Praxis and Allies: The WPA Board Game

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Introduction: The WPA Board Game as a Rhetorical Text and a Pedagogical Tool

The story of the development of *Praxis and Allies: The WPA Board Game* is a narrative about not only the creation of a game but also of a rhetorical text. As we designed the game, the members of our WPA seminar (a semester-long graduate course about the theory and practice of writing program administration) became acutely aware that we were instantiating a particular vision of writing program administration, a vision shaped together over time by discussing our class readings, personal experiences, and beliefs. We came to understand that *Praxis and Allies* is not only a practical pedagogical tool for pre-service and practicing WPAs, but also a rhetorical document that articulates particular arguments—arguments we are making about the nature of WPA work and how prospective writing program administrators can learn about such work.

To understand the rhetorical foundations of the game, it is first necessary to understand the context of its inception. *Praxis and Allies* began as a class project for Purdue's Spring 2008 WPA seminar. As we thought through the game's ultimate purpose and audience, we imagined it as an engaging learning activity for use in seminars like the one we were taking. During the early stages of the game's development, it became clear that our purposes rested on some important warrants about what WPA work fundamentally is and how knowledge of it can be acquired.

The first important argument implicit in the creation of the game is that valuable knowledge about WPA work can and should be taught through formal coursework, observation, and practice during graduate school. In

"Turtles All the Way Down," Louise Phelps states, "Administration is such a multifaceted, context-dependent activity that it is tempting to conclude it can't be taught at all, only learned" (29). She goes on to argue, however, that this temptation must be resisted because it reifies the false distinction between theory and practice. The argument for the importance of explicit teaching about WPA work in graduate school is one that has reverberated through much of the field's literature. Scholars such as Edward White, Trudelle Thomas, Sally Barr-Ebest, Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser have written about the need for graduate-level WPA coursework and training. By creating a game that can contribute to the knowledge development of prospective WPAs, we have conveyed support for these assertions. In other words, *Praxis and Allies* not only provides a tool to help graduate students engage in WPA learning, it also underscores the argument that such learning is possible and desirable.

Closely related to our argument that WPA work can and should be taught formally is a second contention that is inherent to the game: the belief that WPA work is intellectual and scholarly. Rose and Weiser argue that the most persuasive reason for including WPA preparation in graduate study is because "writing program administration is intellectual work that is not only worthy of serious and rigorous formal study, but in need of it" (167). In recent years, many WPAs have asserted that writing program administration is an intellectual activity requiring the support of scholarship and research. Foundational documents such as "The Portland Resolution," "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administration," and Christine Hult's "The Scholarship of Administration" have successfully advanced this view. We see our game as yet another persuasive text that contributes to this conception of WPA work.

In addition to arguing that WPA work can and should be taught, and that it is intellectual and scholarly work, *Praxis and Allies* also promotes a particular notion of one extremely complex and contentious issue in WPA work: the role of power. The game follows a team-play format in which players work together, inhabiting the same WPA role and jointly moving a single piece around the board to different locations on a fictional campus in order to acquire the necessary resources to meet a specific objective. The decision to use a team-play format was the most contentious issue we dealt with while designing the game. As we worked through this decision together, it became apparent that we were embroiled in a debate about a fundamental quality of WPA work. The game's team-play design supports a view of WPA work consistent with the model of collaborative administration espoused by scholars such as Jeanne Gunner. Thus, the third major argument inherent to *Praxis and Allies* is that power and leadership are most

productively shared, and that individual WPAs almost never act with complete autonomy.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. In the first, we describe the specific types of administrative knowledge areas present in *Praxis and Allies* and explain how game play provides low-risk experiential learning that focuses on these knowledge areas. The second section discusses the importance of narrative in representing WPA work and demonstrates how the game incorporates narrative as a pedagogical tool. The third section describes how the game acts as a procedural rhetoric and explains how the board game medium grew out of this procedural rhetorical purpose and the rhetorical context we envisioned. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of how we intend to distribute *Praxis and Allies* and how this distribution approach aligns with the game's collaborative philosophy.

