

Ruler of the Wall

What is a Nomic?

In the words of the original Nomic's (now a full genre) creator:

Nomic is a game in which changing the rules is a move. In that respect it differs from almost every other game. The primary activity of Nomic is proposing changes in the rules, debating the wisdom of changing them in that way, voting on the changes, deciding what can and cannot be done afterwards, and doing it. Even this core of the game, of course, can be changed. (Peter Suber, The Paradox of Self-Amendment, Appendix 3, p. 362)

Ruler of the Wall is heavily indebted to the genre of Nomic games created by Peter Suber; a professor of philosophy at Earlham College. Suber defines Nomic as a game in which changing the rules is a move. There are a myriad of Nomic games on the web, most of which are terribly bureaucratic and arcane. What we tried to do here is to maintain the interesting and enjoyable features of the genre (which we borrowed from various online games) and at the same time simplify the rules as much as possible and adapt them to an ESL classroom.

A Massively Multiplayer Offline Wall?

Traditionally Nomic's have been played through email or blogs, in which players carefully draft out their moves and proposals before sending/posting them. Taking advantage of the fact that students generally meet regularly in the same classroom throughout the span of a course, a simple Nomic could be created by simply having students 'post' their proposals onto an actual physical wall in a classroom.

Ruler of the Wall

Ruler of the Wall is designed as an ongoing game played in a high school ESL class. The overarching goals of the game are to provide students with a compelling environment in which they will enjoy the following:

1. reading, writing and talking English
2. negotiating individual and group identity
3. empowering themselves through the creation of the game's rules as they go along

Ideally, students will be engaged in the game before, after, and during class time. In order to achieve this goal, the teacher should allocate for the game an entire wall in the classroom and about 10 minutes of every class meeting.

Why a Massively Multiplayer Offline Wall in an ESL Class?

Following criticisms about students who are masters of determining when to use “who” and when to use “whom”, yet can not comfortably carry on a simple conversation, language theorists have seen a sharp rise in popularity of “the communicative approach” (sometimes referred to as ‘Natural Approach’). A current buzz-word in the language curriculum world, most major textbooks today try to position themselves as utilizing some variant of a communicative approach. For example, below is the sales blurb for *Kontakte*, one of the best selling series in the field:

This best-selling German text is based on the Natural Approach, pioneered by Tracy D. Terrell. Students learn German through communicative contexts with an emphasis on the four skills and cultural competence, with grammar functioning as an aid to language learning and not an end in itself.

While theorists still argue about the specifics of what defines a communicative approach, in general, it is seen as a language teaching paradigms in which students are expected to interact (ie speak/write) with one another to complete tasks which require some deciphering (ie reading/listening) of a language, in a manner that can be observed by a teacher. While much interest has been generated among course administrators for the implementation of communicative methods, the transition from theory to practice in the curricula materials world still has much room for improvement. For example, below is a typical page from the above mentioned *Kontakte* book:

unfamiliar words from the context (linguistic and social) in which it is situated. While some context is available in the exercises above, it is more fragmented than would be found in a persistent game world.

By using the wall of a classroom as a game space, we hope to create an immersive world where even the rules of the game are negotiated by students. Building upon the current interest in communicative language instruction, we feel a nomic would be the next step in making student tasks more engaging/meaningful and encouraging more open-ended discourse. With a traditional writing assignment, students are to write about an artificial topic (“write about what you did last vacation”) for the teacher to grade/correct and the student to then throw away. Here, in line with communicative philosophy, writing would be produced as part of a discourse between students -- though it would still be publicly accessible on the wall for teachers to analyze and work with. By having a persistent world, rather than discrete activities, students will be better able to infer contexts and to negotiate meaning for themselves.

The Wall Interface

Every action in the game shows on a Massively Multiplayer Offline Wall. (See illustration) The wall with its various zones consolidates the features of messaging boards, rulebooks, blogs, and “skins.” Roughly speaking, the main areas of the wall are the City Hall, the Mayor’s Office, and the Houses of the Residents. All areas of the wall are potentially in flux, besides the Permanent Rules section, which never changes. Since the permanent rules practically constitute the game, it would be most efficient to start our ‘tour’ of the wall in the Permanent Rules Section, where they are written.

*** Permanent Rules Section:**

1. These are the Rules for *Ruler of the Wall*; all players must obey them. Rules 1-9 are the core rules, covering the basic procedures. These rules cannot be changed. Rules 10 onwards are those specific to the current administration.

2. Proposals

Any player may propose a new rule or a change to an existing non-permanent rule by posting a written proposal in the “Pending Proposals” section of the wall. In the proposals players should describe concisely the changes they wish to make to the game.

Proposals can either be Pending, Enacted, or Failed. A player is permitted to have at most four pending proposals.

3. Voting

Voting takes place in Town Hall Meetings, which occur at the end of every class. In the meetings, the 3 pending proposals that are highest on the list are voted on. (In case there is more time, the teacher can increase the number of votes.) A pending proposal should be on the wall for at least an hour before the Town Meeting.

