We're Back, Live and Unplugged: Non-Digital Gameplay for Review and Fun

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, middle grades students spent months isolated and, in many cases, learning remotely from teachers who were themselves scrambling to adapt to new technology. While addressing these experiences will require a multifaceted approach from stakeholders, teachers can help reintroduce students to their classrooms with student-centered, socially interactive, analog-based games intended to reinforce learning and boost engagement. This practitioner paper presents a context and a model for such play based on a popular public domain game that allows for team play, creativity, inculcation, and, frankly, fun while reviewing for mastery. The model affords teachers an extremely low-budget, student-crafted and student-executed game that can be adapted for a variety of disciplines. This paper will provide an example for an English class that has recently read excerpts from Homer's *The Odyssey*.

Introduction

On one of those unusually warm winter days on Long Island, New York, during a break from teaching and from my administrative work as dean of the middle and high school, I took a walk outside our small private school to get a *breather*—that is to say, a break from wearing my mask. A colleague had taken her students for a walk around the campus. The children were allowed to remove their masks outdoors, but few took advantage of the chance. "They're afraid," my colleague whispered to me as we met on the sidewalk. She covered her mouth with her hand to indicate that she was referring to their masks. "It's like the virus is a boogeyman. To them, it can be everywhere."

After the governor of New York State told schools that we could go mask-optional, I saw a familiar middle schooler in the hall. (She and I often meet in the hallway; she has a penchant for requesting bathroom passes and roaming hallways, and I have a penchant for escorting her back to her classroom.) She looked at me on our first day without masks and said, "It's funny. I never knew you smiled."

I am a 46-year-old educator. I spent one twenty-third of my life in a mask and one twenty-fourth of my teaching career in remote learning. She, on the other hand, spent one-sixth of her life in a mask and one-seventh of her schooling in remote learning.

It's funny. I never knew you smiled.

I remain haunted by her words, just as I am haunted by the emerging data concerning the effects of isolation on young people during pandemics. In terms of the isolation experienced as schools across the nation shut down at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, one study found that "middle school is the level at which extended absence from school has the strongest negative impact on social-emotional development" (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021, p. 398). In a rapid systematic review concerning the effects of isolation and loneliness on young people, other researchers noted that "children exposed to disease containment measures scored significantly higher for PTSD symptoms post-pandemic" (Loades et al., 2020, p. 1234).

We are educators. We do not have all the tools necessary to counter such effects, but we continue to have the same power we have always had—the power to influence the quality of our students' learning and learning environment. Now that students have returned to physical classrooms and, in increasing instances, have started to reveal those smiling faces, it may be time for us to remind them (and ourselves?) just how beneficial and fun learning together can be while we are live and unplugged from computer screens and remote instruction.

The purpose of this article is to make a case for the use of non-digital games in classrooms and to provide a sample of a student-generated, student-performed game that teachers from many disciplines can use as a review exercise and, frankly, to add fun to learning spaces because ... well, fun in learning *matters*, as do

those smiles in the classroom, especially in these challenging times (Vawter & McMurtrie, 2022).

Literature Review

It's All Fun and Games 'til Someone Learns Something

As much as we might enjoy having fun and playing, researchers find the meanings of words such as "fun" and "play" elusive (Bisson & Luckner, 1996; Nardi, 2010; Tisza & Markopoulos, 2021). Huizinga (1939/2014) saw play as a natural occurrence in the life of humans and animals and regarded the existence of play as self-evident: "You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play" (p. 3). Thankfully, establishing academic definitions falls outside the scope of this article. Still, it is noteworthy that while some theorists viewed such recreation, at least for adults, as unnecessary and unproductive apart from the pleasures they produce (Huizinga; Calllois, 1961), modern authors find value at the intersections between and among play, fun, and learning. Gee (2004) regarded fun and games as directly and productively linked to the process of learning. "For humans," Gee wrote, "real learning is always associated with pleasure and is ultimately a form of play—a principle almost always dismissed by schools" (p. 65). Indeed, in the years since Dewey (1938) examined traditional and progressive systems of education and asked, "How many students … were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them?" (p. 26), researchers have looked to games as a valuable instrument for teaching and learning (Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2016).

