

# Historical reality vs anachronistic fantasy: The history educators' perspective on tabletop RPGs

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## ABSTRACT

Tabletop role playing games (TTRPGs) offer players the possibility to create and enact the actions of a character in a fictional story-world. TTRPG are great for immersing players in the game world with proven potential for transformative learning, as they promote perspective taking and a deeper understanding of the storyworld. In this work we aim to explore TTRPGs as an activity supporting the education of history in secondary education, by recording the view of educators on the benefits and challenges of the game. History teachers play a key role in teaching students how to examine historical phenomena and recognize the importance of history in understanding the societies of today. We interviewed 7 educators to explore how they promote historical empathy in their lessons and their views on the potential of TTRPGs as educational tools. Our results indicate a positive outlook by educators regarding the implementation of TTRPGs in the classroom, also discussing challenges such as the use of violence, historical inaccuracy and anachronism. The findings are hopeful in terms of the potential acceptance of the game genre by the teachers and they can be used as the initial step towards guidelines for a TTRPG game design tailored to the needs of secondary education.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• General and reference; • Cross-computing tools and techniques; • Empirical studies;

## KEYWORDS

Tabletop role playing games, History education, User study

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games (RPGs), as “the multiple styles of play activities revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world” have turned the human practice of role-play into a tabletop game activity enjoyed by millions [1]. The term “RPGs” today refers to a variety of games that allow the players to create their own identity in the game and experience the game storyworld through the eyes and character traits of this identity. In tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs), players have the possibility to create and enact the actions of a character in a fictional game world, most often being collocated around a table in TTRPGs or, in some cases, even connected on-line. Game play is managed by one or more human “game masters” (GMs), who act both as storytellers and facilitators. They create the story world and assume the roles of the non-player characters (NPCs). The game world, including player and non-player characters and their actions, are constituted by talk between GMs and players, often with supporting props like character sheets, miniatures, rule books, or maps.

The potential of TTRPGs to promote learning and personal transformation has long been recognized [2, 3]. Playing a role gives the chance to live different lives and have experiences unlike the ones one might have on their own. Participants will remember their experiences as if they have happened to them, in a form of personal storytelling [3]. Daniau [4] proposes a learning framework for RPGs based on the different levels of reality experienced by participants, namely: the character, the player, the person, and the human. The “Character” aspect refers to learning themes related both to the story, atmosphere, and shared experience as well as the proposed storyworld, including, geography, history, population, and cultures. “Player” focuses on essential or basic skills relevant to communication, planning and decision making, whereas “Person” refers to soft skills related to small-group dynamics, role taking, desire to discover, critical thinking, collaborative creation, distancing, and empathizing. Finally, she defines the “Human” dimension, which includes skills emerging from transformative learning, such as the evolution of meaning and maturation through awareness, emancipation, empowerment, and community [4].

According to [5] TTRPGs have the potential to offer meaningful learning experiences for the education of history by promoting the development of historical empathy [6], composed of three main elements: historical contextualization, perspective taking and affective

connection. In this context, a TTRPG may offer the representation of historical environments populated by historical characters where the player/reenactor looks through the eyes of the enacted role and feels as though experiences in the game happened to them (experience taking). In line with Daniau’s framework [4], the “Character” dimension of the TTRPG directly addresses the objective of historical contextualization, whereas the “Player” and “Person” contribute to perspective taking. Finally, the “Human” dimension may promote a deeper affective connection with history, transforming the player’s beliefs and values and contributing to a deeper understanding of human nature, grounded on the history of human civilization. More specifically, a TTRPG may offer: (1) representation of historical environments populated by historical characters. (2) first-person audience, which makes the player/reenactor look through the eyes of the enacted role and feel as though experiences in the game happened to them (experience taking) [7] (3) affordances for meaningful engagement with tangible and/or intangible heritage [8] and (4) instilling in the players particular values, beliefs, mindsets, and behaviors that promote empathy for people of other historical contexts.

