

Literature into play: RPG as a methodological alternative in the teaching of literary reading

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Abstract:

This study discusses the use of Role Playing Game (RPG) as a methodological alternative in the teaching of literary reading in the final years of Basic Education. For that, the research applies an RPG developed from the short story “The Fortune Teller,” by Machado de Assis, to students in the ninth grade of a state public school. It is based, fundamentally, on the discussions of Jouve (2002), for whom literary reading is similar to a game and the reader must be considered in its entirety; of Colomer (2009), which highlights the value of shared reading in the formation of the reader; and in the ideas proposed by Barthes (2004), that the reader, in addition to being a complex entity, is a character in the works he reads. The concepts related to the game are supported, mainly, by Huizinga (2000) and Caillois (1990). This path provided us with valuable reflections on how literature has been treated in school and the importance of a methodology in teaching reading, one that is attentive to the needs of “real readers” (JOUVE, 2002), often coming from spaces unrelated to literary circles.

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INTRODUÇÃO

At the beginning of the 1930s, the so-called democratization of education began in Brazil, in the midst of “fierce ideological disputes” between the Catholic Church, “conservative sectors of society, which aimed at maintaining the national education policy then in force,” and those who defended a universal public school (CARBELLO; LOPES; ROSA, 2015). From then on, the poorest strata were allowed to enter school; however, the required adaptations of the educational system to this public were not implemented. Thus, even without understanding why, many students dealt with content that did not suit them, tried to read books that they did not understand (nor did their sponsors insist that they understand), and continued to fail in an environment that rejected them. It is not without reason that, until today, the same aphorisms are repeated: “one must study to be someone in life;” “reading is very important and improves vocabulary,” even though there is no link between the speakers and the material of these propositions.

Such discrepancy between discourse and experience and school content, in general, and literature in particular, remains; something that is visible in the statements of students, subjects of our research in 2008 (ZAMARIAM, 2008)¹ and 2016 (ZAMARIAM, 2016)². In the first investigation, out of the 8 students who participated in the interviews, 7 declared they believe literature has great importance in their training, and all said they agreed that literary reading is done at school, although not in the as it occurs now. In the last study, we found that 11 students, of the 14 questioned, approved that this type of reading should be carried out in Portuguese language classes. These data show how the students, reflecting the society in which they participate, mechanically reproduce the generalized discourse, coming from the intellectual elites - that literature is essential in human formation.

However, the *corpora* of the aforementioned researches point out the fragility of the initial discourse, when the same students affirm that “reading should not be required, because not everyone can memorize the things in the book”, as is the case of a student, whose answer was similar to that of 5 other students among the 14 surveyed in 2016. Both in the 2014 and 2016 groups, the words “literature is good for me”, “reading improves interpretation”, followed by “I don’t like reading”, “reading is boring”, also bring out the incongruity of this discourse, revealing the scarce contact students have with the actual literary text. And although this “dogma” of the indispensability of literature has numerous scientific works to support it, the empirical knowledge of this importance continues to be neglected by educational institutions.

It should be inferred, then, that the reason a large part of the population does not connect to the literature offered by the school, mainly the canonical one, is that access to it was denied, in the historical

¹ “*The relationship between adolescents and literature in the era of digital culture: a study on reading in state schools in Londrina*” was a research conducted in public schools, in 2008, for the Specialization Course in Teaching Methodology, at UEL.

² Research carried out among students of the first year of high school in a public school, in 2016, for the Master’s program in Language Studies, also from UEL, entitled “*Cards on the table: the teaching of literary reading through RPG*”.

course, by the dominant classes, which held the monopoly of the intellectual product in the country. Only the redistribution of cultural capital would establish a balance between the two. On this topic, we bring a reflection by Antonio Candido (1995):

For the so-called erudite literature to cease to be the privilege of small groups, it is necessary that the organization of society be done in a way to guarantee an equitable distribution of goods. In principle, only in an egalitarian society will literary products be able to circulate without barriers, and in this area the situation is particularly dramatic in countries like Brazil, where the majority of the population is illiterate, or almost, and lives in conditions that do not allow the margin of leisure indispensable for reading. Therefore, in a stratified society of this type, the enjoyment of literature is stratified in an abrupt and alienating way (CANDIDO, 1995, p.257).

In truth, Brazil has no longer a majority of the illiterate population; nonetheless, the obstacles to an equitable distribution of cultural capital remain, making literature an object of difficult access inside and outside the school, not only for economic, but mainly historical reasons. This continues to hinder the teaching of literature, since didactic-pedagogical practices are always permeated by political ideals in formal education institutions, and remain artificial, reaching only those who already have the habit of reading “from birth.” Therefore, we must reflect on literature as a component of this cultural capital which, according to the precepts of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979), integrates the instruments of power, along with other social and artistic aspects: musical tastes, uses of language, the practice of cultural activities etc.; these being undeniable markers of social status. That is to say, certain habits and tastes are related to social opportunities, not to low cognitive performance.

Therefore, one can say the methodological changes we seek necessarily include the recognition of the history of education in our country, since the simple opening of school gates did not solve the problem of access to cultural capital, held by the dominant classes. On the contrary, there can be almost as much perversity in perpetuating inequality within the school, with the maintenance of didactics that ignores the origins and difficulties of the poorest population, as well as in leaving the masses out of the school environment. First, because these people are allowed the illusory idea that they have full possibility of academic-social development. Second, society’s spheres of domination assuage awareness with the pseudo-democratization of knowledge, using the fact as an excuse for not worrying about its consequences. All of this contributes to maintain the *status quo*.

In view of such issue, it is paramount to review the methodologies in teaching literature, so to provide a holistic and democratic training of readers. Thus, this study aims to present some reflections on the application of RPG (Role Playing Game) as a methodological alternative for teaching literary reading in basic education. The objective is to provide effective work with this type of text, expanding the students’ repertoire and improving their reading skills, so that they can expand their literacy conditions, especially for literary texts and, in the process, improve their autonomy and citizen awareness. This proposal was studied during the Master’s in Language Studies (UEL), “*Cards on the table: teaching literary reading through RPG*,” carried out between 2016 and 2017, with students from the ninth grade on, in a public state school.

