

## Trading Spaces: An Educator's Ethnographic Exploration of Adolescents' Digital Role-Play

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**ABSTRACT:** In this work, the author examines a digital role-play in which participants composed an alternate version of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Participants imagined characters and posted more than 400 scenes in the online collaboration. The author draws upon ethnographic methods (Merriam, 2009) to describe her participant-observer experience and discuss the digital role-play from the perspective of a classroom teacher and literacy researcher. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998/2003) theory of figured worlds frames moments of participants' discourse to illuminate issues of identity and power that emerged. Analysis complicates the use of digital spaces with adolescent-driven literacy practices. This study provides educators with ideas about how to examine adolescents' online literacies and suggests that research of digital role-play within formal learning settings may help educators explore what it means to read and discuss texts in a digital world.

**Key words:** Young Adult Literature, Digital Literacies, Fan-fiction, Social Identity, Online Writing Practices



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I'd avoided death for weeks. Then the knell of an incoming email slipped into my inbox with notification that my online identity, Neadle, was the next to die in *The Second Annual Hunger Games Role-Play*. My character survived imagined floodwaters, fireball explosions, and swarms of rats. But, the odds were not in his favor. Neadle's physical skills and cleverness could not compete against his rivals in the digital role-play, an activity organized by adolescent fans of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and housed within the Teen Reader hub of an online book community. I was one of 24 participants who joined the digital role-play to write and produce an alternate version of the young adult novel through our activities.

I stumbled upon the role-play event while browsing reviews of popular YA literature, following my curiosity to hear adolescents' online discussions of Collins' novels. At the time of my study, *The Hunger Games* was a best seller, the movie scheduled to premiere in March 2012. Area bookstores dedicated entire shelves to stock *The Hunger Games* and the city library reported a month-long waiting list. Katniss' coming-of-age story earned a wide audience readership because of its page-turning plot and characters that offered a genuine portrayal of adolescence (Simmons, 2012).

Stepping into the role-play activity, participants invented original characters, reimagined the Hunger Games arena, engaged characters in alliances and battles, and enacted key moments of The Capitol's deadly competition, rewriting scenes such as The Reaping, GameMakers Interviews, Cornucopia Run, and Crowning of the Victor.

Role-play activity invites participants to step into someone else's shoes and facilitate the story through character interactions (Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2011). Imaginary settings of role-plays afford participants exploration of issues or behaviors within new contexts (Beach & Doerr-Stevens, 2009; Russell & Shepherd, 2010). Within an online environment, digital role-play is an "asynchronous text-based world" (Thomas, 2007, p. 2) as it exists as a non-physical realm that relies on written character dialogues and descriptions of character's physical

traits, actions, and behaviors.

### **Examining the Space as Teacher and Researcher**

I was drawn to examine the adolescents' digital role-play from my perspective as both a classroom educator and literacy researcher. As an English language arts teacher, I am an avid reader of the YA genre and attend to my students' reading choices. I see Collins' novels in the hands of teenage readers at school, and it is not uncommon in class discussions that students connect themes from Katniss' story—power, corruption, rebellion, survival—with themes from traditional classroom studies of dystopian literature, Shakespeare's plays, or Greek mythology. From my perspective as a literacy researcher, I recognize the increasing significance of digital technologies and digital spaces in adolescents' daily home and school lives (Alvermann, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; Lenhart, 2014). Digital spaces draw adolescents to express themselves and find others willing to join in shared interests or passions (Curwood, 2013; Gee, 2004). Adolescents take up literacy practices in digital spaces in ways that explore, examine, and craft social identities (Betz, 2011; Hull & Katz, 2006; Lam, 2000). Of particular interest to my work is research of youths' online fan-fiction communities in which participants share interests about story characters and events (Black, 2009; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Thomas, 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework**

We invented problems in our brave new story world using conflicts of cruelty and injustice. Through scene dialogue and description, we positioned characters to suggest, experiment, and perform solutions to these conflicts. I frame my research of our digital role-play through a sociocultural lens and draw upon notions of Bakhtin (1994) and Vygotsky (1978) to recognize social identity, participation, and culture as significant to participants' discourse. This perspective situates the adolescents' role-play space as one in which literacy practices are social functions involving people in participation, relationships, and interactions (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Merchant, Gillen, Marsh, & Davies, 2012).