## 1.1 Challenges in the application of TTRPG for education

There are, however, a number of significant challenges to realizing the transformative learning potential of TTRPGs for the education of history. The authors in [5] refer to the complexity and long duration of the game amongst the main ones: On one hand, “the game master needs to conceptualize and prepare the story, setting and non-player characters, through long preparation and research”, and also “adjust the story to the characters the players selected”, having a deep pre-existing knowledge of the rule system, for the game to run smoothly. The players need time “to understand the setting and the rules and create and adjust their character”. So, setting up a TTRPG with a group composed of inexperienced players is by itself a challenge. Additionally, the long-term play of TTRPG, normally spanning across many sessions of several hours each, to complete an adventure campaign “is one of the main elements that make the game so immersive and realize its strong learning and transformative potential”, however, at the same time make it challenging to set it up as an educational activity. Another important issue when attempting to transfer TTRPGs to an educational setting is “the challenge of tackling difficult themes”. As an example, violence is often an important part of a TTRPG adventure. The degree and way violence is represented in the game in an educational setting needs to be very carefully considered trying to achieve “the right balance between creating a challenging setting and overwhelming or shocking the players”, which, in this case, may be teenagers or younger children.

Another challenge identified in [5] is relevant to “the crucial need to leverage historical accuracy with player engagement” and finding the “equilibrium between presenting historical evidence, interpreting, understanding, and disseminating unbiased and multi-voiced aspects of the past in a considerate and respectful way to the individual players” while avoiding “possible negative psychological effects”. Leaving aside historical reenactment practices, which

are, predominantly, according to Mochocki [8] scientific, history-dominated and accurate, TTRPG storyworlds based on historical settings exhibit a varying degree of four possible dominants: history, fabulation, legend, and fantasy. More specifically, according to [8], “history-dominated historical storyworld shows the past according to professional historians. In its magical variant, it shows how – according to said historians – the past appeared to its superstitious inhabitants. A fabulation-dominated historical storyworld shows what the past looks like in popular historical fiction (either magical or realistic) and the legend-dominated historical storyworld shows what the past looked like according to collective oral tradition. A fantasy-dominated one is nominally set in “a historical period with generally accurate real-world geography, but with no attention paid to a believable representation of historical cultures”.

In reality it can be really challenging for a TTRPG storyworld and play to be purely history dominated, i.e., historically accurate and without any trace of anachronism or magical elements. This is a crucial distinction between play and re-enactment. Having agency within the game means that the players need to role play a character that they themselves have conceptualized in a storyworld that provides enough options to ensure realism and immersion. The players are not asked to enact a specific script and thus recreate a historical event, but they are rather given the opportunity to operate as characters in a specific historical setting. In this sense, the storyworld should be inclusive, allowing players to develop their character and be represented in the game irrespective of gender, race or other such factors and (2) provide diverse ways for the players to act and affect the storyworld through their participation in the adventure. These conditions may directly lead to anachronism and historical inaccuracy being introduced in the storyworld. These elements are certainly acceptable in TTRPG play for entertainment purposes. However, can they be considered as acceptable in a TTRPG-based activity for history education? Could there be a balance between myth, legend and historical reality for an educational TTRPG?

In this work we attempt to explore the educators’ perspective on the use of TTRPG for history education. We start from the objectives and challenges of teaching history and examine how these align with a TTRPG approach. We primarily focus on historical accuracy and anachronism, as well as the use of violence and fantasy and magic elements in gaming, as they are amongst the main sources of skepticism for adventure and RPG games for history education. To this end, we start with examining relevant literature from the field of historical research and education as well as gaming, presented in Section 2. As a next step we proceeded with a user study through interviews, to record the perspective of 7 educators on the use of TTRPG for history education. The methodology of this study is presented in Section 3 and the results in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the findings and concludes the paper.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Anachronism in the education of history is a long debated subject. An anachronism is an “error of placing a person, thing, or event into an inappropriate historical period or context” [9]. However, anachronism can also include the projection of modern views and concepts into the past (“whig history”) [9]. Anachronism (obvious / non-obvious) has a negative connotation regarding history, and the

consensus among scholars is to avoid it as much as possible, however it seems to be more acceptable in arts [10]. Anachronism falls under the general issue of the interpretation of history. Hermeneutics as a theory and method of interpretation is important for understanding history in all its aspects. Hermeneutics refers to “the theory and practice of interpretation, where interpretation involves an understanding that can be justified. It describes both a body of historically diverse methodologies for interpreting texts, objects, and concepts, and a theory of understanding” [11]. Theoretically, it can be examined through a number of aspects, mainly through (1) the study of the pattern and rhythm of history, and (2) the study of the driving forces of history [12].