Belova and Zowada (2020) acknowledged the work of researchers like Piaget and Montessori on the value of play and referenced Vygotsky's assertion that games afford children the chance to simulate real-life situations they have not yet experienced. Further, they found "positive effects of educational games such as an increase of motivation…" (p. 221). While there is a need for more empirical data concerning the relationship between playing a game and achieving academic success (Boghian et al., 2019; Simkin, 2013; Singer et al., 2006), students in several studies reported that they believed they learned during games or that playing games reinforced their learning (Simkin). Moreover, qualitative research derived from observations, especially of young learners at play, suggested significant potential for creating productive learning experiences (Singer et al.) and for serving as a motivational force for learning (Tisza & Markopoulos, 2021).

The Case for Unplugging

Nicholson (2013) pointed out the broadness of the terms "games" and "gaming" and that, in our increasingly technological world, these words are likely to conjure images of glowing screens and fidgeting fingers manipulating the buttons and sticks of console controllers. Plass et al. (2016) wrote that when we discuss game-based learning, "Usually, it is assumed that the game is a digital game, but this is not always the case" (p. 259). Indeed, much of the research on game-based learning to date has centered on video games (Berland & Lee, 2011). In particular, Berland and Lee drew a connective thread from the value of studying video games to the equal value of more closely examining analog games: "Just as Gee (2007) shows how video games can be productive spaces for learning print literacy, we believe the same holds true … for contemporary board games…" (p. 80).

Indeed, non-digital games have been connected to human experience for millennia (Engelstein, 2019) whether they manifested in games of chess, *Go*, *Hnefatafl*, ancient Mesopotamia's Royal Game of Ur, or the many games of Nine Men's Morris that have survived for centuries since they were scratched into ship decks or roof shingles by sailors and builders long forgotten (Gorman, 1997). Many of these analog games are cheap and can be played with found objects. They require neither access to computers nor to the technology required to play gaming software, which can be a significant benefit to students and schools lacking the requisite funds to acquire systems and games (Crafti, 2016). Board games can be used in middle school classrooms to promote learning and engagement in content areas (Tsai et al., 2020) and as part of middle school teachers' efforts to promote experiences that involve more doing and less passivity on the part of the student (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Certainly, retail board games can also come with a price tag, though many games—such as the subject of this article—can be recreated with little more than access to index cards and pencils. Even better, analog games never run out

of power, their screens never go blank, and their software never needs updating.

Discussion

Although one purpose of this article is to show how we might use games as forms of social interaction with the understanding that "social interactions are closely linked to emotional health (Umberson & Montez, 2010) and that there may be opportunities for designing social games in this focus" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 129), I would like to share some observations from my own experiences.

First, each session of the following activity allows students to assume a level of "increased autonomy and can positively influence student engagement" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 36). Students take center stage as the teacher serves less as the star of the show and more as a guide and scorekeeper. In Session 1, students create their own customized version of a game that is distinct even from another class' version of the game for a similar unit. While the teacher may have provided the framework for the activity, the content of the game is uniquely theirs. In Session 2, students—both clue-givers and responders—are at the center of the action. Here, individual students can become experts on certain clues because *they wrote the clues and their answers*. In other words, for every single question asked, at least one student knows the answer and can help the team succeed.

Second, the game is iterative. Within a round, students may hear the same clue more than once if a clue-giver passes. In subsequent rounds, students will experience the same pool of answers again because they are always working from the same deck. As a result, I observed that even students who were nervous about playing or felt limited by their knowledge of the content tended to become bolder as they memorized the answers during the inculcation-based play.

Certainly, the goals of my courses extend beyond the simple memorization of information. Nonetheless, students *do* need to possess a ready understanding of the characters, places, events, and terms to be used in later analysis. In discussing her own work with sixth graders and board games, Portnoy (2020) wrote that

"leveraging the low-stakes and recursive nature of games" (p. 56) helped students feel a sense of control over their learning and promoted a greater likelihood that students would willingly accept greater challenges related to that learning. That has been my experience while moderating this game for my students, and I am not alone in finding games useful as educational tools (Martí-Centelles & Rubio-Magnieto, 2014).

I must emphasize that this activity is not particular to English courses. Recently, I had the pleasure of observing a middle school Earth Science class wherein students were learning about cloud formations. It occurred to me that this game could be easily adapted for that teacher's review session; all it would take would be to substitute Homer's Aeolus, the lord of winds, for literal wind patterns. In my mind, I could see these students playing our game and gesturing to create the tall, stacked shape of a cumulonimbus cloud or the triangular points of a cold front. Indeed, the same triangular shape might make its way into a history class when hinting at the Roman triumvirate. One can see how easily students might summarize the shocking and illegal entry of Caesar's army into Rome by calling out "Crossing!" in reference to the Rubicon—or mime the abrupt stop of a soldier's march before the soldier hops over the river and into one of history's most famous civil wars.

