RPGs as Natural Disaster Prep Tools

Using games to increase preparedness

PRESENTED BY
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PRESENTED TO
10th Annual OrcaCon

DATE
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Natural Disasters (Hazards)
more common
more frequent
more costly

Recent PNW disasters

- Atmospheric river chain in December
- Nov. 2025 bomb cyclone
- Wildfires

It can feel hopeless sometimes

Twilight: 2000, all versions, includes the key phrase “You’re on your own. Good luck.”

I prefer **Zelda** “It’s dangerous to go alone. Take this.”

Moreso, I find inspiration in the community building and ideation available in roleplaying games.



Dave Clark

Marketer at risk intelligence company Factal

Third party D&D author

D&D blogger

Once featured in Renton History Museum on D&D and Community

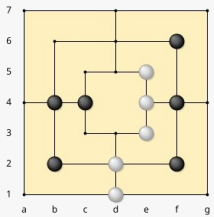
I started playing again in 2014, twenty years after I left gaming.

Recently I hosted a game with 15 players and an audience of a dozen.



RPGs as Natural Disaster Prep Tools

- Using the attributes as a way to create engaged learning.
- Simple framework
- Let's talk about the benefits of gaming
- **After this session, you'll be able to run a learning game for preparation..**











History of simulations

What ‘they’ do



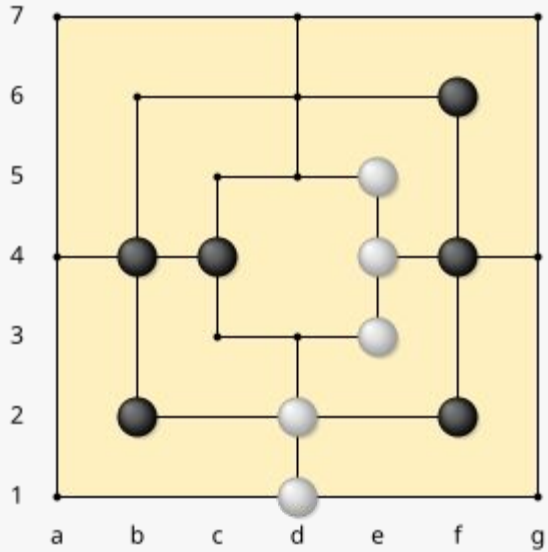
Board games started as battlefield simulations

They were also very simple to start.

Complexity accelerated via wargaming/war planning in the industrial era.

It can be a LOT of rules and instructions

Games that try to **simulate** real life or fantasy life are overwhelming



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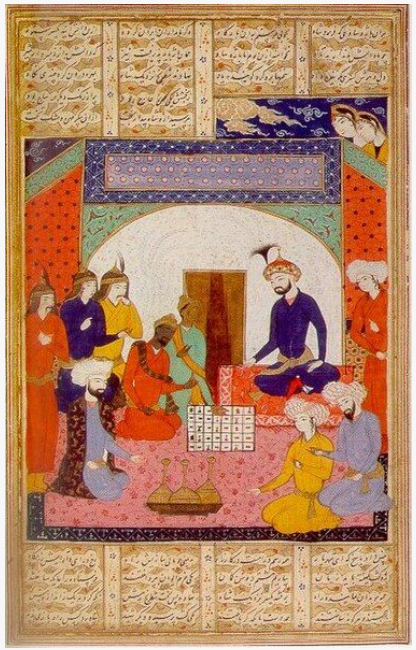

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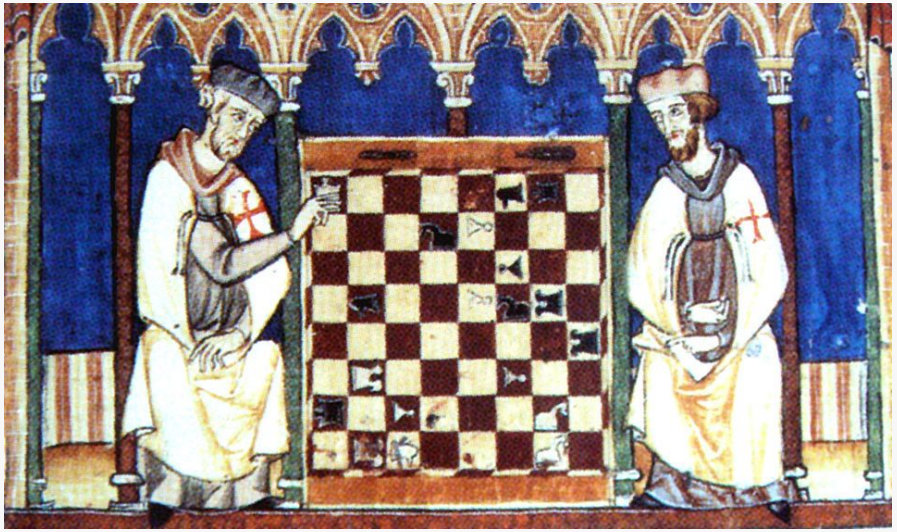

