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# Dare to Use Adventure Games in the Language Arts Classroom

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*Damien crept down the corridor, a sword in his right hand, a shield in the left. Deep growls came from the room. Saying the magic words taught to him by the old wizard, his mind skipped from his body and passed through the oaken door. He floated into the next chamber and found the golden statue he'd been looking for.*

*(Swordthrust Adventure Game Manual)*

Damien sets the stage for entering the universe of Diurla, where Swordthrust computer adventure games are based. Our first reaction to adventure and fantasy computer games could be described as "leave them to the kids" or "they belong in the arcades." Recently, we changed our thinking and believe that these games encourage development of both problem solving skills and organizational abilities and foster reading comprehension. We're convinced that language patterns surface during the exciting writing and speaking activities which follow naturally from the content of the games.

Let's begin by clarifying our terms. What is a computerized adventure/fantasy game? Essentially, these stimulations present problem solving activities in which participants role-play characters, deduce commands, draw maps, and determine a series of actions.

The settings for the games are historical, mythical, and futuristic as shown in these descriptions;

*Legacy of Llylgamyn*—To save Llylgamyn, descendants must wrest a mystical orb from the dragon L-Kbreth.

*Suspended*—The player must control the actions of six independent robots who can act simultaneously.

*Witness*—An interactive mystery set in 1938 must be solved by the player.

*The Quest*—As the King's newest advisors, the players must accompany a champion on a dragon-slaying mission.

*Philistine Ploy*—The player embarks on a Biblical adventure based on the Book of Judges.

*Jenny of the Prairie*—The player must help Jennie, who has been separated from the wagon train, to prepare for and to survive the coming winter.

Success is measured in a variety of ways. Players accumulate wealth and points; they avoid enemies; they slay dragons and androids; they live to see another battle; they master the intricate maze of dungeons; and they create new worlds for themselves.

Reading, math, memory, decision-making and organizational skills are key ingredients to being successful. Games are often accompanied by instructions, quite involved and difficult to read. We selected a popular manual and submitted it to several readability tests. The tenth grade rating surprised us, because the games are popular with upper elementary students. Students who cannot read the manuals but who use these games may learn to be successful players through engaging in trial and error sessions or through discussing strategies with peers.

Math skills are used in buying weapons, depositing and withdrawing money from the bank, and calculating percentages to define the strength or power of a character. So intricate are the mazes created in some games that entrepreneurs offer to

sell maps. These are advertised in trade journals under such headings as "Win Without Cheating," "Clues for Adventures," and "Cheat a Bit." Students at any age should be encouraged to create their own maps as they progress through the game and discover the territory. Map reading, directionality, (North, South, East, West) and spatial relationships are used in many adventure games. Visual memory is stimulated by an absence of graphic display in some games, while others are picturesque.

Surviving an adventure game is an integrated approach to problem solving. Players are given certain conditions and circumstances, only some under their control. The concepts of cause-and-effect as well as sequencing are taught. Being able to "back track" or retrace your steps is mandatory in many games. It may even save your life.

Decision-making is plentiful. In the "Swordthrust" series, a player has five attributes (hardiness, agility, charisma, left-handedness, and fatigue) accompanied by ratings which can change. An adventurer must not only keep these abilities in mind but also a series of weapons, weaponry expertise, magic spells, and financial resources. At least twenty commands (e.g., North, Up, Examine, Get, Attack) must be learned.

The language is filled with exotic characters and expressions, for example the following sentences and phrases are from "Swordthrust," "Devil's Dungeon," and "Swords and Sorcery":

Go forth into the dark reaches of your own mind; dare to challenge the problems that plague and perplex you in your quest for gold and glory.

Each level has up to 16 rooms, some of which have gold, monsters, demons, poison gas.

A road fraught with untold perils!

May the fates smile upon you.

A Dryad wishes to guide you.

Do you wish to consult an oracle?

The Nymph is very offended.

Reactions to the games evoke discussions rich with new vocabulary. When pairs or small groups play, discussions of alternatives, negotiating decisions, and reaching consensus present challenges as well as help develop leadership skills.

