

# JOLLE@UGA<sup>®</sup>

## JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

### Chasing New Worlds: Stories of Roleplaying in Classroom Spaces

Karis Jones, Scott Storm, Jennifer Castillo, & Sasha Karbachinskiy

**Abstract:** We explore our experiences with roleplaying games across learning environments, chasing communal questions such as: how can teachers engage with the possibilities of roleplaying in classroom spaces, and how can we leverage such practices to open up spaces for youth to bodily experience texts, express identities, and imagine new worlds? This article explores roleplaying across contexts—in school, after school, in teacher education, and in K-12 settings. The authors reflect on our experiences using humanizing methods to critically investigate roleplaying with youth.

**Keywords:** roleplaying, social justice, YPAR, teacher education



**Karis Jones** is a doctoral candidate in English Education at New York University. She studies literacies, learning and power across spaces, and designs for more equitable, inclusive and culturally relevant English classroom spaces. She is a cross-disciplinary pre-service teacher educator and field mentor. Her work has been published in journals such as *Linguistics and Education*, *the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*.



**Scott Storm** is a doctoral student in English Education at New York University. Scott has been an English teacher for 13 years in urban public schools. Scott studies disciplinary literacies, critical literacies, adolescents' literary sensemaking, and social justice teaching. His work has appeared in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, *English Journal*, and *Schools: Studies in Education*.



**Jennifer Castillo** is an English Education undergraduate and preservice teacher in NYU Steinhardt’s Teaching and Learning Department. Jennifer is a first-generation Bronxite and first-generation college student, and will be graduating in May 2021. Jennifer is a current writing mentor in Youth Online Writer’s Web. Jennifer’s interests lie in new literacy studies, cultivating student agency and interaction through reading and writing instruction, and exploring the intersections of languages and multiple identities in learning spaces.



**Sasha Karbachinskiy** is a project manager and junior research scientist at NYU’s Literacy, Culture, and Technology Lab. She is also a master’s student in NYU Steinhardt’s Teaching and Learning Department studying Secondary English and Special Education. Sasha is broadly interested in new literacy studies and the learning sciences with a particular focus on gaming pedagogies and learning in informal settings.

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

When we read or listen to stories, the words may evoke images of the characters and their actions. What if, instead of imagining a character acting in predetermined ways, we embodied these characters and made decisions for them? For this kind of activity, we look to *role-playing games* (RPGs). Rooted in our experiences with RPGs and learning across after-school, classroom, and teacher education spaces, we explore the unique potential of RPGs. Like a combination of a choose-your-own-adventure books and improvisational theater, RPGs are imaginative activities where groups of players portray different personas—both narrating these characters’ actions and speaking as the characters themselves. RPGs are a form of collaborative storytelling. The *game* part of these activities relates to a system of mechanics that affects how the story unfolds—like rolling dice to see what happens next. This system of mechanics varies across RPG games but often allows for elements of agency,

skill, and luck. Cooperative in nature, the point of playing is not to be the single “winner” but rather to achieve collective or character-driven goals and enjoy telling stories together. The kinds of RPG games to which we refer are not video games but rather are typically played in-person and sitting at a table or in a circle. Popularized in TV shows like *Stranger Things*, *Community*, and *Big Bang Theory*, RPGs allow for choice-making and identity exploration in a co-constructed imaginative narrative space.

Educational researchers note the benefits of RPGs, including opportunities to apply literary knowledge, build empathy through experiencing characters’ perspectives, and collaboratively problem-solve (Cook et al., 2017). Others cite benefits of developing communication skills (Quevedo da Rocha, 2018) and the acquisition of target vocabulary (Lu & Chang, 2016). Garcia’s (2019) research on RPGs has demonstrated how participants “read, produce, and communicate” (p. 9) not only in the imaginative game world, but also at the gaming table, and even

---

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we will use the pronouns preferred by each participant. This choice respects each individual’s choices about how they wish to be identified.

beyond the RPG activity. Taken together, some of this research suggests that RPGs may help pedagogues interested in social justice education—including building critical consciousness, celebrating multiple linguistic practices, honoring many identities, and including all learners in agentic ways.

