

Embracing the *Fiasco!*: Roleplaying Games, Pedagogy and Student Success

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between games and pedagogy through the example of the roleplaying game *Fiasco!*. *Fiasco!* is a part of a growing genre of collaborative roleplaying games (RPGs) that have important applications in the university classroom. *Fiasco!* is an innovative game system that upends the traditional model of Game Master-led RPGs to create a collaborative environment for players to create their own stories. This paper explores how the unique model embedded within *Fiasco!* can be employed as a pedagogical tool for active student-led learning.

To showcase the pedagogical innovations of a game like *Fiasco!*, we present classroom applications in English, Anthropology, and Sociology. Our experiences teaching with *Fiasco!* show how quickly and intuitively the game can be integrated into curricula with significant benefits for student engagement and learning. Roleplaying games that emphasize player agency, like *Fiasco!*, offer adaptive and innovative strategies for student-led learning in an interdisciplinary setting. Much as the structure of *Fiasco!* drives player engagement by making each player an equal participant in the generation of narrative content, using *Fiasco!* in the classroom allows each student an equal stake in developing course material. Beyond individual case studies, this article offers pedagogical inspiration for using *Fiasco!* in a variety of classroom settings that offer the possibility of an adaptive and interdisciplinary approach to student engagement.

Keywords: Active Learning, Gamification, Student Centered Education, Teaching Strategies, Interdisciplinary, Roleplaying Games, Flipped Classroom Introduction

This paper explores the unique benefits of *Fiasco!* (Morningstar, 2009), a player-centered roleplaying game, as a pedagogical tool for active learning in the classroom. In recent years, the introduction of gaming elements to the classroom has been shown to foster student engagement, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication.¹ Employing roleplaying games as a teaching strategy encourages diverse voices to be heard in the classroom and allows for alternate modalities of learning that help students apply and have ownership over course concepts beyond the textbook and in their own lives.

Fiasco! is a lightweight and adaptable roleplaying game that can easily be incorporated into classroom sessions of varying lengths. Throughout this paper, we argue that *Fiasco!* is an ideal tool for educational use because it upends the traditional model of roleplaying games. Following the model originally presented in *Dungeons and Dragons*, standard roleplaying game design relies on an asymmetrical play between a game master (GM) and players, with the game master running the world, presenting challenges, and adjudicating choices made by players. The standard classroom model functions in a similar way to the standard roleplaying game (RPG) model.² In the classroom, course content, and classroom environments are developed through instructor choices of materials and delivery, much like the GM plans the adventure for the RPG players. This format can create student expectations of passive learning and undermine the collaborative potential of both game and learning. The classroom applications of *Fiasco!* discussed in this paper present an alternate pedagogy that overcomes the limitations of hierarchy, responsibility, and agency shared by both the standard college classroom and the tabletop roleplaying game.

Unlike the standard RPG model, *Fiasco!* actively engages all players in constructing the game narrative. *Fiasco!* is a GM-less roleplaying system that maximizes the collaborative potential of RPGs by eliminating the differential roles of GM and player, instead positioning all players with equal agency in the construction of the game. All participants develop the plot and apply its lessons within the game itself. Rather than relying on the game master (GM) or instructor, *Fiasco!* is driven by student choices and interconnections. Without a game master to ultimately rule on rules and player choices, *Fiasco!* encourages players to work together to craft the narrative. This participant engagement makes *Fiasco!* an especially good course activity for instructors looking to implement innovative approaches to classroom pedagogy through active learning and student engagement.

By its very design, *Fiasco!* flips the gaming table and the classroom to place student players in control of the game and lesson narratives. Players use a themed playset to establish the tone and organize the game. Bully Pulpit Games creates playsets in a variety of genres. They can also be created by anyone for any setting, from the wild west, race to space, gilded age, steampunk, and zombie apocalypse – imagination is the only limit! Playsets lay out the setting, special rules or considerations, and a series of die-determined relationships, needs, locations, and objects that motivate the role play and plot points of the game. The rest of the story emerges from die rolls, role play, and player imaginations. *Fiasco!* decentralizes the gaming table by having each player equally participate in the construction and play of scenes throughout the game.

The application of *Fiasco!* as an active learning tool in the classroom allows students to learn from each other and their experiences rather than relying on the instructor's lectures to be the sole source of instructional content. The implicit relationality of *Fiasco!* gameplay is an integral benefit of the game's unique structure because it decenters learning as an individual activity and instead emphasizes collaboration between students as well as the instructor.

1 The flagship for this approach has been *Reacting to the Past*, an educational roleplaying system that incorporates active learning styles within gamified course materials. The main limitation of *RttP* is the large classroom footprint which requires restructuring of the overall syllabus.

2 Beginning with *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* in 1974 and increasing to hundreds of games in various genres, settings, and playstyles, tabletop roleplaying games have progressively risen in public profile and popularity in recent decades and are now a multibillion-dollar industry.

To showcase the innovative pedagogical implications of employing *Fiasco!* in the classroom, we describe three case studies of how *Fiasco!* was integrated into English, Anthropology, and Sociology classrooms at the university level. In each of these classroom applications, *Fiasco!* is employed as an active learning tool in which the game's structure of collaborative relationality reinforces the lessons conveyed by the course material.

