

## **Spirit Seekers: Examining Affordances of Computer and Tabletop Role Playing Games**

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## Background

Role-playing games (RPGs) emerged in the 1970s from the worlds of miniature-based wargaming, fantasy literature, and the traditions of rules less role-playing (Porter, 1995). Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is often considered the first entry in this genre, published in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules (Hosch, 2024). RPGs exist across a wide range of genres but typically consist of a few key components: players take on the roles of characters, succeed or fail on tasks based on rules, and a player takes on the role of game master (GM) who guides the narrative and interactions. As soon as the D&D ruleset was published, game designers were sneaking into campus computer labs to create and play computer RPGs (CRPGs) – digital versions of tabletop RPGs (TRPGs) that translated RPG mechanics into the digital realm (Daglow, 1988). These CRPGs streamlined many RPG mechanics such as inventory and skill management, and enabled single player RPG experiences without the need for a GM.

The difference between TRPGs and CRPGs lies primarily in flexibility. CRPGs are typically characterized by a detailed and defined story that the player explores through their character. The player's impact on the story largely exists through the selections they make for their character's skills and abilities. TRPGs on the other hand, are typically defined by their openness – the limit of player exploration, decision-making, and impact on story is only defined by the GM's willingness and ability to explore the decisions made by the players.

There is a hybrid space that blends the digital affordances of technology with the flexibility of TRPG systems. Porter (1995) theorized that future versions of role-playing games may include “live role-playing by Net” or “a personal digital assistant” to assist with tracking character status or passing information back and forth between player characters (Porter, 1995, para. 32). Many of his visions have come to life through the many online services that exist to

support hybrid tabletop and computer roleplaying such as Roll20 (Roll20, 2024) or D&D Beyond (Wizards of the Coast, 2024). These hybrid spaces allow for the high levels of player agency and narrative flexibility typical of TRPGs, with the affordances of the CRPG like automatic calculations and tracking of items and statuses.

Bringing the focus to the educational – RPGs and game-playing have been explored in the classroom in many forms to many conclusions. From rudimentary side-scrolling platformers (Jamshidifarsani et al., 2019), to problem solving CRPGs (Chen & Wu, 2023; Zou et al., 2021), interactive digital retellings of classic literature (Kirginias, 2022; Cook et al., 2017) and beyond, many educators have deployed and examined the use of games in their classrooms. Gaming literacy has emerged in the field of multiliteracies, the player understanding of objectives, rules, and gameplay standing distinct from narrative understanding (Apperley & Walsh, 2012). Gaming literacy invites students to “critically and creatively apply their experiences” within the structure of the game, making layered meaning as they move back and forth across “types of text, experiences, and so forth” (York et al., 2019, p. 120; Cook et al., 2017, p.202).

Educators have identified some key components of deploying RPGs in the classroom to include open narrative structure for improvisation and collaboration, game simplicity due to tight timelines and logistics, and the minimization of the role of the GM whenever possible (Campbell & Madsen, 2021; Cook et al., 2017; Zou et al., 2021). When applied thoughtfully and not treated as a pedagogical panacea, tabletop games and TRPGs have been found to support knowledge acquisition, narrative skills, interpersonal skills, and personal development (Chung 2013; Daniau, 2016; Kirginias, 2022; Orr et al., 2020; York et al., 2019).

With this background in mind, I've developed a rules-light one-page Discord RPG heavily inspired by the incredible work of Grant Howitt, John Harper, and Will Jobst. The rules can be found on the following pages.

# Spirit Seekers

You are:

A group of ghost hunters who have been brought to the House on Haunted Hill to dispel ghosts

OR

The two ghosts who live there

## Pre- Game

### Setup

1. Pick 2 rooms from each of these list(s) or create your own rooms based on the tone you'd like the house to have.
2. Set up Discord channels for each room in the house.
3. Set a timer for 60 minutes of game play.

Name rooms - bedroom, bathroom, craft room, studio, nursery, junk room, root cellar.

Object rooms - Library, study, office, kitchen, dining room, saloon, bar, cold room.

Ritual rooms - basement, dungeon, storage, wine cellar, stables, gardens, conservatory.

### Ghosts

Both ghosts join each other in a separate Discord channel from the ghost hunters now.

