Running an Introductory Roleplaying Game for Kids

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A Jedi Knight and his assigned clone trooper companions fight against enemy battle droids to take control of the bridge of the Separatist warship. Photo: Ryan Carlson

How do you break the ice with kids and create their first introduction into roleplaying games?

As a GeekDad that has been roleplaying since I was about 12 years old, I have been anticipating an introduction to roleplaying for my three daughters. Sharing my love for a game that rewards the use of imagination, math skills, and creativity sounds like a good thing, right? The struggle geek parents generally have are in relation to the timing of when to introduce a roleplaying game and just as importantly, how to introduce it.

My opportunity to break new ground in the roleplaying world with the next generation of young gamers was recently presented to me. Recently, my wife and I gave our friends a much-needed date night by watching their kids. Our friends have four kids (ages 2 through 9) and my wife and I have three kids (ages 6 months through 6 years). My primary job for the evening was to manage the nine year old boy since the rest of the kids would happily play with one another or were young enough to stay out of trouble. The nine year old boy was older than all of the rest of the kids and an avid board-gamer, so it seemed like the perfect opportunity to introduce him to a roleplaying game.

In my preparation for the evening of entertainment I went through the following motions having previously run introductory roleplaying game demos at the local friendly game store (LFGS) back in college and as a volunteer GM at gaming conventions.

Step 1: Gauge Appropriateness and the Game Setting

It should be apparent, but you don't want to be the adult that introduces mature themes like violence, death, magic, or supernatural horror to somebody else's child. Making this decision without foreknowledge of their current parent-approved experiences might be rather difficult. When in doubt, get permission if it's not your child.

Since I didn't want to be irresponsible, I acted on information that I had gleaned from several days before our game night. I knew that father and son had just started watching The Clone Wars animated Star Wars series on Cartoon Network together. This information had provided me with a solid foundation in which to build upon. The beauty of The Clone Wars era is that the wholesale destruction of battle droids at the hands of Jedi and clone troopers cleanly sidesteps the moral implications of murder and the dismemberment of living beings. The Clone Wars setting would allow my young padawan to save the galaxy with a lightsaber and blaster against an army of lifeless robots.

Step 2: Oversimplify the Rules

The age of your audience will significantly impact the level of complexity that you'd want to use for your introduction to roleplaying games. I decided to skip character attributes and skills altogether in favor of simplicity, rewarding creativity over dice rolls (which is a lesson most GMs should take to heart for games of all ages). I was able to draw upon my vast experience with different game systems to find a few mechanics that seemed to work really well. In

hindsight I feel that True 20 by Green Ronin and Hackmaster by Kenzer & Company both influenced the following rules.

My Sample Generic Adventure Game Rules Summary

The primary mechanic that I used utilized the iconic d20 (20-sided dice). Every action would either involve a quick contest (dice-off), or the action resolved automatically if it was a good idea. The reason for eliminating too many dice rolls is because this introductory game would be about fostering the child's imagination through storytelling and simply being the facilitator of cinematic action. It's about the players making choices and seeing what happens as a result. Dice rolls are there to help create tension at appropriate times throughout the adventure.

Quick Contest: A player will roll a d20 and adds any appropriate modifier or bonus to the roll and (you) the game master will roll a d20 and add any appropriate modifiers. Whomever ends up with the higher roll after modifiers wins the quick contest. My general rule of thumb is that I only ask for a quick contest when it's the players character performing an action in opposition of something that can actively resist the action.

Simple Tasks and Difficult Tasks: If I wanted to make something really easy or convey a huge penalty for good or bad choices on the part of the player, instead of assigning negative numbers I just change the type of dice rolled. So if the player gets the jump on the bad guys by being sneaky, I roll their initiative on a d12 (twelve sided die) and the players get to use the d20. Initiative is the quick contest to see who gets to go first when fighting is about to start. By changing the die-type it still allows for a chance of failure, but helps stack the odds when appropriate.