The voting procedure:

- * The person who posted the proposal gets 1 minute to introduce the merits of their proposal in a speech.
- * Anybody can take up to 1 minute to spell-out arguments in objection to a proposal.
- * The poster of the proposal gets up to 1 min to answer his critics.
- * Then a vote count takes place.

All participants have to vote. Valid votes are FOR, AGAINST, and “THE MAYOR KNOWS BEST”. The latter will count as the same as the mayor’s vote. Obviously, the Mayor cannot cast a vote of “THE MAYOR KNOWS BEST”

4. Enactment

If the number of FOR votes for a pending Proposal exceed or equal Quorum¹, the teacher moves the proposal into the “Current Rules” section on the wall. In addition, the teacher updates the “Score Chart” accordingly.

If a Proposal fails, the teacher removes it from the wall and updates the Score Chart accordingly.

Subsequently to the Town Meeting Residents start behaving according to the new rules.

5. The Town’s Elder

If players disagree on the interpretation of any of the rules, any Player may ask the teacher who functions as town’s elder to mediate the disagreement in the next Town Hall Meeting. The teacher can (but doesn’t have to) ask the residents to vote on the issue. The teacher’s ruling is final.

The Town Elder may post proposals for rules using the mechanism provided for residents. Unlike the residents, the Elder is not scored in the game.

6. Score

All Residents start with zero points, except of the mayor who starts with five points. When a Proposal is enacted, the Resident who proposed it gains 10 points. When a Proposal fails, the Resident who proposed it loses 2 points.

Any player with a positive number of points may transfer any them to another player.

7. Administration

Ruler of the Wall is divided into cycles called Administrations. Each Administration has a single Mayor, whose title reflects to the number of times the Player has been Mayor (e.g. "The 3rd Ravi Administration"). At the beginning of each administration, everybody’s score gets back to zero.

Players other than the Mayor are called Residents.

¹ Quorum is equal to half the number of players, rounded down, plus one

The Mayor can veto any Proposal (by attaching a Veto sign to it on the Pending Proposals Section of the wall). A vetoed Proposal automatically fails, unless 2/3 of the residents have objected to the veto in the Town Hall Meeting.

The Mayor may affect the score of any Resident capriciously. At the end of every Town Hall Meeting, the Mayor tells the teacher (Town's Elder) how many points (0-2) he/she wants to add or subtract to/from every resident's score. (It is possible that a resident will end up with a negative score.)The teacher updates the charts accordingly.

8. Acceptance speech

When a new administration begins, the new mayor should perform the following actions within the first two days of his Administration:

- Change the title and visual style of the wall to reflect the new Administration.
- Post an Acceptance Speech on the Wall.
- Repeal all or some of the non-permanent rules of the previous administration (rule 10 and up)

9. An administration ends when:

Each and every resident has gained, at least once, a higher score than the Mayor's current score. Participants should be vigilant of the score situation. In the first point in time a participant's score is higher than the mayor's score the participant will alert the teacher/Town Elder and the latter will check the participant's name on the score table. When all names are checked – the administration ends. A new administration begins with the resident with the highest score as Mayor.

Note: By and large the scoring system of Ruler of the Wall is constructed in a way that levels the playing field at the beginning of each administration. Regardless of his or her score in previous rounds of the game, each player has equal opportunity to win and be the next mayor. The mayor's initial bonus of 5 point and his/her ability to give or take up to 2 points from each player will probably insure that the mayor will stay in power for at least two Town Hall meetings (which is a desirable effect). However, soon enough this head start will become insignificant as players gain dozens of point by rule enactment and score transfer deals (see rule 6).

* The Mayor's Office Section

After the Permanent Rules Section, this is the most powerful zone of the wall; Acting as Mayor gives students the most significant opportunity to influence the course of the game and to put their personal stamp on the class's physical appearance.

The way to become mayor is to have the largest amount of points when the former mayor is thrown from office (see rule no. 9). We constructed the permanent rules, and particularly the scoring mechanism, in a way that creates an initial advantage for the mayor, yet ensures that replacing the mayor would be feasible pretty quickly. (The mayor's initial 5 points and his ability to add and subtract residents up to two points, are

balanced with residents' ability to transfer their points to other residents and with the option to pass rules that result in additional points.)

Once in office, the mayor changes the name of the city and the title of the game. The mayor can use a name of a real American city (Welcome to Las Vegas), the name of their hometown or a fictional city ("Welcome to Catville," "Welcome to Britney Town"), depends on a theme they chose for their administration. The name should be consistent with their acceptance speech; together they set the premise for the content and style of this round of the game. In addition, during their administrations mayors are totally in charge of the appearance of the wall (as long as they don't invade residents' houses and don't meddle with the content of the various sections.) If a mayor's theme is Barbie, the wall should scream Welcome to Barbieville. Players can use any media to create their theme; photos, paintings, signs, collages, etc'.

Following is a hypothetical Mayor Office section:

Welcome To New Boston of New New England
The second Administration of Christina

Acceptance Address:

Dear fellow citizens and pioneers,
We finally made it all the way from Earth to our beautiful new home in New New England. If, like me, you are homesick, don't be shy and make yourselves at home by decorating your new houses with Red Sox paraphernalia. (I'll be watching your Red Sox decorations. Rewards at the next Town Hall meeting are promised.)