The interpretation of history is therefore a complex matter that requires a careful and specific approach, especially in education and pedagogy. While historians bring together text and context in a meaningful dialogue about the past, students tend to learn about history as a “finished product” rather than an “active process” [13]. The subject of bias in history has troubled many scholars. Bias is formed through the inclination or prejudice for or against a person or group of people, which may or may not be based on facts and knowledge [14, 15]. The identification of bias in history interpretation lies between two opposite and mutually contradictory beliefs: the belief in a single coherent truth and the belief in the impossibility of any knowledge, underwritten by relativism [16]. Ditley in [17] acknowledges that “the essence of interpretation consists in reconstructing the world as a living act of its author . . . it is the task of interpretation to place the reconstruction of scientific footing by anchoring it in the nature of the productive act in relation to language and the artistic form”.

Interpretation of history doesn't stop at the historical information but can extend to mythological texts, myths or fairy tales, which are one of the most common and ancient methods of storytelling that give insight into the experiences of humankind. It is known that fairytales and fantasy novels have didactic benefits especially for children. Fairy tales and fantasy stories usually provide moral education and can be one of the most impactful media used for character building [18–20]. The use of fantasy and historical novels can be seen as an “escape” from school [21]. Reading fantasy novels provides not only an insight into how children learn but according to [22] we can extract a 2-stage learning process from it: “readers enter—like infants—an unfamiliar world, readers—like the protagonists—must ask the right questions in order to make sense of the world”. The learning transpires while children are invested in the power of the book or story and takes place during the process of making sense of the unfamiliar through the recognition of familiar patterns, repetition and experiment [21]. Historical novels like fantasy can help children understand how events came to be, however they add other benefits as well. Fisher [23] distinguishes two types of historical fiction: novels with real historical figures and novels with wholly imaginary characters. Historical novels (for children) can be described as a “cultural form of remembrance” [24]. Novels using historical events, transmit social norms and values, which can be of the time represented on one hand and on the other, of the time of the writing onto the time represented [24]. Having relatable characters and situations, interesting stories and creative outlooks on historical events, historical novels allow children to approach history in a manner that fits their own educational needs

[25]. As Finch [26] mentions “with fiction we can see deeper into the human intricacies of the events of the past, and this gives us a more personal sense of understanding” [26]. But can the implementation of fiction be considered acceptable, since in the teaching of history emphasis is given on accuracy of facts?

The challenge of coping with fictional or historically inaccurate elements in a historical setting can become even more pronounced in the context of games. In RPGs, these elements can be introduced in the design of the storyworld and story, by the game designer and the GM in the case of TTRPGs. However, players themselves through their agency may also introduce them as well, resulting in a spectrum of approaches to historical accuracy, as Mochoki's [8] four dominants, history, fabulation, legend, and fantasy, in historical TTRPGs can attest to.

The topic of violence in games, computer-based and tabletop, is also an important factor to be considered in an educational context. There is an on-going and still unresolved controversy on the correlation between the exposure to violence in computer games and aggressive behavior in adolescents [27]. There is a line of research [28–30] and others, suggesting violence and computer games indeed leads to increased aggression. However, a significant body of research suggest that this effect is minor [31, 32], taking into account not only the effect of publication bias in the aforementioned studies, but also the arguing that they do not take account other factors, including genetic predisposition to an antisocial personality and environmental factors, such as peer influence and family violence. This controversy has been reflected in the media for the past decades, affecting the public view of gaming in terms of accentuating its perceived negative effects.

On the other hand, the topic of violence is in fact a constant in the teaching of history. As Kellie Carter-Jackson [33] suggests “Students often complain that history is taught as a litany of battles, wars, campaigns, and struggles over power.” Researchers in educational theory have recognized the challenges of teaching the violent past and also examined ways to address these challenges [34]. In this sense, violence is already an integral part of human history and completely ignoring this fact would indeed lead to historical inaccuracy.