In the section “Reading proficiency and humanization,” we will briefly discuss our methodological conception concerning the teaching of literary reading. In “Reading as a game: theoretical basis,” we will address the concepts that support this work. In section “RPG: what is this game?,” We will explain the rules of role-playing game (RPG). Finally, in the items “Methodological procedures and constitution of the *corpus*” and “Let’s roll the dice,” we will explain the research methodology and present the analysis of the collected data.

We anticipate our understanding that literature alone does not transform the character or social conditions of its reader but expands possibilities for reflection and exposes the individual to other cultures, other thoughts, other universes (to which he might not otherwise have access), providing them with subsidies

for conscious choices, not only regarding personal but also social issues. Hence its direct relationship with the concept of otherness.

As literature is an important instrument in this process of humanizing the individual and reflecting on the other, our methodological proposal for the teaching of reading – the *RPG* – aims precisely at the opposite of what is historically constituted: allowing students from public schools to have access to literary language and all the experiences that reading can provide.

READING PROFICIENCY AND HUMANIZATION

Antonio Candido, in *Right to Literature* (1995), is categorical in stating that no one can survive without some kind of fabulation, and literature is therefore an essential element of our humanization. Literary characters themselves are examples of the importance of this fabulation, like Cervantes's Quixote, who prefers to be branded a madman, while living by imagination, than to remain in his noble boredom. Jack, from *Jack and the beanstalk*, risks everything he has left in exchange for magic beans, because he refuses to conform to his situation of misery. Santiago, from *The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway), demonstrates that the desire to do what one loves and to reach for one's dream is greater than any fear or loneliness. In the national children's literature, we have Emília, from *Sítio do Picapau Amarelo* (Monteiro Lobato), the no-nonsense doll that is always ready to put herself in the position of individual, not puppet. All of them are touched by fantasy, but also by nonconformity and by the effective performance in the spaces that concern them, characteristics that build the transformations of the world and alternatives to great human problems.³

In this context, Petit (2019) draws attention to the relevance of the “celebration of the imaginary.” The author denounces the little appreciation given to fantasy, in the face of more “practical” gains brought about by reading: expansion of linguistic knowledge, improvement of written production, among others that the pedagogical discourse tends to reinforce. Thus, defending the value of imagination and reverie as fundamental elements to life and to the subjective constitution itself, Petit (2019, p. 123) states:

What we make up when reading seems very close to what we made during our travels: a wild and poetic reserve that we will be able to revisit, sometimes a long time later, even though we have forgotten most of what we have read or covered. This wild and poetic reserve is more or less what we call the imaginary, this space essential to the expansion of the self – to the forgetfulness of the self –, this essential place, so often depreciated.

In addition to these effects, they can have on the reader and the affirmation of the relevance of fantasy in our lives, works like the ones we mentioned awaken us to the importance of preparing the teacher who trains readers. With their obstinate characters, in constant struggle, full of hopes, we learned about the search for solutions in extremely adverse situations. As teachers, it is inevitable to subvert the harshness of the system that is imposed on us to meet individual and shared fantasies, because that is part of the human. And that also means equipping students for the full enjoyment of the cultural capital deposited in fictional writing. Such a task requires hard work by the educator, who must be the mediator in this process, without losing sight of the construction of affection between subject and object, but always aiming at expanding the student's literary horizons. In other words, one should move away from the pre-constructed discourses of education, which often limit teaching action to a certain obedience to standards known to be ineffective. This

³ All these works are well known in Brazil and, because they are not directly cited in the text, but only briefly commented on as examples, they are not part of the references.

is what happens, for example, when the reader in training is abandoned to the tutelage of books since, if the student is not a proficient reader, they are unable to know which works to read, they will not even have enough experience know for a fact whether they like it or not.

Abandoning a place of subjection to certain pedagogical standards requires some boldness to face crystallized discourses, both in terms of content and methodologies. For a long time, as pointed out in the introduction to this article, the school had a bad dialogue with its students, especially since the process of democratization of education. By insisting on a certain canon, without giving proper support to the new public, and negating the literate culture of the low-income students that started to be received in classrooms, a huge gap was established between the culture of the school and the culture of the student. Hence may result discourses of rejection of reading and literature such as those mentioned above. Later, however, mainly after the 1980s re-democratization, aiming at a more effective approximation to the student profile received, there was a reverse process, and the school stopped insisting on the canon, opening the flank for less complex or less extensive works and with themes thought to be closer to the reality of the contemporary youth. In this sense, we are allied with the criticism established by Colomer (2009), although the context in which it is elaborated is not exactly the same as what we live in our country:

using ‘what pleases students’ as a criterion for school selection seems too problematic. [...] The problem is that you give up helping them to do it [develop reading]. But we know that you don’t learn to read difficult books just by reading easy books (COLOMER, 2009, p. 43-44).

In view of this problem, *i.e.*, the need to seek methodologies that can help the student to deal with more complex readings, the author points to the indispensability of the teacher’s work, which has a fundamental role in the holistic formation of their students and, due to exactly that, has the responsibility of not polarizing literary education between relegating them to the tastes of the moment or requiring them, without accompaniment, a canonical reading for which they were not trained. For this set of reasons, we set out to think of a tool that could effectively bring literature to the classroom, and we arrived at the role-playing game.

READING AS A GAME: THEORETICAL BASIS

We must emphasize that our entire work proposal is based on the concept of “reading as a game” (PICARD, 1986 *apud* JOUVE, 2002, p. 111-112), which includes literary reading as a dialogical practice, in which every fantasy is subordinated, at the same time, to the reader’s subjectivity and to an essential rule to its coherence. According to Jouve (2002), this concept is linked to two types of playful activities: (1) *playing*: an allusion to simulacrum, identification with a certain character, immersion in history; (2) *game*: referring to the rules given by the text itself, which must be followed by the reader to obtain an (or more than one) understanding authorized by the textual construction. For the author, “reading would therefore be, at the same time, a game of representation and a game of rules” (JOUVE, 2002, p. 112).