Learning through Play: How Praxis and Allies
Provides Low-Risk Experiential Learning of
Key Administrative Knowledge Areas

As discussed in the previous section, two central arguments of *Praxis and Allies* are that WPA work is intellectual and scholarly and that knowledge about this work can and should be taught to prospective WPAs. What, though, does the game teach? For us, this is fundamentally a question of what we believe WPAs must know: in deciding what we wanted players of the game to learn, we had to consider what we believed to be the major knowledge areas of writing program administration.

The question of what constitutes administrative knowledge has been raised in much WPA scholarship. In "Politics and the WPA: Traveling Through and Past Realms of Experience," Doug Hesse offers one possible area of WPA knowledge. He argues that first, "WPAs simply must be politicians" and that second, "the most meaningful political decisions generally involve competition for resources: time, space, and money" (42). If we look at these claims rhetorically, Hesse's syllogism sounds something like this:

> Major Premise: WPAs must be politicians
>
> Minor Premise: Politicians compete for resources of time, space, and money
>
> Conclusion: WPAs must compete for resources of time, space, and money

So, in the effort to figure out what constitutes administrative knowledge, it seems that we have one possible answer: a WPA must know how to compete with other "players" for resources.

But understanding how to compete with others for resources is not the only knowledge a writing program administrator needs. It is commonly acknowledged in WPA discourse that a major challenge of administrative work is the need to balance many diverse roles and responsibilities. In the introduction to *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours,* Diana George likens this balancing act to plate twirling. WPAs, she claims, find themselves "on stage, trying to sustain the illusion of perpetual motion, worried over how to end the show without losing control as those plates go crashing onto the stage floor" (xi). Further, a WPA must balance her many administrative responsibilities and juggle that administrative work with teaching and research. It seems that another area of WPA knowledge that future administrators must cultivate is how to juggle a number of responsibilities and roles.

All this responsibility juggling relates, again, to resources, though perhaps not exactly the same types of resources for which WPAs must compete with others. Instead of external sorts of resources like money, space, and time, demands on the WPA compete with each other for the WPA's personal stock of resources. What is less commonly acknowledged than WPAs' need to balance responsibilities and roles is that the sheer amount of responsibilities delegated to writing program administrators—and the diversity of these responsibilities—requires that WPAs learn to use wisely (and sometimes conserve) their supply of personal resources. Again, not only do administrative responsibilities demand the WPA's resources, but the WPA's resources are also typically drained from the demands of teaching and research. The WPA is engaged in a one-person game that requires her to balance her own resources to win: knowing how to use wisely one's personal resources constitutes another important area of WPA knowledge.

Praxis and Allies clearly focuses on the administrative knowledge area of competition for resources because a major element of game play is gathering resources. During the game, players must complete a task similar to something a writing program administrator would do (set up a WAC program, complete an assessment project, etc.). To complete the task successfully, players must obtain resources—specifically knowledge, funding, and *ethos*—from different places on the board that signify places in the university and department (library, faculty lounge, etc.). As the game progresses, players may gain or lose resources from chance cards. These chance cards are meant to represent the inevitable problems, as well as the positive experiences, a WPA will face and that she is often unable to control. Examples include: "A grant you wrote that would fund a WAC program is rejected—Lose 2 funding points" and "Interviews of student writers that you're conducting go really well—Gain 2 knowledge points." Because players win by

collecting the different resources they need to complete their given task, the sense of struggling for resources is central to the game.

