Mantles in the Museum

by Dr. Jason Cox and Dr. Lillian Lewis

Table of Contents

Introduction: Welcome to the Grand Museum Gala!

Description

In this live-action role-playing game (larp), a group of critics must decide on three works to send to an international exhibition. Each character role in this game embraces one of five interpretive frameworks for evaluating and understanding art, though how they understand that framework to operate is specific to their individual lives. Through this experiential method, players learn to participate in polyvocal narratives about, through, and in works of art.

The Story

In this game you play one of the people that are influential in your local Art scene, and must decide on three works to send to an international biennial hosted by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a UN agency that promotes international collaboration and reform in service to worldwide peace and security.

Each character in this game embraces one of five interpretive frameworks for evaluating and understanding art, though how they understand that framework to operate is specific to their individual lives. The goal of discussion about the artworks you look at isn't to change someone else's framework, but to look for the productive discourse that emerges at their intersections.

Requirements

This game is designed for between 5 and 15 players, and takes about two hours to play. In order to play you will also need the Mantle Character Cards.

Players should have a basic understanding of the Elements and Principles of Art, though in-depth knowledge of the arts is not required to play. Players are also expected to do some light research work before the game, and will ideally have at least one costume item for their character.

One person must act as The Facilitator, but they may also play a character. The best characters for this person to choose are the Institutionalists, though others can be made to work. The Facilitator organizes play, describes the game to participants, acts as a rules arbiter, and orchestrates the character-creation, in-character play, and debriefing sessions.

The ideal space to play is in a Museum, especially one with a diverse collection of pieces. You will want to let the Museum know you are playing to avoid confusion! The game can be played in other spaces as long as they can be divided into at least three different spaces, but it requires no less than ten artworks to be on display in each space. You will also need a comfortable space to debrief in after the role-played portion of the game.

Discourse and Safety

The majority of interactions in this game happen through a discourse between two or three characters, in which they describe their reaction to a piece and their reasoning about it. This discourse is meant to develop an understanding of the Interpretive Frameworks and how they might be applied by different people.

It is very important to remember that in this game the purpose of critique isn't to insult a person or idea, or to belittle their worth, but to consider how Art looks from several different perspectives.

It is important to remember during these conversations that people are always more important than the game. If at some point the interactions become more stressful than a player is comfortable with, they may opt out of the game. This will not be challenged by the other players or the Facilitator (though they may need to complete an alternative assignment if this is an educational experience).

Character Creation: Assuming the Mantle (50 Minutes)

Deal with It

Before the game, the Mantle Character Cards are laid out for players to choose from, grouped according to their Interpretive Framework: Expressionist, Formalist, Imitationalist, Institutionalist, and Instrumentalist.

The large font on the front of the card includes the first initial and last name as well as a job description of the character. The character's way of expressing their Interpretive Framework is explained in their Backstory on the back of the card.

If there are 5 players, only one character may be selected from each framework. If there are 6-10 players, up to two may be selected from each framework. If there are 11-15 players, any character may be selected.

"Yes, and/but…"

"Yes, and/but…" is an improvisational theatre technique wherein participants respond to statements made by other characters about the world, their lives, or the relationship between you as facts. Participants should avoid negating or refuting claims, but they can modify statements by adding to them ("Yes, and…") or restricting them ("Yes, but…") to create more options for dialogue and interesting play.

This technique is demonstrated by the facilitator and a volunteer to collaboratively imagine the relationship between their characters. This discussion is done"in-character". Players find a partner and take turns using the technique for themselves for a minute each. They then find a second partner and repeat the process.

Critique: Form+Theme+Context®

There are many different ways to examine works of Art, some of which may be unfamiliar to players. This can create difficulty in having productive discussions, so the Facilitator introduces the Renee Sandell's (2006, 2009) FTC Palette. This Palette focuses on three interconnected qualities (Form, Theme, and Context) that can be used to help formulate questions and ideas about the specific attributes of a work.

Form: What we SEE in a work; the Visual Evidence. Includes the elements of art (lines, shapes, colors, values) and principles of design (balance, volume, and space), as well as a work's media, scale, and style.
Theme: What we can DISCERN from the Visual Evidence. The Big Idea, subject matter, mood, and art historical references. Form and theme help interpret the meaning(s) of the work.
Context: The SIGNIFICANCE of a work. Often refers to what we can't see, such as the history of the work or artist, and provides information about the relevance of the work.

For the purposes of this game, known facts about an artwork (often written next to those works) may not purposefully be contradicted by characters.

Your View

This is an exercise to get a player used to thinking and talking like their character, especially when it comes to art. Each player chooses a work of art that they feel drawn to and writes a one paragraph critique that describes what they see in the work and why it is meaningful to them. They can refer to the FTC template to help articulate their thoughts.

Players write a second critique in the "voice" of their characters. This critique doesn't necessarily take an opposite view to their own, but should be distinct in terms of what it highlights and what they think is meaningful about it.

What's Your Story?