Scholars underscore the importance of working toward social justice education. As Kirkland (2013) argues, a pressing problem is that educational spaces often exclude and silence youth practices that do not align with mainstream white<sup>2</sup> conceptions of literacy.

Pedagogues might problematically position the linguistic and cultural practices of communities of color as “deficiencies to be overcome” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Social justice approaches instead embrace culturally sustaining pedagogies that center students’ identities (Paris & Alim, 2014). A youth literacy practice, RPGs are rooted in youth cultures and the communities of the youth who play them. Further, RPGs have the potential to be activities where diverse literacies and identities are celebrated. Garcia (2019) has explored these gaming literacies and notes that they may build critical consciousness as players fluidly navigate across real and imagined identities, noting: “These are rich environments for collaborative and peer-supported learning” (p. 25). The potential of RPGs as a tool for identity exploration and working toward justice with youth needs to be further explored.

However, merely adopting RPGs in educational spaces may not be enough to work toward justice-driven aims. Unfortunately, many traditional RPGs have included racist, sexist, and homophobic stereotypes and assumptions as has been well documented by scholars (Garcia, 2017), popular media (Blum, 2020), and the gamemakers themselves (Wizards of the Coast, 2020). Therefore, youth and educators need ways to interrogate and reimagine these aspects of RPGs to reorient them toward justice.

Resisting problematic elements, many youth are already engaging with RPGs in critical ways, including rewriting game mechanics and crafting their own counternarratives. Social justice educators may encourage youth “to engage in *restorying processes* that place them at the center of their literate worlds and that foster collaborative understandings which affirm their lived experiences and identities” (Thomas & Stornaoulo, 2016, p. 332, emphasis added). Educators

**“RPGs may help pedagogues interested in social justice education—including building critical consciousness, celebrating multiple linguistic practices, honoring many identities, and including all learners in agentic ways.”**

have highlighted restorying pedagogies as a vital tool for transforming schooling environments, arguing that they have the potential to surface marginalized narratives (Enciso, 2017) as well as reframing dominant deficit narratives to construct more hopeful futures (Coles, 2020). Restorying allows students to center their own experiences. RPGs are a promising venue for exploring how to enact restorying practices that strive toward social justice.

<sup>2</sup> In line with APA guidelines, the authors have chosen to capitalize most racial groups (such as “Black”). However, we have actively chosen to lowercase the term “white” because this term has a history of being capitalized by

hate groups, white supremacist groups, and white nationalist groups. Our choice to lowercase “white” is intended to be a rejection of language practices that have reified the prominence of whiteness while marginalizing Blackness.

This article brings together four educators interested in taking up RPGs in both afterschool and classroom spaces for critically transformative ends. Karis and Scott, both avid RPG players, connected over their shared commitment to social justice teaching and centering youth voices through RPGs. Sasha and Jennifer are pre-service teachers studying with Karis as part of their teacher-training program. Sasha and Jennifer took part in an RPG through Karis's class and related fieldwork and were inspired to share their experiences and engagement with these possibilities. Our work illustrates a diversity of perspectives on transformative RPGs.

In our conversations together, we have found no easy recipe exists for ensuring transformative pedagogies with RPGs. Thus, in this article, we share a variety of experiences and contexts so that readers might consider many strategies for critically engaging youth with RPGs. We explore our own experiences with RPGs in diverse learning environments—in and out of school, with K-12 youth, and with pre-service teachers. We hope readers consider which elements of these designs might work best in their situated contexts. We explored the following questions: how can teachers engage with the possibilities of RPGs, and how can we leverage such practices to open up spaces for youth to restory texts, build critically conscious identities, and imagine socially just worlds?