Game play also focuses on the administrative knowledge area of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities because throughout the game, players get to try on different roles and must take on multiple responsibilities. Again, the chance cards are fundamental to this aspect of the game, since they reveal the breadth of WPA responsibilities and roles. For example, during game play, a player may receive a chance card that says she has gotten an article accepted to a journal, received a prestigious teaching award, or been awarded a grant to buy her writing program new computers. These positive chance cards would award the player with knowledge, energy, or funding. On the other hand, a player may receive a chance card that tells her an article she submitted was rejected, or one of her students filed a grade complaint, or her writing program is suddenly short a few teaching assistants. These negative chance cards would take away one of the player's resources. Importantly, the chance cards refer to different roles that the WPA has, not only as a WPA, but as a teacher and researcher as well. These chance cards are a continual reminder that the player is juggling a number of different roles and responsibilities.

During game play, players must not only gather resources and negotiate multiple roles and responsibilities, but they must also use wisely one of their own most precious personal resources: energy. Players are given a certain amount of energy at the start of each round. This energy, as happens in life, does run out. When players are low on energy, they must return home to replenish their supply. If players run out of energy, they suffer burnout and are unable to complete the game's task (in other words, they lose). Because players must manage their energy points wisely to finish the task—and therefore win the game—knowledge of how to conserve energy is also central to the game. This is important because, as Susan McLeod reminds us, successful WPAs must avoid burnout by managing stress and caring for themselves.

In considering how, through game play, *Praxis and Allies* facilitates learning about these three areas of administrative knowledge (competing for resources, juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, and conserving one's personal resources), we return briefly to Louise Phelps' "Turtles All the Way Down." Here, Phelps points out the complex methods by which learning most productively takes place at the intersection of three modes: "explicit formal learning through curricular study and research; experiential learning, a convenient term for an array of indirect practical learning modes; and pragmatic learning through the direct exercise of leadership in positional administration" (30). It is our contention that *Praxis and Allies*

incorporates all three of Phelps's modes to maximize learning: first, the game is intended for use as a formal learning tool in the context of course-work and requires students to draw on knowledge from their research and scholarship; second, it requests students to reflect on their own observations and experiences collaboratively; and third, it provides pragmatic opportunities to role play and simulate the leadership positions and decision-making processes that students might experience in real WPA positions.

Praxis and Allies can add to graduate students' preparation for administration by providing them with a low-risk opportunity to practice with key knowledge areas that are fundamental to writing program administration. When used in a course, the game can add an experiential element to supplement other more traditional activities like reading and discussion. The game also has potential to supplement graduate students' experiential learning in administrative internships and jobs by giving them a lower-risk opportunity to experiment with WPA work before they actually have to do so in a graduate student administrative position. In other words, *Praxis and Allies* allows prospective WPAs to *play with* some of the most important areas of WPA work.

Reaching and Teaching an External Audience: The Importance of Narrative in WPA Literature and in Praxis and Allies

In "The Next Generation of WPAs," Barr-Ebest remarks, "If we want the next generation of WPAs to avoid the problems and prejudices [the first generation of WPAs has] encountered, we need to ensure that they learn what we know before they graduate" (82). One of the ways in which administrative knowledge has traditionally been shared is through narratives. Narratives are ubiquitous throughout WPA scholarship because they help WPAs situate their reader within an otherwise possibly foreign context. It is through narrative that WPAs are best able to share with a larger audience what they do and why and how their work is intellectual. *Praxis and Allies* incorporates narrative into game play as a learning aid, with the central focus on creating a team narrative. The game provides prospective and current WPAs an opportunity to create, tell, or rewrite their own stories.