The Facilitator groups the players by their character's framework. If a person is the only person playing their framework, they can join another group. Each player offers a rough description of where their character came from, what their family is like, and when they decided to get involved in the arts.

Afterwards, players are divided into new groups of three or four. They introduce their character, and talk about the way they think about art to the other people in the group. It is important to remember in this section that art matters to these characters for both personal and professional reasons, and to think about why that is.

You've Got the Look

Players must choose an item of clothing that is iconic for their characters to wear during the game. It should ideally connect their Interpretive Framework and/or Background in some way. It should also be an item that the player would *NOT* normally wear.

Players may also wish to adjust their voice, walk, or body language to suit the characters. It can be great fun to do this, but they should remember to choose something they can maintain as they will be "in character" for a significant amount of time.

Please Allow Me to Introduce Myself

The Facilitator gets the players to form a rough circle. Going clockwise, each player takes about thirty seconds to introduce themselves by their character's name and describes who they are in their own words.

Example of Character Creation

Jason takes the card for *F. Urdinak the Sensationalist*, which describes a Formalist artist that uses the elements and principles of Art to create very sensual works. He decides that the character goes for a self-consciously punk-rock aesthetic and attitude, and that they enjoy the performance of their identity almost as much as making the work.

In conversation with another player, Jason says his character wants to "stick it to the man" by subverting artistic assumptions. They speak with absolute certainty of their opinions, and can be a little insulting to people who reject their line of thinking. He imagines their provocative nature and raw approach means that they don't have many close friends and family, but quite a few followers.

To look like the character he has described, Jason decides to cut the sleeve off and to rip a few holes in an old black t-shirt. He also puts a little product in his hair, making it extra spiky, and dons a pair of sunglasses.

In-Character: The Gala (60 minutes)

Let The Gala Begin!

The game takes place over three rounds, each in a different space with art on display. At the end of each round, one of the pieces in that space is selected to be sent to the UNESCO exhibition. At the beginning of each round, The Facilitator identifies one portion of the room as "The Gathering Area". All characters begin the round in this space.

In the first room, the Facilitator says "Welcome everyone! Tonight we have been asked as arts advocates for our community to select three works from the Museum to travel to

UNESCO's upcoming International Exhibition. I think that this also represents a fantastic opportunity for us to get to know and learn from one another! I'm going to start with [indicates a work], but I hope to have a chance to talk to each of you tonight!"

The facilitator moves to the work they indicated, and strikes up a conversation with at least one character. Other participants seek out works and conversations. A conversation may include as many people who wish to participate.

Experience (XP)

At the end of a conversation characters mark one experience box that matches the *Interpretive Framework* of one of the characters that talked to them.

Characters can talk to people from the different frameworks more than once, but you do not make additional marks during this scene. If a character is the only representative of their framework, they may mark it for free.

Once you have marked all five experience boxes (meaning you have talked to at least one representative of each Interpretive Framework) return to The Gathering Area. Characters may come to the Gathering Area to find representatives of frameworks they are still missing if necessary.

While in The Gathering Area, characters should talk to each other about the different works they saw. They will use this conversation to nominate a work for the UNESCO exhibition.

Advance

Once all the characters are in The Gathering Area, the Facilitator calls for nominations for the first work to go to the exhibition.

Once all the nominations are all in, the Facilitator calls for one person to make a thirty second pitch for each work and another to present any important counterpoints.
The characters take a vote for which piece to send. The Facilitator calls out the works in the order they were nominated. Each character has only one vote, which is given by raising their hands.

All the characters move to a second gallery. A second work will be chosen from this gallery using the same process as the first. After the second work is chosen, characters move to a third (and final) gallery for their last choice.

The End of the Night

Once characters have made their final determination, the Facilitator says "This was a tough selection process, because all the pieces are so strong! Our selected works are [work number 1], [work number 2], and [work number 3]. Thank you everyone for coming, and let's have a round of applause for everyone's efforts tonight!"

After clapping, players drop out of character and head to the debrief area.

The Debrief (10 minutes)

The debrief should take place in a safe, comfortable space with chairs arranged in a circle. The Facilitator asks players to take a minute without talking to reflect on the experience.

After this reflection, The Facilitator asks players what they learned about the different frameworks.

Did your own view on the arts change?
How did the way you think about other perspectives change?
Was there one interaction that particularly stood out to you?

The Facilitator asks what players learned from their characters. As they answer, they remove the item of clothing representing the character.

How are you alike or different?
What is one thing about your character that you admire?
What is one thing about your character you want to leave behind with them?

The Facilitator thanks players for attending, and officially ends the experience.