A Game of Many Names: A Description of Our Review Activity

The activity suggested in this article is based on a public domain game that goes by a variety of names including *Celebrities* and *Salad Bowl* (BoardGameGeek, 2000). It is commercially available in games such as *Monikers* (2015) or *Time's Up!* (1999). For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this adapted game as *Time's Up* because I find that the name tends to intrigue students and offers a sense of the excitement.

While I will explore the set-up and play of the game as adapted for my classroom in the next section, it would be useful to note a few essential ground rules.[1] First, the game is team-based, and players from both teams create and use the same, single deck of terms as they take turns attempting to have one player give clues to the

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[1] For a concise breakdown of the following setup and play descriptions, see Appendix.

rest of the team in hopes of having any other member of the team guess the correct answer. The game takes place over three rounds of play, each of which requires a new method of providing clues to teammates.

Let's Play

### The Setup: Session 1 (10 Minutes)

Here I describe the setup and execution of a game session for an assumed class size of 20 students, though the game can accommodate more or fewer participants. The provided examples will be based on a middle school class' reading of excerpts of Homer's *The Odyssey* (1999), the epic poem about a crafty veteran of the Trojan War, Odysseus, and his 10 years of struggle at sea while trying to return to his homeland of Ithaca.

During the meeting before your play session, allow students 10-15 minutes to create a pool of clues and responses that will be necessary to play the game during the next session. (If pressed for time, you may be able to have them prepare terms and then immediately play the game, but it is best if the teacher can check through the collection of clues and responses in order to avoid repetition and to curate the collection so that the game will be maximally useful as a review session.) Sample clues, composed prior to an actual classroom game session, can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Cards Prepared as Models for Students in Preparation for the Class' Review Game
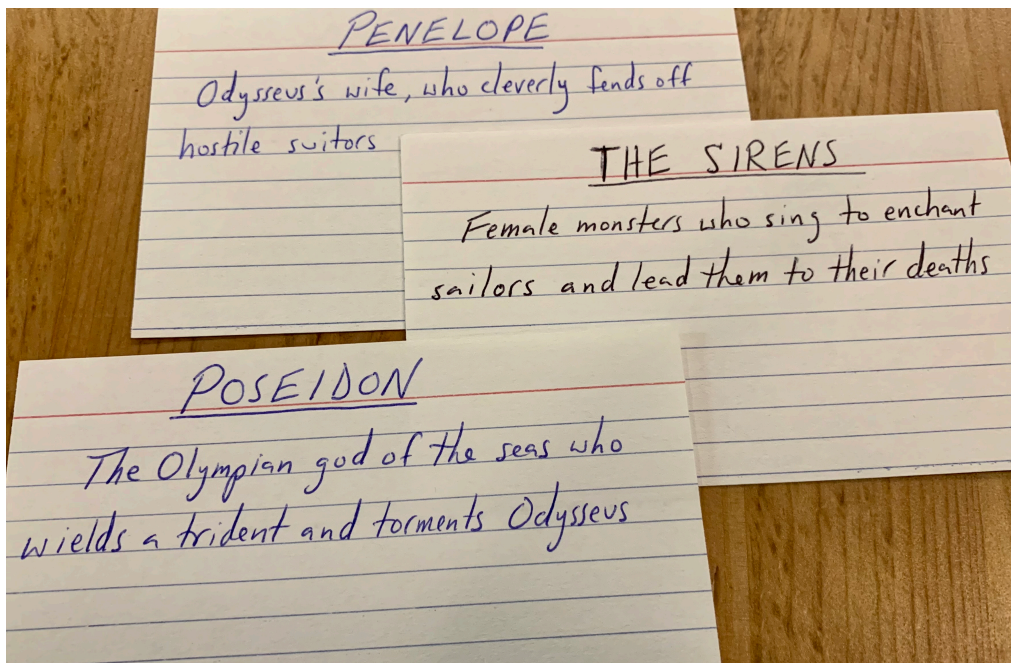
In terms of materials needed, bring a pack of index cards and check that each student has a pen or pencil. Distribute the index cards so that each student receives six cards. On these six cards, students will write a term, a character name, a location, or an event followed by a short description, as needed by the content of your particular unit. You can model this with teacher-created samples. For instance, the teacher might write "Poseidon" on the top of the index card.

Then, underneath that, the teacher might add, "The Olympian god of the seas who wields a trident and torments Odysseus."