GAMES & PEDAGOGY

Roleplaying games in particular have immense potential to engage students' imaginations in active learning and encourage students to see beyond preconceived biases and personal experiences (Coil et al., 2017). Roleplaying games provide a collaboratively creative environment where the participants in the game all tell the story together through the players' collective choices. In pedagogical applications, roleplaying games upend the standard classroom dynamic through active learning strategies, improve student engagement with the learning process, and contribute to the larger goal of student mastery of course material. With this collaborative base, roleplaying games offer educators an avenue for presenting students with an opportunity to embody different perspectives and take ownership of the classroom experience.

Theorists of educational pedagogy have proposed a variety of ways to move beyond the standard classroom model in which students are passive recipients of knowledge. Building from Vygotskii's (1978) constructivist model and work begun by King (1993) and Mazur (1997), the concept of student-centered learning or peer instruction has generated a great deal of pedagogical discussion. One of the most prominent of these pedagogical turns for active learning and student engagement is the concept of a "flipped classroom." A flipped classroom is usually defined by its flexibility in classroom and assignment structure that encourages students to engage with material through focused activities.³ These exercises encourage collaboration between students, their peers, and the instructor. Students become facilitators of classroom learning, which fosters better processing of information and ownership of the learning process. While most studies show that the flipped classroom improves student engagement and motivation, Jensen (2015) suggests that rather than flipped methods themselves, the touted performance benefits may result from active learning strategies.

The concept of student-centered learning considers the function of students as active participants in their own educational path, ones with the agency to develop their own procurement of educational benefits within a classroom setting. Roleplaying games engage students in active learning and circumvent many of the potential short-comings pedagogical scholars have identified with a fully flipped classroom model (see Akçayır, 2018; Awidi & Paynter, 2019; Blair et al., 2015; Stöhr et al., 2020).

The approaches of Baker (2000, p. 13-14) and other advocates of student-centered learning shift information normally provided via lecture to alternative delivery methods and relegate in-class time to active learning where students clarify, apply, or practice that material under instructor supervision. Lainema (2009) situates this active learning approach within constructivism, plotting two defining components: "(a) Learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge, and (b) instruction is a process of supporting that construction rather than communicating knowledge" (p. 49). Active learning is best conducted in a collaborative group and designates learners as the primary agents in constructing knowledge facilitated by the instructor rather than passive recipients of information passed on by the instructor (Michael, 2006). This approach emphasizes how classroom engagement with these pedagogical strategies allows students to participate in the course using methods that best fit their own learning styles, encouraging student agency and cooperative learning alongside the mastery of course material (Lage et al., 2000, p 38-41). Because of their collaborative and flexible dynamic, games are an important method through which educators can employ a

3 For more on the FLIP Learning Network pillars of Flexible environment, Learning culture, Intentional content, and Professional educator, see "Definition of Flipped Learning" and the subsections on each of these pillars at flippedlearning.org.

classroom model that emphasizes active learning through collaboration.

In particular, the roleplaying game *Fiasco!* offers an innovative pedagogical tool for employing active learning strategies in the classroom. In addition to being an award-winning game, *Fiasco!* has been used by educators across a variety of disciplines as a teaching tool to help students engage in collaborative and creative endeavors (Morningstar & Segedy, 2011). One of the most pedagogically generative features of *Fiasco!* is that rather than having individual winners and losers the team wins by collectively telling a compelling story. This creates an environment of cooperative learning in which students can collaborate rather than compete without feeling that their ideas are threatened if they lose the game. Authors such as Morningstar and Segedy (2011) have noted the educational benefits of using *Fiasco!* as a teaching tool such as helping students gain confidence and self-esteem by providing opportunities for public speaking, relational storytelling, and improving interpersonal dynamics (p 136-142). This emphasis on the group outcome and collective decision making over the success of the individual player makes *Fiasco!* an ideal tool for classroom use because it emphasizes the importance of student-led discovery within a cooperative learning environment. Within the structure of the game, students become active participants because the structure of the game demands it. We next turn to a discussion of how *Fiasco!* overcomes the intrinsic limitations of both classroom and RPG by increasing the collaborative potential of learning and play.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS FIASCO!?

Fiasco! is a 2009 storytelling-based roleplaying game for 3-5 players that is “inspired by cinematic tales of small-time capers gone disastrously wrong” (Morningstar, 2009).⁴ Like other RPGs, in *Fiasco!* players take on the role of a fictional character within a shared world created through interactive storytelling. Rather than mediating player decisions with a Game Master (GM) who describes the world and adjudicates the rules, *Fiasco!* has no GM and puts players in the driver’s seat of narrative choices. Players collaboratively develop the major plot, setting, and character dynamics that shape the game.

The first step to playing *Fiasco!* is for the group to collectively choose a playset that provides the setting for the game. These playsets cover a wide range of genres that can be set in any time or place from medieval England to 1940s Los Angeles to spacefaring science fiction. In addition to published playsets, instructors and players can easily construct their own playsets in new genres to fit the respective needs of the classroom or meet players’ interests. An example of an instructor-created playset is included in appendix 1 of this manuscript.

The gameplay in *Fiasco!* takes place in a number of distinct phases that are shaped by a series of die rolls. In the “Setup Phase,” players use the numbers from rolled dice to generate possible relations, settings, objects, and needs tied between two players. The connections between players’ respective characters populate the game with shared motivations and circumstances that act as the driving force of the narrative.

