

Conquest of the Realm  
O'Neill Middle School  
2015 Follett Challenge Winner  
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## **Necessary Steps for Creating a Winning Game for Your School**

### **Part 1: The Goals**

As with any implementation, it is best to decide what you want for the end result, so that it can give you the formula to create. With Conquest of the Realm, at O'Neill, we wanted to take the idea of a winter reading program and shake it up. Our school had really been focused on reading, so we wanted to add in the component of creative writing. Our goals for the game were for students to:

- create their own works of literature
- write reviews of books they had read for our online catalog, Destiny
- interact with other students and teachers regarding works they had read or planned to read
- work collaboratively across their team to make decisions
- evaluate works' relevance to specific challenges
- assess texts for an authentic audience by creating blog reviews posted on the blog [www.booksinthemiddle.wordpress.com](http://www.booksinthemiddle.wordpress.com)
- have more students submit work for our state's Young Authors contest
- produce original pieces using digital means to entice others to read a text
- increase critical thinking, collaboration and communication skills through interactions with others

### **Part 2: The Set Up**

After we'd established what we wanted the game to do for our students, the next important part was to gain a buy-in from the teachers - without which, this game would not have been as successful as it was. Buy-in can develop, but it is always good to have a core of teachers and administrators who are supportive of your plans. Depending on the size of your school this may range from 1-2 people up to 20.

Teachers had to willingly give up their classroom time for students to watch a short video to get them excited about the idea of the game. Also, some of the challenges required adults to participate by giving out vital pieces of information to students. Our Reading Specialist, both our Counselors, our Assistant Principal and Principal, Head Custodian, Science, Social Studies, Math, Special Education and English teachers all volunteered to embrace the game. It was

stressed to the teachers the challenges would be of an academic nature, and would focus on reading and creative writing, while utilizing 21st century skills. In 2016, I showed the video during lunch for all the students and didn't have to take up any class time. I did that again in 2018, and 2023.

Teams had to be created. You could do this in various ways. Our school, at the time we did the first game, was already divided into four teams or clusters as we called them. So it was easy to just say everyone in the Silver Cluster was the House of the Gray Lands. In 2015 we didn't have clusters anymore, so I made the teams based on Science classes. For example all 1st period Science classes were on the same team. In 2016 I used the four lunch periods as teams.

- **Hint for establishing teams** - If you have a natural division, use it. If you have a competitive nature already built into your school - such as 7th grade against 8th grade, use it.

I had 7th and 8th graders on the same team in 2015 and I don't feel it was as successful as having 7th graders against 8th graders as we'd had the first year. In 2016, I went back to two 7th grade teams and two 8th grade teams and have continued that since then.

Make sure you have a way for students to talk to each other. We set up Edmodo accounts for each team. They also had time to talk in homebase (study hall) and during lunch. In 2015 they had some time in their Science classes, but I feel it was more successful when they had the same "off" time to work together and I went back to the same lunch and homebase periods in 2016 and 2018.

### **Part 3: The Launch**

For implementing Conquest of the Realm, it was evident we had to build the excitement and then maintain it. This new approach with a game had to pique students' interest level quickly. The first step was to build anticipation. Before the game began, the school librarian (myself) put up flyers around the school mentioning CotR, but not saying exactly what it was. Students began asking teachers and the school librarian what was going on. It was the perfect lead in for the video that was shown in classes the week before the game began. More ideas for the launch would be:

- Create a story, give out little bits of it to get the students interested. You can make it as elaborate as you'd like.
- Make a movie or "trailer" about your game. Here are links to the 3 that I've done so far.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E7P0izXnOw> (2014)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7frRVRdYgg> (2015)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ9djjYrKM4> (2016)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjtJKmoVVvw&t=83s> (2018 and 2023)

- Put up posters
- Start an “advisor group” with students who would like to more of a role in how the game will be run or played. These can be the “game masters,” and would probably work better in a middle or high school setting
- Create a list of rules for the game and share it with all the students - but don’t make it too long or involved - here is a link to one of my [Rules](#) pages.
- Be very clear on a beginning date and an end date for your game. Between 3 to 5 weeks seems to be a good amount - although you may find longer works for your school

I would also say that it is good to really have a solid week or two before you actually begin your game for all the students to understand what it is and what is going on. Also, if possible read any parts of your story out loud on the announcements - especially if you don’t typically do the announcements.