In this sense, if, on the one hand, it is possible to play with subjectivity, *i.e.*, to appropriate the text based on personal experiences which allow the reader to be linked to the text, by identifying processes with characters, situations, feelings, etc.; on the other hand, it is not possible to break certain interpretative limits imposed by the text itself, which are, to a certain extent, a guarantee of a production of meaning more shared with those of other readers. Reading, for Jouve, thus occurs in a balance between *playing* and *game*, between subjectivity and sharing. The fixation in a single procedure would have the effect of shallow readings, because they are too fixed on literal, or over-interpretations, missteps that would not lead to understanding the work. Therefore, *playing* and *game* do not work as isolated procedures, the game of reading being the constant dispute between one and the other.

Following this concept, we relate the phenomena that occur in the reading process with the categories of games listed by the French researcher Roger Caillois (1990): *agôn*, *alea*, *ilinx*, *mimicry*. According to the author, *agôn*, due to its Greek etymology, is linked to competition games. It is a matter of creating an artificial combat environment, controlled and without outside assistance, in order to give the idea that the opportunities among the competitors are equitable, in order to demonstrate superiority regarding a certain characteristic: speed, strength, cunning, memorization etc. This is the case with chess, fighting and running, for example. In reading, it is the use of cognitive skills in the clash with the text, perhaps closer to those demanded by the *game*, according to Picard's (2011) meaning, since they relate to certain previous constructs for facing the text's "rules."

The second category, *alea*, comes from the Latin term for "risk," which is why it is associated with dice, that is, games based on luck. Contrary to *agôn*, in this category are games whose victory is not subject to the player, since he does not even have strategic control over the action, as his opponent is more chance than the opposing participant. In the same proportion that the *agôn* requires discipline and individual effort, the *alea* demands the renouncement of the power of choice. Any individual characteristics are put aside in favor of a random decision. Examples of this type are roulette, coin toss, lottery, etc. The turning of each page, without knowing which paths the story will take, can also be considered the domain of the *alea*. Likewise, subjecting the reader to what is controlled by the rules of the game also inscribes this category within the concept of *game*.

The following division of Caillois comes from the Greek term, which means "whirlwind": *ilinx*. Here the so-called "vertigo games" are added, which seek to "destroy, for an instant, the stability of perception and inflict on lucid consciousness a kind of voluptuous panic," with the aim of stunning oneself (CAILLOIS, 1990, p. 43). Sensations such as those mentioned are in the practice of parachuting, the Globe of Death, some attractions in amusement parks, such as *kamikaze*, even "corrupio" (a game in which the child spins alone until their balance is lost), among others. Metaphorically, *ilinx* can be understood as that feeling of deep ecstasy, delirium, when we read a work so interesting and intense that we "get lost" in overwhelming emotions. In this sense, this category seems to be more conditioned to *playing*, insofar as it takes effect from the individual experience, which will be unique to each subject. That is, if the feeling of being in *kamikaze* can be so positive for some and for others it represents true terror, also in reading a work can mean true rapture for a reader, while for others it is absolute boredom. It is, therefore, about how the subject interacts with the object from its uniqueness, from its most intimate construct.

The last category is inspired by the mimicry of insects and concerns camouflage, disguise. *Mimicry*, an English term, refers to games that are organized around a peculiar and imaginary universe, in which the player leaves his personality to assume another in a parallel world. Examples of *mimicry* range from pirate or knight games for children to carnival balls and *RPG*, our focus in this work. In literary reading, *mimicry* occurs in the reader's affection for a character, whom he "transforms" himself during reading, when imagining himself in his adventures, dramas and novels. In this category, as much as the previous one, due to its character more linked to subjectivity, we see a perfect adaptation to what Picard (2011) named as *playing*.

In the work undertaken, we consider all the aforementioned categories in the reading of literary narratives and in *RPG*, since they all seem to encompass the role-playing game and the "game" of reading. This is because *RPG*, by enabling active student contact with classic narratives (contextual, lexical, plot, even symbolic), puts into operation procedures very similar to those performed during the reading of the literary text. In *RPG*, players are assigned the role of characters who, experiencing the complete paradigm of Caillois (1990), become responsible for reconstructing the narrative, as it occurs to the proficient reader during their fictional reading. This idea is in line with the concept of "reader-character", by Barthes (2004), which removes the reader from the condition of mere receiver and transfers him to the role of co-author. In this role, he is able

to create his “text-reading” (BARTHES, 2004), the mental and subjective rewriting of what was read, as opposed to the emptying of meaning or a submissive reception, totally alienated from the text’s determinations. It is worth saying, therefore, that the proficient reader is the one who has the ability to balance himself on the line that delimits the respect for the text’s rules and the drift imposed by the expression of his subjectivity in the interaction with the work. Player or reader, in activity, assume a certain position of authorship.

For this, cognitive skills are necessary that we cannot ignore, such as the recognition of the syntactic-lexical game, the inference and the negotiations of meaning based on the understanding of the entire context in which the writing is inserted. Therefore, according to Goodman (1991), reading goes through brain limitations, the represented reality, the linguistic structure, and the social and situational contexts. For this reason, the “good” reader is the one who manages to make the necessary transactions with the text in a certain authorized semantic direction. At this point, *RPG* operates productively, as it drives players to all these actions, as we will see later in data analysis.

But cognitive requirements are not enough to describe the reading process, because the mental mechanisms are closely related to the experience and the emotional bond with the work (JOUVE, 2002; PETTI, 2009), resulting from immersion in the “magic circle.” The concept, borrowed from Huizinga’s (2000) studies on games, says a lot about the imaginary in the literature. For the author, the “magic circle” is the universe proper to the game, capable of causing players to temporarily abdicate the “ordinary world” and submit to the specific rules of the new space. In other words, it is “a playing field within which the usual categorical differences between men are temporarily abolished” (HUIZINGA, 2000, p. 59). However, for everything to function properly in the “magic circle,” the order must prevail in the playful environment, as its absence or disobedience would extract the essence of the game. It is also in the “magic circle” that the player finds the opportunity to experience different experiences, without taking the risks foreseen in “real life;” it is where the possibility for them to develop their skills and do what give them pleasure in a recreational, safe universe, alien to the weight of reality, is realized. All of these characteristics can be transposed to literary reading and the practice of *RPG*.

