# Sitting in the Gamemaster's Chair

Jacob Reed*
*Otemon Gakuin University*

## 📕 Item Details

## 🔑 Key points

- **What is this?** This paper expands the definition of "gamemaster" to include board/card games, moving it beyond the confines of the TRPG space, and shares observations from a student gamemaster (GM) through an interview.
- **Why did you make it?** To help educators know what qualities are necessary in a gamemaster, and therefore how to help develop those competencies in students to grow and expand their ludic language teaching courses.
- **Who is it for?** Teachers who want to use games in their classes and empower students to be facilitators instead of trying to GM everything on their own. This is particularly relevant for larger classes/clubs where having one teacher GM is not ideal or feasible.

### Tweet synopsis

"I have more than 30 students in my second-language learning course, and I want to use board games. But I can't, because I can't run that many games at the same time!" → You can! Teach your students how to be good GMs.
#boardgames #gamemasters #ESL #EFL #teaching

**View at the LLP Playground**: https://llpjournal.org/2024/11/06/reed-sitting-in-the-gms-chair.html

---

* Contact Email address: j-reed@otemon.ac.jp

## What is this paper about?

This paper showcases an interview with a student GM named Guy (pseudonym) enrolled in a self-directed learning course (called simply *"jishu"* in the Japanese university context the course took place in) and touches upon how he navigated his multiple roles as game facilitator/leader (GM), player, and language mediator. The paper begins with important definitions, describes the *jishu* course, shares selections from the interview with a student gamemaster, and then provides a worksheet to help prospective LLPeers prepare their own students for effective GMing.

## What is a Gamemaster?

A Gamemaster (GM) is a term typically reserved for Tabletop Role Playing Games (TRPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and has been defined in Tychsen et al. (2005) by the functions they serve in the game. The GM is responsible for functions that include framing the narrative of the game by describing the situation in which the players find themselves, knowing the rules[1] of the game and adjudicating disputes, facilitating communication between the players, and the creation of the fictional world the players inhabit. Part of this creation could include realia such as maps, visuals, and other handouts either in an analogue or digital modality.

Due to a TRPG's narrative structure, a GM in a TRPG serves more functions than a GM in a board game setting, but there is overlap. For TRPGs, having a GM is essential, but for board games such as *Blood Rage* (Lang, 2015), *Legends of Andor* (Menzel, 2012), or *Root* (Wehrle, 2018), the only requirements for play are that the players know the rules and objective of the game; no GM as typically understood by TRPG players is needed. However, several functions that a GM serves are applicable to board games as well. Particularly for board games that are rules heavy or somewhat niche, it is often the case that one person will take on the role of teaching the game to others either through overt explanations, gameplay demonstrations/examples, distributing pre-play materials to help ease new players into the game, and even developing "house rules," which are alternate or amended rules to either enhance, simplify, or balance the gameplay.

Therefore, I would like to expand the definition of a GM to also include board and card games. A GM in these non-TRPG ludic environments refers to the person or people responsible for conducting what is sometimes called "the Teach[2]" while also ensuring that the game is running smoothly and players are engaged.

---

[1] In many TRPGs, the GM can have total authority over the rules, even inventing new ones or altering/eschewing standard ones in a very dynamic, fluid manner, sometimes during even a single session or encounter. This rarely occurs in board games outside house-rules, which are still explained before the game and not a surprise.
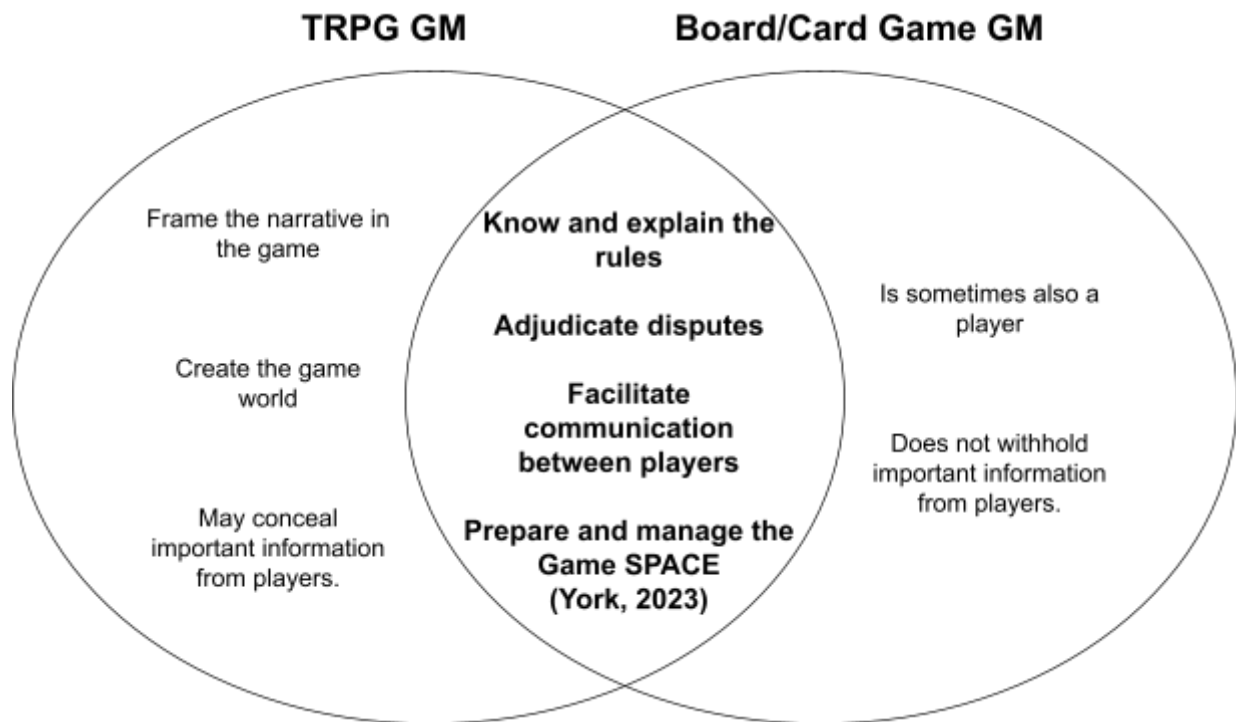[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5fjDaFuft8