Here are some examples of the set ups and stories that I read for the game in [2014](#) and [2016](#) - it was a Zombie/ Infection themed game.

#### **Part 4: Playing the Game**

Once you have your goals set, your teams established and your story and rules laid out, you are ready to play the game. Make sure your game has some big things that each team must accomplish together, or they won’t have a need to collaborate. The game has to walk the line between including students who feel more comfortable working alone, yet giving them the chance to be part of a larger collaboration and engaging students who enjoy the comradery of gamesmanship. For example, in my first game, students had to find their House Sword - what was the name of it, and where was it hidden in the Lands of Oneillia. In 2015, students had to find out what their clan’s talisman was, and what the name was as well. In 2016, students had to find rations cards, their Stronghold’s Safe, as well as an actual vial of “The Cure.” (The actual vial of the “cure” was a little test tube filled with colored water and put into old discarded books that had been hollowed out and shelved in the library collection.) These were things that the students had to share information on and work together to find the answers.

Earning points in the game is how the team will win. So every few days, sometimes even every day, I would send out challenges to the students via their email. If you don’t have email, you could announce it on the loudspeaker in the morning, or post it outside the library, or around the school. Make sure it is somewhere all the students have the ability to see it. Like the bathroom doors!

Another important part of our game was allowing the students to see where they stood in the game at all times, as well as their competition. I did this by creating a google spreadsheet and giving students the access to see the sheet. Once again, if students don’t have access to computers you could always post what the total amount is for each team, or have a link to the spreadsheet on your library webpage. Here is an example of the [spreadsheet](#) from my first year.

Now, what were challenges and how did I determine points for them? Challenges were anything really. How much work I thought would be required determined the amount of points. For example, writing a review of a book on our online catalog system, Destiny, might be worth 1,000 points, and figuring out the titles of books I'd booktalked to the students and then using parts of those titles to unscramble an important clue, was worth 20,000 points. Examples of those are [here](#) and [here](#). In subsequent years I called them Quests and Missions.

Here are some ideas for challenges, quests, missions - whatever you want to call them:

- Creating a character in the game and what that character does
- Writing a page story about the character
- Taking a picture in front of the student's favorite shelf in the library and writing one sentence about why that is their favorite shelf (taking a "shelfie")
- Writing reviews of books
- Writing one sentence booktalks
- Telling a teacher about a book the student has just finished reading, or is currently reading
- Writing a poem about their character, their House, Clan or Team, or about anything
- Drawing an emblem for their House or Clan
- Coming up with a Motto for their team
- Creating a graphic novel about something that has happened with the game, or just making one up
- Writing a story
- Making a book trailer for a book they have read
- Bringing an article on a topic being studied (if you are doing this in a content class)
- Writing a question for a visiting author
- Journaling about their character's situation in the game

Points can be given for anything you want the students to do. Look at your goals, and then try to come up with a challenge that would help students meet that goal. Plan to have at least two to three each week of your game. Some can also have a time restriction which will add an urgency to the game.

After that, new challenges had to keep coming or the students would lose interest. Every few days, challenges were emailed to the teachers and the students. Teachers and students shared the same House in 2014, so they were able to discuss the challenges and figure out the best way to complete them. Adding in strategy cards created an element of chance to the game that students responded to very quickly. After earning a certain number of points they could qualify for a strategy card. Each House had a limited number of cards. Once the cards were gone, they were gone. This put the pressure of time on students to complete challenges and earn a card. Strategy cards that were earned were collected in some Houses by one or two students who had become de facto leaders for their team and were played at specific, strategic times. The

cards were powerful and students wanted to have that ability to impact the game. Some challenges had specific time frames for completion which also increased the sense of urgency.

Strategy cards were cards that I created to give the students something to look forward to earning during the game, that could have a large impact on the game. Each team had the same exact cards, and the same amount of cards. However, not all cards were earned by each team, so the teams that earned the cards had a decided advantage. These cards all were to the benefit of the team that earned them, and could be played against other teams. Here are some examples of strategy cards:

- Get triple points for any challenge you have completed
- If you get four other members of your team to complete any challenge, you all get double the amount
- You get an extra 10,000 points
- Cause any one team to lose 100,000 points
- Cause any one team to lose their Talisman
- Cause any one player to lose 50,000 points
- Infected 10 members of another team (for my zombie themed game)
- "Cure" 5 members of your team (for my zombie themed game)
- Cause a team to lose 5 of their ration cards (also zombie game)

Students could play these cards at any time, however, it was best to wait until the end because you never knew who would come on at the end. This was all part of the strategy of the game, and students really loved trying to decide how and when to play their cards. Any points they earned extra were counted for their team as well.