In addition to the benefits described, the role-playing game also works with the concept of otherness, because it leads the player to make decisions in the role of another, contributing to socialization and citizenship, as well as to their understanding of literature. In this way, the *RPG* is able to serve as an instrument of reader training (not as a substitute for the book), with a focus on vertical reading, in all the plurality that involves literature, including the subjectivity of the reader, in addition to shallow understanding of the plot. It inserts the non-proficient reader in the reading process, as it makes them experience the mechanisms, strategies and sensations mentioned above, to which the proficient reader already has access.

As for the treatment of the original plot in the *RPG*, it is worth clarifying that, although we have another text at stake, it is possible to maintain a certain fidelity to the work, given that the playful practice itself drives us to follow a certain path, traced by the characteristics of the characters and the context presented. The player has the feeling that he commands his destiny in the game, even keeping the guiding thread of the story, a typical characteristic of *RPG*. However, despite the illusion of freedom, in addition to the interference of dice, it is up to the Game Master (narrator) to manage the story, which gives him the “power” to guide the choices without the manipulation being evident. In some cases, the course of history is beyond the Game Master’s (GM) predictions; it is when his ability to improvise to resume the cohesion of the narrative comes into play, which requires a logical sequence. The Game Master functions in *RPG* as a regulator of meanings, which authorizes or not certain interpretations, such as textuality in literature.

Regarding this feature, we find one more advantage of applying *RPG* to the teaching of literature, since the student can make interpretations of the plot without distorting the semantic essence proposed by the author of the original. On the other hand, the characteristics of this game show its propensity for learning,

without the need to teach it. Adapting a classic literary work to this type of game already keeps it in its domain: fictional narratives, as we will understand in the following section.

RPG: WHAT IS THIS GAME?

Although it is a game with a complex rules system, proposing a literary *RPG* is more related to the didactic capacity and the literary formation of the teacher than to his skills as an *RPG player*. With that, we emphasize that it is not the objective of the literature class to turn *into* an *RPG* workshop, since the game is an instrument for literary proficiency, not the target of teaching.

Having clarified this point, let us see what the role-playing game consists of. According to Schmit (2008),

Interpretation games, better known in Brazil as *RPG (Role playing games)*, are cooperative activities in which a group of players create a story in an oral, written or animated way, using imagination as a game plan, as well as sketches, gestures, lines, texts and images. Each player, with the exception of one, represents a character in the story, with pre-defined characteristics. The remaining player assumes the role of narrator (or game master, among other names), being responsible for describing the scenario, in addition to representing all supporting actors, antagonists and extras, called *non-player characters* or more commonly *NPC*. There is no direct competition between players, so it is a socialization game (p. 23).

The adventure experienced by the participants during the game is called a *campaign*, which can be divided into several sessions – the parts of the story. Our campaign, for example, was the plot of the short story *The Fortune Teller*, which we divided into six sections, namely the moments experienced by the characters, such as “The arrival at the port,” “Meeting for tea,” “Rita and Camilo go for a walk” etc. A campaign can last for hours and does not need to be run in a single day, if the story goes on. Sometimes, it lasts for months and, in extreme cases, even years, when the imagination of the participants has the breath to feed the narrative to that point. However, in these cases, it should be noted that these are free narrative creations, without a previous limiting text, unlike what happened in our experience with *RPG* in the classroom.

Each campaign can have as many players as there are characters in the story. The GM is the player who leads the game table, narrates the initial situation, shows the options, requests actions from the participants, interprets secondary characters and gives “realism” to the story, setting it with objects and descriptions. He is responsible for guiding the participants, so as not to deviate from the diegetic rule or the coherence built by the group. In reading classes, this role would be the responsibility of the teacher, whose proficiency would guarantee the maintenance of literary elements and essential aspects of the work. It is also worth mentioning that it is essential that the *RPG* session does not become a substitute for the book but maintains its function of enabling the immature reader to read more fluidly the original text. In a second application, the Game Master’s interpretation can be extended to students, after due teaching guidance.

For the game to take place, one must organize, in advance, some basic materials, among which: the characters’ sheets, a kind of guide for the player to incorporate his role; notepads, for recording the score achieved and advances in the campaign; different sets of dice, used in situations that, as in real life, do not depend on the skills of the participants, but on chance or luck; and the Master’s Book, script of the plot. It is worth mentioning that the character sheets are the basis for all the actions of the participants, as they show the *attributes*, *characteristics*, skills and *abilities* of each one, according to their origin, social function, physical and psychological profile. A doctor or healer, for example, will not have the same attributes as a police officer or a detective, so their skills and functions, in the game, will be different, as expected in non-fictional society. In a situation of flight, the police have an advantage, as they are used to this situation, so their skills are more developed in this regard. Everything revolves around the imagination, but without losing sight of verisimilitude.

To better clarify the role and importance in the game, we provide below one of the sheets used in the work carried out with the text “The Fortune Teller:”

ROLE PLAYING GAME - FICHA DA PERSONAGEM							
VILELA		DOMINADOR (Leal - lei/caos e Mau - bem/mal)					
Nome da personagem		Tendência				Jogador	
Magistrado / Advogado - Nível 1 (nível inicial)			A Cartomante		Rio de Janeiro (Botafogo)		
Classe e Nível			Campanha		Terra Natal		
Branca	Lei	Masculino	29	1,70m	75 kg	Preto	Castanhos escuros / gélidos
Etnia	Crença	Sexo	Idade	Altura	Peso	Cabelo	Olhos

ATRIBUTOS	
Determinação (Força)	14
Carisma (Destreza)	10
Inteligência	14
Vitalidade	11

Características	
Prudência	Int + 2
Moralidade	Car + 5
Coragem	Dt + 1
Dissimulação	Int + 1

Perícias e Habilidades	
Manipulação	14
Observação	12
Arma de fogo	14

Pontos de Vida	14
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ANOTAÇÕES	

Source: Zamariam, 2108, p. 163.