You may wish to ask students to write a clue and its correct response for particular categories that matter to your unit. So, for *The Odyssey*, I might ask students to make three cards about three different characters, one card about a particular

location, one about an event, and one about a term we learned in class.

Once students finish, collect the index cards and, between sessions, curate your final deck of clues and responses so that play can begin during the next session. You may wish to modify some cards or even add some cards to assure that key terms are covered by the game session, but you should aim for a total of 40-50 unique, legible cards.

Game Day: Session 2 (30-40 minutes)

Now that you have your finalized deck of student-generated clues and answers, you will simply need a countdown timer, which is easily found on an app, a laptop, a watch, or through the use of a sand or egg timer. Set the countdown to 45 seconds. You may also wish to bring back that sample card that you created—Poseidon, in the example above—so that you can use it to model gameplay.

Figure 2

A Student

When time runs out, that student will join the rest of the team, and you should count and record the number of cards correctly answered by that team. Then, a new student from the opposing team will take a 45-second turn. Repeat these rotations, going from team to team with new clue-givers, until the deck is

Divide the students as evenly as possible into two teams. (You may use three teams if you feel there would be too many students on each of the two teams.) Place the deck on an unoccupied desk at the front of the room; this one deck will be used by both teams in alternating turns through the entire game. Allow space for student movement near the desk, as the final round of the game requires charades-like action, as will be described below.

Inform students that the game takes place over three rounds, and that each round ends once the deck has been completely gone through by the teams. Each round, one student from a team will stand at the desk with the cards and, beginning with the topmost card, provide the clues necessary for the student's team to win points. That student has 45 seconds to get through as much of the deck as possible. When a correct answer is guessed, have the player set it aside and then draw the next card from the stack. If the team is stumped, the student may set the unanswered card at the bottom of the deck to reemerge later in the round.

completely answered and scored. Then, the next of three rounds begins, and each team should select new clue-givers. Reset the deck with all cards in a fresh stack; the order of the cards does not matter, but every card should be returned from both teams.

The game is complete and the score is tallied after the third round. Allow for celebrations and honoring of all participants.

The Rounds

In the first round, the team's clue-giver simply reads the hint directly from the card. The student may repeat this as needed but may not say more than what is on the card.

In the second round, the clue-giver is restricted to providing a single word as the clue. The student must choose a key word that best describes the answer. While the clue-giver may repeat the word as much as needed, no gesturing or extra words are allowed.

In the third and final round, the clue-giver may not speak at all. Rather, using gestures and physical movements, the clue-giver attempts to provide silent clues to the answer.

Remember, all students from all teams will have heard every correct answer through these three rounds, so they already know the field of possible responses as they view—and probably laugh along with—the clue-giver's charades-like antics.

Samples of answers and the kinds of clues one might offer during each round are provided in Table 1. Once the game is finished, tally the points and declare the winning team.

Table 1

The Three Rounds of the Team-Based Board Game Time's Up *and Samples of Relevant Questions and Responses Based on Homer's* The Odyssey.

	Round One	**Round Two**	**Round Three**
Rules of the Round	Student reads the full clue as written on the card.	Student may only speak one key word as a clue for the team.	Student may not speak at all but must communicate the clue through charades.
Sample Card: "The Sirens"	"Female monsters who sing to enchant sailors and lead them to their deaths."	"Singers!"	*Student flaps arms as if they are wings and then gestures as if a song emanates from the throat.*
Sample Card: "Penelope"	"Odysseus's wife, who cleverly fends off hostile suitors."	"Wife!"	*Student mimes sewing a burial shroud and then, after looking around, pulling out the stitches.*
Sample Card: "Poseidon"	"The Olympian god of the seas who wields a trident and torments Odysseus."	"Trident!"	*Student slams down an imaginary trident and gestures to indicate storms and big waves.*

Notes on Positive Experiences and Pacing

Because the game is team-based and because the group of guessing students are welcome to call out answers, I have not experienced instances when any one student in the guessing group has been criticized by teammates for inhibiting the team's chances of victory. That said, the clue-giver role can present a risk for a nervous student who might be concerned with looking foolish or letting down teammates. For such students, you may wish to recommend that they assume the role of clue-giver in Round 1 because they do not need to effectively summarize the clue as in Round 2 or provide a charades-like performance as in Round 3—they simply read the clue on the card. Of course, for some students, the idea of reading aloud in front of the class in a timed, competitive scenario might be stressful. That is okay. Our goal is to create a fun experience in a learning environment, so let it be enough that the nervous student is guessing answers among teammates.