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Sourced from RPGGeek

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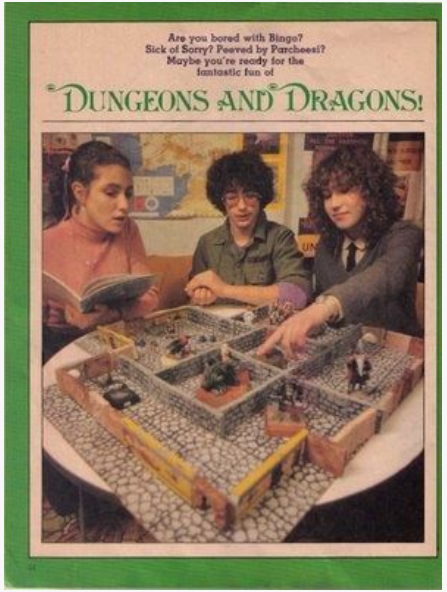


Sourced from RPGGeek

D&D can be a LOT







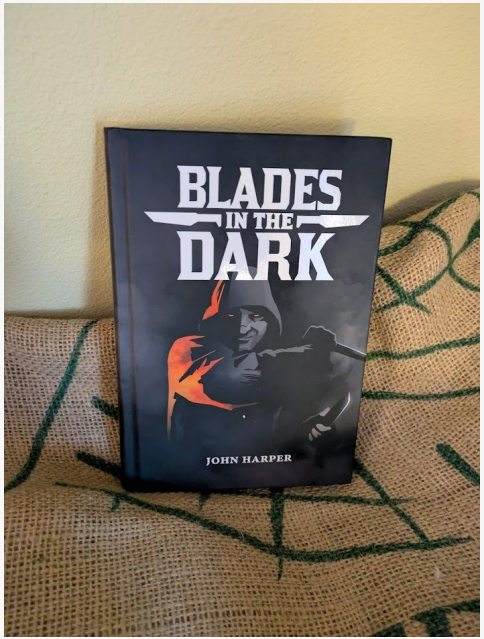


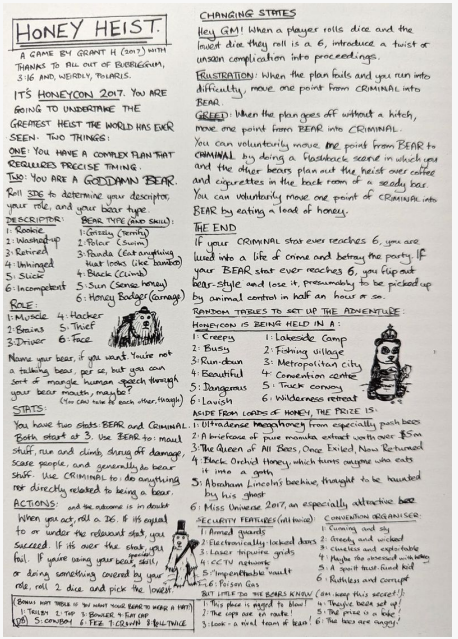


Sourced from Ghosts (US) on CBS, my personal collection

It doesn’t have to be that hard



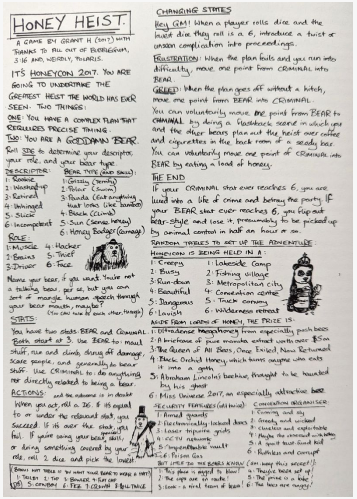




Sourced from SYFY, my personal collection, Honey Heist (CC BY 4.0)

Story games are faster to learn, mimicked in popular media

Some can fit on a single page, or even less





Borrow from games that are faster to learn, mimicked in popular media

This is how I teach business continuity, security and intel people

- Lean into simpler games, borrow from rules reductions seen in Critical Role, Not Another D&D Podcast and other Actual Plays.
- Use a framework that's D&D adjacent because there's mind share around that game.
- Nearly 100 million people have played D&D at some point in their lives.