Figure 1 – Vilela’s character sheet

We can notice, in the sheet above, that the non-measurable peculiarities of the character are at the top, comprising behavioral tendency (it can be *Dominant*, *Evildoer*, *Undecided* or *Free Spirit*, always based on LAW or CHAOS and GOOD or EVIL), name, social function, origin, ethnicity, belief, sex and physical descriptions.

Attributes are the basis of the personality of any character in the game, so they only undergo changes in their scores, not in categories. From them, the characteristics are organized, arranged in the central frame. *Prudence*, for example, is the sum of the *Intelligence Attribute*, plus 2 points; *Morality* is the product of *Charisma*, plus 5; and so on. *Characteristics* based on intellect are related to *Intelligence*, as is the case of *Prudence* and *Concealment*. *Courage*, on the other hand, is related to *Determination/Strength* etc. Finally, *Skills and Abilities* are related to the skills and tools that the character has and are also interconnected with *Attributes* and *Characteristics*.

In a system that takes three six-sided dice as a reference, the maximum score for *Attributes*, *Characteristics*, *Skills and Abilities* is 14, since one must leave space for chance, represented by the dice roll. In addition, the character can evolve up to 18 points (the sum of the dice), until the end of the game. That is why the *Life Points* are 14, as Vilela is considered the “strongest” in the game (and in the story).

As exemplified in Vilela, all characters have the possibility to increase their points in a certain skill or ability and evolve in the game, as they reach the objectives imposed by the narrative. For this, all steps, decisions, plot details and progress are recorded, in ink, in the individual notebooks or in the blank space on the Character Sheet, and they are used in the next decisions. Experience also counts, so everyone gets points

at the end of each session, for having made it that far. Thus, the players become responsible, as far as possible, for the path they will follow in the narrative, but the one who gives the final word, on several occasions, about the success of each one, is the Game Master, always based on the coherence of the text of the campaign.

In addition to the decisions based on the characters' own abilities, the *RPG* requires the dice to confirm or not the success of certain actions, such as breaking through a gate, saving yourself from a fire, dodging a blow, cheating or persuading another character etc. For example: a certain character must convince someone that he did not steal a certain object, otherwise he will go to prison, but his Persuasion skill score is low; she must decide whether and how they intends to argue, and roll the dice to see if their choice was successful. This item represents chance in life (*alea*), arbitration permeated by luck, because the effectiveness of an argument also depends on the other being susceptible, having little information, on not having witnessed something that the first wishes to hide. Anyway, even great skills depend on a series of casual factors to have an effect. This is taken into account in the game.

However, randomness is not absolute when playing the dice, as the points drawn in it are compared to the previously established score of each Characteristic and Ability, on the character sheets. Thus, a warrior who has Strength 10 on his sheet and draws below that number in the dice in a combat situation will have managed to land a good hit; if the number of dice exceeds that of their strength, the blow will not land. The logic is that the more skill (score) the character has, the less it will depend on luck for its achievements, as in the real world. This is not the only possible system for using dice in *RPG*, but it is one of the most popular.

Another peculiarity of the game is the concern with immersion in the “magic circle” (HUIZINGA, 2000), the fictional universe, in order for the fabulation process to be successful. To this end, it is not uncommon (nor mandatory) for the GM to prepare a representative scenario for the campaign, and for players to dress up as their characters, taking *mimicry* (representation) to a higher level.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES AND CONSTITUTION OF THE *CORPUS*

The research⁴ developed in 2016-2017 was carried out in four stages. The first was dedicated to the in-depth study of the short story “The Fortune Teller,” by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, which was chosen for several reasons. Initially, because it is a short work, hence not presenting the obstacle of extension, in addition to being shrouded in a mystery, which almost always constitutes an attraction for teenagers. But, above all, we made the choice because this text is a classic of Brazilian literature. Furthermore, Machado de Assis has a very particular language in its richness and a very striking style, which can be enjoyed in that story. As he is considered one of the most important Portuguese-speaking writers, knowing his work is the right of all his countrymen.

We observed, through the reading of literary criticisms and several readings of the work in question, some specifics that, at the same time, are pearls to literary enjoyment for the competent reader, but barriers to abstraction for the immature reader. The first of these is the plot itself, which is so simple (the story of the love triangle destined for tragedy bordering on tropes presented in today's police shows), it can lead to the mistake of wanting to refute the obvious. Still, the narrator's antics to mislead the reader make the narrative fascinating and surprising. The intertextual game itself presented at the beginning of the story, with a quote from Shakespeare, is deceptive, and prepares the reader to believe that “there are more things in Earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy,” so the fortune teller's predictions would be indefectible. This resource requires proficient reading in order to avoid falling into the narrator's traps. Thus, we believe that the work would be enriching in its transposition into the Master's Book.

⁴ Approved by the Ethics Committee under Opinion 1,670,952, 2016.

Resuming the research methodology, in the second stage, we created the RPG, based on the aforementioned tale, after studying the rules of the game in manuals and with players *in loco*. We seek to maintain, in the adapted script, original parts of the story and Machado's language, as far as possible. When necessary, we add participations of the characters, without escaping the diegetic coherence, so that the RPG had gameplay. This game was tested with teachers and other professionals, before being applied in the classroom. In figure 2, we can see the game components.



Source: Zamariam, 2018, p. 87

Figure 2 - Components of *The Fortune Teller* RPG

In the third stage of the investigation, we screened the participants, for which we applied a questionnaire to three newly started classes in the ninth grade, about reading habits and tastes. We received approximately 100 responses, among which we selected 12 research subjects (here referred to as A1 to A22)⁵, based on the criterion that they answered “no” to the question: “do you like to read?”, In addition to showing absence or little affinity with reading literature on other questions. This selection criterion was used because we sought to observe the effectiveness (or not) of the methodology under test in the training of readers, with “non-reader” students.

In the next phase, we applied the game in three campaigns, with three different groups, of which we participate as a Game Master. Under this function, we made the descriptions of the context of the narrative, including spreading in the environment images of the time, of tilbury, drawings of clothes and popular

⁵ Twenty-two students were selected for the initial research phase, but only twelve participated in the game phase.

architectural facades, even photos of historical personalities and paintings of the 19th century. It is important to note that the students did not read the original story in advance, nor were they informed of the origin of the narrative in the Game Master's Book. Only after the campaigns did we reveal the existence of the text "The Fortune Teller," which had been the basis of the game.