Although text and speech are the most prominent media of communicating the past in history classes, they are not the only legitimate media for such purposes [35]. Other legitimate types include documentaries, films, music, even games etc. According to McCall [35] a historical video game has to “begin at a clear point in real world history, and that history has to have a manifest effect on the nature of the game experience”. Video games follow two approaches in illustrating the past: games that take a realistic approach that focus on fictional characters who act in a historically accurate and documented setting (like a historical novel) and games that do not focus on showing how the past was exactly but communicating how the systems and the processes of the past functioned [35, 36]. The second approach is more conceptual and presents the past, underlying rule sets and systems with stylized and abstract symbols and graphics [36]. Other approaches include role playing techniques [1, 44–46], which are often used in informal education settings in the form of reenactments [8]. However, applications of TTRPG are very limited in education in general [47], mainly due to their inherent structure and complexity. One of the key

concerns of illustrating the past through other media other than a history book is indeed the concept of accuracy in relation to the represented history and cultural heritage. Historical accuracy and historical authenticity are two terms that have concerned many scholars. Accuracy refers to the extent to which a media's representation of the past is consistent with the available evidence, while authenticity relates to the verisimilitude of accuracy in a historical media, rather than the extent to which it actually resembles the past [37]. While accuracy can be measurable by comparing the details of the fictitious world with the details of historical research, authenticity is a more complex topic. In games, the concept of "historical authenticity," also known as "selective authenticity," involves blending historical representation with audiences' expectations to produce a historical experience that feels factual and generates immersive gameplay [38]. Inevitably, debates over the accuracy or authenticity lead back to the subjective nature of interpreting the historical event. However, a myth-based approach in games might be more "safe". Combining concepts of myth along with video games Todor [39] argues video games do indeed replicate mythical structures and the players themselves play a role in that myth propagation and transformation. The interactive nature of games and subsequent choices made by the player add a lot to the process of mythical alteration [39]. Chapman [36] acknowledged that since video games are popular cultural products, they are capable of meaningful engagements with the past and have the potential to determine and reflect how we collectively and individually think about, understand, negotiate, and talk about the past in the present.

### 3 USER STUDY METHODOLOGY

To go forward with the design of a TTRPG-based approach as an activity aligned with history education objectives, it is important to go beyond existing education theory and research, and consult with experienced educators. They will ultimately decide to adopt or reject such an approach in the classroom and they are in a position to report, firstly, the benefits, or lack thereof, of TTRPGs in the context of formal education, and, secondly, identify concrete challenges and shortcomings and propose possible solutions. To this end, we conducted a study based on semi-structured interviews. We aimed for a variety of expertise in our sample, in terms of familiarity with RPG in general and TTRPG in particular. The interview questionnaire was structured in 5 main sections: (a) Participant profile, with basic demographic information such as age and gender and gaming experience, (b) objectives, methods and challenges when teaching history, (c) attitudes towards the historical empathy model and concepts such as bias and multiperspectivity, (d) their perspective on RPGs and (e) the perceived potential of TTRPG, in terms of their benefits and drawbacks for use in a classroom, as well as the possible experiences of teachers who have already employed such approaches. The interview questionnaire can be found in [43]. For this study we decided to focus only on Greece and target the specific needs of the Greek educational system, where we plan to test a future TTRPG-based design.

An open invitation was sent, inviting history educators with experience in secondary education. The invitation was distributed through the authors' personal acquaintances that were educators, with the request to forward also to colleagues, (2) to two discord

servers dedicated to TTRPG, looking for educators which are also experienced TTRPG players or gamers in general.

