

The most interesting session that I attended at the NAI National Workshop was called the “Ecology of D&D.” The presenters discussed how they adapted the classic role-playing game of Dungeons & Dragons into a nature-based RPG for a high school club in the Three Rivers Park District.

They used the local habitat and overlaid it with a fantasy theme. In one scenario, the creek had been contaminated and the water nymphs were dying. The kids used role-playing mechanics to work through possible explanations and solutions to the problem. They did this by pairing together the RPG play with real-world scientific techniques.

For example, they conduct an aquatic macroinvertebrate inventory and used this knowledge to evaluate the stream health in two different forks of the creeks. This allowed them to follow the source of the contamination upstream to its source: a dump site for potion ingredients.

Each club session begins with teaching/exploring something that may be of use in the game. The kids learn things like how to use a map and compass, archery skills, or wild edible plant ID. The skill taught in a given week is often dictated by the course that game play took during the preceding week (a well-run RPG is open-ended... the gamemaster needs to have basic world creation and overall goals in mind, but they cannot dictate the decisions that the players make – and that’s what drives the narrative of a game). The kids may have decided, for example, that they need to fix a broken wagon wheel; so, at the beginning of the next session, they learn basic tree ID skills and the qualities of wood, so that they can select the best one to use in the repair.

I love the concept of creating a fantasy overlay for a real-world habitat! It encourages people to develop knowledge about your local plants, animals, geology, and more, while using critical thinking skills that can later be applied to real-world issues.

A couple of existing RPGs were recommended by some of the attendees as good starter games that could be adapted and built upon: Humblewood, Coyote & Crow, and Hot Springs Island. There was also a recent Kickstarter for an reference book that can be used in any RPG system, the Herbalist Primer (the same people are also developing one right now that’s based on geology).

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