Finally, we organized the focus group, in which we discussed the role of students in the game, their reading trajectory, in many cases absent or interrupted in childhood, and the storyline. Data were collected through video recordings⁶, both from the three campaigns, which took place separately, and from the focus group, whose discussions involved 9 of the 12 research subjects. Both moments aimed at verifying the reading processes followed by the players/students during the sessions, such as the sharing of interpretations, the affection towards certain characters and the plot, and the attribution of different meanings of each player-reader to the development of the narrative. The focus group, specifically, also intended to prove or not the motivational role of *RPG* in relation to literary reading.

LET'S ROLL THE DICE

Before starting the analysis, let us make it clear that, with the *RPG*, we deal with two different texts: one is the game's script, the Game Master's Book, based on "The Fortune Teller;" the other is the short story itself, a literary text, with a very different structure, which was not read by all participants. However, as we have already discussed, both present topics of similarity to each other, especially with regard to the reading process.

During the observation of the groups in the practice of the game, we found that the concepts studied as theoretical support were realized as components of reading in the *RPG*, which was a favorable aspect to the methodology under test. *Alea* (luck), *ilinx* (vertigo), *mimicry* (representation) and *agôn* (competition), by Caillois (1990); the *game* (textual rules) and the *playing* (involvement), by Jouve (2002); and the "magic circle" (game/fictional universe), by Huizinga (2000); all, in some way, were present in the campaigns and in the dialogues with the participants.

In addition, we observed, in the application of the game adapted from a canonical tale, the possibility of sharing interpretations of the plot, ethical elements, such as the behavior of the characters and sociocultural values of the work, such as fidelity, the idealization of marriage and the issue of adultery in the 19th century.

The very configuration of *RPG* allows it to be a bridge between students and literature, through sharing (COLOMER, 2009), which provides both the identification with a group – something very important to young people – and the use of the micro-community formed there to advance the reading process, as exposed by Spanish educator Teresa Colomer:

[Sharing] is important because it makes it possible to benefit from the competence of others to build meaning and obtain the pleasure of understanding books more and better. Also, because it allows to experience literature in its socializing dimension, making the person feel part of a community of readers with mutual references and complicities. Possibly one of the causes of resistance to reading comes from the loss of forms of collective reading in contemporary societies. Before, participating in the oral folklore of the community, listening to the reading aloud by the teacher or knowing that everyone knew the same poems and songs by heart and could remember them at any time, gave an intense feeling of having an instrument that harmonized with the surroundings (p. 143).

⁶ The transcription of the dialogues of the research subjects preserved their syntactic and lexical variations, but not phonetics.

This statement by the author was ratified by the research participants in the focus group. For them, the themes and language of the canonical text can make reading difficult, but this obstacle tends to be overcome in the community, through a kind of “system of interpretations”, as one of the participants in the dialogue below supposes:

Researcher: *But, for example, this story of the game is from a classic, “The Fortune Teller,” by Machado de Assis, and you said you liked the story. Then what?*

A22: *It is that [in the game] it was more interactive, with everyone like that... so we... it made us want [to read] more.*

A20: *When you read interactively, with other people, it is much more fun.*

A22: *I think... let's suppose, in the reading room... I think if you can comment on the book with someone, I think you will have a much greater advantage... a desire to... “bro, did you see that part? Wow, how tense.” Then he says: “I didn't read yet, I need to read it...”*

A19: *It's really cool when people are reading together...!*

A14: *It's just that there are forty people in the room, and there's no way to talk, so it's... like... very bad.*

A22: *Yes, it would just be about the subject [the conversation]. And that would be more of a stimulus, because people must be encouraged to read. I think it's very important...*

A15: *Yeah, the thing has to be collective. Everything is cooler with the group. Everything in group. Like... he has his book there, right? Alright... Like, if he and I... I'll give you an example of the book we read: there comes a time when, like... Captain America and the group split up. It's cool that, in the whole world, there is no, like ... hero and villain there ... each one is on the side they find it's the most right.*

A16: *Yes, with different thoughts.*

Researcher: *Ah, I see ... You compare the readings, the interpretations ...*

A16: *Yes ... we tell everything we read and see, who is the villain and who is the good guy.*

[...]

A22: *In my opinion, sharing everyone's ideas, I think we build a system, mold some better idea to understand the story.*

The reading practice in the group contributed to the enjoyment of the text, confirming that the pleasure of reading can and should be taught at school. In the aforementioned dialogue, the desire to read arises because of the collective stimulus. Through the game, students achieved the pleasure of overcoming, together, the difficulties inherent in the literary text, the pleasure of feeling belonging to a community of readers (COLOMER, 2009), hence the statement that everything is more fun in groups, in addition being more fluid. The shared reading, according to the participants, also favored the expression and organization of thought, an effect demonstrated in the example given by the students, who put human complexity into debate when they questioned who is the hero and who is the villain in the “civil war” between Marvel characters.

We were also able to observe the benefits of sharing during the campaigns, when the participants experienced the story “The Fortune Teller” (Machado de Assis) transposed to RPG and made interpretations of it, but without escaping the coherence established by the original text, all built in the collective. The three teams we organized managed to anticipate the plot just by reading the characters' files and sharing their information with colleagues. Upon reading certain information about her role, such as being a “needy wife,” the participant already inferred that there was a husband and possibly a lover in the story. Afterwards, he divulged the characteristic to the group, to which his colleagues returned with the exposure of their own attributes, confirming the hypotheses of the player who predicted the plot.