On a separate note, it is possible that some cards are harder to guess than you could have predicted (even though someone in the class created the card!). If students repeatedly pass on a particular card, set it aside from the game. Let the pace and sense of game-show excitement remain strong.

In Conclusion, An Invitation

Educators looking to experiment with game-based learning may wish to consider two entry points. First, Gee's (2003) exploration of gaming presents a renowned scholar's journey toward perceiving games and gameplay as rich, positive opportunities for learning. While his work focused on video games, theoretical discussions of literacy, meaning-making, identity, and socialization remain relevant to analog gaming (Berland & Lee, 2011) and are likely to help nervous teachers develop a well-framed response to parents, administrators, or even colleagues who might question why we are laughing in class instead of learning very serious topics in very serious ways. Additionally, I welcome you to explore www.boardgamegeek.com (2000), which boasts a massive database of thousands of games, many of which can be adapted for the classroom. Consider starting with the category of party games since this genre is easily adaptable and designed to accommodate larger groups of players. (The game featured in this article is a party game.)

As of this writing, Americans await guidance on how and when to receive a vaccine for the Omicron subvariants of COVID-19 even as some members of Congress prepare for battle over vaccine mandates. I confess that I have already found myself speaking of the pandemic in the past tense, perhaps as my way of banishing the experience to a distant, powerless past. I am no Teiresias, no underworld prophet to predict the future, but I believe in my own school's counsel to be aware of and attentive to students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. These recent school years have been difficult, and I believe we should continue to do what we can to bring our students joy. As a teacher, one of my favorite tools for engaging students and eliciting joy is to build gameplay into my lessons whenever possible, and I have shared an easy sample that can be used across multiple disciplines.

In his consideration of play, Huizinga (1939/2014) envisioned a magic circle, which, like an actor's fourth wall, separated the real from the unreal and allowed for otherwise nonsensical rules to exist simply because they were agreed upon by the participants. In games, for instance, the players dwell in a magic circle insofar as they are bound by a collection of rules that have no actual meaning outside of the circle; in the real world, hungry beasts cannot be defeated by a roll of dice, no country's kingdom has ever been defeated by the utterance of "checkmate," and the floor, at last inspection, is not actually lava. Such is the power of play.

It is possible that I am drawn to games and to engaging my students in games because of that magic circle—especially now. After all, in a classroom's magic circle, the world is safer. In the circle, we laugh and enjoy learning together, and no student ever says to me, *It's funny. I never knew you smiled*, when the truth is, I have been smiling in this job for 24 years and smiling even more these last two in hopes of bolstering the spirits of my students and colleagues.

The world has changed, but the magic circle remains a sanctuary of play and pretending. Within, the rules are clear and the goal is joy. Consider stepping inside the circle with us, at least for a game or two.

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A concise description of how to play a classroom adaptation of the game *Time's Up*.

Session 1 (10-15 minutes)
Materials Needed: index cards, pens or pencils

1. Provide each student six index cards.
2. Instruct students: On each of their cards, students write an answer to the card on top and then an effective clue for that answer underneath. Show pre-created cards as samples of the formatting and final product. See Figure 1 for samples.
3. Once students are finished, collect the index cards into a deck.
4. Between Sessions, curate the deck down to 40-50 cards so that there are no repeats and so that cards can be easily read by students during Session 2.

Session 2 (30-40 minutes)
Materials Needed: timer, curated deck of clues and answers, scorekeeping tools such as dry erase markers and a board

1. Set a desk front and center for the deck and the clue-givers.
2. Prepare the scorekeeping board.
3. Split students into teams as best suits your needs.
4. Teach the game, reading or paraphrasing this:

Rules of the Game
Our game takes place over three rounds, and each round lasts until all the cards are answered. Each team takes turns with one teammate offering clues to the team over 45 seconds. You earn a point for each correctly answered card. When all the cards are completed, we'll move to the next round. Using the same cards, we'll play the same game, but the clues will be provided in a new way.

5. Using one of your sample cards, model the way a clue-giver should present the clue and either score it (set it aside) or pass it (place it at the bottom of the deck). See Table 1.
6. Randomly choose the first team to play, ready the timer, and go.

Round One: Clue-giver simply <u>reads the hint directly from the card</u>. Student may repeat as needed but may not say more than what is on the card.
Round Two: Clue-giver <u>provides a single word</u> as the clue. Student must choose a key word that best describes the answer. While the clue-giver may repeat the word as much as needed, no gesturing or extra words are allowed.
Round Three: Clue-giver may not speak at all but <u>uses gestures and physical movements</u> to provide silent clues to the answer.