Syllabus Design and World-Making

Rima Basu
Claremont McKenna

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The first time I drafted a teaching statement one of my cohort commented that the way I talked about students sounded like the field notes of an alien observing a new species. Perhaps knowing that story will make what comes next less surprising.

When designing a course it's not much of a stretch to say that you're designing a world, a world that's governed by conventions that need to be made explicit. It's similarly not much of a stretch to say that the world of a college classroom can be an alien environment for many students. The rules and conventions can be hard to grasp. It has been well-documented that the unstated norms disadvantage students unfamiliar with the space. For example, in high school going to the teacher's office means you're in trouble, you need help. It's something bad, something to be avoided as much as possible. In college, on the other hand, going to office hours is good, it's encouraged. The document that's supposed to make the conventions and expectations of the world explicit is our syllabi. However, syllabi have come to resemble long legal contracts, and so it should be no surprise that students frequently don't read them. When was the last time you read the terms and conditions?

In thinking about how to design my syllabus, I was struck by the following realization: there are many commonalities between the framework of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) and what we do when we're designing a course. The professor (the dungeon master) selects a number of readings with some end goal in mind (the campaign). Along the way the students are expected to be active participants (roleplay) and the professor designs progressively harder assignments (quests) in order to test the students' abilities and to promote learning and growth (leveling up). This structural analogy prompted me to investigate how such a framework could be implemented more explicitly in a class. That is, if I took a step back and started from scratch, if I threw out what I previously thought a syllabus should look like, how would I explain all the elements of the course—e.g., the course goals, the set-up of the readings and assignments, the unstated norms of etiquette that govern classroom discussion—to someone new to the space?

There are some superficial ways in which designing a class is like designing a TTRPG or the start of a good fantasy book. For example, you have to think about the narrative arc of the course. That is, when designing syllabi we think about how to structure readings and assignments so that assignments get progressively harder and build upon skills from previous assignments. Similarly, we think about what students will need to read at the start of the semester to be in the best position to tackle the readings at the end of the

semester. A good dungeon master has their players fight low-level bosses before they get to the big boss. A good professor, like a good DM, thinks about how to encourage that path of growth and improvement over the course of the semester and how all the pieces of the course will fit together in a satisfying way. Each quest, each reading, each assignment, although not always obvious to either players or students, plays a role in a larger campaign, in a larger story.

Another lesson from TTRPGs is that you're not in this alone. Our individual success depends on the success of others. A successful learning environment also requires students to recognize that they're not in this alone. To do well they must work together, respect one another, recognize each others' strengths and weaknesses, and cooperate successfully to not only defeat whatever assignments that we put in their way, but also to grow as characters and develop the skills they need to tackle harder classes. With the general motivation now laid out, let me get into the specific elements of the class that resemble a traditional TTRPG, including the game we play as part of the class.