Appendix 1: Interpretive Frameworks

Formalists believe that the value of a work of art relies on the relationship between the visual elements in a work.
Adherent Examples: Walter Gropius, Josef Albers, Anni Albers, Nick Zangwill, Lilly Reich
Instrumentalists believe that art should say something, it should have a purpose and that it should lead to some social good.
Adherent Examples: John Dewey, Linda Nochlin, Paolo Freire, Audre Lord, Judy Chicago
Expressionists believe that art should express the emotions of the maker and have an emotional impact on its viewers.
Adherent Examples: Clement Greenberg, Hans Hoffman, Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Eva Hesse
Imitationalists believe that art should imitate the actual appearance of things in the world.
Adherent Examples: Chuck Close, Grant Wood, John Ruskin, Camille Claudel, Sally Mann
Institutionalists believe that the responses of people with authority in the art world determine an artworks value.
Adherent Examples: Arthur Danto, Pierre Bourdieu, George Dickie, Elaine de Kooning, Fred Wilson

Appendix 2: Accommodations

Costuming Limitations

If costuming is not an option, consider having a collection of diverse photographic portraits for players to choose as a representation of their character. They can attach the image they chose to their card as a "Photo ID". If the group is artistically inclined, they could instead draw a portrait of their character.

Note Pads

Some players may have a difficult time keeping track of details in the works. A small notepad or clipboard can be a great aide to those players.

Appendix 3: Adaptations for the Classroom

Preparation

When using this game with a class the preparatory work for the game can be done much earlier than the in-character portion, allowing students the advantage of being able to research their interpretive frameworks and to create their characters in more depth. A teacher may wish to use the "Your View" writing workshop as a pre-assessment of their knowledge, and to follow it up with the "Letter to UNESCO" assignment for a summative assessment.

The "Letter to UNESCO" Assignment

You have developed a character for the Mantles in the Museum game, and you and your group played Mantles in the Museum in character to select three works of art to move forward to the UNESCO world exhibition.

Now it's time to put all your experiences together in the form of a persuasive letter. You need to write a short persuasive essay that takes the form of a formal 2 – 4 page letter to the members of UNESCO.

Your letter should follow traditional letter format: your character's first and last name, invented address and relevant details in the header, a formal address for UNESCO, a salutation and a formal closing.

Additionally, your letter should provide an opening paragraph that states why you are writing UNESCO (introducing your argument) along with a summary of your character as a way to support why you are qualified to make an argument regarding these works of art.

Once you have a strong introduction written, the body of your letter should expand your persuasive argument. This argument should state specific reasons that the works you or

your group selected are the best works for inclusion into the exhibition rather than works selected by other groups or individuals.

Each artwork should be depicted in the letter with a small photograph and described briefly with the title, artist, date, and other relevant descriptive information. Additionally, you should use at least three (3) references from class media (readings, videos, or websites) to support your arguments about each of the artworks.

Ask yourself: what have other experts this semester said about works of art that my character would agree with? How do those statements about art by other experts support my character's views about these works?

When you have made your argument for all three works, you should wrap up your letter with a strong conclusion that leaves the reader convinced by your points.

The essay must be prepared on a computer and submitted online. Be sure the font can be read easily. Put page numbers on each page. Double-space your text and use one-inch margins all around. At the end of your letter, include a reference list. APA Manual, 7th edition, is the most commonly used style manual in art education.

Rubric
This assignment is worth 20 points and will be evaluated according to the following rubric:

Format & Intro *3 points*	Do you follow a formal letter format? Does your introductory paragraph describe your character and the reason for the letter?
Argument *5 points*	How clearly does your essay make a convincing argument for each of the three artworks?
Support *5 points*	Did you use at least 3 references in the letter in a meaningful way that supports your arguments? Did you correctly cite them in-text and include APA 7th edition formatted reference list at the end of the letter?
Images *3 points*	Have you included images of the three artworks in the body of the letter? Did you include other photographs that help readers understand your character and the arguments you are making?
Writing *4 points*	How well do you manage the conventions of a college-level essay, including grammar and spelling, overall readability, and bringing the essay to closure?

Appendix 4: Additional Reading

Andresen, M. (2012), Playing the Learning Game: A practical introduction to educational roleplaying based on experiences from The Larpwriter Challenge. Copenhagen, Denmark: Fantasiforbundet and Education Centre.

Bowman, S. (2010). The functions of role-playing games: How participants create community, solve problems, and explore identity. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

Flanagan, M. (2010). Creating critical play. In R. Catlow, M. Garrett, & C. Morgana (Eds.),Artists re:thinking games (p.49-53). Liverpool, England: FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology)

Gee, J. (2005). Why video games are good for your soul: Pleasure and learning. Melbourne, Australia: Common Ground Publishing.

Leavy, P. (2015) Method meets art: Arts-based research practice (2nd ed.). New York, New York and London, England: The Guilford Press.

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). Rules of play: Game design fundamentals. Cambridge, MA & London, England: The MIT Press.

Sandberg, C (2004) Genesi. Larp Art, Basic Theories. In Montola M & Stenros, J (eds) Beyond role and play. Tools, toys and theory for harnessing the imagination. Ropecon

Segal, E. A. (2011). Social empathy: A model built on empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility that promotes social justice. Journal of Social Service Research 37(3). p. 266-277.

Sullivan, G. (2010). Art Practice As Reserach: Inquiry in Visual Arts (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.