Attack and Defense Values (Player Characters): Players will have "Attack" and "Defense" clearly marked on their character sheet with a numerical bonus. Since the goal is to be an introduction to roleplaying and not a tactical simulation, I recommend giving the players a score between +5 to +10. This split in scores helps translate a variety of character archetypes, such as armored fighters and nimble swashbuckling pirates.

Bad Guy Bonus: I realize that the name isn't terribly clever or creative, nor is it my implication that all non-players are bad guys. But it's fun to say out loud and it's a very simple mechanic for an introductory game. The larger the threat, the higher the BGB. The BGB is used for nearly every quick-contest, so finding a way to get players to make smart choices and reduce the roll from a d20 + BGB to rolling a d12 +BGB becomes very important. I recommend asking the players to describe what they are doing and how it might give them an advantage over the bad guys. Be prepared to hear some really creative answers!

Example. A Separatist Battle Droid has a BGB of +2 because they are just that bad. Whereas a Droid Destroyer (the rolling droids with deflector shields and heavy blasters for arms) is high on the threat meter and has a +10 BGB!

Hit Points: This mechanic is going to be familiar to most people and the number of starting hit points for player characters can vary. In a modern setting with no magical healing, 40-60 hit

points feels right. Whereas fantasy settings with magic potions and healing magic, having players start with a lower hit point value will increase the inherent value of treasure chests that contain healing potions.

When a player or bad guy reaches 0 or fewer hit points, they are no longer able to act. Their actual status is open to interpretation for each game since it could reflect sleeping, unconsciousness, dying, or actual death. I usually explain in my games that if you reach 0 hit points, it means you've been knocked out and will be put into the jail by the bad guys (leaving the players to find a way to escape).

Causing Damage: Where there are hit points, there are clearly ways of taking them away. I use d6's (six-sided dice) for rolling damage. Basic attacks do 1d6 (1 six-sided die) such as a punch, kick, or thrown object. Weapons do 2d6 (2 six-sided dice added together) such as swords, lightsabers, and blasters. Whereas big things like explosions, big guns, and getting rammed by vehicles or the horns of a charging beast will be 3d6 or more damage.

Minions & Bosses: Remember the part about this being an exercise in storytelling? Well, we've all watched the movies in which the minor bad guys don't stand a chance! To keep things moving along when a player character scores a hit against a minor bad guy (like a battle droid) it's removed from the battle with no need to roll damage. I find that the use of minions helps keep the excitement level up because the odds are stacked in the player's favor. When it only takes one successful hit to take out a minion you can have a lot of fun describing the cinematic action. Whether the bad guy is chopped in half, knocked unconscious, or falls to the ground in an explosion of robotic limbs and a spray of hydraulic fluid which now covers the walls in an oily residue, you get to focus on making the player feel like they are a hero. I assign hit points to bad guys with a BGB of around 8+ since it is at this point it might take a few hits to put it down and having the occasional boss fight and mini-boss fight is all part of a fairly standard formula in games of all kinds.

The Golden Rule: It should go without saying, but the golden rule in this case is to have fun. You do whatever it takes to keep things interesting and moving the action along. The dice-rolling should create an element of excitement, not an exercise in tedium. If rolling a quick-contest for every single attack drags things out too much, allow players to come up with creative maneuvers that can hit multiple bad guys at a time. Sword combos that strike multiple foes within reach, arrows that can pass through bad guys that are in a straight line, or rapid-fire blasters that can target up to 3 bad guys that are standing close to one another. Don't let a strict set of rules limit your choices, this isn't a linear video game with the number of options being limited to the button and trigger combinations on a control pad. Reward player imagination and creativity; the dice are just that random element to keep things from becoming too predictable.

Step 3: Character Creation

I don't know about you, but character creation was always so much fun. I still have notebooks filled with old roleplaying characters from early in my gaming career. As the host of the game you can either provide pre-generated character options if the game involves using a formal rules system or you can have your players help make key decisions about their character.

My conversation for my Star Wars icebreaker game went something like this.

Me: "So do you want to be a Jedi Knight like Anakin and Obi-Wan? Perhaps a soldier with heavy weapons, a bounty hunter, or a sneaky spy guy?"