It is worth remembering, before proceeding with the analysis of the campaign, that the plot of “The Fortune Teller” is based on a love triangle formed by Vilela, his friend, Camilo, and Rita, his wife. At a certain point in the narrative, Rita, distressed by the situation of adultery, consults a fortune teller, and later exposes the results of that encounter to her lover. In a second moment, it is Camilo who consults the fortune teller, leaving the session very confident, which leads him to believe in his friend's ignorance of the adultery. In the end, however, contrary to expectations, Vilela kills his wife and lover inside his own home, showing that he knew he was betrayed. It is an almost cliché plot, because it is based on the love triangle, but it reserves

surprises, as the narrator plays some tricks on the reader, by giving “false hopes” of a “happy” outcome, with the union of lovers, without the risk of her husband’s disapproval. Thus, what appears, initially, as a basic narrative, proves to be quite complex throughout the story, especially as the characters’ behavior becomes better known. Such complexity can only be noticed, however, in a reading experience or, as we could see, through the experience with *RPG*.

An example of this occurred in the first *RPG* campaign, still at the time of the instructions, without anyone having any information about the story:

A15 (*Vilela* role): *Wow, I have 14 in firearms! (referring to his points on the character sheet).*

Teacher: *Yes, there will be the moment of the firearm, which you can use, if you want ...*

A15 (*Vilela's* role): *Oow! (very excited).*

A22 (role of *Rita*): *I am sure that you will point this gun at me. I am, for sure!*

A18 (role of *Camilo*): *Or is it me (meaning that he would be shot).*

A15 (*Vilela* role): *My goal will be to separate you (Rita), man!*

A22 (*Rita's* role): *But if I separate from you, you lose your honor ... because you separated from your wife ... What will happen? He (pointing to the student who plays Camilo) will try to seduce me, so I will act against you (pointing to the student who plays Vilela, already thinking about the strategy for the game). Teacher, we're already philosophizing, and the game hasn't even started!*

In the excerpt above, from the information about the firearm, it is observed that the students interact in order to infer the role of the object among the three characters they represent. In the dialogue, they launch hypotheses still based on cliché plots, but already being configured as anticipation strategies, so common and even essential to the verbal text reader. Such action reveals the potential of the game as a strategy for developing fundamental procedures for reading. The cut proves, again, the effectiveness of the shared reading defended by Colomer (2009), because the whole process took place collectively, through the dialogue between the participants. According to the author, “reading is always related in some way to shared activities,” since “educational reflection has already pointed out that the feeling of belonging to an ‘interpretive community’ is the basic mechanism for learning to enjoy literary forms that are more elaborate” (p. 148). In the case of the campaign developed, it is possible to observe, already in this brief dialogue, the involvement of the participants, as, together, in a collaborative attitude, they compose their hypotheses of reading.

In addition, we verified the occurrence: of *ilinx*, in the ecstasy of the participants; the immediate immersion in the “magic circle”, starting from *mimicry*, when the speech already begins in the first person and the participants automatically put on the moral values of the time (honor vs. dishonor - divorce); the *playing* and the *game*, observed in the affection shown by the players, by the involvement in the story, at the same time that they tried to follow the coherence imposed by the narrative woven in the group. The same process was repeated, with some variations, in all campaigns.

Following the reading of the sheets, an emotional bond was established between the players and the characters that belonged to them. Below, the transcription of speeches in different campaigns, but referring to the same character, *Rita*:

A14: *I am perfect for this character. (Campaign 3)*

A22: *Guys, I suck. (Campaign 1)*

Note the degree of connection between the reader-players and the text, in the diverse reactions to the same character, in the rejection of one and identification of the other. This experimentation of freedom for the reader’s subjectivity demonstrates how much the game can mediate reading and what other methodological paths the teacher can follow in literary education, as opposed to the usual “book test,” in

which the student only has space to expose protagonist names or other superficial elements of the plot. Furthermore, it also explains the complexity of the text-reader relationship, as it develops through identification processes, which can lead to a more or less fluid reading, depending on the subject-reader position in relation to the work, as seen in the statements of A14 and A22.

In the focus group, after participating in *RPG* campaigns, students externalized their positive impressions of being able to dialogue with the text, and intuitively verbalized the concepts of reader-character and text-reading, by Barthes (2004):

A15: It's just that in the game, we kind of incorporate the character, you kind of ... you feel like a character. The choice you make will interfere in the future of the story. This is kind of cool! This is very fine!

A22: You don't start reading and interpreting, you start creating.

A14: Ah, it depends on the person. She (pointing to A19), for example, is used to reading, so ...

A19: It is like this: there is the main character [in the book] and I become the main character; I'm reading, it seems that it happens to me, that's why I love books ...

A14: That's what she said ... She has read since she was a child. We didn't. When you read you are forced, without giving in ...

In general, all students reveal a very positive perception of the game, insofar as they feel active, which can be noticed in the words they use to express this feeling: “incorporate” (A15), “create” (A22), “I turn”, in the sense of becoming, (A19), “it happens to me” (A19), “surrender” (A14). The last speech also signals one of the major problems in the teaching of literary reading in basic education: the obligation without accompaniment and without affectivity. The students themselves are able to perceive that the readers linked, in some way, to literature, are those who are more easily immersed in the text, due to the repertoire they already have. They also perceive how the game awakens their protagonism and places them in the position of subjects in their readings, which should also happen in the face of the book. All this methodological work and listening to the students' speeches showed the flaws in the usual ways of working with literature at school, leaving students to the obligation of a reading with which they never had contact, to then be evaluated without any consideration of its subjectivity or the multisignification of the literary text, as we have already discussed in the first section of this article.

As for the role of *RPG* as a motivator for reading, we had a positive response of approximately 20% of the group. That is, only a few students sought the tale on their own. The others signaled their desire to read it, but they did not succeed, according to them, because there was little time between the campaigns and the focus group, in addition to being in tests at school⁷. This was the dialogue with the readers of the story:

Teacher / researcher: For those who read, what did you think?

A14: I thought the ending was too heavy ...

A19: I was thinking: oh no, it will be that little love or each one will go to their own corner ... No. The way, like, he opens the door, like, the woman is dead! I was like, Oh My Gooooood!!! I was really scared!

A1: Ah, it's a little bit like our ending. You died!

A19: Yeah, I died! (laughs).

Teacher / researcher: And why did you try to read the story? What did you want to find in the story?

A19: Well, I liked the game so much that, as you said it was based on that story, I was curious. You put so much mystery at the end that I said: wow, I have to know! And each one gave a story, a different ending and I said: how is the ending really?