**Figure 1** A comparison of GM roles in TRPG and Board Game ludic settings.

## What is the Gamemaster's Chair?

The Gamemaster's Chair is a term I would like to introduce that refers to the space that a GM inhabits within an educational context. This includes not only the physical, but more crucially the mental/psychological space that a GM must inhabit in order to successfully run a game and get players to want to come back to the table. Looking at the center of the Venn diagram (Figure 1), this means that a GM must be knowledgeable of the game, be able to negotiate potential disputes, facilitate communication and engagement between players, and maintain the SPACE (York, 2023) the game takes place in (explained in more detail later in this paper). Moreover, unlike in a TRPG, a GM in a board game context may also be a player. In a competitive game, this means that the GM may have an unfair advantage over novice players. Realizing this, a GM needs to be accommodating of this knowledge and skill gap and may use strategies to prioritize pedagogy and engagement with the game rather than solely on winning. Similarly, for cooperative games, a GM also needs to be careful not to become an "alpha player," which is a player that leverages their knowledge about the game being played to such a degree that, perhaps to avoid losing, steals the agency of the novice players and becomes more like an overbearing commander.

Being aware of the pedagogic role that a GM plays is especially important in contexts where the players do not share the same first language or the game components and rules are written in players' second language as was frequently the case in the course I ran (English was the second language of all students in the course). Spano (2021) drew connections between good GMing and good teaching, claiming that gamemasters fill a similar role to teachers in that they facilitate players' learning of the game in much the same way that a teacher might create tasks following a Task-Based Language Teaching approach (see Ellis et al., 2019) for students to accomplish.

> Being aware of the pedagogic role that a GM plays is especially important in contexts where the players do not share the same first language.

# Overview of the Self-Directed Research Course (*Jishu* course)

## What is the *jishu* course?

The *jishu* course is a year-long elective course that teachers at my university in Japan can choose to offer for credits if there is student interest. The topic offerings for each *jishu* are different as they relate to each teacher's topic of research. In my case, this means the *jishu* course is for students interested in game-based learning, game design, analogue games media, acquiring games literacy, and using/practicing English playfully. The variety of *jishu* courses available give students a chance to trial different topical areas of interest before going into their fourth and final year to pursue their much more involved and focused capstone research project. As a pass/fail course, the guidelines and syllabus are quite open-ended and free form, allowing teachers and students to set individualized expectations, negotiate outcomes, meet as frequently or infrequently as desired, and generally learn in a very self-paced or even self-directed manner. In fact, the word *jishu* in Japanese means something akin to "self-directed."

This formed the perfect setup to create an interest-group for game-based learning, which is exactly what the goal of my particular *jishu* course is: to familiarize students with tabletop games as a genre (develop games literacy), learn some of the necessary lexis to talk about and analyze tabletop games, provide an opportunity to use English as a second language in a non-traditional educational setting, and generally develop students' interest in games as a subject of more formal research and inquiry later on in their university studies. As the course is now in its second year with four students having joined two years in a row (credits for *jishu* courses can be earned up to two times, including from the same-named course). One of those students, Guy (pseudonym), is the interviewee in this paper. Before enrolling in the course, Guy considered himself a gamer. Guy's native language is Indonesian, his second language is English, and third language is Japanese.

Given the diverse interests and background with gaming that the students had, the course focused on board games, and as the course was year-long (two semesters), the spring was for competitive games, and the fall for cooperative ones. In the first iteration of the course, I ran all the games as GM myself in my office for two different groups of players weekly. Each group played a different game, and at the end of the term, they would try and teach each other in English how to play their respective games they had learned throughout the term.

The second year of the course starting in April 2024 is structured similarly with weekly play sessions, only I am not the sole GM. The course makeup is such that the repeat students can also run their own game groups as GMs and report back to me (the teacher) about how things are going or if they have questions. One of these GMs was Guy, the interviewee in this paper. The meeting times/days for each of the game groups was dependent on students' schedules (see the following "Players and GMs" section).

## Players and GMs

In total, there were 11 students enrolled in the course, eight of whom were only players in one or two groups. Three other students were GMs for their own groups once per week, in addition to being a player in another group. Each group had between three and four players and one GM. Adding myself to the three student GMs, there were a total of four GMs in charge of one group each during the week with a total of four groups (Table 1).