We present our experiences across three profiles. In the first profile, Scott talks about his experiences combining an RPG and Youth Participatory Action Research project through a queer-led afterschool group. In the second profile, Karis explores using an RPG with pre-service English Language Arts teachers—creating opportunities to “restory” canonical texts. In this profile, Jennifer, a preservice teacher who was enrolled in Karis's class, shares her reflections from a participant's point of view throughout the RPG experience and draws further

connections to critical transformation. Finally, in a third profile, Sasha, a preservice teacher who had also been in Karis's course, reflects on how she was inspired by her experience in this class to create a completely new RPG activity during student teaching. Together, these profiles add a much-needed set of rich descriptions for considering how to productively use RPGs for social justice education.

### **Exploring Possibilities for RPGs and Social Justice Education**

In this section we present three profiles from using RPGs in different contexts for justice-driven teaching and learning.

#### **Profile One: Storytelling through Youth Participatory Action Research**

Scott has been a high school English teacher for thirteen years in urban public schools. Recently, in an afterschool RPG club, he helped facilitate a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project where youth posed social justice-driven research questions and answered them using qualitative discourse analytic methods. The YPAR group started as a group that was already playing the RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D).

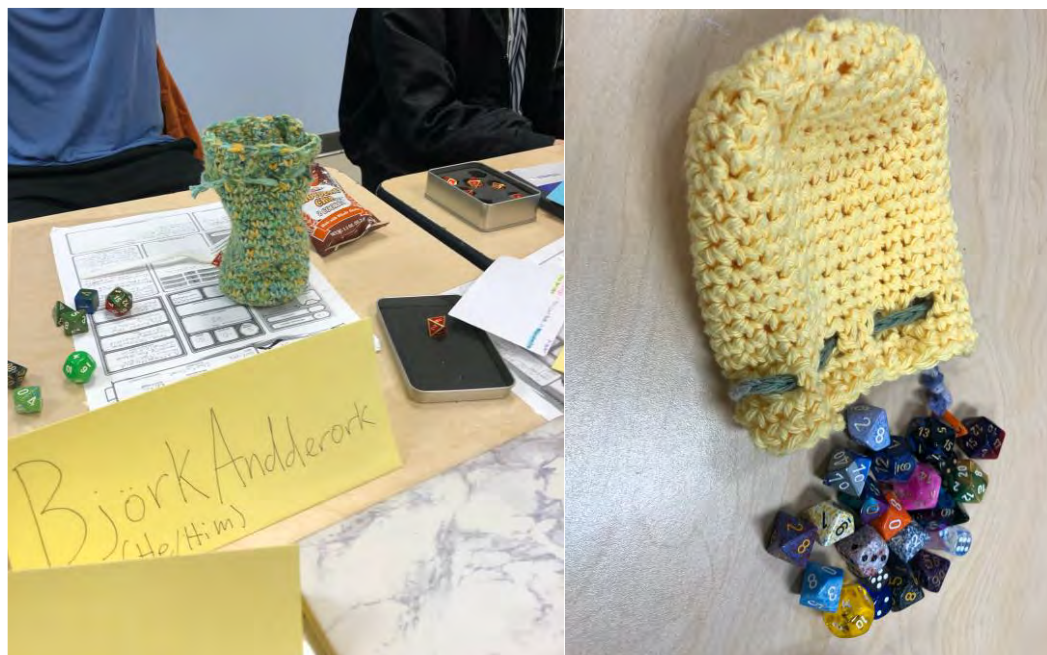
D&D is not a video game, board game, or card game, but rather is designed as an in-person RPG where each player pretends to be a character in a fantasy realm. Though costumes are not required, players might imagine that they are wizards, elves, or other magical folks in a fantasy realm of their own collective design. Players sit around a table and each person verbally narrates character actions—such as fighting a villain, lifting a large boulder, convincing a witch to give them a sacred artifact—and players roll multi-sided dice to see whether and how successfully they perform these actions. The D&D rules are complex and published over hundreds of pages and



Figure 1

*Left: character sheet, dice, handmade dice bag, name plate, and other materials used in the roleplaying game.*

*Right: multi-sided dice and handmade dice bag that one of the players knit for this group.*



across multiple books. Players might often refer to these books during gameplay. Figure 1 includes pictures of the dice, papers, and some of the other materials that youth used in this RPG.

