arrested, the theme would be radically different from the scenario in which the PC got away with the crime. The output of theme is meaning, for the characters in the story as well as the audience ("How to Develop a Theme When Writing")

Another concept I felt needed included was chance, which is central to many tRPG systems such as D&D. Dice are used as a mechanic to add the element of chance to a player's actions, which takes some control away from the DM. For example, the DM could make an obstacle very difficult for a player to get past in hopes that the player chooses a different route, but if the player rolls a 20 on their 20-sided die (a critical roll), their character can beat the odds and overcome the obstacle, changing how the story plays out. The output of chance, in this case, is surprise, which makes sense when applied to creative writing-- effective stories are unpredictable, while seeming inevitable. The events of the story should surprise audiences. Therefore, while chance is used in its literal form for tRPGs, it can be factored into fiction by encouraging writers to surprise their audiences and maintain the illusion of chance, or the possibility that events could play out one way or the other.

Table 1.1 Concepts Table

Concept Input "What"	Pacing	Worldbuilding	Improv	Stakes	Chance	Character Development	Theme
Mechanics "How"	Rests, Encounters	Geography, Characters	Roleplay	HP, AC	Rolling dice	Leveling up	Consequences
Output "Why"	Focus	Immersion	Immersion, agency	Tension	Surprise	Character	Meaning

Structure

The next task was finding a structure to follow for each episode. It was pointed out to me at an early stage in the planning process that the concepts needed to be demonstrated. A classic case of show vs tell. In response, I decided to add live action examples of the game being played to each episode, which would show the concept at play.

Each episode had three parts:
1. Explanation of concept
2. Live action example
3. Analysis

Introducing the live action example meant introducing characters who would play the tRPGs. At first, the plan was to have isolated stories featuring the same characters, so that each episode could stand on its own. I realized, however, that most successful serials have a story that

continues in some way. If I could give the series an overarching story, it may increase viewers' engagement with the material.

I revisited the organization of the episodes, and developed a story around them. I first generated possible story beats, or events, for each concept. Then, given a list of beats, I tried arranging and rearranging them until I found an order of beats that connected well. It was a unique brainstorming exercise. The story I decided on was as follows:

The four PCs have just completed their quest at Crackmouth Cave. It's a long journey back to the village, but the DM lets them skip the details to avoid redundancy (demonstrating pacing). Arriving at the village, the DM adds description that paints a clear picture of the location (demonstrating worldbuilding). He asks the PCs what they do next. Dave, one of the outspoken players, decides his character requires a drink at the tavern. The rest follow along somewhat unwillingly. The DM describes the tavern and roleplays a conversation between Dave's character and one of the tavern patrons (demonstrating improvisation). The patron challenges Dave's character to a drinking competition, and Dave's character accepts. The stakes are raised: loser buys the whole tavern a round of drinks (demonstrating stakes). The competition begins, and Dave rolls a few times to match his competitor. On the last die roll, Dave rolls a 1, which is a critical failure. The DM describes his character passing out on the tavern floor (demonstrating chance). Skipping a few hours, the DM describes Dave's character waking up in a tavern bed, with significantly less money. His character resolves to stay away from alcohol (demonstrating character development). Revisiting the bar for a glass of water, the bartender comments on the events, reminding Dave's character that "pride comes before a fall" (demonstrating theme). The last concept, idea testing, is shown by reviewing the story as a whole and pointing out ideas that the DM introduced or could incorporate into his writing.

Pedagogy

An important question to ask at this stage was how best to teach. The viewer would be introduced to the concept at the beginning of the episode, watch the live action scenario, and have the concept reinforced through analysis. The parts that weren't live action needed to be clear as well as entertaining.

I decided to model these sections off a popular trend: the explainer video. Explainer videos are a popular way of concisely getting information across to an impatient audience. They're a favorite of internet-based startups, embraced by the business world, and are being used more and more for education. Many explainer videos mimic drawing on a whiteboard, or tell the story of a character whose life is improved by buying the advertised product ("Explainer Video"). Choosing this form for the narrated segments was also a good way to capitalize on skills I already had, like motion graphics animation in Adobe After Effects.

Prototyping

At the end of the fall semester, I created a prototype episode to be evaluated by the IDS faculty. The prototyping process proved useful in identifying elements of the series that were extraneous and adding elements that were missing.