⁴ *Fiasco!* is part of a fast-growing genre of independent roleplaying games (RPGs) and has won numerous industry awards for its innovative structure including an Indie RPG Award at 2010 GenCon, shortlisted for an Origins Award, and only the 4th RPG to win the Diana Jones Award for “excellence in gaming.”

Relationships

1 Academic

- ▣ Professor/ teaching assistant
- ▣ Lab partners
- ▣ Instructor/student
- ▣ Teammates
- ▣ Club members
- ▣ Rivals

2 Friends

- ▣ . . .for now
- ▣ . . . from childhood
- ▣ Since our shared ordeal
- ▣ Cool kid/nerd
- ▣ Sorority or fraternity
- ▣ “Cousins”

3 Community

- ▣ Supervisor/subordinate
- ▣ Journalists for the college newspaper
- ▣ Work study program
- ▣ Roommates
- ▣ University police/frequent offender
- ▣ Coworkers

4 Romance

- ▣ Old flame
- ▣ Unrequited love
- ▣ Regrettable hook-up
- ▣ Friends with benefits
- ▣ . . . is a distraction
- ▣ For the ages

5 Villains and Henchmen

- ▣ Supernatural entity/human avatar
- ▣ Mad scientist/test subject
- ▣ Mastermind/stooge
- ▣ Criminal genius/dirty campus police
- ▣ Unethical advisor/grad student
- ▣ Evil team captain/followers

6 Classic Duos

- ▣ Final girl/slasher
- ▣ Hysteric/skeptic
- ▣ Paranormal expert/haunted
- ▣ Harbinger of doom/protagonist in denial
- ▣ Old person/ignorant youth
- ▣ The hunter/monster

Figure 1 – Excerpt from the authors’ playset

Following the Setup, play begins with “Act One” in which each player stars in two scenes between their character and another. The star player distributes dice depending on the outcome of the scene. After everyone has had a chance to run two scenes, the next phase of the game is the “Tilt,” in which two unforeseen developments upset the narrative arc established in Act One. The Tilt portion of the game is designed to upend players’ plans and turn the plot on its head to create a true fiasco. Combined with the cooperative storytelling dynamic throughout the game, the chaos brought by the Tilt de-emphasizes competition between players to instead help them focus on collaboratively building a satisfying narrative.

After the Tilt, Act Two proceeds with each player starring in two scenes and keeping the outcome dice. The game concludes with “The Aftermath” which acts both as a conclusion and denouement for each of the characters in the scenario. During The Aftermath, each player rolls all the dice they have acquired and consults the aftermath table to learn their die-determined fate. Each narrates the (often disastrous) outcome of the scenario for their character. The game’s emphasis on relationality, collaboration, and creativity makes *Fiasco!* an effective and adaptable tool for active learning.

COURSE APPLICATIONS

The unique structure and flexibility of *Fiasco!* promotes innovative engagement with course material in a variety of disciplines. Our classroom experiences with *Fiasco!* highlight how this game promotes active learning and works well as a modular pedagogical tool within a flipped classroom model. For example, in the English classroom application, *Fiasco!*'s interactive process illustrates how story protagonists rely on connections with other characters. In anthropology, the analogous structure of *Fiasco!* with Campbell's "Hero's Journey" instructs students on the larger structure of myth as it shapes multiple central narrative figures through relationships. The relationship-building and roleplaying aspects of *Fiasco!* provide Sociology students with experiential learning opportunities for the application of concepts from classical theory. Each of these case studies shows how the relational gameplay of *Fiasco!* upends the traditional classroom dynamic to emphasize student collaboration and agency.

ENGLISH

In the English classroom, one co-author has utilized *Fiasco!* to facilitate instruction of creative writing, narratology, genre conventions, and cultural concepts just to name a few applications. In this case study, *Fiasco!* was employed as a classroom exercise in a freshman composition course focused on the cultural function of heroes. Since the "social turn" in composition studies, pedagogical theory has focused on synergistic relationships between cognitive and compositional development best summed up by Bizzell's (1982) seminal work: "students' thinking needs remediation as much as their writing" (p. 213). To facilitate this development of key critical thinking and analysis skills, students read primary texts focused on heroes in different contexts – such as superheroes, Arthurian knights, and post-apocalyptic narratives – as part of the larger narrative of how heroes themselves reflect the values and issues of their respective cultures. While the class had previously engaged this material through guided discussion, students often focused more on restating what occurred in the text rather than reflecting on the ideas and tropes demonstrated therein.

The instructor employed *Fiasco!* as an in-class activity in a single class session to tackle these ideas from a different angle. Based on the time constraints of the course, only the Setup phase of *Fiasco!* was employed for this exercise, resulting in ten minutes of setting up and providing instructions for the exercise, forty-five minutes for conducting the Setup phase, and the final twenty minutes of class time reserved for groups discussing their setups and guided discussion. The class was divided into groups of three to four students and classroom furniture was rearranged to enable students to face each other in their groups. The instructor introduced the activity to the class and provided *Fiasco!* playsets in a number of genres highlighting variant heroes – including westerns, comic book superheroes, space-faring science fiction, detective noir, and crime narratives – for student groups to choose from. Groups then conducted the Setup stage of the game by rolling dice and choosing defining Relationships, Needs, Objects, and Locations situated within the settings. The instructor floated between groups to help answer questions and guide students through the process. Once students completed the Setup stage, the instructor led a discussion walking through each group's choices followed by questions on how those choices were made. Students were finally assigned a writing assignment to reflect on their group's Setup phase with two questions: How do our expectations of heroes shift in different settings? Why does that matter? Despite the use of only the Setup phase for this exercise, the positive results were quickly apparent in both the subsequent discussion and in the assignments written by students. For the former, students were happy to share their group's experience, including not only the more amusing choices but also how the choices made by others affected their own choices in kind. Further, students began piecing together how so many of their choices were built upon the expectations of the genre and how internalized those expectations had become. This discussion was lively and encouraged even those students hesitant to speak on similar subjects in previous sessions to engage in the larger conversation.