A14: I saw that there was a lot of possibility, you know? We made a different ending and I realized that there was a lot of possibilities.

⁷ The application of the game and the realization of the focus group occurred shortly after the end of occupations of school spaces by students, in the last two months of 2016, in protest against the Federal Government's “Innovative High School Program”. Therefore, the calendar was overdue and the evaluations accumulated. This, according to the students themselves, became an obstacle to the fulfillment of any activity that was not mandatory, as is the case of the post-game reading that we proposed in the story.

At first, there is an expectation in relation to the original plot, possibly based on the students' experience, since they do not belong to violent communities and have very quiet personal histories. The tale, however, extrapolates their horizons of expectations and makes them frightened by the outcome, not only of history, but of an immoral relationship, in terms of our society. Even though the players gave tragic endings to the characters, they did not expect this to be fulfilled in canonical literature. It is as if the "ugly things" only happen in real life or in widely traded texts, like the *best sellers* that young people usually read. The fact that a text by Machado de Assis ends in such a bloody way breaks the traditional view of "happy ending", held by those who still have a naive knowledge of the classics.

Furthermore, a very positive point of the intervention was that the game contributed to the deconstruction of the superficial concept that non-proficient readers tend to have, that literature only admits a single meaning to be interpreted. It is observed, in the statements of A14 and A19 (and in the facial expressions of the others), the surprise and enthusiasm with the discovery that the literary text, like the game, brings countless possibilities of meaning.

In preparation for the students to read the original work, the *RPG* also fulfilled its role, as we read in the reports below:

A19: The game makes it easier, because, as we have already played, the context of the story is already in our head, so, like, certain metaphorical language, which we would not understand, we already understood, because, in the game, we already went through it ...

A14: And in the game we had images, these things. And there [in the story], if you told me to read it and try to talk about it, then I wouldn't like it, I would say a few things, because I wouldn't understand anything.

We found that many of the difficulties in dealing with the canonical text, such as understanding the socio-historical context and the lexicon, are remedied during the game, enabling the vertical enjoyment of the work, at the time of literary reading. However, perhaps more interesting than our finding about the need to build a certain repertoire to cross the reading of the canonical text, is the fact that the student can see himself in this process. That is, the statements above show the student's perception of his own demands in relation to more complex readings, fundamentally linked to the knowledge of the historical context and the literary language itself. In this understanding, it is possible to refer to at least two gains in terms of their training as readers. The first refers to the construction of a less rigorous self-image of readers, because it involves the understanding that their difficulties are not personal failures, but the effect of a repertoire still under construction. The second concerns the demythification of the reading of the canonical literary text, understood, now, no longer as impossible, but as subordinated to the possession of a certain repertoire that can be constituted.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before concluding this discussion, we highlight that, in addition to the way we apply the methodology described, an alternative is to make the adaptation of the work part of the teaching process, bringing the responsibility for producing the material for the students themselves or for a group of frequent readers, who could take the position of Game Masters. If there are 10 students interested in literature, in a room of 40, it is already possible to form game groups, with the first ones being prepared, in a project outside school hours, to run the tables. In the case of a single longer work being done, it is still possible to take turns with the participants. More than one student can play the role of the same character in a campaign: while not acting, they watch the game to be able to act on their turn. Thus, everyone participates.

Another suggestion would be to propose that several works be read in the classroom and transformed into *RPGs*, after the teacher's instructions. Then, each group would play the production of colleagues. There is also the possibility for the teacher to remain responsible for selecting the work and making the material, giving a class on the rules of *RPG*, after which the students themselves would form their groups and choose their GMs. The room would also be divided into groups and the teacher would move from table to table making the necessary mediations. All models, in some way, tend to contribute to strengthening students' autonomy. Anyway, each class may demand a different way of practicing this methodology, but all of them are able to do the work.

The path experienced by students throughout the *RPG* campaigns described in this article provided several results both to students and to our understanding of the processes that involve reading and how the school can act to provide quality access to reading of the literary text.

The students' reports about their experiences with *RPG* express, as seen, the effectiveness of the methodology presented here as a gateway to a specific form of language, in general, little present in everyday life, thus enabling the expansion of knowledge their own language and the appropriation of the cultural capital to which they are entitled. In addition, such dialogues made subjectivation processes common, common to games and reading, which allowed us to reiterate our conception that they are fundamental in the path of the formation of the reader and the understanding of literary language.

Regardless of how the teacher chooses to apply the game, we can say that *RPG* is not just a motivator, as are dynamics and conventional theatrical games about a given work. It is a complex and useful mediator. For the teacher: observing the way students read, so that they can better understand the potential readers they have in the classroom and, therefore, reformulate the didactic-pedagogical processes in literary reading classes; for the student, an affective and cognitive approach between reader and literary text, so that he can follow, more substantially, the path of reading formation, and prove that reading itself is a plurisignificant game.

Clearly, playful practice is not a substitute for books, but a way to build or recover the student's affection for literature and to provide a collective preliminary reading, inserting it in a community of readers. Although the initial objective was the teaching of literary reading, we also verified the development of other skills, such as dialogue, the negotiation of meanings with other readers, the expansion of vocabulary and contextual knowledge of the work, among others. More than a motivational tool, *RPG* functioned as a basis for readings considered difficult by adolescents, as a further step in the proximal zone of the mature enjoyment of the literary text, on the path of reading training.

In short, we can conclude that non-proficient readers are able to enter the reading game, following their rules (*game; agon*) and effectively get involved with the text (*playing; mimicry*), but they need adequate mediation and a methodology that embrace all the complexity of the reading phenomenon and the reader himself, considered here under the concept of real reader (JOUVE, 2002), in all his subjectivity. And with the *RPG*, there is a significant initial contact of the student/player with the canonical works, not only through the usual fragments or abstracts worked in the classroom, but with the student experiencing them, interpreting them, filling in their gaps, "playing" with the plots and making as many other possible readings of the story, with autonomy of reflection and symbolic appropriation of the narrative.

With the application of this methodology, a first step was taken towards the redistribution of cultural capital claimed by Pierre Bourdieu (1979) and Antonio Candido (1995) so many decades ago.

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