**Table 1** Group makeup of the *jishu* course

|  | **Monday**<br>**GM - Student 1** | **Wednesday**<br>**GM - Student 2** | **Thursday**<br>**GM - Student 8** (Guy) | **Friday**<br>**GM -** Jake Reed |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Players:** | Student 2<br>Student 3<br>Student 4<br>Student 11 | Student 5<br>Student 6<br>Student 7 | Student 9<br>Student 10<br>Student 6 | Student 1<br>Student 10<br>Student 3 |

I attempted to group students in such a way that they would either GM and play once per week, or play twice per week for the non-GM students. I also attempted to mix and match students so that they weren't always with the same people. Given students' schedules however, it was not always possible to bring this about. Occasionally, Guy would drift to the other groups if his schedule allowed and watch them or help out at their invitation. He did this voluntarily and not in any planned manner, which is part of what made him an interesting choice for an interview—he could compare his own GMing with that of others, and it also showed how engaged he was with the *jishu* course outside of what was required.

The English language level of the students in the course varied. Some (like Guy) were highly proficient users (TOEIC 800+), while others were lower to middle intermediate users (TOEIC approx. 500). They also came from different cultural backgrounds, with five from Indonesia (including Guy), one from Germany, and the remaining five from Japan. Guy's group (the Thursday group) had two Indonesian players and one German player who are all learning English and Japanese while studying in the same international studies program.

**What is SPACE?**

York (2023) introduces the concept of SPACE, which is an accessible method of framing a ludic experience within an educational context to help ensure that it meets the needs and wants of the participants. In the case of Ludic Language Pedagogy (LLP), this means that it is playful, is focused on learning, and induces thought and reflection. Broken down, SPACE is an acronym that refers to **S**afe, **P**articipation, **A**gency, **C**ritical, and **E**xperiences, and York (2023) contends that "playful, progressive, and contemporary literacy teaching practices ask us to create SPACE for students" (p. 93).

As this paper attempts, the concept of SPACE could also be used in a reflective manner to verify in hindsight to what degree SPACE was being created, where gaps might exist, and how to remedy those gaps in the future.

**What are the constraints of the *Jishu* course?**

Part of SPACE is determining the constraints of the course. The first is certainly student schedules. Some of the players would prefer to be in a group with their friends, but this was not always possible due to students all having different scheduling conflicts. As a result, the groups had to be formed based on the GMs' course schedules and then players' schedules that could match in any given week.

Another constraint was the game collection that I currently have available. While it is quite a selection of different competitive and cooperative games of different rules weights/play-times, it still does not represent even what one might find in a board games cafe. Also, the games largely come from my own personal collection, and are therefore representative of my own personal tastes in games, which may not always align with those of students. However, new games are continuously being added to the collection over time, so this should be less of a concern going forward.

Each group started by playing a game that the GM was already familiar with in order to lessen the burden on the student GMs. The games the student GMs ran were *Blood Rage* (Lang, 2015), *Sorcerer* (Scholz, 2019), *Root* (Wehrle, 2018), and the one I ran for my group was *Dice Throne* (Chattelier & Trembley, 2020). Student GMs sometimes switched which game they were running, and this is detailed later on in the ludic section of the paper.

**What are the affordances of the *Jishu* course?**

When the students enrolled, they needed to write me a brief report outlining their interest or prior experience with games (if any) and why they wanted to join, and reading those led me to believe that motivation to play games and explore the genre would be high.

Additionally, with 4 repeat students, it was the perfect setup to leverage the expertise those students had built about the games in my collection the previous year and give them an opportunity to become GMs for their own groups, also helping them to build leadership skills. This setup, with the repeat students positioned as experts and

the new students as novices is supported by the work of Vygotsky (1978) who described sociocultural theory of learning as experts mediating the learning environment by "scaffolding" it in a way such as to bring about learning in novices. Many university courses are 'one-and-done,' and do not offer the sort of progression or 'leveling up' that the *jishu* class does.