Beyond discussion, however, the students' journals demonstrated how the activity led them to reflect on the cultural function of heroes. In particular, one student considered the moral variance of a hero's intentions as determined by their setting: "*In the western setting, the hero could be considered an outlaw, but he is stealing to help someone else... You would always expect the hero to do what is right, but that depends on the context.*" This student went on to consider how their own interpretations of a hero's righteousness largely varied by the conditions surrounding that hero. Another student wrote that their perception on heroes in war narratives changed after the exercise: "*The nurses were the main heroes because they saved so many lives via their physical help of healing the wounded and mentally by keeping them company and talking to them when there is very little they could give to help with pain and suffering.*" This student expanded on how the glorification of violence changes audience reception of a hero. Yet another student reflected on the role of immoral acts from heroes: "*Most of the time we see heroes as these great people who do good for the world and save everyone in a peaceful manner to make the world a better place. However, that is not always the case. Sometimes heroes must kill in order to keep the world safe. But how can a murderer be considered a hero?*" This student concluded by considering if context was enough to excuse actions and remarked that far worse acts than murder are regularly carried out by heroes in popular media. Even using *Fiasco!* in a single class session and only conducting its initial phase, students were better able to process, interpret, and engage course material throughout the term. More importantly, the development of critical analysis and reflection skills showed marked improvement following the *Fiasco!* activity, an improvement that carried on through the remainder of the course. By integrating *Fiasco!* into the classroom dynamic, even just once, students worked together to process course material from a different perspective that provided lasting benefits.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Another author employed *Fiasco!* in their "Anthropology of Science Fiction" classes in 2014, 2015, and 2019 as part of a larger project on speculative fiction and student filmmaking. This course focused on the application of anthropological perspectives to popular culture and communication of anthropological lessons through the medium of film.⁵

As part of this movie-making process, the first portion of the class used *Fiasco!* as a three-session workshoping tool to help introduce students to the analysis of narrative stages and character development within the structure of Campbell's Hero's Journey. *Fiasco!* was used to teach the structure of myth in a memorable way while also serving to create cinematically inspired and narratively cohesive stories for their short films. The first step of the filmmaking process was an introductory lecture on the concept and history of the Hero's Journey, as well as critiques of its universality.⁶ At its core, the Hero's Myth is a purported universal structure underlying much of human myth and storytelling. Campbell distills the central theme of the Hero's Journey as "*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*" (Campbell, 2009).

The second classroom session introduced *Fiasco!* to facilitate student use of the Hero's journey as a template for the successful creation of their short films. The gameplay of *Fiasco!* provides students with a recognizable character arc within the typical three-act narrative structure. Heroes move through a series of trials, unexpected

5 In these films, the students created short 10-minute movies that focused on teaching a specific anthropology concept using a fantasy/sci-fi setting through the medium of film. At the end of the semester, students presented their films at a variety of public forums including the 2019 Jack Williamson Science Fiction Lectureship and the ENMU Student Research and Creativity conference.

6 The Hero's Journey is most closely associated with Joseph Campbell, who drew on scholars such as psychologist Carl Jung (2014) interpretation of symbolism and dreams as well as the cross-cultural study of myth from E. B. Tylor (1871), who is considered the father of anthropology. Campbell's Hero's Journey has been used extensively in the movie industry as a guideline for creating cohesive narratives (Vogler, 2007).
Volume 9, Issue 4

reversals, setbacks, and small victories. This session helped students approach *Fiasco!* as an academic part of the course narrative and create narratively tight films using *Fiasco!* as a storytelling framework.

On the third day of the Hero's Journey *Fiasco!* exercise, students ran the Setup of their scenario and the first few scenes of their screenplays. Students watched a video of an actual *Fiasco!* game (Geek & Sundry, 2013) as homework in order to introduce the game mechanics and see the process in action. Students were organized into groups of 3 to 5 class members that would be their partners for the larger movie-making project. Each group chose a *Fiasco!* playset based on the genre of movie they wanted to make and to establish the principal Relationships, Items, Locations, and Goals that would motivate their movies.

One of the most innovative aspects of using *Fiasco!* to teach the Hero's Journey is its emphasis on interpersonal dynamics as the foundation of the story. In the setup of a *Fiasco!*, players first build relationships with each other based on social relationships such as family, work, love, or neighbors by placing a note card between two players and writing what type of relationship connects them. In a subsequent homework activity, students later expanded on the roles and obligations associated with these relationships within the framework of the Hero's Journey. In this write-up, students worked to flesh out the name, identity, and other attributes of their character after the relationship is established.