We proceeded with individual interviews, which were conducted remotely at a pre-arranged date and time through a teleconferencing system, with seven of the educators that responded to the invitation. Three of the participants mentioned that they have used role playing activities in class. Gina specifically is an experienced psychodrama and sociodrama moderator and has applied relevant practices when teaching and Carter an experienced TTRPG gamer and game master. The participant profiles are as follows:

- Mina: age 36-45, 2 - 5 years of experience in history education, PhD in education, no experience in role playing or gaming
- Mona: age 46-55, more than 10 years of experience in history education, no experience in role playing or gaming
- Erica: age >65, more than 10 years of experience in history education and in literature education. Tutoring volunteer work in organizations for children, using role playing and dramaturgy-based activities
- Carter: age 46-55, more than 10 years of experience in history education, experienced TTRPG player and game master, experience in computer-based RPG and LARP
- Marissa: age >65, more than 10 years of experience in history education, author of books for education, tutor of younger educators, no experience in role playing or gaming
- Lucy: age >65, more than 10 years of experience in history education, no experience in role playing or gaming
- Gina: age 56-65, more than 10 years of experience in history education, role playing activities, live action role playing, experience in psychodrama and sociodrama

This research has been approved by the Ethics department of the Department of Informatics and Telecommunications of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

### 4 RESULTS

For the analysis of interviews we followed a purely qualitative approach, attempting to record different attitudes and opinions towards the main research questions of our study and to gain deeper insight as to the educator perspective towards the specific challenges for the inclusion of TTRPG in education.

#### 4.1 Perspectives on the education of history

History education presents some challenges on its own. To figure out more suitable approaches we could follow during the implementation of TTRPG in education, we first examined the perspectives of educators regarding teaching in a classroom, for the course of history or literature. One of the major challenges mentioned is the polarization and diversity of the overall student population in relation to their place of residence in Greece, which opens up the bitter discussion of what history should emphasize and whether, in this age, which is dominated by access to information, the subject of history has any standing at all. According to Maria K., the background of the students plays a major role in their ability to understand and interpret a historical event. Teaching about a specific event in a specific place (such as Kokkinia, where the subject of socialism is sensitive), shows that the past unquestionably rouses deep emotion.

The students' background knowledge is closely related to their previous studies, as well as the family and social environment. Schools in Greece are also characteristically different and diverse, depending upon their location and societal environment. Erica mentions some challenges might arise, regarding the understanding of texts, because each student has different ability and language levels, and since some words may not be known to them (eg foreign policy) they will face more difficulties in understanding the text and since texts are important in history, as the main media of communicating the past, they will have trouble regarding the comprehension of the historical event. Moreover, the education curriculum of primary and secondary education (learning subjects, goals, policies, books) is highly dependent on and determined by the IEP and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. This pressures schools to follow a rigid program and "takes away" any capabilities and liberties they could have otherwise, which forces educators to use more traditional approaches with little or no innovation. Educators also mentioned this lack of communication between schools and the aforementioned institutions creates many problems and unrealistic expectations.

However, all educators mention that the teaching of history is a fascinating subject not only because of the inherent interest of history but also because it promotes skills and knowledge that are truly useful to students and society. The topic of engaging students in the classroom was mentioned by all educators. All noted the challenge of keeping them curious, interested and engaged with the subject of history, because it requires building from prior knowledge and students need to genuinely engage with the examined subject or event for historical thinking and critical reasoning to occur. Carter highlights the importance of raising the interest in the subject and making it more appealing to students. Erica and Marissa noted the students' perceptions of history and their difficulties in approaching and comprehending the lesson, is not only dependent on the student's cognitive abilities but also on general school practices. Educators also recognise that the effective teaching of history is not tied only to the traditional classroom lecture but can implement other activities which take place within or outside the school environment, most commonly visits to museums and heritage locations. Regarding the methods and resources of teaching, most of the educators noted that effective teaching implies the use of other forms of media besides text or the lecture (images, documentaries, film, games) that ensure the involvement of students in the classroom.