The school where the course took place has a self-access learning center that caters primarily to language learners (Images 1 and 2). There, students can access the games anytime they are free, even outside of the scheduled meetings. Students can also use the space for language practice, study, and other cultural activities that would put them in contact with other students, thereby offering an opportunity for growing their community. In other words, the location itself being outside of a classroom setting might help participants feel more relaxed. This also ties into the fact that the course is pass/fail and very low-stakes which allows students to truly play and "be ludic" without feeling like they are being monitored and evaluated constantly. To earn a pass for the course, students simply needed to attend a majority (more than half) of the game sessions as well as take part in the two scheduling/reflection meetings described in the next section, "What are the 'ways to play?'"
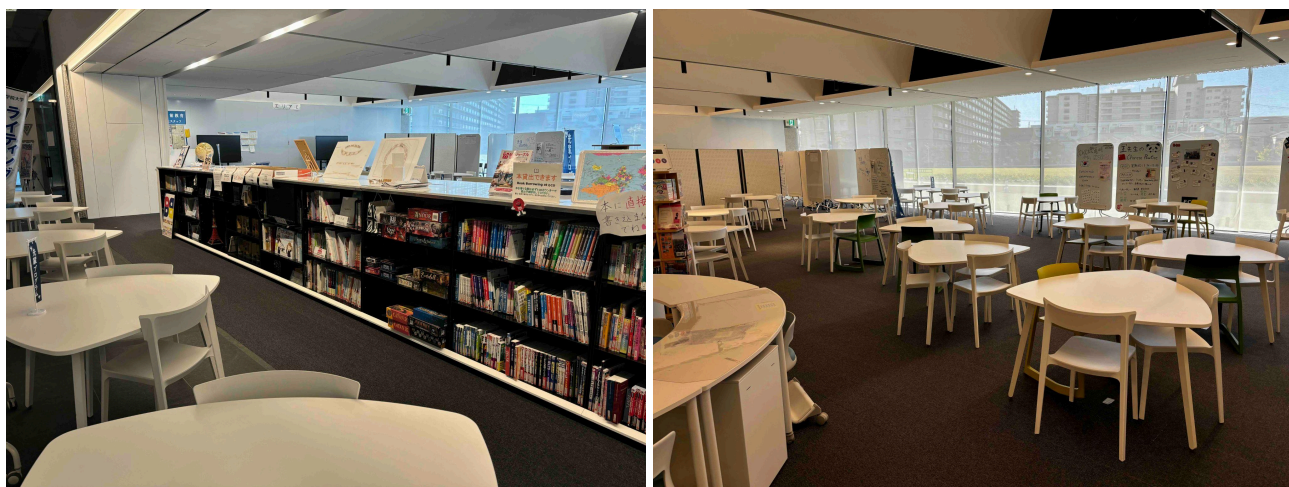


**Image 1 and 2** (Left) Shelf with games and tables on the side; (Right) Tables in more open area

While student schedules were a constraint on group formation mentioned previously, this is also paradoxically an affordance at times. A normal university course is constrained to one time period per week of a set amount of time (105 minutes at my school), but students were not given strict guidelines for how long their game sessions should be, leaving it open to each group to play for as long as they had time for. It was often the case that a *jishu* group would be free for 2 or even 3 consecutive periods from the beginning of their scheduled game time. This meant that longer form games could be enjoyed if the group members were amenable, or the same game could be played multiple times in a row. The fact that time was not constrained to one period meant that students could also take their games very slowly and not worry so much about the clock ticking down.

> The course is pass/fail and very low-stakes which allows students to truly play and "be ludic" without feeling like they are being monitored and evaluated constantly.

**What are the "ways to play?"**

The SPACE keywords helped to examine the *jishu* course post implementation.

The *jishu* course is **<u>safe</u>** because it is pass/fail and language output is not forced, but encouraged. Students were in a low-stakes environment where they are not constantly being monitored by the teacher, but rather given the opportunity to learn without the feeling they are being evaluated. Play could also proceed at each group's pace, so there is less chance of feeling left behind as might occur in a larger classroom setting.

The course encourages **participation** based on its location in a communal space (self-access learning center), and the games were played with other peers. Along similar lines, the course and the games themselves afford **agency** because the students chose to be in the course (it is an elective), the games could be changed at the GM's option if the group wasn't having fun, and the games allow each player to take a turn and have individual input; no-one can be non-participatory. This facet of games is explored more in the "Ludic" section of the paper that follows.

At the beginning and end of each term, the course members would all meet together to have a preliminary and debriefing discussion where they could voice their opinions about the course, ask questions, talk about the games they played, and reflect on their **experiences**, engaging in **critical** discussions. The preliminary session was used mostly for scheduling/forming groups (GMs were decided before enrolling in the course), while the debriefing session was more for discussion and reflection. Additionally, Guy agreed to an interview, the subject of this paper, where more reflective and thoughtful discussion could be had. In Guy's case, the main topic was the nature of GMing and good leadership within a game environment. Table 2 below summarizes how each of the 5 SPACE keywords fit into the *jishu* course.

**Table 2** SPACE Keywords in the *Jishu* Course

| SPACE[3] | Description |
|---|---|
| **S**afe | <ul><li>Pass/Fail course structure (low-stakes)</li><li>Any language is okay; L1 explanations encouraged</li><li>Games repeated throughout the term, building confidence</li><li>GM is another student</li><li>Groups can play at their own pace, with time being less of a factor</li></ul> |
| **P**articipation | <ul><li>Games played in groups of peers</li><li>Games played in a communal space (self-access learning center)</li></ul> |
| **A**gency | <ul><li>Games allow each player to take a turn</li><li>Games can be changed based on group's interests/discussions</li><li>Students all chose to be in the course (elective course)</li></ul> |
| **C**ritical | <ul><li>Preliminary and debriefing sessions / discussions</li><li>GM interview (Guy)</li></ul> |
| **E**xperiences | <ul><li>Preliminary and debriefing session / discussion</li><li>Shared experience of learning and playing a game together</li><li>Course survey</li></ul> |

## Interview with Guy (Student GM)

This section is divided into the most interesting **Ludic**, **Language**, and **Pedagogy** related elements that emerged in the interview with Guy (pseudonym). Guy's native language is Indonesian, his second language is English, and third language is Japanese. He is a full-time university student in an international studies program in Japan and, as an international student outside his native Indonesia, uses mostly Japanese and English in his daily life.