By emphasizing the webs of relationships that support, guide, and even oppose the hero as equally important parts of the narrative, *Fiasco!* inverts tropes of individualism present in both Hollywood and traditional RPGs. Rather than as autonomous beings within the supposed universality/primacy of the individual in Western culture, *Fiasco!* introduces the anthropological concept of "dividual" personhood in which people take their identities from their relations with others, (Strathern, 1998; Mentore, 2007; & Omarova et al., 2018). Dividuals and relationality revitalize the concept of the Hero's Journey by emphasizing that success in heroic undertakings depends more on teamwork and interpersonal relationships than on one individual.

At the end of the semester, students were asked to reflect on the assignment and the effectiveness of using *Fiasco!* and other alternative mediums of instruction as tools for engaging with anthropology. Students were enthusiastic about their experience using *Fiasco!* as a way to both create the scripts for their movies and learn about the steps and character archetypes of the Hero's Journey. One student remarked on the accessibility of *Fiasco!* as a storytelling tool, saying: *My favorite class activity was the Fiasco! Game. I have never played Fiasco! up until I came to this class. It was pretty interesting and was a great way to build a story (2015)*. While another commented on the pedagogical implications of *Fiasco!* for teaching anthropology: *It is a great introductory Anthropology class since it not only explains the fundamental principles but also used Fiasco! to delve into great detail about Hero's Journey (2014)*. Students commented on how *Fiasco!* changed their perception of the Hero's Journey as the story of an individual. One student remarked: *The relationships between our characters was the best part of the Fiasco!. Everyone played an important role in the story instead of just one person being the star (2019)*.

With its focus on relationality in the narrative, rather than a singular hero, *Fiasco!* is an ideal tool for teaching the structure of myth, the Hero's Journey, and anthropological concepts like dividuals to students. *Fiasco!* sessions are constructed according to a similar narrative structure as the Hero's Journey while challenging its underlying assumptions. The characters' archetypes found within the Hero's Journey, including mentors, sidekicks, threshold guardians, and the final boss (shadow), offer students an opportunity to showcase the relationships between the characters as the driving force of the larger narrative. Employing *Fiasco!* as part of an active classroom pedagogy makes the learning experience more accessible to a wider variety of student populations, broadening the exposure of students to the discipline of anthropology.

SOCIOLOGY

Another co-author used *Fiasco!* as part of a course unit on socialization and the social construction of “the self” in classical sociological theory and introduction to sociology courses. *Fiasco!* is an especially promising instructional tool for cultivating an experiential understanding of classical American sociological perspectives and complex philosophical questions that are often difficult for students to grasp. Even within the Setup stage of *Fiasco!*, students creatively re-imagine themselves according to roles that were structured by the game, relationships forged through the interaction of die-rolls, and interpersonal narration. *Fiasco!* is an accessible illustration of many aspects of the social self in practice that directly connects with the methodologies and philosophies of sociological disciplinary founders. Classical sociologist George H. Mead (1934) based many of his social scientific theories of the self on the study of roleplaying and viewed games as an important part of the socialization process. *Fiasco!* serves as an aptly enacted metaphor for many foundational sociological concepts, and engages students in a first-hand study of how roleplaying can influence both social action and self-perception.

Prior to running *Fiasco!* in the sociology classroom, the instructor set the sociological stage with lectures and discussions on the social self. Students were introduced to three theoretical perspectives for which *Fiasco!* is especially relevant, distilled into three sets of vocabulary terms and the classical theorists known for introducing these concepts to the discipline. First, *Fiasco!* is a hands-on illustration of how statuses and roles in society shape personality, action, and life possibilities (Simmel, 1909). Secondly, the relationship-building aspects of *Fiasco!* demonstrate the concepts of intersubjectivity and relationality, and how social actors co-construct social reality and themselves through communication (Schutz, 1970; Mead, 1934; Thomas, 1923). And finally, as an RPG, *Fiasco!* engages students in the concept of performativity, how the “self” is created through performances that are determined by social and historical contexts (Goffman, 1978).

The initial game Set Up and play took one fifty-minute class period. Students watched an introductory video as homework to prepare for in-class play. During the Set Up, students wrote basic information about their characters’ needs, relationships, objects, names, and backstories as they emerged from the game set, available die rolls, and their own creativity. Documenting each step of the *Fiasco!* experience kept students focused on the game and served as a basis for later reflection activities. After gameplay, a second classroom session was spent debriefing the *Fiasco!* experience and applying a sociological framework to lessons learned through the game. Students framed their gameplay experience using sociological theories of socialization. Students were given a set of reflection questions to guide the discussion and submitted written responses to these discussion questions at the end of the unit. Reflective questions included: 1) What statuses does your character hold? (professional & personal), 2) What roles (expected behaviors & obligations) are associated with each status? 3) What assumptions did you make to form your character? 4) Did your character surprise you? Why, when you were the one who created it?

The overarching lesson to be learned through these questions was that reality is collectively and socially created, from the micro (personality) to the macro (social structure or “sets”). The provided discussion questions encouraged students to consider the social construction of reality through the three major themes of the unit: social forms, intersubjectivity, and performativity. Student responses to these questions were varied, but reflected the sociological concepts introduced at the beginning of the unit and served as a departure point for a more fully developed discussion of social theory as experienced through the hilarity of *Fiasco!*.