#### 4.2 Use of TTRPG for historical empathy - benefits, objectives, challenges

Educators mentioned the achievement of historical empathy in the classroom is a direct result of the guidance students receive from them. According to most educators the promotion of historical empathy is based on several factors, such as the student's previous historical knowledge, the sources provided and the processing of primary sources as well as the teaching methods of the teacher. Most of them seem positive to the idea of incorporating a TTRPG approach in the classroom and believe in its advantages for the cultivation of historical empathy. An interesting point was brought up by Carter who highlighted the character creation activity as a strong means to promote historical empathy. "Character creation

is an important aspect not only in history but also in TTRPGs. It is important for students to understand how a "hero" was created". This notion of character creation along with agency and interactivity as the story unfolds are important components to achieve perspective taking. He also noted that a weak point in RPGs is that students are given already matured adults instead of emphasizing in character development of the hero. Lucy mentioned the added benefits of TTRPGs regarding historical empathy related to supporting understanding of the social stratification of each period. Regardless of the approach, most of the educators noted the value of perspective taking through this approach as students will be able to contemplate the events from different perspectives.

Other topics that came up during interviews include challenges, especially managing time and the role of the GM. All of the educators referred to the limited time the strict schedule creates for extra activities, especially in high school. Most noted that this approach would be more feasible in junior high school. Additional challenges might arise when giving the role of the GM to students. This role is particularly difficult since it requires more preparation than player roles, having more tasks to perform and requires specific sets of skills such as creativity, storytelling, communication, fairness, humor etc. When asked how educators would help the groups, most indicated they would assume a supervisory role. Another interesting point made by educators is that a RPG approach may be even more compatible with a literature course, a fact that we hadn't considered before.

#### 4.3 Anachronism and historical accuracy

One of the major topics that frequently came up during our literature review is anachronism in non-scientific history media (e.g., movies, novels, games etc.). Since anachronism is such a central issue within history education, it is surprising that there are not clear guidelines regarding the topic from the relevant services of the Ministry of Education, instead the teaching of anachronism is highly dependent on the teacher and how they approach the subject. First, we asked teachers if they take into account anachronism and how they approach the subject. Most of the teachers responded that they make an effort to address it, considering the different frames of reference, such as spatial, chronological, sociocultural. For example, Mona commented on the importance of clarifying the context of the historical event when reconstructing it. Erica noted the importance of timeline, which does not only reconstruct the phenomena but also uses context to compare them or present different perspectives on a historical event. Marissa mentions "in education I use analogies, comparisons and contrasts. In my opinion, this helps students focus on similarities and differences". This perspective covers the understanding of different eras and times and their sequences and helps students understand the past by categorizing them into eras. Educators had different perspectives regarding the types of anachronism. For instance, Carter and Marissa thought that "non-obvious" anachronism won't be a problem, as long as it is highlighted in a discussion afterwards or during the game and is clear to the students what actually happened during that specific time and what happened earlier or later. Most of the educators claimed that this approach shows the interconnectivity of events and whether they change or stay the same across time. Regarding

obvious anachronism, Carter had a strong opinion that anachronism in societal functions should be avoided as much as possible. More specifically he mentioned that “the choices of real historical figures (shouldn’t be altered). As for other reconstructions (buildings, environments etc), some form of creative freedom must exist because the aim is not just about historical accuracy but also to involve students in the process”. This, however, fits more into the definition of “historical inaccuracy”. Most educators thought of anachronism as an opportunity to the teaching of history if used correctly. Creative freedom can support the concept of “what-if” and alternate history as Carter mentioned that “it could be a fun approach to figure out why specific sides were formed regarding an event and what could have happened if a situation was different (eg what other career path would Eleftherios Venizelos follow if he did not become a politician?)”. In this way anachronism and inaccuracy combined with fiction can indeed lead to historical empathy. On the whole, anachronism is considered acceptable when referring to objects, buildings, environments, provided some basic rules are respected, but the perspectives of people of a period should reflect and convey factual information.