Role Playing v. Simulation

Why RPGs?

“Role-playing games are likely to improve retrieval from long-term memory”

Sourced from Cognitive benefits of computer games for older adults



Why RPGs?

Unlock learning through role-playing, repetition and simplicity.

"You can run scenarios in your adventure that can teach players a lesson."

Washington State Sec. of State Steve Hobbs

Sourced from KUOW 'Dungeons, Dragons and Disinformation.'

Designing for learning versus designing for simulation

Your family and/or neighborhood doesn't want a disaster sim.

Let's simplify

- Review the goals from your learning simulation.
    - Repeat those throughout the game.
- Build a simpler exercise towards those goals.
- Help participants who don't game.
    - Describe the action
    - Ask for a response
    - Roll for success
- Empower ideas you haven't thought of.



Borrowing from one-page RPGs

Disaster Prep: The RPG

Basic rules	Examples
Describe the situation	Set up the scenario as the participant understands it. Include a danger or problem to be solved
Ask what they do	“How do you solve this problem?”
Assess difficulty	Most situations should be a Difficult Check of 13 But if the answer is autosuccess/failure that’s valid
Roll	Success should solve that problem, may introduce another. Failure should add complications, compounding problems.



Disaster Prep: The RPG

Basic rules	Examples
Simple stats	Know, Think, Choose, Do Give a +2, +1, 0, -2
Relevant classes	Prepper, Communicator, Networker, Actor Grant +2 if their idea is relevant to their ‘class’
Use advantage/disadvantage	Use your experiences to grant advantage/disadvantage Don’t focus on precision towards the plan
Role v. difficulty of 12	You want people to succeed because success helps memory. Use varying degrees of success

Game objective

LOCALISM

“In every after-action review, the same pattern emerges: the communities that survived weren't necessarily the ones with the most resources. They were the ones with the strongest local networks, the clearest lines of mutual support, **the neighbors who knew each other's names.**" – Kyle King, Crisis Labs

Today’s first game is going to have LOCALISM as the learning objective

Demo

Disaster Prep: The RPG

My character is a Knower and Prepper

Know +2 | Think +1 | Choose -0 | Do -2

Prepper +2

Scenario: The Colossus of Cascadia - A Super Bomb Cyclone

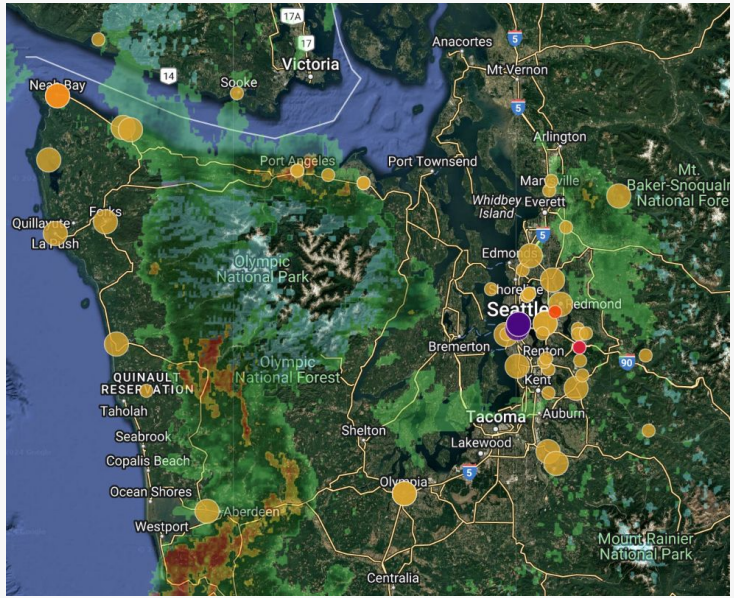
Keeping it personal

The Colossus of Cascadia - A Super Bomb Cyclone

It is late March 2026. The Pacific Northwest has experienced a relatively mild winter with above-average ocean temperatures lingering further offshore than usual.

An unusually strong and deep low-pressure system begins to rapidly intensify far out in the Pacific, fueled by this warm water and a potent upper-level jet stream.

Models are indicating a central pressure drop exceeding 35 millibars in 24 hours – significantly more intense than the November 2024 event (mid 20s).