The first major theme that emerged from student responses related to the way character types were determined by the play setting and available dice. These structural constraints illustrate “formal sociology,” which focuses on how personality is determined by social roles, relationships, and networks (Simmel, 1909). The terms and mechanics of the game emulate how extra-individual social forms constrain players’ choices. As the game unfolds, characters evolve through a combination of performance and the intervention of forces

outside of the players' control (die rolls). Societal expectations are internalized through dynamic social-psychological processes that are shaped and constrained by social position (Du Bois, 1903; Frazier, 1949). *Fiasco!* places students into roles that they do not experience in their own lives, providing a window into the experiences of others and the ways that ascribed roles shape life outcomes.

A second major theme of the post-activity analysis concerned social roles and relationships. The structure of gameplay demonstrates early American sociological theories of "the self" as a fundamentally social construct. This social-self is an inter-subjective phenomenon that develops through communication and symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1962; Schutz, 1970). Roles in *Fiasco!* emerge from character relationships, which were determined by dice and collaborative storytelling. *Fiasco!* positions individual characters as secondary to relationships, highlighting the primacy of relationality over individualism. *Fiasco!* enrolls students in the enactment of intersubjective communicative development by creating characters and narrative arcs through interaction with classmates and genre. Rather than an autonomous, individual essence, the characters' selves emerge from the evolving relationships of the game.

A third topic that students remarked on was the performance of cultural ideals. The three acts of *Fiasco!* demonstrate the sociological lesson that we learn and enact our social selves through the performance of cultural scripts (Goffman, 1978). Cultural assumptions about setting, genre, roles, types, and corresponding scripts shaped how students played their characters and thus how those characters developed. Role-play itself unfolds according to our cultural notions of behavior in different social positions (status) and settings (social context). *Fiasco!* also illustrates the power of shared cultural perceptions and conventions on the development of self. Classical theorists view the self as a social structure that emerges from a dialectic relationship between agency and reflexive self-perception (Mead, 1934). Common cultural symbols are internalized through socialization and interaction.

Fiasco! works particularly well as an instructional device for sociology because of its emphasis on relationships and collaborative narrative. Classical sociological theory understands even the most intimate aspects of character and personality to be largely determined by social relationships and positions within larger social forms (Simmel, 1909), a perspective embodied by *Fiasco!*'s reliance on set, genre, trope, and die-determined circumstance. Actions and choices were continually influenced by the other players in the game, as much as the available game options. In a game that is touted for both its "dark humor" and appeal to "poor impulse control," characters often evolved in ways that surprised even the players who animated them. Character personalities and possibilities in the game develop through interaction and situational context, which serves as an enacted metaphor for how life outcomes are constrained by social structures and relationships.

DISCUSSION: BENEFITS OF *FIASCO!* AS A TEACHING TOOL

These three case studies offer examples of the versatile pedagogical application of games like *Fiasco!*. In English courses, students learn to employ narrative conventions, plot devices, genre, tropes, character development, and critical thinking in an applied and collaborative context. By employing roleplaying games in the Anthropology classroom, students gain new perspectives on the relationality of the Hero's Journey and gain the opportunity to inhabit the lived experience of other people through a first-person perspective. Through role-play in the Sociology classroom, students explore alternate positionalities and gain a better understanding of the self as a performance that is heavily shaped by social roles.

Many benefits can be gained from doing all or even just part of the *Fiasco!* game phases and the settings themselves provide a wide range of subject matter that can be easily customized to specific class settings. *Fiasco!* playsets are highly customizable, following templates that instructors can easily modify to fit their course material. Instructors who wish to utilize *Fiasco!* as an extended exercise to structure their classes can

engage the system on a deeper level by designing play sets in a variety of social or historical settings. As demonstrated by the above case studies, instructors can design course-specific worksheets with reflection questions and explicit learning objectives to help students stay on track during this exercise. Perhaps most important to utilizing *Fiasco!* in the classroom is post-game discussion, where instructors elicit discussion and critical evaluation of the game itself from the class. This discussion allows a prime opportunity to fill in any gaps students may have had during play and to reorient student reflection on the course content covered during the game.

The unique structure of *Fiasco!* allows for customizable applications within a wide range of classroom settings with minimal disruption to the overall class structure. Though pedagogical strategies based on active learning have significant potential benefits in the classroom, restructuring course material to accommodate these strategies while adhering to student learning outcomes and course requirements can be difficult. Instructors often do not possess the luxury of switching their entire course to a new “system” for both practical and administrative purposes. However, flipping a handful of class sessions with *Fiasco!* can result in lasting and fruitful benefits for students, instructors, and the class dynamic at large.

One of *Fiasco!*'s greatest benefits as a pedagogical tool is its modularity. *Fiasco!* is easily scalable for different time increments and classroom needs, ranging from a week-long unit to a single-day activity, while still providing a meaningful and memorable learning experience. The authors found that *Fiasco!* activities worked well with a 1-day preamble explaining the objectives of the activity, 1-2 days for game set up and role-play, followed by an additional class period to debrief the experience and discuss lessons learned. However, the game is adaptable for instructors only able to devote more limited time to the activity. The Setup and Act One can be accomplished in one class period each, through which students have an opportunity to gain genre, narrative, and role-play experience. Even in one class session of *Fiasco!*, students can have a meaningful experience from the game setup. Each part of the game offers opportunities for learning, from familiarizing with the selected playset, establishing initial plot points, developing characters, tilting the story upside down, and concluding with the limited resolutions of The Aftermath.