Enjoy yourself and ignore the baseless rumors about violent Martians.
Your Mayor,
Christina

* Residents' "Houses" Section

These are private spaces which players can use anyway they want. They can post messages that explain the rationale behind pending proposals they posted, or express their objections to proposals made by others. Players are also welcomed to decorate these spaces in a way that complies – or not – with the theme of the current administration.

* Pending Proposals Section

This is of course the most unpredictable section of the wall. Following are a few possible rule proposals in the hypothetical world of New New England.

- Proposal: Martians hate threes and love twos
Every time players reach a score with the digit 3, then Martians rob half of their points. Every time they reach a score with the digit 2 in it, then they get a bonus of 20 points

- Proposal: “Red Sox” fiction

The first resident who'll post a story in his “House” in which all the characters have the first names of the Red Sox players will get a 40 point bonus.

- Proposal: bonus to a friend

If a resident submits the name of another resident with his rule proposal, then the other resident gets a 5 point bonus in case the proposal has been approved

Documentation

If there's room left on any of the classroom's walls, it's more than recommended to create an archive of the wall's evolution. Using digital camera, the teacher and students can take snapshots and create a gallery of the highlights of every administration.

The Role of the Teacher

The way we constructed the rules of the game enables the teacher to choose how much of an active role she or he wants to play in shaping the game's evolution. We do recommend however that the teacher will kick-start the game by acting as a provisional mayor for a while, modeling what mayors can do in the time of their administration. Also, since the teacher is allowed to post rule proposals, they can model new genres of possible rule proposal and inject new energy to the game if it is in a creative deadlock.

Looking at the example proposals above, a teacher should naturally be able to pull out enough grammatical structures for analysis. (Ok, look at the different conditional structures used, we have “Every time ... then ...”, “The first ... gets ...”, “If ... then ...” can anyone think of how we could have said this proposal using a different conditional? What is the difference between if we said “Every time” versus “Whenever”?) Alternatively, a teacher who didn't buy into communicative philosophy as much could legislate explicit grammar into the game itself (“As überdeity of the wall, I pass a mandate that all proposals using more than 5 unique prepositions get an additional point. Also, every time someone posts a proposal that uses a subjunctive modal that has never been used before in the game gets an extra 3 points).

Handling Mistakes

Ruler of the wall provides for a variety of mechanisms for dealing with student errors. One possibility, is, of course, to go through the wall and mark all errors for students to correct. We would, however, encourage teachers to keep in mind that fear of public perception is a primary factor inhibiting experimentation in language learning and that errors are a natural part of learning² (IE All children learning

² See Lightbown and Spada, “How Languages are Learned”

English begin by saying "goed" before saying "went"). Other strategies include having students work together to peer-review each others postings, working with students to correct their postings before being posted, or simply using personal analysis of patterns in the types of errors being made on the wall as a guide for what concepts students are effectively absorbing from the normal class lessons and which need further re-enforcement. _

Conclusion:

As a product of the communicative approach and the Nomic game genre, Ruler of the Wall is a unique and creative environment for studying ESL. First and foremost the game's effectiveness as an ESL teaching tool is due to the fact that it provides players with ample opportunity to communicate meaningfully with each other both orally and in writing. Writing acceptance speeches, negotiating point transfer deals in order to replace administrations, posting messages, and debating rule proposals are some of the communicative activities the game facilitates.

An important feature of these communicative activities is a partial overlap in content between the oral and the written activities; e.g. a player who posts a written rule proposal needs also to present it out loud, and is likely to also post a short commentary in his or her "blog", elaborating the merits of the proposal. This flow of expression from the written to oral medium and vice versa can help students cement new vocabulary and grammatical forms they acquired in the process.

A crucial element in the communicative approach to language acquisition is that educational communicative activities should be open ended, simulating real life, where communication is not limited to specific subject matter or grammatical form (as opposed to the limited scope of workbook drills that tend to be compartmentalized, devoting their different segments to specific tenses, word groups etc'). Ruler of the Wall takes this openness to the extreme since its content is ever changing; each 'administration' takes place in a different city, with its different buzz words (in the example above students get familiar with baseball and outer-space vocabulary).

Finally, what makes Ruler of the Wall effective as an ESL teaching tool is that it is an engaging game, embedded with many incentives to take an active role and communicate with other players. From the possibility to be mayor and shape the overall makeup of the wall, to the possibility to affect the game locally with a proposal for a single rule, to politicking to replace the administration, this game is full of possibilities for self and group expression. We believe that in the case of high school ESL students, by and large teenage immigrants, self expression and sense of empowerment are the keys for meaningful communication leading to an effective acquisition of English.

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Welcoming to
Lundgris 1

Document with illegible text on a red background, featuring a green header and a yellow sticky note.

Document with illegible text on a red background, featuring a green header and a white sticky note.

RECEPTION OFFICE
Reception Area
Document with illegible text on a yellow background.



Grid of five colored cards (red, purple, pink, green, red) with yellow sticky notes.

Grid of four colored cards (red, green, pink, purple) with yellow sticky notes, located near a door handle.