The Colossus of Cascadia - A Super Bomb Cyclone

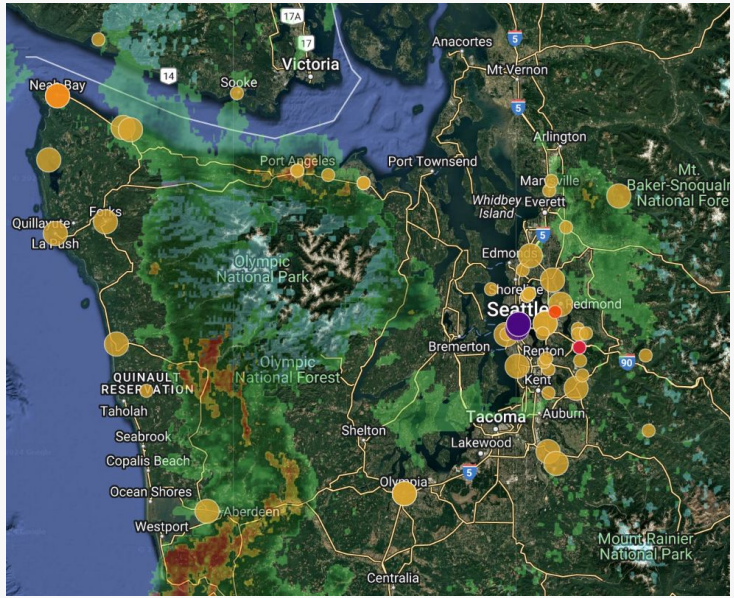
Impending problems include massive power outages, river flooding, slowed shipping, straight-line winds in the foothills over 100 mph, falling trees, public anxiety

The Colossus of Cascadia formed 200 miles from Neah Bay.

Your neighborhood doesn't seem aware.

What do you do?

Yes, I have a d20 to roll to see if you succeed. You could also use a d6 with adjustments to the rules.



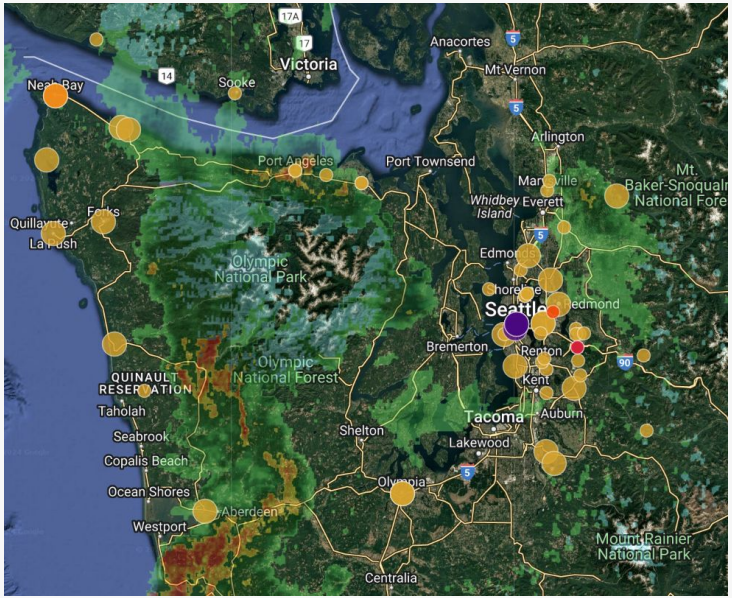
The Colossus of Cascadia - A Super Bomb Cyclone

Intensification was faster than expected.

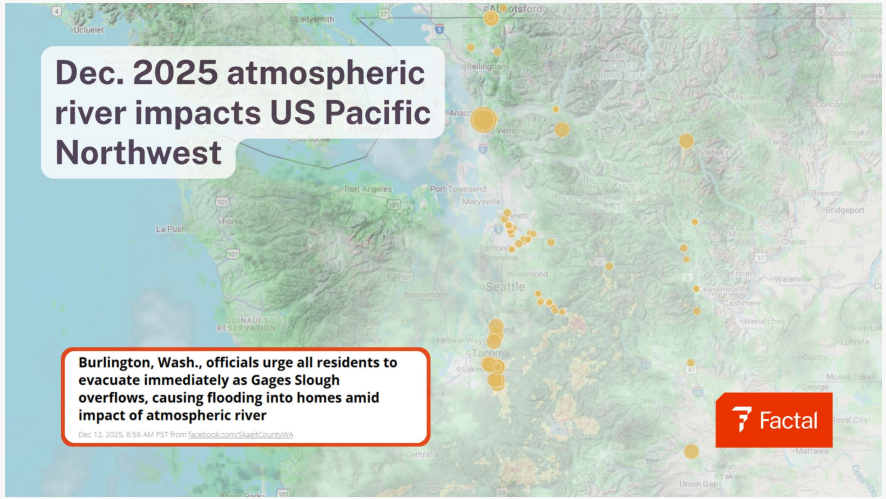
The house next door never found out.