#### 4.4 Violence, engagement and historical accuracy

The issue of the use of violence in computer games and its effect on the player behavior has been a long-debated issue and it still remains a controversy whether there is indeed a correlation between the depiction of violence and aggression. During the interviews we explored this issue in depth with the participants, as it can be considered as one of the main sources of skepticism about the use of role playing games in education. For those that were already gamers of any sort, it was already clear that the use of controversy and violence as an element in adventure and role playing games cannot be avoided as it is a strong factor affecting engagement. Interestingly, all non-gamers except one (Mina) were positive to the use of elements of violence, in moderation and under certain conditions. All agreed that the graphic depiction of violence should be avoided as much as possible. Erica commented that currently teenagers are already over-exposed to violence, not only through gaming and, in this sense, violence in combat would not be a novelty to them nor such a strong factor for engagement. Carter, on this issue, felt that being accustomed to violent gaming in computer games sometimes leads children participating in TTRPGs turning to violence as the obvious solution “in an attempt to simulate their action in computer games”. And he adds that “it is within our role as educators to guide them through the game to alternative non-violent ways of approaching a situation”. Erica and Marissa also agreed that violence could be used to highlight the contrast of using other solutions, and to show that there are different, more peaceful ways to approach a situation.

Erica suggested exploring other types of violence beyond combat, such as that between the oppressor and the oppressed, helping children develop the perspective taking and affective connection aspects of historical empathy. She considers violence as an integral part of human history, and it would be detrimental to historical accuracy to completely hide it from the children. She offered as an example setting an oppressive regimes or violent movement of

populations and “the perspective of the mother losing her child” or “the traitor or the victim in a dictatorship or conquered country”. Gina offers the perspective of psychology, mentioning that “it is important to explore and understand also the more violent parts of our psyche”. However, this should be done “in controlled conditions” and not as a constant theme.

#### 4.5 Fantasy, myth and magic

The existence of fantasy or magic elements in the game could be considered as another obvious point of controversy for the use of TTRPG in history education. As with the topic of violence, the participants offered different perspectives, surprisingly being, on the whole, willing to consider the notion instead of directly opposed to it. As Mona comments: “The use is definitely not prohibitive. Firstly, it serves to make the game attractive. [...] Using, for example, divination in the game does not affect historical accuracy. And the balance between learning and playing should be maintained. These are complementary features, not contrasting ones.” Gina, from the psychology perspective considers the use of magic as “very important, also as the allegoric transcendence of personal boundaries and difficulties.”

Erica discussed the issue also from the perspective of teaching ancient Greek literature and was enthusiastic, proposing a myth-based approach: “In a setting of myth and legend we have greater freedom. It would be amazing to be able to play in the setting of the epic poems of Homer, Iliad and Odyssey. . . We have greater freedom to make the game more inclusive, with the strong roles of female goddesses, sorceresses, etc. Consider the goddess Athena, the sorceress Circe and the wife of Ulysses Penelope!”. Carter mentioned that there is indeed such a Greek TTRPG game that was published in the past but is now out of print.

Erica moves on to discuss the interaction between myth and historical reality: “The works of Homer indeed combine both. I am thinking. . . Consider that we have two groups, one assigned the mythological setting and one the real one. They play at their own setting and then they are asked to discuss and compare their experiences: “The perspective of the legendary heroes and demigods and that of historical kings and generals”.

Carter discussed at length this issue, focusing on the danger of the inclusion of magic and supernatural elements leading to misconceptions about their existence in the modern-day world: “If magic actually works in the game, wouldn’t it be natural for the student to think that it would work also in the real world? This is a sensitive issue that requires careful design.” He then proceeded to reflect and discuss possible ways to address this: “At certain time periods, like in Greek antiquity, there were types of technology or medical practices that were lost in the Middle Ages. So, an approach game-wise would be to introduce magic as some type of lost technology. Secondly, there was a strong belief and a system for magic in ancient Greece, including spells, curses and divination. These could be introduced in the game but, at the same time, explicitly present them as part of the folklore of that time. [...] The inclusion of such features could be an incentive to guide students to research those religious or magical beliefs.” Lucy agreed with this view, as “such beliefs were a strong part of specific historical contexts.”

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The transformational nature of TTRPGs and their great potential for education have long been discussed in the literature [3, 4, 7, 8]. However, this potential so far has not been widely implemented as an educational activity, but rather sporadically explored by educators who happen to be experienced RPG gamers. Taking into account that both digital and analog board games have been established as an activity for education, with the term “serious games” coined to represent games with educational objectives, we seek to explore TTRPGs in this role. We focus on the education of history, as TTRPGs are an obvious fit for the historical empathy model, offering a personal, first-person view of the storyworld and promoting perspective taking. Interestingly, through our consultation with the educators, we found out that this method is also considered suitable for teaching literature due to the need to present the historical context of literary works.