Figure 2 Screenshot from the prototype episode

The prototype episode was the first episode of the series, which discussed pacing. The outline of the episode was as follows:

1. Definition of pacing
2. Pacing as seen in the films of Martin Scorsese
3. Live action scene
4. Analysis
5. tRPG System Used

A few things changed after getting feedback on the prototype episode. First, showing clips from films was cut from the series. The introduction of these clips created a mismatch in style, and overpowered the live action scene. They also made the episode much longer than needed. Second, I decided to stick to D&D for the tRPG system used, especially in light of having an overarching story. Initially, I wanted to show the variety of tRPGs available to the viewer, and highlight a new tRPG for each episode; however, this added confusion to the writing process and

conflicted with the continuing narrative-- the players wouldn't swap tRPG systems for each new event in the story.

I kept the elements that were effective: the initial explanation of pacing, the live action scene (although I later trimmed the fat from the dialogue), and the analysis at the end. However, with the filmic examples cut, it felt like something was missing. In the rewrite, which I will discuss in the next chapter, I added a visual metaphor for understanding pacing. The structure of the episode was changed to this:

1. Definition of pacing
2. Visual metaphor for understanding pacing
3. Live action scene
4. Analysis

The result of prototyping was a shorter, cleaner, and more enjoyable structure for the series.

Branding

Throughout the planning process, I kept branding in mind. It was important to have a brand name and aesthetic that fit with the mission of the series: to show how D&D and other tRPGs can teach storytelling concepts.

I iterated on the title of the series a few times before settling on "Roll for Story," the simplest variation. It communicates what's necessary: die rolls as they are used in many tRPGs, especially D&D, and the product being "sold," in this case an education in storytelling.

Developing a "look" for the series was also addressed at this stage. When developing the prototype, I decided that a "pencil and paper" aesthetic would fit the subject matter; after all, D&D is played [most of the time] with pencils and paper. The animations and titles would be contextualized by the paper surface, on top of a wooden table background. For the prototype, I developed vector graphics in Adobe Illustrator that were color-coordinated with the Roll for Story logo; both contained the same sky-blue color. Later on, I changed the aesthetic of the animations to resemble a hand-drawn look, since the vector graphics didn't look like they fit the environment of the paper and pencil. The new assets were generated with Adobe Photoshop, using brushes that mimicked the line quality of a pencil. Figure 3 shows a screenshot from the prototype episode, compared to the newer style.
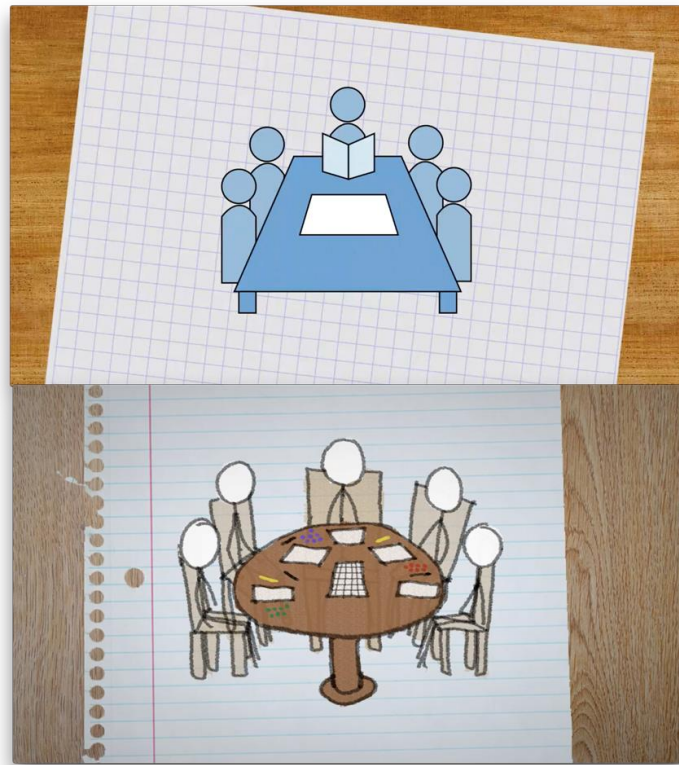
Figure 3 Comparison of Styles

After changing the style of the assets, I revisited the logo, redrawing it to match the new style. Figure 4 shows the change from prototype logo to final logo.