Only one ghost wants the ghost hunters to succeed (the spirit), the other ghost's objective is to waste the ghost hunter's time so they run out (the poltergeist).

Both ghosts should agree which ghost is playing which role. Both ghosts should change their Discord names and profile pictures to match, so they are indistinguishable from each other.

### Ghost Hunters

You wish to dispel the ghost living in this house before 60 minutes elapses. You will work together to make this happen. Start by creating a ghost hunter with the following two steps.

1. Create a name for yourself.
2. Roll on the Hunter Motivations table to discover your ghost hunting motivation.

Your motivation will impact how you narratively and mechanically make attempts to succeed.

### Hunter Motivations

- 1 Wealth - getting rid of the ghost will enable you to buy this enormous house for cheap.
- 2 Fame - getting rid of this ghost will catapult you into ghost hunting fame.
- 3 Peace- this ghost needs to be dispelled to end its torment of unfinished business.
- 4 Self-improvement - dispel the ghost to prove to yourself that you can do it.
- 5 Scientific curiosity - you don't think there is a ghost and are here to prove it.
- 6 Thrill Seeker - you are just here for the thrills, chills, and spills of ghost hunting.

### Adjectives

- |   |           |   |            |
|---|-----------|---|------------|
| 1 | Glowing   | 4 | Troubling  |
| 2 | Unearthly | 5 | Shocking   |
| 3 | Haunting  | 6 | Unsettling |

### Noun

- |   |             |   |            |
|---|-------------|---|------------|
| 1 | Candlestick | 4 | Dagger     |
| 2 | Rope        | 5 | Wrench     |
| 3 | Lead pipe   | 6 | Game Piece |

### Ritual

- |   |                  |   |                    |
|---|------------------|---|--------------------|
| 1 | Eternal Slumber  | 4 | Expiration         |
| 2 | Perishing        | 5 | Kicking the bucket |
| 3 | The Grand Finale | 6 | Pushing daisies    |

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## Game

### Ghosts

1. Ghosts cannot use the mic. Ghosts can post text, images, and links in each room's channel.
2. Two ghosts cannot exist in the same room for longer than 30 seconds.

### Spirit

If you are in a room where ghost hunters have successfully rolled to discover evidence, you must give them evidence via text, link, or image. Remember that you want them to succeed so you can leave!

### Poltergeist

You are trying to discombobulate and confuse the ghost hunters. If they succeed in a roll to discover evidence you can give them whatever you want via text, link, or image.

### Ghost Hunters

1. You know that to remove a ghost from a house your group will need to discover its name, find the keystone object it is attached to, and perform the ritual to dispel it.
2. To discover the name, find the object, and determine the ritual you will require evidence.
3. You find evidence in the rooms of the house by rolling dice using your motivation. The room you are in when you make the roll dictates what piece of information you find.
4. A ghost must be present in the room to deliver the information you have discovered.
5. Name evidence requires 1 success, object evidence requires 2 successes, and ritual evidence requires 3 successes (non consecutive) in the appropriate room to be revealed.
6. Once you have learned the ghost's name, the object it is tied to, and the ritual, the group of ghosts hunters must perform the ritual (however they see fit) to dispel the ghost.

### Discovering Evidence using Motivation

1. You roll 1 dice for each level of motivation you have. You must narratively justify how the action you are taking is aligned to your underlying motivation!
  - A. 6 is a success and it levels up your motivation.
  - B. 4+ on your dice roll counts as a success.
2. You can help each other by describing how you help in that circumstance. if you do so, the ghost hunter making the original roll can add 1d6 to their roll.

Gameplay Example - Summer McCreedy is a wealth motivated ghost hunter. She is in the junk room with a ghost, who is sending encouraging images through the room channel, and she decides to search through the piles of junk looking for the deed to the house. She has 1 level of wealth motivation, so she rolls 1d6 and receives a 6. Summer levels her wealth motivation up to level 2 so in the future she rolls 2 dice when using her wealth motivation. The spirit is the ghost in the junk room and sends a message to the junk room text channel with their name - "Emily".

## End Game

If the spirit's ritual is completed before the timer hits 00:00, the ghost hunters & spirit win!  
If the timer hits 00:00 before that ritual is completed, the poltergeist wins.

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