Before moving on to the implementation of a TTRPG design for formal education, it is important to, firstly, understand and then address shortcomings and challenges of the game in this context, as they are perceived by educators. They will be the ones responsible to include and combine such practices in their teaching process and the ones with deeper understanding of the prerequisites for this inclusion to be smooth and productive, aligned with educational objectives. To this end, we aimed mainly for participants who are experienced as educators, with a deep understanding of objectives and challenges of the teaching on history. And, secondarily, we selected participants with experience in RPG games or role-playing activities in general and their application in an educational setting. A concrete limitation of our study was the difficulty to adequately convey through a presentation the nature and game play of TTRPGs to participants who in some cases had not even experience with computer-based RPGs. This presentation took place during the interviews.

We focused primarily on understanding how educators perceive the issues of historical inaccuracy, anachronism and violence in relation to TTRPGs, as their perception of these elements as part of the game could possibly become important inhibiting factors for their adoption. Surprisingly, although the participants recognized these issues as challenging, they, overall, felt that the positive qualities of TTRPGs are stronger and proposed design solutions to minimize their effect.

On the issue of violence, educators felt that it would be detrimental to historical accuracy to design completely non-violent storyworlds. Violence is an integral part of human history, and moving beyond combat violence, to which children are over-exposed through computer games, there is political violence, oppression, social injustices, etc. that are part of the historical context of every time period. Educators agreed that consideration should be given to aligning the inclusion of violence to specific educational objectives and making sure its depiction should be well designed and appropriate for the educational context. When discussing historical inaccuracy and anachronism in the context of the game, the consensus of the educators was that it cannot really be completely avoided, as it is the case with other media, like films. However, it is crucial to clearly point out and discuss the cases of anachronism and historical inaccuracy with the students, depending on the case,

during the game or after. Considering previous research on the value of dialogue for education [40–42], anachronism and historical inaccuracy could be turned into incentives for discussion in class on authenticity and the accurate and historically valid representation of the past, leading to reflection and deeper understanding of history. Similarly, for the inclusion of magical and the supernatural elements, most educators were not negative, as they, firstly, considered them important for player engagement and, secondly, they are a key part of the belief system of past societies. Presenting them to the students as such could promote perspective taking. As in the case of anachronism, the TTRPG activity could become the incentive for children to research more deeply the past and, especially in the case of the GM, weave adventures on top of accurate historical contexts.

Although our study focused on a small sample of educators and specifically on the Greek education curriculum, the results were still promising for the future inclusion of TTRPG as an educational activity. On one hand, there have been attempts from the perspective of game designers to create games based on Greek history and myth, and on the other, the educators themselves proposed settings with such themes. Carter mentioned that he is in the process of designing and testing a TTRPG adventure based on historical and folklore elements of certain regions in Greece.

In this work we aimed at understanding the perspective of educators towards a TTRPG based approach in terms of key issues like historical inaccuracy, anachronism and violence, which could be prohibitive to the acceptance of the game genre for formal education. The results of the study were encouraging, and the next step should include further bridging the gap between educators and game designers by the co-design of TTRPG adventures tailored to the needs of history education. This requires close collaboration with initiatives such as the one of Carter and targeted research within a multi-disciplinary team of educators and game designers, towards the design and assessment of prototype TTRPG game scenarios. An interesting note regarding the issue of anachronism is that if it cannot be avoided, then it is good to clearly present the real historical context through examples, analogies and comparisons. Students could have an active and participatory role in determining whether a representation of a building or an event looks authentic. This will encourage them to interact with the past and its environments in an imaginative and interpretive way. Most educators highlighted the importance of history in creating responsible citizens, since “understand the past, students will make sense of the present”. Regarding the subject of myth and fantasy, these could be integrated harmoniously since they can pull the players into the story and the game world, offering inclusion and opportunities to learn about folklore elements. Overall, although representations of the past are challenging, the potential of a TTRPG approach in history education seems promising.

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