Figure 4 Comparison of Logo Styles

Chapter 3

Filmmaking Process

Overview

Once the planning stage was done, it was time to get busy with production. The process of filmmaking has many steps. This section highlights the steps required to produce the series, explaining each step's purpose and reflecting on its associated challenges.
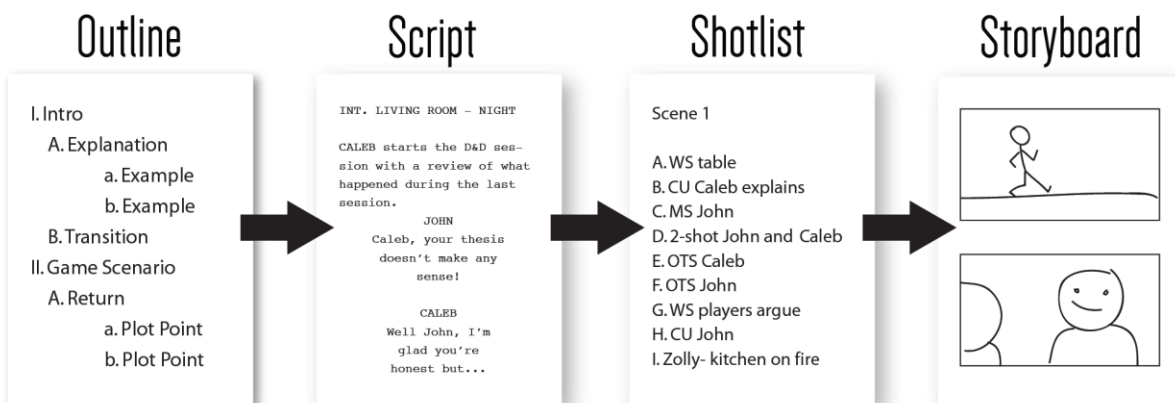

Figure 5 Pre-production Process

Outline

Before the scripts could be written, there needed to be a structure in place. For each episode, I took the general outline (see Chapter 2 "Prototyping") and expanded on it, tailoring it to the episode. The outline included the definitions, how the narration would explain the concept, the events of the live action scenario, and a brief overview of the analysis.

Script

I took a somewhat unique approach to writing the script. The live action scenes were written in screenplay format, since they needed to be filmed. They were separated from the narration script, which was written in simple block letter style, separated into short paragraphs in order to make reading easy.

This method fit my approach towards production, since the live action scenes would need addressed on their own-- I treated them as if they were standalone, since they required the most coordination in terms of scheduling. The narration segments would bookend the live action scenes, and the only production necessary was voiceover recording.

After a first draft of the script, I sent copies to my colleagues for feedback. Typos and continuity errors were smoothed out, a few ideas were added, and dialogue was modified, but overall the story stayed the same-- it could be considered cheesy, but it fulfilled its purpose. With a tight production schedule ahead, I decided to move forward with the script after the third draft.

Shotlist

The next step in pre-production was generating a shotlist. This process involved breaking the script into a list of shots.

When deciding on the shotlist, I had to consider a few factors. One was the setup: all the scenes took place around a table. There were five actors, and their positioning was important to how the shots would be composed. The other factor was time, arguably the most valuable resource. A simple shotlist would reduce the time needed for setting up each shot. I needed to maximize the amount of coverage, which would give me room to experiment in the post production process, with the amount of time it would take to film.