9-Year Old: "If I'm a Jedi, I get a lightsaber right?"

Me: (grin) "True. You can even choose the color."

9-Year Old: "Cool! Since I think red is already for the bad guys, I'll pick green!"

Me: "Great choice! Now it's time to review your character sheet and discuss what these numbers are for. But before we can move onto that we need to pick out the name for your Jedi."

Step 4: Pick a Character Name

Every hero needs a name and this is where the imagination comes into play. Let them use any name they want, even if it's silly. Letting a kid choose their own characters name will be more memorable for them. The hero in this tale was "The Thing, Jedi Knight." Sure, the name was a bit silly but what do you expect from a young boy? My young gaming padawan grinned every time an NPC (non-playing character) he was interacting with used the name he picked out.

Step 5: Tell a Story

The very nature of what makes a roleplaying game so unique and interesting for kids is that they get to play an active role in telling a story. The story does not need to meet any literary standards, it just needs to be simple enough that kids can follow it. The story that I had created involved a Separatist warship that was bringing spare droid parts to the front lines of a battle. A single Jedi star fighter outfitted with a stealth emitter could sneak in undetected, disable the engines, and drop the shields from the bridge. It felt a lot like a Dora the Explorer adventure with very clear milestones established from the beginning. We had made a mantra of the mission goals that after being repeated over and over again, the young boy felt that he was taking ownership over what was happening. Board the ship, kill the engines, drop the shields, call in the clone troopers. Whether the quest is finding a lost pet in a dungeon, saving a princess from pirates, or fighting robots in space, it all comes down to telling stories.

Step 6: Create Opportunities to Win

Rewarding creativity and using your imagination are key factors in making this a fun memorable experience. The very first icebreaker game should be about highlighting cinematic action and memorable (and silly) character interactions. If things seem to be losing momentum don't be afraid to make quick changes to the story to bring the game back on track. Kids won't be bothered by overtly convenient turns of events. Asteroids that fall from the sky to splat the bad guys or being saved by friend at the last minute can actually be pretty fun if done right. As long as the kids' characters are at the center of attention, that is all that really matters developmentally. Let's face it, you've already got a vast mental catalog of children's stories, television shows, and

movies in your brain. It's time to put that knowledge of story, adversity, setting the stage for right and wrong, and the inevitable happy ending in which the day is won and the heroes have a party. Set the players up to win and always be ready to make the appropriate changes to your story if necessary.

Wrapping Up

I've been doing a lot of thinking and looking into what other parents have been doing to introduce roleplaying games to their kids. Seems I'm not the only geek parent that has had the same idea to create a simple story and provide a basic set of rules in which to work from. I'm now aware of several published sets of rules that are available for purchase on the internet in PDF format. The first is RPG Kids and it was written by a veteran gamer so he could play with his own children. A similar story is shared by Ben Garvey, who with the help of his 4-year old daughter created Kids Dungeon Adventure. This is a clever game geared towards younger kids with a set of rules I plan to try with my 4 and 6 year old daughters in the near future. Ben was interviewed and featured in GeekDad back in 2011 by Dave Banks about Kids Dungeon Adventure. The gist is that you build your dungeon out of the stuff you have lying around in your playroom and send your kids' favorite toys on an adventure to fight against silly monsters and collect edible treasure and other small prizes.

So if you're ready to take up the gauntlet and have some mini-geeks that are primed to give roleplaying a try, just know that many geek parents have tried and succeeded. If it wasn't for my friends dad back when I was a wee lad, my friends and I would never have started our regular roleplaying game. To be honest, we spent more time in our own imagination than we did reading the rulebooks. It was that early storytelling experience that ended up shaping much of where I am now today. A love for literature, statistics, strategy, and history all followed as a result of my experiences with roleplaying as a child.

If this quest sounds like something your willing to accept, start with these basics and work your way up from there. In my experience if you can run a game for adults, you can run a game for kids. You just might find that although there are fewer tactics and rules there will probably be less whining playing with the kids.

Game on!