## Connecting Literacies and Imagination

Vygotsky (1978) correlated literacy development with imagination. He argued that children developed increasingly complex speech communications as they used representative symbols and cultural tools. For example, a child's use of a simple object, such as a stick, might launch her into a new fantasy world as the stick transformed into a galloping horse. Represented meaning pushes forward human language and literacy experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Scholarly research of digital spaces reflects Vygotsky's notions in practice. Adolescents' digital spaces often foster highly imaginative responses to literature (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Thomas, 2007). Likewise, in the digital role-play, character identities were borne and broadened through creative written expression.

## Situating Literacy Practices as Social Functions

Participants' online processes also reflected heightened social interactions. As we posted scenes, we parsed how our characters were perceived and reworked our characters in response to others' voices. We constantly negotiated conflicts of identity and power that surfaced. In this paper, I refer to the work of Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) to shape definitions of identity and power, referring to identity not as a biological marker, but as fluid and negotiated self-concepts that move in and through social discourse; power is a social and dynamic network "produced in and through individuals as they are constituted in larger systems" (p. 4). These definitions help illuminate complications that developed in the digital role-play composing processes.

## Exploring Social Identities in Figured Worlds

Also critical to my research is the theory of figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998/2003). Figured worlds are socially and culturally

constructed sites in which "particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52). People develop, perform, and continuously realign identities in an improvised response to others and in response to the social relationships within the figured world. Holland et al. (1998/2003) argue that during identity-making processes we become perplexed by tensions from our histories and the dominant cultural storylines of our worlds. When these tensions tug against what we think we know and understand about ourselves, we find ourselves wrestling with new ways of thinking about ourselves. In such moments, we are malleable under others' social and discursive practices (Holland et al., 1998/2003).

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Each digital role-play participant posted writings that reported his or her character's physical appearance, behaviors, and thoughts. Holland et al. (1998/2003) might describe these expressions as self-understandings: what we tell ourselves we are, how we act as we think we are, and who we say that we are to others. Examining these identity-making processes is important as these understandings shape how we "make sense of our world and our experiences in it, including our experiences with texts" (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 228).

## Methods

In this study, I use qualitative research methods for "discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied" (Merriam, 2009, p. 1) and draw from ethnographic methods to shape the direction and discussion of my work.

## Researcher's Position

As a participant-observer, I closely observed the complex networking of participants as they performed

characters through social and discursive practices. For purposes of this paper, my response draws upon my immersion in the story world and takes the shape of a narrative, a format that reflects our digital composing processes, illustrates my character experiences, and provides a closer analysis of the inner-workings of the participant-driven activity.

### Data Collection

I collected data over a four-month period in Spring 2012. Artifacts included participants' written scenes, art/graphics, and more than 400 screenshots (electronic images) to document participants' composing processes. I maintained weekly field notes that annotated and described key moments, recording specific observations of group practices, game rules, and character comments. I also maintained a whiteboard to visually track character alliances, advancements, and expulsions.

### Setting

I selected this particular field site because it was a public online community with hundreds of members who participated in book discussions, literature reviews, and reading activities. Participants in the website's Teen Reader area focused on YA literature, and it was within this area that participants issued an open call for *The Second Annual Hunger Games Role-Play*.

### Participants

Twenty-four participants enrolled. In my beginning field notes, I recorded doubt about my acceptance in the digital role-play as I was a 40-something, not a 14-something, participant (Field notes, March 19, 2012). I openly listed my name and university affiliation on my digital role-play profile and reported out to others in the game that I was a graduate researcher who studied YA literature and digital cultures. My self-disclosure elicited zero response.