The shotlist I decided on resembled a live recording of a performance more than a staged short film. Most of the shots were the same for each episode, which simplified the camera setups. I also decided to use two cameras, filming in directions that would not conflict with each other. Figure 6 shows the shotlist for episode 7, and a diagram of the camera setups. I was able to film each episode with no more than three camera setups by including a wide shot (the master shot), a closeup of the DM, a two-shot for each side of the table, and a closeup of Dave, who had the most interaction with the DM.
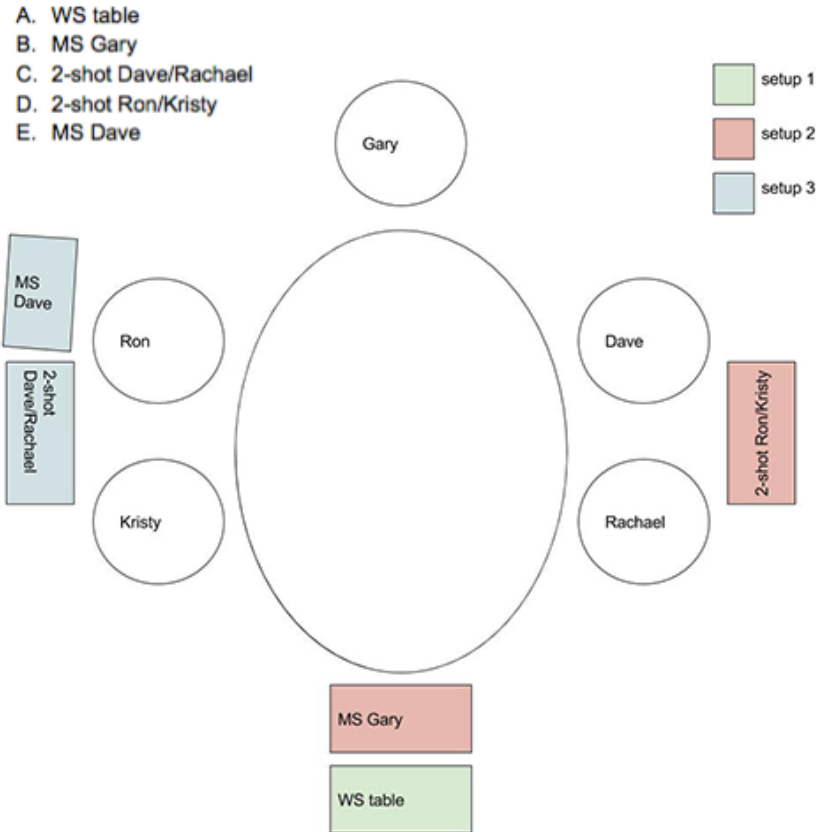
EPISODE 7 - THEME

A. WS table
B. MS Gary
C. 2-shot Dave/Rachael
D. 2-shot Ron/Kristy
E. MS Dave

setup 1
setup 2
setup 3

Gary

MS Dave

Ron

2-shot Dave/Rachael

Kristy

Dave

2-shot Ron/Kristy

Rachael

MS Gary

WS table

Figure 6 Shotlist for ep7 and camera setup

Storyboard

In pre-production, the storyboarding process is used to visualize scenes before filming them, and to get a rough idea of what the film will look like before getting on set. In this case, the setup and shotlist were simple enough, so I decided not to storyboard for the live action scenes.

However, the narrated segments were a different story. I wanted to get a sense for how the visuals would line up with the narration, so I developed storyboards for the animation. I started by creating a table that took the narration line-by-line and matched it with a brief description of the visuals. Next, I took the column of brief descriptions and used Photoshop to draw out simple storyboards. I chose to address transitions later, focusing on what was onscreen during the narration.

The storyboards by themselves weren't terribly useful, so the final step in this process was to match them up with the narration. I used Adobe Premiere to time each storyboard image to the narration audio, creating what's referred to as an animatic, or an animated storyboard. This process helped inform which narration segments were clear, and which had problems that needed addressed.

Production

Since most filmmaking is a collaborative effort, I recruited colleagues in the Film-Video program to assist me with the physical production. My roles would be director and producer. The roles I recruited for included director of photography, boom operator, and production assistants (two: one for slating and one for keeping logs).

Casting was also dealt with early in the process, before scripts were written. The actors I casted were all from past short films I had directed, which meant I knew they had talent, and I knew how to work with them.

The location I was working with did not have an overhead light, so lighting the scene required creativity. The DP and I settled on a rig composed of a 300 watt fresnel light, attached to a line of pvc pipe that was held horizontally over the table by two c-stands on either side. The wire for the light was run across the pvc pipe and down one of the c-stands. The light was plugged into a dimmer, which allowed us to manually adjust the brightness and tailor it to the lighting needs of the shot. The rig was rotated around the table for each shot, in order to avoid c-stands showing up in the frame. Figure 7 shows the rig setup.

The cameras used were Canon C-100s. Filming occurred over the course of two nights, totaling about 8 hours, with breaks in between episodes and a dinner break halfway through.

The narration was recorded at a later date, in a single hour-long session. Similar to the casting process for the live action scenarios, I casted a voice actor I had worked with before to narrate the series.

Figure 7 Lighting rig for live action scenes

Post Production

The post production process was intensive, and took the most time. This process included logging and organizing footage, generating animation assets, creating rough cuts, animation, color correction, and sound mixing, as a general overview.

To put each episode together, I utilized Adobe's integrated workflow. Photoshop was used to generate assets, which were imported into After Effects and animated. The animated sequences were then imported into Premiere, where they could be combined with the live action cuts and sound mixing.