In 2016 I created a game that would exist within the walls of our school. I set up the scenario that there was a virus on the loose and as a precaution our school had to be locked down. This time the teachers were NOT on the teams - as they had been in 2015. Instead they handed out ration cards. Each week each Stronghold (team) had to have a certain number of ration cards for 5 different categories. Each card had a certain point value. For example

#### Week 1

Heat - 4 Cards (each worth 10,000 XP)  
Electricity - 15 Cards (each worth 5,000 XP)  
Food - 20 Cards (each worth 5,000 XP)  
Water - 15 Cards (each worth 5,000 XP)  
Shelter - 10 Cards (each worth 7,000 XP)

#### Week 2

Heat - 10 Cards (each worth 8,000 XP)  
Electricity - 15 Cards (each worth 10,000 XP)  
Food - 30 Cards (each worth 5,000 XP)  
Water - 35 Cards (each worth 5,000 XP)  
Shelter - 20 Cards (each worth 8,000 XP)

The students had to “turn in” these cards to their Stronghold’s Safe, which was simple a locker that wasn’t being used. The students really loved this aspect, and the teachers did too, because they had a lot of power. Teachers started to make the kids really work for their ration cards. We had teachers having them do mini missions for them. Like researching certain aspects of water - in a Science class, writing book reviews - in an LA class and even as an incentive to do well on a quiz.

Also, in 2016, the strategy cards were placed around the school for any students to find. Once they found the card they had to have earned 15,000 XP to play them. It was different and fun to have an element where the students were actually looking for something in the school. I will continue this in future games. It also meant that the cards would not necessarily be evenly distributed between the teams. This did not seem to adversely impact one team over another however.

In 2018 I hid and gave to teachers parts of the Dragons’ Hoard that each team had to find. There were specific amounts of each item they needed to get. Teachers could decide if the students needed to do anything to get the gems, coins, rings and necklaces. [If teams didn’t gather enough of each type for the Hoard](#), they automatically lost a certain amount of points.

### **Part 5: End Game**

As a way to build anticipation, I always take the ability for students to see the google spreadsheet away, a few days before the game ended. That way they couldn’t see exactly who had the lead at the end. Each year I’ve been able to have an assembly to announce the winning teams. This has been a lot of fun for the students and created quite the buzz.

In terms of prizes, everyone on the winning team who completed at least one challenge gets a free book. The top 30 players in the entire game get a free book, and the top 5 usually get \$20.00 in free books at our book fair. I supply all these free books with money that I’ve gotten through our book fairs. The top 30 in the winning team get their names put into a drawing. We draw two names. One student gets to be the principal for the day and the other gets to be the assistant principal. The students and the administration have really enjoyed this. In 2018, we were able to partner with a local miniature therapy horse group and we had them bring two horses to our school. Students on the winning team were able to go and pet the horses.

However, that is all we offer for prizes. I feel strongly that I want to reward with books.

One big takeaway is that, after 2016, I won’t be running the game each year. I ran it for 3 years in a row, and I believe that the students who experience it for the first time, have the most fun with it. It seems to drop off the following year.

Because I’m in a school with only 7th and 8th graders, I have decided I will run the game every other year - allowing all the students to experience it once in their time with us. I anticipate this will allow for more excitement for all the groups.

In 2017 I went back to a more traditional winter reading/literacy program and only had 20% of the students participate. I created a podcast for the students and had fun doing that. If you would like me to send you some examples of the podcasts, I'd be happy to.

I ran the game again in 2018 and here is the link to the website I created for the game. It is down now, but hopefully the link will still take you to it.

<https://sites.google.com/dg58.org/onlrc/the-dragons-are-coming>

I did do the game again, the Dragon one, in 2023. With COVID and so many interruptions, this was the first time back that I felt I could do it. I had planned to do my Quarantine Game the year that COVID happened, in 2020, and I don't think I'll ever do that game again, because of the pandemic.

### **Links to More Information**

[Link to the video submission for the Follet Challenge detailing the game](#)

[Podcast Discussing the Win along with Britten Follett talking about the Follett Challenge](#)

[Link to an article written by Tasha Squires on the game for the American Libraries journal](#)

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have about running your own game, or about my participation in the Follett Challenge.

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