### Ludic

One of the key questions when running a course like this is: "what games should I choose?" I argue that the games we choose need to be **fun** such that students **want to play them**. If students aren't interested in or engaged with the game in front of them, then the maximal learning benefits that come from playing it are logically much less likely to be achieved, even if the game itself is otherwise pedagogically sound.

Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) (Ryan et al., 1996) describes intrinsic motivation as being composed of three basic psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. One contention of the theory is that

---

[3]Adapted from: York, J. (2023).

these three needs, when satisfied as a result of performing some activity, allow for more positive affect towards said activity in addition to "greater psychological health at the personal level" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, 424).

**Relatedness** is the social/human connections and bonds we form while performing some activity. In any tabletop game, the members of the game group itself can be a motivating factor for engaging in the activity (or a demotivating factor, as touched upon later.)

**Competence** means having the sense that the activity in question is one that the do-er is good at as evidenced by positive results directly related to their input. For instance, someone who wins most of the time at a board game may be filling the BPN in terms of competence and therefore want to continue to play, while someone who consistently loses may be demotivated.

Lastly, **autonomy** refers to the feeling of having control over a situation, having decisions, and also having ownership over those decisions. In the context of a board game, this is directly related to the agency afforded to a board game player on their turn.

In the case of the *jishu* course and Guy, the board games he played and ran in the course satisfy all three of these basic psychological needs for him, which can be seen clearly in his interview responses.

Guy started his gaming journey as a video gamer, but now primarily plays tabletop games. For him, the reason for the shift had everything to do with people and the social interaction that comes from sitting around a table with a group of friends. He elaborates:

> *"When you play [video] games, it's fun, but when you finish, it feels like you wasted your time. When you're playing with your friends, it doesn't feel like you're wasting your time because you're with people you like. You're deepening your bond with them."*

In other words, tabletop games are fulfilling an important relatedness need for Guy, which motivates him to want to play more. In addition to bonding with friends, he mentioned the mental challenge of the games being a factor that encouraged him to continue playing:

> *"I like games that use my brain, a little bit of luck, but mostly games where I can—if I play right—I can win. And that's why I was interested in your tabletop games."*

If he wins a game as a result of his "playing right" and "using his brain", he is fulfilling a competency-based need, and therefore derives pleasure out of the experience.

As briefly mentioned before, autonomy is already embedded into games and is part of what defines the genre. Games create an environment where making choices and taking ownership are central mechanics. Players are constantly asked to make decisions and prompted for direct input when it is their turn. Beyond this, Guy as the GM could make the important choice of which game would be played in his group. In fact, Guy mentioned this as being one of the motivating factors of being a GM in the course:

> *"I like being a leader. I do both [player and GM], but being a leader means that I can choose the games I want to play. It gives you more control."*

GMs were, however, encouraged to continue playing the same game and not to switch too frequently or at all. They were asked to take their time in order to build players' expertise at a given game, and thus increase confidence and ideally allow for more working memory space to be devoted to language output / interaction instead of rules comprehension. This concept is beautifully detailed in York (2020) in which he advocates for LLP to be a slow, methodical approach as opposed to a fast, throwaway one.

However, not all people in Guy's group were motivated to play all the time. Some of the episodes from his group that he witnessed and explained in the interview that demotivated players in the course were:

- Repeatedly losing at a game
- Winning every time / not having a challenging opponent
- Playing the same game over and over feeling stale

The ways that these issues can be mitigated are many, including changing the game, which Guy did several times. The game being played may simply not be a good fit for the group (e.g. the players aren't interested in the theme, find the rules too difficult, think it takes too much time, etc.) Guy explains that "knowing what people [in your gaming group] want" is key and acknowledging that game players are a diverse crowd with different aspects that motivate/demotivate them to engage.

> *"I think it's important to know what people want. Maybe separate them in groups depending on how—what kind of people they are. Just like in card games, people will hang out more often if they were more interested. And people who are not interested, they would come and go. And there's nothing wrong with that."*

In other words, a game may be fun/engaging for one group, but not so for another, and what may once have been exciting to a player may have now grown stale and uninteresting.

Guy's interview helps highlight the potential of games to leverage the powerful effects of intrinsic motivation in maintaining the engagement of players. If a player is unmotivated to play a game, it is important for the GM to explore why that might be occurring and to see if steps can be taken to improve the situation, particularly in a course that wants to use games as pedagogical tools. Creating a ludic experience that matches all participants' interests all of the time is perhaps an impossible task, but making an effort and being able/willing to adjust dynamically is a crucial consideration for a GM.

> "Knowing what people [in your gaming group] want" is key and acknowledging that game players are a diverse crowd with different aspects that motivate/demotivate them to engage.

**Language**

The rules of a board game are at once a part of game literacy—a ludic object—and also linguistic interest since language proficiency is required to understand and interact with them in the first place. Understanding the rule book and written text on game components such as cards is one of the biggest linguistic hurdles of a board game. In other words, **the shared language of a board game is the rules**. Failure to read and understand them properly will result in a failure to map that language into real world objects (game components) and faithfully recreate the experience that the game designer intended.