How do you want to do this?

What's your class and attributes?



Atmospheric river chain



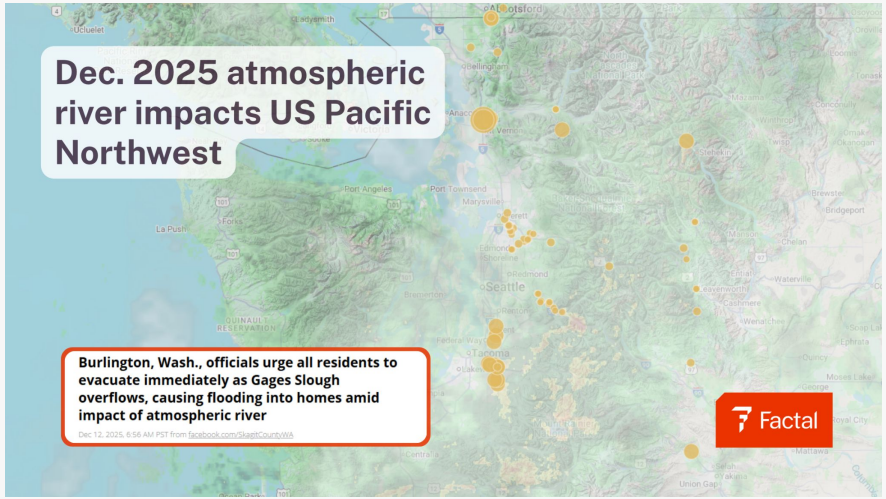
Let's focus on PLANNING for this one.

Both your primary and secondary routes are closed, but your family/friend/neighbor needs help.

How do you want to do this?

What's your class and attributes?

Atmospheric river chain



Let's focus on FATIGUE for this one.

This is personal – we were in a state of warning or watch for nearly three weeks.

Me, someone in the field, was tired of seeing the alerts. I started to ignore them.

But then a levee near my friends' work broke.

How do you want to do this?

What's your class and attributes?

I’ve seen fire and smoke



Let’s focus on LOCALISM again.

Remember summer 2020?

I couldn’t see the hills by my house.

It was 90+ degrees.

Smoke was everywhere and permanent.

Then we all had masks, because we trusted people.

Next summer if there are wildfires how do you help?

What’s your class and attributes?

I’ve seen fire and smoke



Let’s focus on TRUST.

Smoke was everywhere and permanent.
Then we all had masks, because we trusted people.

Maybe you know someone who no longer has masks, plus they have to use fans with open windows for cooling. What do you do?

What’s your class and attributes?

I’ve seen fire and smoke



Let’s focus on PREPARATION.

What if the fires are closer?

What if they close the road away?

Are you ready for get set and go?

What’s your class and attributes?

Take home with you

Gaming -> simulation -> gaming

Gaming grew into complex simulations that take a long time to learn.

Building simple games

Borrow from D&D's cultural cache.

Build from story and 1-pagers like Honey Heist.

Demonstration of local empowerment

Today's game focused on helping non-experts learn to act locally on the best information they have.



Appendix N

The Virtues of Simulation: Reflections On Playing ‘The Ch’Ing [Qing] Game

Educator Resources for the World's Greatest Roleplaying Game

Learn-to-Play with a 5-Room Dungeon

Social Studies Teachers’ Use of Role Play and Simulations and the Making of 21st Century Citizens

Four Elements of Successful Historical Role-Playing in the Classroom

Useful role playing game mechanics which can make crisis exercises more valuable

Cognitive benefits of computer games for older adults

Honey Heist

All those books from the photos, plus other games with difficulty ranges from *Honey Heist* to *Synnibarr* as well as wargames from *Diplomacy* to *Squad Leader*

Thank you

Ben Brandt

Dean Baratta

PJ Coffey

Tyler Adams

Elissa Olinsky

Martin McClellan

Katy Swihart

Further inspirations from Mike Shea, Grant Howitt, John Harper, Deborah Ann Woll, Teos Abadía, Shelly Mazzanoble, and Greg Tito

as well as John White, Brendan Vaughn, Tim Foss, Armin Khansari, Randall Conger, Susie Rants and all who have campaigned with me over whether in the 80s and 90s or today

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