I secured IRB approval for my study, yet I cannot speak with certainty about the identity of all participants. My data indicates most participants were female, between the ages of 13 and 17. Participants each posted a role-play profile that listed age and

gender. In my research processes, I observed that participants posted comments to the role-play space to discuss school classes, homework, and holidays. I also tracked participants' digital footprints in areas of the online book community where they posted book reviews, discussed books, or posted messages to other members. This anecdotal evidence reinforced the participants' self-reported adolescent identities. However, I do not have sufficient data to confirm that each participant was an adolescent. I sought IRB assistance as I struggled with unforeseen ethical and logistical questions in my research of the digital role-play space. Conversations with IRB members informed my practices though IRB documentation concerning research of internet and social media was emerging. Continuing and expanding my research of adolescents' digital literacies, my work today is guided by IRB policy and the ethical framework of the Association of Internet Researchers, an organization developing resources for reflection and decision-making in conducting research within a global and rapidly changing digital environment.

### Immersion in the Role-Play World

Figured worlds take shape within collaborative activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts. In turn, these collaborations shape the participants' figured world (Holland et al., 1998/2003). Our story world began to shape through the collaborative direction of five adolescents. These Game Moderators (The Mods) set the expectations for our gameplay. To maintain the authenticity of The Mods and participants' expressions, in this paper I have not altered grammar, spelling, or punctuation in the role-play postings. The Mods explained the role-play rules:

Starting within the next few days, we will be hosting an enormous Hunger Games role-play, in which 24 members will create 24 tributes and be thrown into an arena. The Games will last until March 23, in that time you will be able to:

- Roleplay your chariot rides & interviews
- Be given a training score
- Make alliances with members of your choice
- Fight and run and hide and kick-butt in the arena

Moderators (organizers) will act as

GameMakers & Sponsors, reigning all sorts of havoc upon you (and supplying you with necessities, depending on your given training score). Tributes will be killed off in a poll, made by GameMakers. This is where your alliances really come in handy, since you can gang up on a certain tribute. Of course inactive Tributes will be killed off in a GameMakers attack. All the fine details (rules, guidelines, arena, etc.) will be supplied once we have our 24 Tributes...See you in 24 hours, and may the odds be *ever* in your favor! (Jenny/Happy hunger games, Web post)

### Understanding the rules of the game

As participants, we committed to composing daily scenes. One participant's post would lead to another participant's post.

Role Play (in this sense) is basically like writing a story with a bunch of other people. You each have a character (or two, three...ect.). It really just depends on the particular Role Play) or in this case, 2 characters- a guy and a girl. You create backstories for them, personalities -- basically everything that makes up a good character in anything and you act as them, like you are seeing the world from their eyes. (Rachel/Happy hunger games, Web post)

The Mods encouraged storytelling techniques such as imagery, characterization, and dialogue. We were to write characters in the third person and avoid slang in the language of our scenes. Here, as an example, is an early post for Neadle:

Neadle's hands slid blindly down the walls, the magical sensor goggles on, his eyes following the heat of the surging blobs within the wall. Suddenly his hands pushed forward on the wall and he fell, into the darkness, into the cave of the grey-wall tomb. Through the energy-glasses, he could see the red blob scatter, the pitter patter of tiny feet, the squeaking of --- mice, thousands and thousands of them. He started running away from the blob, he could see tiny red dots in the distance -- he ran to the figures there. "Hey! Over here!" he called to

them as his running footsteps filled the passageway... (Neadle/The games, Web post)

Quickly, participants came to understand that survival in the digital role-play connected with the way we presented our character identities. As in the beginning stages of figured worlds, identities are largely undefined; gradually, the world takes shape as participants report out who they are and what they value (Holland et al., 1998/2003). In *The Second Annual Hunger Games Role-Play*, an important aspect of the gameplay was the strategic shaping of characters. We modified characters and bestowed upon them superior strengths. This, in turn, shaped our online interactions and the developing storyline.

### Crafting My Character Identity

I carefully considered what my character might look like, how he would speak, and what talents he would display. I named him Neadle and designed him as a 12-year-old boy who despised the brutality of the Hunger Games. Since Collins described many of her story characters with gender-neutral behaviors, I felt satisfaction in crafting Neadle with qualities that might complicate stereotypes of male teenagers (Field notes, March 21, 2012). In an early game post, I placed Neadle at the edge of the arena waiting for the games to begin:

He held himself steady, arms to his side, even though his stomach was churning and beads of sweat ran down his neck. He felt turned upside down. His hair itched. His teeth hurt. Next to him, his District 10 tribute Sherry was singing aloud again, humming and mumbling a few words. Something about her finger hurting? He couldn't quite make it out. He glanced down at her hands, soft and pretty. Not the kind of hands to be used for strangling someone or shooting arrows into their hearts. (Neadle/Pre-game thoughts, Web post)