When the rules are written in a foreign language (as was the case in the *jishu* with all games being in English), it can be an even more taxing exercise. This is particularly true in competitive games with hidden information such as a card game in which every player has their own hand of cards, each with different abilities and use restrictions such as *Sorcerer* (Scholz, 2019). This necessitates each player independently understanding their legal moves on their own without being able to consult with their opponent(s), lest they reveal information that could cost them the game. Guy draws a comparison between learning the rules for a board game and learning to play a video game:

> *"The biggest thing I learned from [jishu] classes was that it's much harder to play board games than playing video games [...] when you play video games, the rules and the system is all given to you by the game. You can't make mistakes because the game is doing it for you. But when you're playing board games, you have to understand the rules, you have to teach other people, you have to understand to do the*

*right things in the right time, or else you're making a mistake, but that's also part of the learning process, which is also the fun part about it."*

Naturally, having to read a rulebook and becoming acquainted with the system of a game from the ground up in order to be able to play and teach the game properly can be a demanding task, both from a game literacy/genre awareness perspective (e.g. being familiar with the common layout of a rulebook) as well as a foreign language one. Being able to process the information and thereby access the gameplay at all can require a high degree of linguistic competence.

Admittedly, "board games are harder than video games" may be a somewhat simplistic view as video games such as RPGs can be extremely language-dependent experiences, while some board games can be highly visual and not require much in the way of second language ability.

However, it is true that a board game may require more consistent effort and attention on the part of players to ensure that rules are being followed, as there is no computer rules-logic preventing illegal actions/moves from occurring in the game space. Additionally, the games played in the *jishu* course were all language-heavy experiences which required reading and understanding the game realia in order for play to continue. Therefore, in Guy's experience at least, "it's much harder to play board games." Guy notes that while his English is already at a highly proficient level, playing board games in English helped him to learn game-specific terms such as "fjord" from the viking-inspired game *Blood Rage* (Lang, 2015). Despite these one-off instances, he said,

> *"Dice rolling, positioning, movement, traps, dungeons, words like those, I knew them all before I played the games."*

As a result, he suspected that having more opportunities to play games in Japanese—his third language—might have been more beneficial for him from a foreign language learning standpoint.

> *"If everything was in Japanese, I think we did− we did a half-half once. Half English, half Japanese. And if it was in Japanese, I feel like I would learn a lot. Especially when it comes to the phrases. I think we played a Japanese game once and that was the biggest takeaway and the biggest language learning experience for me."*

In his first year of *jishu* as a player, he was in a group with Japanese students whose English proficiency was not near his level, so he sometimes needed to use a language other than English to facilitate comprehension.

> *"But in the first year, I did have two Japanese students in my group and at that time I realized that I also had to [...] of course speak English most of the time because it was− everything was in English, but if I had to, I would speak in Japanese."*

During the second year, Guy also sometimes visited other groups at their invitation if he was free during the week. One other group was composed mainly of Japanese students with one, the GM, being of mixed background (Japanese and English).

> *"A lot of the times the Japanese students were struggling with the cards and how to play them or what they did. It also meant that it was harder for them to be interested because they didn't know what they were doing."*

However, the group he was GMing in the second year was composed solely of highly-proficient English users:

> *"We have three Indonesians and one German. And sometimes the Indonesians spoke Indonesian, but often I spoke English and the German guy spoke English. Mainly they are all fluent in English, so they would 80, 90% of the time speak English, 10% Indonesian. I think."*

For this group, the target language being learned was not only English as a foreign language, but game rules themselves[4]. He explains that the Indonesian students used their native language to "talk about the game" about 10% of the time:

> **Interviewer:** *If you can remember, when people were speaking in Indonesian, were they talking about the game, or were they talking about something else?*
>
> **Guy:** *I think they **talked about the game**[5]. Sometimes if they were talking about something else they would also speak whatever's most comfortable, but **when it comes to the games, 10% of the time they also spoke Indonesian**[6].*

Regardless of the foreign language proficiency of players in a gaming group, the shared language that must be learned by all is the rules of the game, and it is the GM's role to facilitate this. In Guy's case, he provided incidental support as issues arose in the game, such as by using circumlocution to explain rules differently or using the native language of the players for clarification, whether it was Indonesian for his group, or Japanese when he visited another group.

Guy didn't always understand the English rules himself even when he read them. He explained that his group would help him to understand them better.

> **Guy:** *Sometimes they helped me read the rule book to understand more about the rules.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *How did you feel about that? Someone helping you read the rules?*
>
> **Guy:** *I think it was good because it just meant they were interested. It also means that I'm not perfect, but I'm also learning with them.*

Guy's positive reception towards receiving help in comprehending the rules from the players may indicate that language barriers were being overcome via group interaction, it also demonstrates a good quality of a GM, especially in an LLP setting: not getting so caught up in leading that we forget we are also learners. This leads into the next section on Pedagogy.