This youth-led D&D group included eight participants who were all in the eleventh or twelfth grade. The group members identified with diverse gender and sexual identities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, non-binary, gender-non-conforming, and queer. Two group members identified as straight allies. Most group members also participated in the schools' LGBTQ+ activism club and, through that club, had previous experience leading justice-driven events that raised critical awareness around LGBTQ+ issues in the school community. The majority of group members identified as people of color, and group members identified with diverse and sometimes overlapping racial and ethnic identities,

including Black, Asian, Latinx, Moroccan, Filipino, multiracial, and white. Group members talked about their own racial, gender, and sexuality positionalities as part of their typical interactions, and many group members had strengths in critically analyzing power in their lives and in pop-cultural narratives from their favorite movies and books. Some group members had been playing D&D and other RPGs for many years. A few of the group members referred to stories about previous RPG experiences together. However, five of the eight youth members had not played D&D or any RPG before this school year.

The group was concerned that D&D held racist, sexist, and homophobic assumptions in its narratives and mechanics. They followed several Twitter feeds that talked about the problematic elements of D&D. Aware of the problematic assumptions built into the game, but also loving to play RPGs together, the

group wanted to think deeply about how they could play D&D in antiracist and queer-inclusive ways.

The group knew that Scott was a queer-identifying teacher who used critical lenses—including queer theory and critical race theory—to analyze literary narratives. The group knew that Scott had previously facilitated justice-driven student groups. The group talked with Scott about ways that they could critically think about their RPG. Together they discussed that a YPAR project might be a good approach. YPAR, a community-driven and participatory research methodology, provides space for youth to systematically ask justice-driven questions about their own contexts and empowers youth to explore and answer these questions by using methods of academic research (Mirra et al., 2016). YPAR was well-suited for this project because it foregrounds a critical perspective and affords youth researchers more power over their own questions than some traditional forms of academic research. Further, YPAR supports youth researchers to act on their findings and work toward their justice-driven goals in their own community contexts (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Thus, the group asked Scott to bring his critical YPAR expertise and his 20-sided die to the game table.

Although YPAR often uses methods such as interviews, ethnographic field notes, and surveys, Scott and the youth researchers decided that because their questions focused on how they themselves might be reifying racist and heterosexist language, that using discourse analytic methods to analyze their own self-talk may be useful. Thus, the YPAR group played D&D and systematically recorded and transcribed their sessions. Between gaming sessions, they analyzed the transcripts using methods from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Gee, 2014) to see where their language resisted and where it might reify racist, sexist, and heterosexist norms. Sometimes the group had difficulty analyzing their own talk—especially when they noticed how they

might, despite best intentions, play into a problematic narrative trope, but the key was always remaining open and brainstorming justice-driven linguistic alternatives. Below, they share three lessons from their YPAR project for considering RPGs and justice.

### *Critically Examining Ourselves*

The YPAR group's RPGs start with everyone sharing their preferred gender pronouns, which begins to build a tone of inclusivity. Players also consider their characters' gender identities and critically check one another when necessary. For example, they noticed that one player sometimes had his character perform a kind of toxic masculinity by interrupting female-presenting characters and starting fights with the townspeople in the fantasy realm. When another player tried to mention this toxic masculinity, the first player brushed it off, saying that he didn't act this way. However, examining the transcript changed his mind about the level of his character's toxic masculinity. The group analyzed the transcript and marked all the words that might index ideologies of toxic masculinity. Quickly, a pattern emerged which showed that this one player used linguistic resources linked to toxic masculinity much more than other players. This player used a higher number of words about fighting, violence, and sexual conquest, including language that objectified female-presenting characters as sexual objects. For example, he repeatedly said that he wanted to have sex with all the mermaids the adventuring party encountered. He also interrupted female-identifying characters more than any other player did, and he launched into ninety-second monologues where he "mansplained" what the group should do without letting anyone else speak.

