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Overland Trail Game: A Lesson Plan

Alexandria Weber

Introduction

Gamification is an immersive teaching method used to engage students of all ages with historical content. I designed a lesson plan using Reacting to the Past gamification pedagogy, which requires students to role-play as a historical figure to achieve a goal. Students must research and understand their character and the historical context to play the game. Set in Westport, Missouri, 1855, my game aims to teach students about the diverse types of people who travelled westward to Oregon during 1855. This game emphasizes the barriers created by legislature that prevented certain demographics from settling in Oregon and how people overcame said barriers.

Methods

I designed this game in multiple stages over the course of the Spring 2021 semester. A wide variety of primary and secondary sources informed my design of a comprehensive cast of characters based on real historical figures, legislature, and events. Examples include my usage of *The Prairie Traveler*, a handbook for travelers to use on the Overland Trails in 1859. I designed a gamebook which contains the list of characters, logistics of the game, and assessment materials. I also developed a justification for role-playing games, especially Reacting to the Past simulations, at the secondary level. To do this, I researched the benefits of RTTP using *Minds on Fire* and *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*.

Acknowledgements

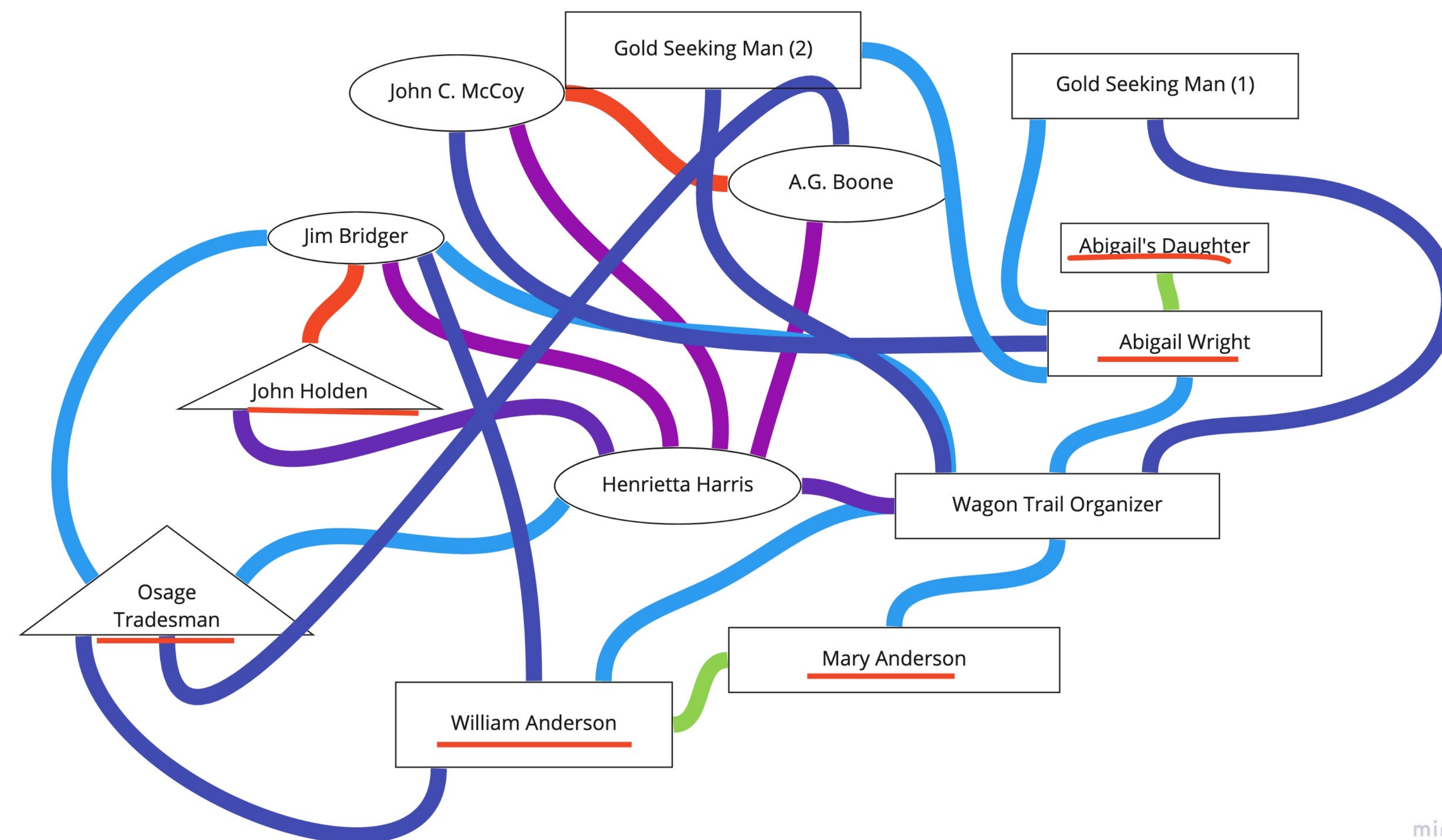
Special thanks to Dr. Cynthia Prescott who advised me throughout the game design process.

Results

I developed a playable first draft of my game. The next stage of this project is to playtest my game with secondary level students and revise as necessary.

I found much evidence to support role-playing simulations as useful teaching methods as they boost student engagement. However, these games need lengthy development and review, which is what is done with Reacting to the Past Games. Other roleplaying games demonstrate potential pitfalls that happen when games are not carefully handled. If the students lack historical context, then games about serious topics such as race can become unproductive and even harmful. Proper scaffolding is the best solution to this problem. This encompasses appropriate texts, time blocks, and prioritizing student needs before beginning the game.

This mind map is a visual representation of the relationships between characters in my game. Circles are locals, squares are westward travelers, and triangles are tradesmen from nearby Westport. Colors show the degree of cooperation between the characters, red being completely negative, green being completely positive, and blues being more neutral.



Conclusions

Studies show role-playing games can improve active learning, student autonomy, interpersonal skills, and cultural understanding, and that Reacting to the Past games are extremely well researched, useful pieces of educational material. However, they are currently designed solely for post-secondary students. They take entire semesters to complete, often do not fit into standards, and are not yet scaffolded to meet the needs of a younger audience. Secondary level students would benefit highly from RTTP games, but we need to bridge that gap. The solution to is to develop scaffolded versions of these games by having secondary and post-secondary game designers work together. Secondary students would benefit from playing Reacting to the Past games, they just need the opportunity.

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