We believe students enjoy these fantasy/adventure games, and the games provide content for exciting classroom activities. The following list of student and teacher designed activities is by no

means exhaustive. After you have dared to bring adventure games into your classroom, the list will be longer.

#### Student Activities for Using Adventure Games

Play the game "The King's Testing Ground" from the "Swordthrust" series. Read selections from Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*. Find several passages which demonstrate Modred's hardiness, Lancelot's agility, and Arthur's charisma.

The following descriptions of magic spells come from the "Swordthrust" series. Place them in your order of preference, from 1 for the magic spell you would most like to have to 4 for the one you would least need. Defend your rank ordering in a paragraph.

Heal—This spell can remove hits from the body of the person casting.

Power—Casting the spell results in a momentary lowering of the strength of natural laws, a gap in the bridge between cosmos and chaos, and a general empowering of the local magic.

Farsee—This spell pulls your mind free from your body and lets it explore from one to three rooms without being in danger.

Teleport—This spell is designed to send you and your companions home.

Play the adventure game "Time Zone." Read C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and compare and contrast the maps from "Time Zone" and of Narnia. What characteristics do they share? In what ways are they different? Write an essay comparing and contrasting the maps.

Some adventure games take place in faraway mystical lands. Play two such adventure/fantasy games. Read Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Pretend that you are a travel agent writing short, exciting descriptive paragraphs of the setting from your first game, the setting from your second game, Shangri-La, and Middle Earth. Write your paragraphs.

Read the following three advertisements for adventure games. Discuss the advertising techniques which are used. Which game would you be most likely to buy? Why?

The Philistine Ploy—Based on the biblical Book of judges, the game starts when law and order have fled from the hills of Judea. It's a turbulent world of intrigue and revenge, altars and idols, heroes, and justice. You'll seek the long lost mythical treasure of the Seven Nations, racing against a dangerous Philistine warrior who is trying to kill you.

Randamn—The high gods are searching for a replacement for Randamn, the powerful demi-god of random events. Accept the challenge and you enter a universe of randomness. It will take your wits and skills to fight and think your way through seven stages of ever increasing difficulty.

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Aztec—Imagine. You're deep within an ancient Aztec pyramid. You're searching for the Golden Idol—running, jumping, crawling, fighting cobras, scorpions, giant lizards, and Aztecs with a wide assortment of weapons, falling through trapdoors and blowing up walls. Aztec—the adventure of your life.

#### Teacher Directed Activities for Using Adventure Games

Ask students to play some of the Eamon or Swordthrust adventure games created by Donald Brown.\* Plan a teleconference with Donald Brown after the students have prepared questions to ask.

Study several manuals from adventure games. Use the text in the manuals to develop grammar, usage, and vocabulary exercises (the following are used throughout the Swordthrust series: *hardiness, agility, charisma, encumbrance, reservoir, parrying*).

Develop comparison and contrast activities which relate the adventure/fantasy games to historical periods or to specific myths.

Ask students to collect advertisements for adventure games and use these to build an advertising techniques unit.

Involve students in discussions of the problem solving skills that the successful adventurer must have. Ask students to describe how successful adventurers acquire these skills.

Ask students to research the historical period in which the game is set. Then, suggest that students become detectives searching for anachronisms (e. g., Are the weapons appropriate for this period?) Students might wish to write to the publishers of the games to ask about the anachronisms.

Develop an extensive year-long project which involves the whole class in producing an adventure game. Organize teams to complete the following tasks: (1) develop the story line, (2) develop the advertising, (3) develop the maps, (4) develop the instruction manual, (5) develop the computer program. (The programming could be optional, depending on the expertise of the students involved.

\*Donald Brown may be contacted at C. E. Software, 801 73rd Street, Des Moines, IA 50312.

Some of Eamon games in the public domain have been developed by students.)

Ask students to evaluate the difficulty factor of three adventure games. What recommendations would they develop to make the games easier to play . . . harder to play?

Suggest that students build a diorama of a game terrain with appropriate pathways to follow, mountains or rivers to cross, and known props to encounter . . . i. e., boat, casket, chains, bottles, etc.

Examine Story Tree, by Scholastic, Inc. This program enables students to create an adventure story with appropriate options achieved through "branching" without writing the computer program in basic language.

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