**Pedagogy**

With Guy's experience gaming both in the *jishu* class and throughout his life, he evinced a strong grasp of some of the features that are part and parcel of good GMing. His experience as GM in the course involved significant preparation, including understanding the game rules and teaching them to the players in his group. Guy also explains that beyond explaining the game, facilitating it and making sure everyone at the table is included and engaged with the game is important. He considered these facets of his role as GM even before he started:

> **Interviewer:** *Okay, so especially the second time when I asked you to be a leader of your group what did you expect that to be like?*

---

[4] **Robb McCollum:** So does this activity result in useful language learning? If English is supposed to be the target language, so students feel like they are improving their English as a result of the course? This sentence seems to contradict that idea. What about student interactions during a game? So far, the section on Language is focusing on rules-learning, but once rules have been learned, does gameplay allow students to use language (English) is useful ways such as negotiating, asking questions, clarifying, etc.?
**Jake's response:** This is a great question, and the honest answer is that I don't know. This paper is focused just on Guy's role as a GM and how that role intersected with the L L and P aspects of the course, so the only info on interactions / language episodes that I have are what guy shared in his interview. In the future, I'd like to get the groups to record their games like I had students do in my 2022 paper, especially if the groups can be mixed up better where the students don't mostly share a first language. There is potential...!
[5] Author's emphasis
[6] Author's emphasis

> *Guy: I expected to teach a lot. I think that in order to play the games you need to understand the rules, so teaching the rules were– was the first thing that I thought about.*

Guy mentions the word "teaching" several times without being prompted, and is what he expected he would be doing as a GM. This suggests there is a clear relationship between pedagogy and games, especially at the outset when needing to learn the rules.

To teach, preparation is important. Having game literacy and knowledge of the game to the degree that it can be explained and demonstrated to the players is indeed a crucial quality of being a good GM:

> *"Though if you don't know anything about the rules, then you have to study before you teach it. If you forget a little bit of things, that's okay, but if you forget everything what's the point of you being the leader? You're just another member at that point."*

Understanding and teaching the rules is a clear must, but how does one do it effectively? Long-winded explanations and reading rules aloud aren't the only, nor perhaps the most effective way to teach someone how to play a game. Depending on the game in question, the methodology can vary. For instance, Guy mentioned one strategy he learned to use when teaching how to play a card game in which players' hands are normally hidden:

> *"I learned that if you're playing card games, if you play open hand, it's easier to teach them in the first game. That's interesting, so yeah next time I teach someone how to play a card game, I'll play open hand."*

Playing "open hand" means that all players agree to play the card game revealing all of the cards in their possession in order to focus on learning the rules. This strategy significantly lowers the stakes for novices by explicitly making the goal about learning rules and strategy rather than winning or losing. This relates to the technique of scaffolding from sociocultural theory described earlier.

Other than teaching rules, he values the role of a GM in facilitating fun and learning, while also ensuring that everyone is engaged in the game.

> *"I think that it's important for a group leader to make sure that everyone is having fun and knows what they're doing before they try to enjoy the games themselves because, sure, you're also there, you want to play, but you have the **responsibility**[7] of making other people have fun over– I mean… it's important for you to have fun, but it's also a lot more important for other people because you're the leader. It's what I think personally."*

Expanding on this point, he explains that he would teach them while playing after only a basic explanation, which emphasizes a "learn-by-doing" approach.

> *"The way I taught people was mostly I taught them how to– the basic rules, then I taught them while we played... The best thing to do would be to first play a casual game where people would just– can just ask questions and then you know once they're more used to it, they can play more seriously."*

He recognizes that effective GMing requires being flexible and scaffolded his approach to the group's needs, which he did by first playing a "casual game", only moving on to a "more serious" play style after everyone was comfortable with the basics.

However, not all budding GMs understand this "responsibility" that Guy refers to. Guy described another *jishu* group's game that he witnessed which was scheduled on a different day and time. This second group was composed of 4 Japanese students with both the GM and another member having the same experience as Guy (both 2nd year *Jishu* veterans), with the other 2 being newcomers. Guy explained:

---

[7] Author's emphasis

*"A lot of the times the Japanese students were struggling with the cards and how to play them or what they did. It also meant that it was harder for them to be interested because they didn't know what they were doing. I think the thing that that group… The biggest mistake that that group did make was making some of the students feel left out because sometimes I would see there's like three students and then two of them will be playing and then one person will just be watching. And then sure, sometimes they're okay, but the problem is the group leader is the one that's playing and a member is just watching. And also sometimes there's four people, but two people are watching which I don't understand because you can play four people. And in the first place you can play three people in that game, so…"*

In fact, what Guy witnessed was not an isolated case. This group experienced serious problems with attendance and several membership changes throughout the term arising from both sudden scheduling conflicts as well as direct complaints about the GM. This caused frustration for both the GM and several of the players alike. Based on Guy's quote above, it is possible that the GM failed to equip the players with the tools they needed to play the game, or was himself unprepared to sit in the Gamemaster's Chair—to prepare and manage the game SPACE effectively.

Guy also mentioned commitment as being an important factor to take into account when planning a game group:

*"Yeah…it's− it's important to understand people's levels of commitment… and to input that into the games… by, for example, if maybe you're playing a campaign you can have a character that's less important being played by that person. But some people already want to play. They just don't want to play as much as you do."*

While ideally part of preparation as a game group is first forming, levels of motivation and commitment are not static, but dynamic constructs as alluded to in the **Ludic** section earlier. This may be particularly the case for novices who may not know entirely what they are signing up for.