The importance of narrative creation to *Praxis and Allies* reflects the ubiquity of the narrative in WPA literature (Enos and Borrowman; George). As newer and established WPAs work to convey the knowledge they have gained through practical experience and research, WPAs have often struggled against the lack of understanding with which their audience may view their profession. One reason for this is the situatedness of WPA work. Rose writes:

> Writing program administration is deeply embedded in and dependent upon the cultures of the particular institutions in which individual writing programs are located, the disciplinary culture of composition studies and English studies more generally, and the broader culture of faculty life and work in higher education [. . .] WPAs frequently turn to narrative as a way to impose order, meaning, and value on their experience. (221)

As a result of the "embedded" nature of WPA work, a WPA's reading audience may reside largely outside of the author's working context and may misunderstand or devalue the work a WPA does. This external audience may be composed of those working outside academia or across disciplines and may perhaps be composed of other WPAs who work in very different contexts. Future WPAs currently enrolled in graduate programs also comprise this external audience. It is particularly for this group that *Praxis and Allies* was created.

In WPA scholarship, the narrative is a very appropriate tool for narrowing the knowledge gap between a WPA's external audience and the intellectual work in which the WPA is engaged due to the narrative's accessible nature. Readers' familiarity with narratives in other contexts make the scholarship of WPA work written in a narrative form more accessible to an audience otherwise unfamiliar with the WPA's context. Rose explains how narratives may be used to increase understanding among readers who perhaps lack familiarity with the context being described:

> [Narratives] impose order and coherence by sequencing and suggesting cause-effect relationships, making experience predictable by fitting it into familiar patterns and making it make sense by transforming it into stories with recognizable characters, conflicts, and resolutions. These stories allow their narrators to integrate the experiences of the individual agent into the broader social experience by naming them, describing them, and contextualizing them. In this way, they can give meaning and value in a broader culture to what might otherwise seem to be singular, inexplicable experiences without significance, representing them in terms of familiar shared metanarratives. (222)

During game play, narrative construction promotes learning and discussion about administration, and also encourages prospective WPAs to draw from their previous experience and reading about WPA work. Specifically, as players strategize how to move about the game board, they construct nar-

ratives based on previous experience, inhabit narratives by WPAs in the literature, or imagine the actions they might take themselves. The game seeks to move players beyond the traditional role of a narrative's external reader and allow the players to become a character in their own narrative.

As an aid to narrative construction, *Praxis and Allies* incorporates the use of situated performance activities into its game play. Rose and Finders argue that these activities allow participants to "enact the subject positions being examined" and that they "impose a narrative structure on what might otherwise be inchoate experience . . . allow[ing] participants to at least temporarily inhabit those subject positions they might have assigned to the Other" (38–9). As players of *Praxis and Allies* are put into the subject position of the WPA, the "situated performance supplies a dynamic text for interpretation and revision by temporarily transforming fluid, fragmented subjects acting in dynamic settings into agents in structured narratives that can be examined" (36). In this way, *Praxis and Allies* allows graduate students the opportunity to try out and learn from their own narrative creations within a low-risk environment that has relatively little consequence. Rather than simply remaining part of the external audience of someone else's narrative, players begin constructing their own WPA histories.

Intersection of Purpose, Medium, and Rhetorical Context: The Choice to Make a Board Game

Of *Praxis and Allies,* one might reasonably ask, "why did this text have to be a board game as opposed to some other medium?" Our choice of medium grew out of decisions we made about both the rhetorical context and the purpose that we envisioned for the game. Following Anne Wysocki's argument in *Writing New Media,* our foremost concern was with *how* and *why* we would produce our text, not *what* we would produce (15). In other words, the purpose and rhetorical situation of *Praxis and Allies* drove our decisions about medium, rather than vice versa.

When we imagined our audience for this game, we pictured a class like our own: six graduate students and an instructor gathered together in a classroom to teach and learn about writing program administration. Therefore, we needed something that each person could participate equally in and something that would afford the audience the opportunity to interact. Our response to this rhetorical context was a board game similarly fashioned to the ones we had played as children. First, a board game requires the physical presence of a group of people. Second, it enables players of different ages and expertise to participate in meaningful ways. And finally, it is largely dialogue driven. Therefore, developing a game based on the pro-

cedures of writing program administration enabled us to capitalize on the rhetorical context of class meetings.