Already, in my earliest scenes, I presented Neadle as a compassionate young adult. I gave him quirky skills that might prove valuable to his survival as the game progressed. I described his home in District 10 where he lived with his grandmother and tended to their farm's livestock. Neadle was good at handling ropes,

tying knots, and using knives. He could sew the toughest of materials. His curly blonde hair was tufted like a shock of wool and he used this shaggy mass to squirrel away small items like pins or shards of glass in case these might become useful later.

### **Establishing Positions of Power**

Other participants also painted vivid characters and showcased character strengths to secure a reputation in the story. In this example, the participant Grant describes himself as a willful, competitive character:

Strength and Weaknesses: Strengths - Good with all weapons, but has a specialty of a bow n arrows or hand to hand combat. Trained in four different martial arts. Acrobat for 7 years of his life. Nimble and quick. The mind relishes under pressure, emotions play no factor in anything.

Weaknesses: Frustration, if frustrated, will be easily distracted. Family is the only thing that he will do anything to save. (Grant/The reaping, Web post)

Grant's early self-descriptions were strategic—he planned to win. In my next postings, I attempted to follow this lead and expanded upon Needle's physical strengths, and thus I began my pattern of character modification. Like a chess match, I reconfigured Needle in ways to improve his chance of role-play survival. Likewise, other participants modified their characters. Our online identities were changeable in this story realm, a world that shaped in relation to the everyday activities and happenings within it (Holland et al., 1998/2003).

### **Designing Our Story World**

Our setting also shaped who we were, our choices of action, and how we interacted with other characters. The Mods established the opening setting and participants added descriptions as the story unfolded. Similar to Collins' characters, our digital characters lived in constant danger. The arena was a labyrinth of smooth walls:

There are some isles in the maze where the ground gives way to a deep hole (perhaps ten meters wide & deep) of water. There is no choice but to swim through it or double back.

The water is drinkable. The maze is littered with swarms of mice, rats and birds. These are your only food source, unless others were gathered from the cornucopia/stolen from other tributes. You may need a few gifts from your Sponsors. Around the maze you will find a number of trapdoors (that lead to a black claustrophobic underground labyrinth) and ladders (which will take you to the top of the maze wall. Though if you slip and fall, you'll die.) (Rachel/The games, Web post).

We imagined destructive weather that forced us into the arena's tunnels. We faced flesh-eating rats, deadly technology, and swam in raging floodwaters. We also invented tools such as backpacks, medicines, and night goggles that enabled us to outmaneuver competitors or move forward in the game arena.

### **Surviving the Participants' Poll**

Security was essential for survival in the role-play. The Mods' rules explained that we were allowed to fight and injure other characters, as long as we received the participant's permission first. We were not allowed to kill other characters unless The Mods approved. Game rules also called for a weekly poll in which we voted a character killed from the storyline. Votes were anonymous. "This is where alliances may become handy as you can organize to gang up on someone in order to protect yourself," explained The Mods (March 14, 2012, Web post). If voted from the game, participants wrote their own character's death scene though The Mods selected the killer. Both the character dying and the character killing could write corresponding death scenes.

As an example, when the character Benjamin was voted from the game, the Mods named Grant as his killer. From Grant's vantage, he crafted a scene that described his raid on Benjamin's campsite.

Grant then snuck up behind Benjamin and grabbed both sides of Benjamin's head. He didn't scream or sound loudly...Grant then lent in and whispered in Ben's ear, "You know you're suppose to break your leg for luck. But I don't want to fall for the stereotype. Stage left". With that, he snapped

Benjamin's neck like he was trained to do. Ripper and the others heard Ben crumble to the ground and turned. Grant bent down and picked up Ben's blue bag that he had dropped. Now Grant had both a red and a blue bag. (Grant/The games, Web post)

Competition among characters was deadly. In my field notes (March 26, 2012), I described feeling pressure to protect Needle.