To close, Guy offered some advice for GMs just getting started, or for those considering taking a seat in the Gamemaster's Chair:

*"Just have fun. Of course, you can have fun too. Also make sure other people are having fun. Even if they suck, don't scold them because if you were a beginner as well, you would also suck. Also don't focus on yourself too much especially when you're dealing with beginners. Focus on their reactions. Also their expressions can tell a lot if they're not having fun you can tell− tell it in their face. If they're being confused you can ask them, 'do you have any questions?' Don't be too competitive from the start. Just have fun and adjust the difficulty level according to the players."*

> *"The biggest mistake that that group did make was making some of the students feel left out [...] the problem is the group leader is the one that's playing and a member is just watching."*

## Conclusion and Resource for Teachers

This student GM idea assumes at the outset that the teacher is not the only GM as is the case in Poole (2021), wherein a "Co-Management Approach" is advocated for in order to artificially make the number of students in a course smaller (i.e. a group of students together control one character/player), or Smith (2024), in which the teacher is the GM and runs a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* via Powerpoint. Rather, students in the *jishu* course described in this paper are also taking on the role of GM just as in Reed (2022), which focused on TRPGs. Particularly in classes of 20+ students, including student GMs is highly desirable and allows the teacher the space to facilitate and manage the course on a higher level. It also allows for each individual student to be engaged with a game in the way the designer intends it to be played.

However, Guy's interview leaves us then with the question: **how can the course teacher help to ensure that students in their LLP classes are being good GMs?** Therefore, before getting students in an LLP-themed course to take on the leadership role of GMing, it's important to make them aware of what it takes.

Earlier in the paper, one tool for setting up the framework for the course was referenced: SPACE (York, 2023). This can help us to determine from a top-down perspective whether the course as a whole is serving—or has the potential to serve—its intended purpose. However, despite our best intentions to create positive SPACE, the interview with Guy revealed some of the negatives that can arise as a result of deficient GMing such as decreased motivation to participate. Therefore, it's vital that a student GM is made aware of what it takes, much of which is outlined in Guy's interview (i.e. knowing the rules, getting the players to engage with the game, etc.). This is especially important to accomplish before asking students to sit in the Gamemaster's Chair.

As such, I designed a worksheet teachers can use with prospective GMs or an entire class in an effort to find out where the GMs are.

The worksheet is divided into three sections:

1) **Discussion Questions**
    relating to games, language/rules, and GMing,
2) **Activities**
    Game selection exercise,
    Rules explanation practice,
    and several situational role plays such as: "a player is losing and seems upset"
3) **Reflection**
    A written reflection for students after engaging in discussion and some activities to summarize and opine on what they learned.

Sample answers to the questions as well as tips and advice on running the activities are included in the margins. The discussion questions could be tasked as an in-class group activity, or given one at a time and run as a class discussion. The answers for the questions provided in the comments can be shared with students if they are missing any key concepts. The answers students write could also be used in a class discussion followed by the reflection as a homework assignment, or the substance of a short demonstration/presentation in order to develop GMing competencies and better ensure a positive LLP SPACE.

## Preparing to be a GM Worksheet

# References

Chattelier, N., & Trembley, M. (2020). *Dice Throne: Season One ReRolled* [Board Game]. Roxley.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Self-Determination Theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 416-436). SAGE.

Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Li, S., Shintani, N., & Lambert, C. (2019). *Task-Based Language Teaching: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Lang, E. (2015). *Blood Rage* [Board Game]. Cool Mini or Not.

Menzel, M. (2012). *Legends of Andor* [Board Game]. KOSMOS.

Poole, F. (2021). Co-Management: A Ludic Language Pedagogical approach. *Ludic Language Pedagogy*, *3*, 48-59. https://doi.org/10.55853/llp_v3Pg4

Reed, J. (2022). "This class doesn't have a textbook?": An overview of a TRPG course for L2 English learners in Japan. *Ludic Language Pedagogy*, *4*, 53-70.

Ryan, R. M., Sheldon, K. M., Kasser, T., & Deci, E. L. (1996). All Goals are Not Created Equal: An Organismic Perspective on the Nature of Goals and their Regulation. In P. M. Gollwitzer & J. A. Bargh (Eds.), *The Psychology of Action: Linking Cognition and Motivation to Behavior* (pp. 7-26). New York: Guilford.

Scholz, P. (2019). *Sorcerer* [Board Game]. Wise Wizard Games.

Smith, E. (2024). Dungeons and Dragons meet PowerPoint: an interactive ICT tabletop experience for EFL learners. *Ludic Language Pedagogy*, *6*, 66-93.

Spano, F. (2021). *Skilled Game Masters, expert teachers, and task planning* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved July 23, 2024, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWgiY2svzTE

Tychsen, A., Hitchens, M., Brolund, T., & Kavakli, M. (2005). The Game Master (Y. Pisan, Ed.). *The Second Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment*, 215-222.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wehrle, C. (2018). *Root* [Board Game]. Leder Games.

York, J. (2020). It's your mooooove: Why teaching with games should be like vaporwave (and not nightcore). *Ludic Language Pedagogy*, *2*, 104-114. https://doi.org/10.55853/llp_v2Pg7

York, J. (2023). Creating SPACE to play in your classroom (An LLP zine). *Ludic Language Pedagogy*, *5*, 89-99. https://doi.org/10.55853/llp_v5Pg2