In seeing the pattern in the data, the group member who was using this language became convinced that he needed to move toward more inclusive practices.

He stopped using sexualized language as his only way of interacting with the mermaids. He became more aware of his interruptions and actively stopped himself from speaking over female-presenting characters. Similarly, he avoided “mansplaining” by more frequently posing questions back to other characters instead of holding and singularly controlling the conversational floor. This act of critically examining language together seemed to help players to move beyond defensiveness and start to build anti-oppressive strategies.

### *Restorying Problematic Narratives*

Youth researchers quickly learned to deconstruct the problematic narratives they encountered in the official playing materials. For example, there is a type of character in D&D called Tieflings which the official rulebooks (Wizards of the Coast, 2014) refer to as being descended from evil demons. Often portrayed with darker skin, Tieflings are described in the official gaming materials as black-haired, black-eyed, “small minorities found mostly in human cities or towns, often in the toughest quarters of those places, where they grow up to be swindlers, thieves, or crime lords” (p. 42). Youth questioned why the demon-descended characters seemed to be, as one group member put it, “black-coded” because of both darker physical features and how these features get linked to being “minorities” from the “toughest” part of crime-riddled inner cities. Youth researchers identified the racism inherent in the portrayal of Tieflings and thought about how they could change the assumptions around these characters. In response, the youth reimagined Tieflings as powerful scholars and kings who were seen not as sinister but as gifted and powerful. Through this restorying, youth upended the

**“This act of critically examining language together seemed to help players to move beyond defensiveness and start to build anti-oppressive strategies.”**

problematic narratives that their discourse analysis had uncovered.

Similarly, the group also noticed that in many of the game materials, the orcs were often portrayed as living in militarized forts with primitive-looking technology. The youth researchers identified this as problematic as well, in part because the rulebooks also portrayed orcs with darker skin. Youth crafted counternarratives by describing cosmopolitan orc-run cities that actively worked against the problematic tropes. When they interrogated the game’s assumptions like this, they found they could restory their RPGs toward justice.

### *Imagining Critical Utopias*

The group worked to erase heterosexist discourses from their fantasy world. For example, the group actively agreed that: a) homophobic language or slurs should not be allowed in their game; b) there should be no violence that targeted people for their sexuality; and c) they would strive never to assume that any characters they encountered in the game were straight but rather would assume that characters might identify with any number of sexual identities.

On one occasion, a player questioned this game-play style, saying that the group should consider a homophobic villain so that the group could show how to defeat this foe. One player responded by saying that there was already enough transphobia and homophobia in the world today and that they should expel it from their fantasy world. She argued that their fantasy realm should strive to be a utopian escape. Another player dubbed the game a “queer-topia” and the group cheered.

The group agreed to explicitly imagine what a fantasy world without heterosexist oppression might look like and to keep each other another accountable to these ideals. For example, they not only embraced queer identities but imagined new ones. One player referred to their character as a “theythemsbian” meaning a lesbian who used they/them pronouns. For this participant, this identity did not feel available in the world outside the D&D game, but it was celebrated as a legitimate identity in the group’s imagined queer-utopia. Similarly, the group re-wrote popular cultural tropes in favor of queer-centric ones. For instance, when discussing the cosmology of their fantasy world, the group rejected ideas of a singular god who is often portrayed as a cis white man. Instead, they constructed a pantheon of queer gods led by a reimagined Sappho, the Greek poet whose work centers themes of lesbian love. While not always successful at crafting a queer-topia, they brought a critical lens to all interactions and strove toward queer-topia in both the imaginary game and the real world.

This profile illustrates how, through RPGs, participants might unpack and restory problematic ideologies to ultimately envision utopian worlds. Pedagogically this project suggests how teachers might use these elements—YPAR, discourse analysis, and RPGs—in flexible ways to open spaces for transformation and justice.