In addition to the classroom applications which we piloted in our own classes, *Fiasco!* is a versatile learning tool that can be adapted to many other classroom settings. The dynamic interactive play of *Fiasco!* is especially relevant to social learning and narrative-focused disciplines, such as those piloted in this study, with wide relevance to instructors across the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, communications, and personal development courses. For example, a course on early American history could use a playset themed on the American Revolution to perform the respective needs of various colonists, the British, and Native Americans in a time of social upheaval. Similarly, a playset based on police procedurals could allow students to evaluate their own assumptions on the criminal justice system as well as how those assumptions differ by respective position within that system. A playset designed around medieval Arthurian romances could present the conflicts of social hierarchies, military prowess, and chivalry as forces that should operate together but often work against one another. In social work, a variety of playsets can easily be integrated into class lessons on mediation and negotiation. For instructors in the natural sciences, laboratory or space-themed play sets could also be of use in a more creative biology or physics classroom.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION

As a classroom activity, *Fiasco!* introduces an instructive space where students employ the knowledge they have gained in a setting that collaboratively constructs knowledge. Applying course material in a hands-on method puts students in the driver's seat of course material. In these activities, students all have agency and become equal participants in building a story together that reinforces course content.

Across a variety of disciplines, *Fiasco!* offers an effective pedagogical exercise for active learning in the classroom because it challenges many of the preconceived notions about both RPGs and the classroom. *Fiasco!* creates a flexible environment where all participants collaborate together to develop narratives according to their settings. As an imaginative and collaborative activity, roleplaying games like *Fiasco!* open up the classroom environment and provide a highly memorable learning experience. Rather than focusing on whether their individual characters won or lost, the group wins together if they create a narratively satisfying storyline. Playing characters other than themselves allows students of all ages to be more outgoing and engaged with dialogue, interaction, and what could otherwise be tense subject matter in a non-threatening environment. The collective silliness of a *Fiasco!* session builds confidence in creative enactment, communication, and analysis in a variety of classroom settings.

The unique structure of *Fiasco!* as an RPG encourages group collaboration, making this game an ideal exercise for an active classroom. These benefits are applicable to an entire course built around student-centered pedagogy or a single class session to drive home course concepts. The learning culture of *Fiasco!* has each participant adding to and developing the game's content through their own choices and reactions to other participants, removing the hierarchical divides of the standard classroom that gives each person at the table equal stakes and authority. The intentional content of *Fiasco!* allows students to find their own conceptual understanding and procedural fluency as they work through the game's processes together.⁷ Finally, by employing *Fiasco!* the instructor operates as the Professional Educator in the room, not standing at a podium to proclaim course content but working with each group individually to answer questions. Instructors facilitate students' process through the game, develop coordinating assignments that drive home the pedagogical gains from the exercise, and encourage students to continue applying those components. *Fiasco!* is the self-promoted game of "small-time capers gone disastrously wrong," but allowing students to play through these events together in a decentralized pedagogical activity develops stronger ties to course material while creating engaging and unforgettable class sessions.

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APPENDIX 1 – AUTHOR CREATED FIASCO PLAYSET



Horror U

A Fiasco Playset

Horror U

CREDITS

This playset is written by Michelle Schmidt, Erik Stanley, and David Sweeten.

Cover art created with nightcafe ai, <https://nightcafe.studio/>

BOILERPLATE

This is an unofficial, fan-made playset for Fiasco Classic. Bully Pulpit Games is in no way affiliated with its content. For more information, see <https://bullypulpitgames.com/games/fiasco/license/>

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If you would like to create your own playset or other *Fiasco-related content*, we'd like to help. Write us at info@bullypulpitgames.com.

The Score

Campus life can be a real killer

At Horror U, students joke that the remote location next to a small rural town has a dead nightlife. Bored undergrads resort to strange efforts to entertain themselves, whether that means tipping cows, raiding the bio lab mice to prank a sorority house, or finding new locations to throw ragers. When the grisly remains of a student are discovered in the quad, the games seem to have taken a dark turn that brings new meaning to “Dead Week.”

This playset assumes most players will be part of a campus community or adjacent to it, with students, faculty, staff, or locals. The horror elements steer toward slasher films, but there are more cosmic and other horror options as well.

Movie Night

Urban Legend, Scream 2, PCU, Happy Death Day, Van Wilder, Initiation, Sorority Row, Pledge

Relationships

1 Academic

- ▣ Professor/ teaching assistant
- ▣ Lab partners
- ▣ Instructor/student
- ▣ Teammates
- ▣ Club members
- ▣ Rivals

2 Friends

- ▣ . . .for now
- ▣ . . . from childhood
- ▣ Since our shared ordeal
- ▣ Cool kid/nerd
- ▣ Sorority or fraternity
- ▣ “Cousins”

3 Community

- ▣ Supervisor/subordinate
- ▣ Journalists for the college newspaper
- ▣ Work study program
- ▣ Roommates
- ▣ University police/frequent offender
- ▣ Coworkers

4 Romance

- ▣ Old flame
- ▣ Unrequited love
- ▣ Regrettable hook-up
- ▣ Friends with benefits
- ▣ . . . is a distraction
- ▣ For the ages