Not only was the board game format crucial for the rhetorical contexts we imagined for our audiences, but it was also crucial to the purpose of the game, namely, facilitating the understanding of writing program administration processes prior to actually engaging in those processes. In *Persuasive Games,* Ian Bogost argues that procedural rhetoric, the practice of persuading through processes, is an especially useful means of understanding the potential and real effects of video games because the "procedurality" helps us gain a better understanding of the "methods, techniques, and logics" that operate systems (3).

For an example of the complex procedurality of writing program administration, consider Trudelle Thomas's 1991 essay on the "Graduate Student as Apprentice." She writes:

> This morning I teach two classes and hold conferences with students. Then I meet with the academic vice president and my department chair to discuss plans for a writing assessment program for the six hundred students who move through our composition program each year. By mid-afternoon, I hope to escape to the library to fine-tune plans for a faculty workshop later this week. It's a typical day in the life of this writing program administrator. I delight in the variety of tasks and relationships that make up my job, but sometimes I think back on graduate school and wonder: how did all of those captivating seminars in Barth and Berthoff and Woolf prepare me for this? (41)

What's missing from Thomas's education is not the theoretical knowledge of working as a WPA but the procedural knowledge of operating within this larger academic system. Returning to Bogost, we see that "procedurality refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith" (3). With *Praxis and Allies,* we have attempted to extend that notion of procedurality, that definition of how things work, to writing program administration.

But simply writing or reading about the procedurality of writing program administration is not sufficient for understanding it. Bogost also contends that simple oral, written, or visual rhetorics "inadequately account for the unique properties of procedural expression" (29) and that "procedural

representation itself requires inscription in a medium that actually enacts processes rather than merely describes them" (9). Therefore, as the designers of this text, we needed to select a medium that would allow us to represent and enact the processes of writing program administration over other media that would merely enable us to describe those processes. As Bogost argues in his book, games provide an excellent medium for enacting these processes.

In considering procedural rhetoric and video games, Bogost argues like Wysocki that the *how* and the *why* of media can be more important than the *what*. When commenting on the discourse surrounding games on online message boards, he suggests that they reveal something about procedural rhetoric: "It's not just about winning; it's also about telling people what you did and how you did it" (39). To put it another way, part of the value of games is the discourse produced about the game's processes. *Praxis and Allies* is a valuable rhetorical text because it articulates administrative processes and also creates discourse about those processes in a way that no other type of medium can do in this context.

Future Plans for Praxis and Allies: A Collaborative Approach to Authorship, Ownership, and Distribution

We created *Praxis and Allies* with the idea that the game could be played, expanded, and adapted by other WPAs and graduate students. In distributing the game, we hope to maintain this collaborative philosophy while also protecting our original intellectual contributions from being commercialized. To this end, we drew upon the philosophies of copyleft and Creative Commons while exploring issues of authorship and ownership. Copyleft, a philosophy opposed to "copyright," encourages individuals to share their works freely in the public domain, fostering community revision and free redistribution. Although copyleft philosophies were originally conceived for the computer software industry, today copyleft has a host of uses, including for intellectual and educational materials. Creative Commons is one such organization that promotes the ideals of copyleft philosophy while offering some protections for authors.

Creative Commons and copyleft philosophies closely align with many values WPAs share and can provide an alternative model for distributing works like *Praxis and Allies* and assist in developing collective WPA knowledge in other contexts. In "Coding with Power: Towards a Rhetoric of Computer Coding and Composition," Robert E. Cummings argues that copyleft philosophies can closely align with the work that Rhetoric and Composition scholars, researchers, and academic writers do. Cummings

makes the case that with a few exceptions (such as textbook publishing) academic authors do not write primarily for the purposes of making a profit but rather for intellectual and educational purposes (431). Since the entire "copyright" system was designed for protecting the profits gained from original creations, if profit is not a primary goal, alternative models can—and should—be considered.