Once an episode had gone through the post production pipeline, it was uploaded to Youtube, where annotations were added to allow viewers to easily navigate the series. Figure 8 shows the introduction episode on Youtube, in which annotations link viewers to the other episodes in the series.
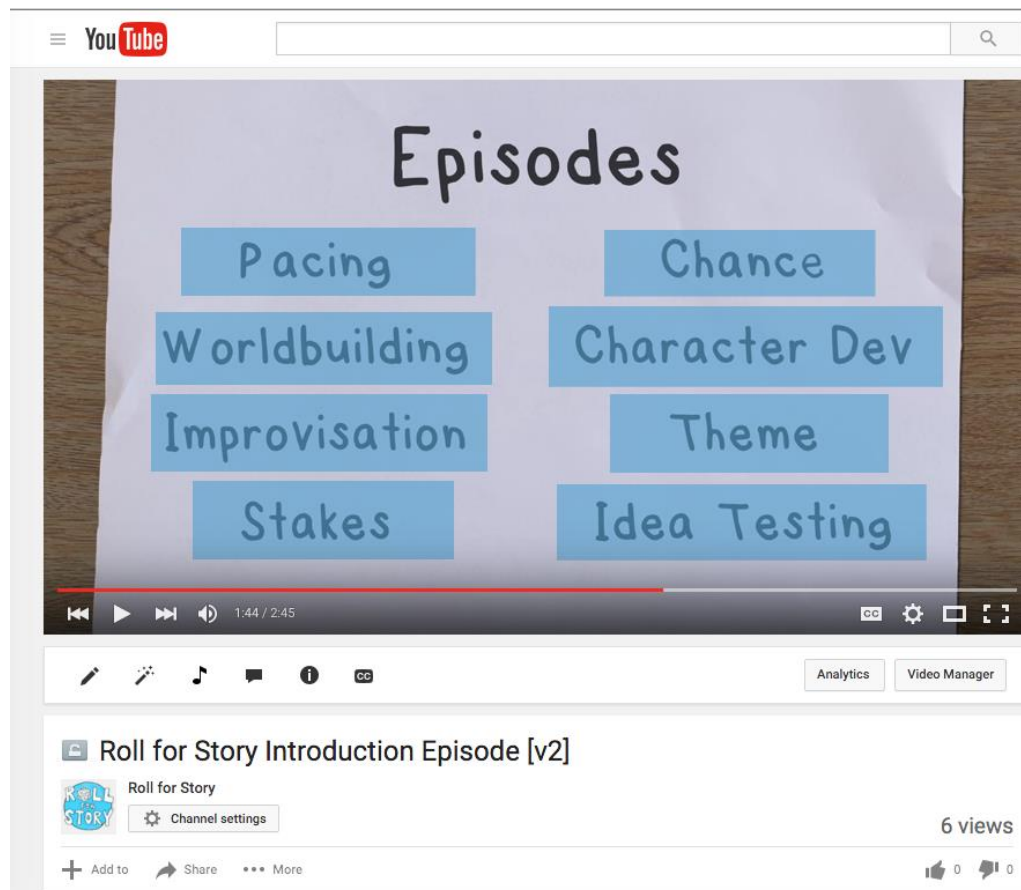

Figure 8 Introduction episode with annotations

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Reflection

Roll for Story was, without a doubt, the most ambitious project I've ever taken on. To write, direct, produce, edit, animate, and fill many of the other roles that are required for a project of this magnitude requires time, effort, and patience.

An artist's work is never done—he or she will always notice the flaws in a project, and given the time, will keep tweaking and changing things until the heat death of the universe. At some point, one must take a step back and accept the project as it is.

Overall, I'm satisfied with how the series turned out. It fulfills the purpose it was given. If given more time, I would have iterated on the script a few more times, devoted more time to the lighting setup, added detail to the animations, and strengthened the transitions, but as it stands, the series works. I'm excited to see what opportunities this opens up for developing writers, as well as gamers. Hopefully, audiences will learn something valuable by watching the series.

Future

I hope to continue playing and studying tabletop RPGs. I strongly believe in their potential to bring people together, tighten the bonds of friendship, tell a story, and create memories. Perhaps *Roll for Story* will help tRPGs like D&D overcome the stigma that's been placed on them, and shine a light on the social and creative benefits that come from playing them.

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