5 Villains and Henchmen

- ▣ Supernatural entity/human avatar
- ▣ Mad scientist/test subject
- ▣ Mastermind/stooge
- ▣ Criminal genius/dirty campus police
- ▣ Unethical advisor/grad student
- ▣ Evil team captain/followers

6 Classic Duos

- ▣ Final girl/slasher
- ▣ Hysteric/skeptic
- ▣ Paranormal expert/haunted
- ▣ Harbinger of doom/protagonist in denial
- ▣ Old person/ignorant youth
- ▣ The hunter/monster

... In A College Horror Movie

Needs

1 To Win/Earn

- ▣ ...MVP after the big game
- ▣ ...student organization of the year
- ▣ ...that big grant
- ⊠ ...grad school acceptance
- ⊠ ...the ultimate frisbee tournament
- ⊠ ...control of the dark forces lying beneath the school

2 To Get Out

- ▣ ...of this crappy little town
- ▣ ...of this career path
- ▣ ...of this life of conformity
- ⊠ ...of dating my high school sweetheart
- ⊠ ...of this final
- ⊠ ...of the deal I made to get here

3 To Get Even

- ▣ ...with your freshman year roommate
- ▣ ...with the jocks
- ▣ ...with the one that stole your boyfriend/girlfriend
- ⊠ ...with the professor that failed you
- ⊠ ...with the townie boss that fired you
- ⊠ ...with the campus squirrel that took your sandwich

4 To Get Popular

- ▣ ...and stop being “the nerd”
- ▣ ...and get the popular girl/guy
- ▣ ...and win student body president
- ⊠ ...and reinvent yourself
- ⊠ ...for the right connections
- ⊠ ...for revenge

5 To Graduate

- ▣ ...first in your family
- ▣ ...top of the class
- ▣ ...before financial aid runs out
- ⊠ ...despite your dark past
- ⊠ ...and get the hell out of this town
- ⊠ ...and get that cushy job at dad’s firm

6 To Party

- ▣ ...to forget your past
- ▣ ...while you’re still young
- ▣ ...to feel something again
- ⊠ ...because that’s what’s expected of you
- ⊠ ...before you fail out
- ⊠ ...because partying is your identity

... In A College Horror Movie

Locations

1 A Gathering

- ▣ The biggest party of the year
- ▣ Club lock-in
- ▣ Athletic competition
- ▣ Concert or theater production
- ▣ Awards ceremony
- ▣ Graduation

2 Academic Unit

- ▣ Laboratory
- ▣ Art studio
- ▣ Hazmat storage
- ▣ Archives
- ▣ Research farms
- ▣ Computer lab

3 Campus Building

- ▣ Library
- ▣ Stadium or athletic facility
- ▣ Student union
- ▣ The quad
- ▣ Theater
- ▣ Dormitory

4 The Neighborhood

- ▣ Greek row
- ▣ Dated off-campus student housing
- ▣ Owned by slum lords
- ▣ Professorville
- ▣ Fancy apartments
- ▣ Family friendly suburbia

5 Building Off Campus

- ▣ Train or bus station
- ▣ Gothic mansion
- ▣ Old farmhouse
- ▣ Local bar
- ▣ Hotel/motel
- ▣ Mall

6 Outside of Town

- ▣ Cemetery
- ▣ The woods
- ▣ Abandoned summer camp
- ▣ Lake
- ▣ Quarry
- ▣ Country road

... In A College Horror Movie

Objects

1 Dorm Food

- ▣ 15 Cup Noodles
- ▣ An obnoxious amount of Redbull
- ▣ Case of granola bars
- ▣ Pepperoni Hot Pockets
- ▣ Last night's leftovers
- ▣ A half-eaten box of cereal

2 Clothing

- ▣ Sunday best
- ▣ The clothes you fell asleep in last night
- ▣ Clubwear
- ▣ Uniform
- ▣ Fresh change of clothes
- ▣ Halloween costume

3 Information

- ▣ Hot gossip
- ▣ A thumb drive with evidence to blow this thing open
- ▣ A conspiracy map covered in red strings
- ▣ Photographs of questionable provenience
- ▣ Blueprints of an academic building
- ▣ The "Truth"

4 College Survival Kit

- ▣ Screwdriver set
- ▣ Axe body spray
- ▣ An inherited mini-fridge
- ▣ Mace
- ▣ Scarface/Bob Marley poster
- ▣ Shower shoes with a broken strap

5 Party Essentials

- ▣ Huge stereo system
- ▣ Jello shots
- ▣ Custom beer pong table
- ▣ Oversized bong disguised as vase
- ▣ Trashcan punch
- ▣ A fake ID

6 Objects of doom

- ▣ Demonic board game
- ▣ Cursed religious symbol
- ▣ Scary mask
- ▣ Haunted mascot uniform
- ▣ A book of forbidden knowledge
- ▣ Satanic frat paddle

... In A College Horror Movie

Horror U

Insta-Setup

Relationships at Horror U

For three players...

- Academic: Teammates
- Friends: Sorority or fraternity
- Community: Roommates

For four players, add...

- Romance: Regrettable hook-up

For five players, add...

- Villains and Henchmen: Advisor/grad student

Needs at Horror U

For three players...

- To Get Even...with the professor that failed you

For four or five players, add...

- To Get Popular...and stop being “the nerd”

Locations at Horror U

For three or four players...

- A Gathering: the biggest party of the year

For five players, add...