### **Strategizing with Alliances**

Similar to the Collins' story, alliances were means to increasing one's value. Finding a way for Needle to befriend Grant, counting him or others as allies, might increase sustainability. I posted more frequently, writing one or two scenes daily, to keep other players aware of Needle's participation. I also reached out to another participant.

Needle: Hi! Do you want to have an alliance? This is District 10 Needle!

Sam: Let's go for it! I could use some protection quite honestly, lol. I'll put it in with the group :)

Needle: Me too. Thanks! (Needle/Messages, e-mail post)

This digital friendship quelled my anxiety. As allies, Needle and Sam were authorized to describe each other's actions and behaviors. In this way, I could perform Sam in my story posts, and Sam could perform Needle in his story posts:

The cannon fired once, and then again, very quickly. Sam jumped at the sound. He needed to get a move on. There were 12 tributes left. He hoped the next to go wouldn't be him. Sam motioned for Needle to follow him. They started forward, being very quiet. They came to one of the holes filled with water. There were a few rats floating in the pond, but Sam tries not to think about it as he fills his and Needle's bottles. They both have some of the dried fruit and move forward into the maze. (Sam/The games, Web post)

A few days later, we joined with Anna. Together, our alliance climbed tricky ladders, tread deep waters, and

fell through trap doors. We shared food, shelter, and confidences in our united struggle to survive in the games. Sharing the narrative space strengthened our identities by making our characters more visible. However, because we could now narrate each other's characters, we also lacked sole ownership of our character identity. This proved to be a challenge.

### **Fighting for My Identity**

In figured worlds we achieve self-control "by the mediation of our thoughts and feelings through artifacts" and seek to "position ourselves for ourselves" (Holland et al., 1998/2003, p. 64). In the digital role-play, there was a steady maneuvering of social identity and power. My efforts to present Needle as a kind, strong-willed male character felt challenged (Field notes, April 4, 2012). As an example of controlling my character identity, in one of my scenes I described Needle's discovery of Nightlock, an important acquisition as he could use the plant for medicine. However, soon after I posted Needle's success, Sam reworked the situation:

Sam ate some of the food from the packs he had found. It isn't really enough, and he does have to save some to save. The rats are starting to smell. The water below them starts to recede. Sam looks to Needle who seems to be sleeping. It's quiet. "Guess it's all me." Sam whispers. He keeps the knives and needles and nightlock close. (Sam/The games, Web post)

Sam confiscated the Nightlock and described Needle as sleeping. Thus, the power shifted from Needle to Sam. I was frustrated, reflecting in my field notes that the digital world was becoming too competitive and that we were too willing to harm others to advance.

### **Questioning Our Story's Direction**

I realized that I also *might* be taking the digital role-play too seriously—after all, this was a game. I enjoyed creating Needle and developing his story. I recorded in my field notes (March 23, 2012) that I embodied my character's identity and, through his actions and responses, I lived a new reading of *The Hunger Games*. However, my enjoyment shifted as participants continued to inflict cruelties and characters died.

Initially, I envisioned that our digital role-play characters, similar to Collins' protagonists, would become emboldened by the tragedies and inspired to rally against The Mods' rules or other participants' cruelties. But after several weeks of the digital role-play, I felt unsettled at our story's direction.

Though events mirrored the significant turning points of *The Hunger Games*, we missed opportunities to unite against The Capitol in our digital version. We seemed to superficially address tensions of identity and conflicts of power. We did not often question authority. Where was our collective uprising? Could we not end the violence? Could we not challenge heavy-handed power?

### Rewriting for Rebellion

I imagined composing Needle's next scenes in a way that might unite participants (Field notes, April 4, 2012). However, before I could take action, an e-mail slipped into my mailbox:

... your tribute has been chosen to die at the Feast in the Cornucopia in the Kids/Teens Book Club's Hunger Games. Needle will be killed by Mylan from District 2. Your character may only be killed *after* the start of the Feast is indicated by the rising table, so you are free to do as you wish until then. If you are able to bring your character to the Cornucopia in preparation, it would be greatly appreciated. (Rachel/Messages, e-mail post)

Needle did not survive the weekly poll. My figured world collapsed. I felt angry at his alliances that befriended him, said they needed him, and then betrayed him. Offline, with self-deprecating humor, I confessed my sadness in Needle's death to my colleagues and family, and forced myself to compose his final scene:

Needle shivered. He peeked around the corner... They were coming toward him, toward the wire hidden on the path. Grant and Merissa were pushing each other, flirting. Jake ran around them a little and was talking and nudging Sherry along, pushing her ahead of the group. She was in front. She was going to hit the wire first. She would be

killed! Needle had to stop her. He took a breath, then stepped out. (Needle/The games, Web post)

I decided to present Needle as motivated to improve our world. I stepped into his role determined to report how he valued friendship and kindness. I ignored The Mods' e-mail that implicated Mylan as his killer. Instead, Needle saved another character from death:

"Sherry -- slow down," Needle said. Holding his hands out toward her.

"What the...? Get him!" Jake yelled.

"Wait -- wait --- it's Needle!" Sherry said.

But Jake and Merissa were running forward, weapons drawn and moving fast. The wire tripped. The poisoned needles popped and zoomed, tips crossing in air.....Merissa's knife pinged against one of the needles, redirecting it ever so slightly, and right into the outstretched hands of Needle. He fell. He stared down at his hands.

"We got one! We got another!" yelled Jake, laughing.

Sherry ran toward him. Merissa was frozen in place and stared at Needle. His vision was blurring, he felt hot, and his shoulder, oddly, wasn't even hurting him any more. He thought he heard Sam and Anna, their voices yelling and shouting. "Needle! Needle! We have your medicine -- Get up! You can do it!"

Needle knew they cared. There could be good here, after all. People could choose to do the right thing. And then he was gone. (Needle/The games, Web post)

I attempted to control his legacy and reimagine our storyline. Sam was the first to respond, describing how he and Anna discovered Needle:

Anna helped him lug Needle back to a new secluded spot. Sam ripped another piece of sleeping bag to soak up the blood... "Ripper is not going to be happy." Sam grumbled.

"And?"

"Well, you know, he'll probably want to murder us all. We have to be really careful now." Sam explained as the bleeding finally slowed. Needle probably wasn't conscious still. (Sam/The games, Web post)

Had I read correctly? Sam reported Needle injured, but alive. An alternate story might happen, after all, if participants revived Needle. Ironically, when I alerted The Mods, it was Easter Sunday:

I did try to make it clear that the poisoned needle got Needle and that he's 'gone' but I think Sam and Anna still think he's alive and just unconscious (I kind of love that, really!) Anyway, it's Easter, right? Maybe you guys will bring Needle back in the spirit of the holiday! (Needle/Messages, e-mail post)

I felt lightened at the possibility of a pardon. The Mods responded:

Sorry, but once you die, you're dead. We just didn't have time to set off the cannon immediately. Sorry about that. (Rachel/Question and Answer, Web post)

Needle's official death posted and *The Second Annual Hunger Games Role-Play* spanned another month.

Eventually, Grant claimed the crown. In his final story scene, he imagined a TV reporter asking: What did he most enjoy about the games?

Grant hated this question every year. Surely, the Capitol must realise that the Games are a horrible thing to experience and you never enjoy yourself.

'Probably having fun in the water with Lia and Merissa. They were such nice people most of the time, and it was the only time I could really relax in The Games. Until Needle got stabbed of course...

'Yes, that was very unfortunate. Jake was very sneaky about that. But at least you had some fun!' said Caesar.

'Yes, but if I couldn't say that moment, I would say winning The Games. I mean, not the killing Allen bit, but rather the thought process. I was going home!' he yelled the last sentence to the audience, who cheered along with him. (Grant/The victor's interview, Web post)

Grant hints at remorse, but he is satisfied with his performance. I recognized that I, too, enjoyed my participation as Needle in the digital role-play. Our fan community successfully produced an alternate

version of the YA novel through social and creative composing practices. **Emerging Themes of the Digital Role-Play**

From this study, my data illuminated the following themes: online language reflected a base of literary knowledge and/or formal understanding of texts and text making; social collaboration was integral to creating a text; player interactions appeared to reflect a desired social status, and character interactions were marked by identity-making processes.