Applying Cummings's arguments directly to the intellectual products of WPAs, like *Praxis and Allies,* we can see how copyleft philosophy is potentially linked with much of the intellectual work of WPAs. WPA work is inherently collaborative—WPAs collaborate with teachers of writing, students, administrators and other WPAs to create and share knowledge. For example, Laura Brady in "A Greenhouse for Writing Program Change" describes the collective ways in which faculty and administrators made considerable changes to their programs through collaboration. As discussed elsewhere in this article, collaboration and collaborative learning were key components of *Praxis and Allies.* We want to encourage an ongoing collaboration that extends beyond the context of the immediate development of *Praxis and Allies;* Creative Commons and copyleft philosophies provide us with the tools to do that.

The philosophy of Creative Commons can be summed up in their statement, "some rights reserved." Unlike the traditional copyright that authors or publishers hold, Creative Commons allows for individuals to protect their works while still encouraging others to build upon them freely. Their range of licensing options includes Attribution, "you let others copy, distribute, display, and perform your copyrighted work—and derivative works based upon it—but only if they give credit the way you request" and Share Alike, "you allow others to distribute derivative works only under a license identical to the license that governs your work" (CreativeCommons.org). By applying a Creative Commons "Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike License" to the WPA Game, we are able to protect our original intellectual work while still distributing it to others.

To further illustrate this point, consider the following two distribution scenarios for *Praxis and Allies.* In the first scenario (under the copyright philosophy), we distribute the game via PDF on the web and retain full authorship, ownership, and copyright. The game is downloaded and played by WPAs and graduate students in various contexts. If revisions are made to the game, they are most likely made by the original authors and redistributed to those who are interested in playing. This creates a very one-way creation and consumption ideology—we create the game and others consume it. This philosophy does not fit with the game's own collaborative and shared knowledge focus, nor does it reflect the day-to-day collaborations in

which WPAs engage. In the second scenario (under the copyleft philosophy), we create and distribute a PDF of the game on the web, but apply the Creative Commons "Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike License." Under this license, we forgo exclusive rights to ownership of the game and open the game up for revision, expansion, and shared ownership to the WPA community. Others download and modify the game, adding to it and expanding it with their own experiences and insights. *Praxis and Allies* and its modifications continue to be distributed and redistributed, becoming a community-driven, collaborative text of shared experience.

If we compare the Creative Commons philosophy to a standard "copyright" philosophy of distributing the game, we end up with two different contexts and underlying ideologies. The copyleft/Creative Commons model has much to teach WPAs about the role of shared texts, knowledge, and experiences. By engaging *Praxis and Allies* in this mindset, we initiate an ideological shift in ownership and a commitment to collaboration.

Conclusion

Praxis and Allies: The WPA Board Game is a rhetorical text that suggests that WPA work can and should be taught and that this work is scholarly and intellectual. The game is also a pedagogical tool that provides prospective WPAs the opportunity to try out their own future narratives as they begin constructing their individual WPA histories through game play. However, the game is not just for those "players" new to writing program administration. On the contrary, the game offers future, junior, and seasoned WPAs an opportunity for dialogue.

We would like to conclude this article with an anecdote that illustrates how this game may be relevant to the work of experienced WPAs as well. In our initial piloting of *Praxis and Allies,* we invited graduate students and professors from the English Department to play the game while we observed. During the game-play session, we witnessed the English Department Head defer to the Writing Lab Director on matters of writing center theory while graduate students offered relevant experiences from their first-year composition classrooms. Although the game players maintained different statuses in the department, each individual's knowledge and experience were valued as they worked toward the game objective. In short, the game brought together players with diverse experiences and insights, and allowed these players to learn and reflect collaboratively about WPA work. Such was our goal for *Praxis and Allis: The WPA Game. Praxis and Allies: The WPA Game* will be available soon for download at the Council of Writing Program Administrators website (http://wpacouncil.org/).

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