Following Grant's final interview, participants' post-game comments pleaded to The Mods to initiate a *Third-Annual Hunger Games Role-Play*. The digital trail of hundreds of role-play scenes and the duration of our gameplay that extended almost four months reflected heightened engagement in writing, reading, and re-crafting the YA novel. The digital role-play was a playground for our imagination and language.

Posts varied in style and sophistication, but story scenes clearly reflected elements of imagery, sensory detail, figurative language, dialogue, and characterization. Participants' language often displayed rich vocabulary and complex sentence structure. As writers, our collective goal was to reinvent *The Hunger Games*, and we posted daily to push the alternative story forward to its resolution. We crafted digital scenes as story turning points, using new settings or conflicts to transition into the next chapter. The online environment afforded participants a dynamic, real-time forum to engage in revision and response. Feedback fueled the story development.

From my lens as a classroom educator, the adolescents' collective interest in producing a digital version of *The Hunger Games* reflected the compelling nature of the novel. Prior to initiating my study, I regarded the YA novel as a text that presented important issues to consider. Themes of childhood violence, hunger, and poverty raise complicated questions. Similar to commonly taught classroom novels such as *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), and *Night* (Wiesel & Wiesel, 2006), the YA text asks readers to think about and respond to complex social issues. The American Library Association (2014) describes *The Hunger*

*Games* as worthy literature and literacy researchers argue that the text is well positioned to support students' critical thinking and problem solving (Layfield, 2013; Saunders & Ash, 2013). *The Hunger Games* can be used to scaffold students in critical examinations of self and society (Sarigianides, 2012; Simmons, 2012).

The study leads me to wonder how *The Hunger Games* digital role-play—and perhaps digital role-play with other challenging YA novels, canonical literature, and non-fiction texts—might be leveraged within classrooms to engage students in closer examinations of texts and of self. The online environment presented a creative forum for participants to practice core literacies. Within a classroom, a teacher might be able to mesh the digital processes with further classroom readings, discussions, reflection, and analysis of the digital text and production processes.

It is the role of the language arts teacher “to make our students conscious of difficult issues, not to turn away from them” (Simmons, 2012, p. 30), and my research raises questions for me about a teacher's role within adolescents' digital processes. From my lens as an insider, I enjoyed this participant-driven activity, yet I recognized missed opportunities for adolescents to question or challenge dominant discourse of the storyline (Field notes, May 7, 2012). My research experiences lead me to speculate how we might have collectively paused to examine the digital text and discuss our roles in its production. What did we learn, or what might we learn by stepping into imagined character roles? What did we learn about ourselves in composing this digital world?

Blending digital spaces with reading practices may motivate students to engage with texts. However, a teacher's thoughtful guidance throughout a digital role-play may help students observe how literacies can be a means for investigating and countering dominant social narratives, and support students in recognizing and analyzing complicated issues that surface in the online world.

### Implications

The art of teaching with digital spaces deserves continued examination as educators wrestle with how to mesh technology within literacy curriculum in purposeful ways and position ourselves alongside students to help make visible connections of power and identity that emerge in the production of digital texts.

**Blending digital spaces with reading practices may motivate students to engage with texts. However, a teacher's thoughtful guidance throughout a digital role-play may help students observe how literacies can be a means for investigating and countering dominant social narratives, and support students in recognizing and analyzing complicated issues that surface in the online world.**

Gee and Hayes (2009) argue that youths' digital spaces are filled with creative problem-solving experiences and suggest that adolescent-driven digital spaces may provide more rigor than the learning demands of many school classrooms. Like the participants of *The Second Annual Hunger Games Role-Play*, adolescents immersed in online composing processes reinforce the significance of digital spaces as relevant and “contemporary tools” that are essential for continued achievement in

literacies (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013, p. 677). Digital worlds can also support students' exploration and examination of social identity, raising thoughtful questions about who we are or want to become in our world (Holland et al., 1998/2003).

This study suggests that adolescent-driven digital spaces are worthy of continued study. In particular, educators should ask: how might we leverage youths' engagement in digital worlds at school? What teaching approaches with digital role-play might support students in an exploration of social identity

and examination of social power? How might educators mesh adolescent-driven digital spaces within more traditional learning spaces? In my continuing research, I take up these questions, bringing the digital role-play into literacy classrooms to examine student learning and teacher approaches.

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