### Profile Two: Restorying Canonical Texts

As a teacher educator, Karis found Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to be a challenging text to teach. This ballad from the mid-1800s tells the story of a mariner who shoots a great white bird and suffers supernatural punishment for his actions until he learns to appreciate living creatures better. Though Karis loved the supernatural elements and central puzzle of why the mariner shoots the albatross, the older language and nautical context often posed

### Figure 2

#### *Outline for a role-playing game based on The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

- As you are traveling through this strange land, a great white bird – an Albatross – comes through the snow-fog and begins to follow the ship as you sail through the ice. What do you do?
- Notes for GM: Following the role order, allow each player to take one action, roll, and resolve
- **Albatross:** Health 4
- +2 to any rolls the players make (the luck of the albatross!)
- A good southern wind springs up and pushes you back northward
- Take one turn at the end for the **ancient mariner**
  - The **ancient mariner** shoots the **Albatross** with his crossbow
  - If one of your party shoots the albatross, **their character now becomes the ancient mariner** (all instructions for the ancient mariner now apply to this player)

challenges for student teachers who found the text difficult to decode and distant from lived experience.

Karis considered dropping the piece entirely but felt conflicted as she anticipated that her students would need support to critically engage with canonical texts in future school contexts. What tools could she introduce to her preservice teachers to help their future students understand and relate to texts using older styles of English while simultaneously building critical consciousness?



### Figure 3

#### ***Context of the role-playing game story***

What are we doing?

- What is the situation?
  - You are creating a crew of sailors who are sailing a ship together. You can decide where you are trying to go and what you want to get (individually or collectively) out of the trip.
- Why are we playing this?
  - We are collectively “restorying” a traditional ballad, which means that we are starting off with the setting, characters, and plot of a certain poem (“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”) and inserting our own characters. Playing through this game together will help us to make sense of the poem and the characters when we read it, even though this story will inevitably play out differently from the original poem.
- What you have the freedom to do?
  - Whatever you want to, as long as it is not harmful or disrespectful to any of the players in our game (or if your GM says you can’t do it due to the mechanics of the game). Don’t feel like you have to stick to the original plot – it’s just our starting point. This is our chance to tell our own story together!

As she struggled with these questions, she realized that *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* would be ideal for an RPG. By creating a loose script of key plot points for students to encounter and react to, she hoped they could sidestep language hurdles and support understandings of plot, character, and theme. Knowing that students often struggled to understand the motivations of the protagonist, she designed an RPG that had students roleplay sailors, creating their own characters and incorporating their own linguistic and cultural practices. She designed an outline (see Figure 2) that would allow characters to experience the same setting and dilemma as the ancient mariner while responding in character-appropriate ways. She hoped this would allow them to personalize their choices as they struggled with themes of fear and fate. She wanted them to be able to use their own experiences to simultaneously embody the story while creating productive juxtapositions between the poem and their collective storying of it, decentering the canonical text and centering their own beliefs.

The following affordances of this RPG emerged in conversation with Karis’s student Jennifer, and excerpts of Jennifer’s takeaways from RPGs and restorying are shared below.

#### ***Building Context Through Immersion***

At the beginning of the activity, Karis introduced everyone to the context of the story (see Figure 3) and assigned directions for a guided character creation activity. During this activity, students were prompted to imagine what kind of character they wanted to play as well as what kind of dynamic they wanted to have among their sailing “crew.” Students read about different roles that were on the ship (e.g., captain, navigator, doctor) and chose their character’s profession. They also chose personal characteristics (e.g., name, gender pronouns, race/ethnicity, age) with the guiding questions “What aspects of your character will be similar or different from your identity?” and considered their character’s backstory. Before the RPG began, Karis projected a picture of their “ship” and shared nautical terminology and descriptions (e.g., prow, mast, deck).

Jennifer describes how she made choices around her character and what she learned about the setting:

I (Jennifer) am a first-generation American, first-generation college student, and an Afro-Latina from the Bronx studying to be an English educator. Participating in an RPG of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* via remote learning was striking. Because I'm a musician who plays piano and sings, I chose to roleplay a young Italian gentleman lyre player named Alex. Alex uses music to defuse stressful situations in a similar way to how I play piano for self-care. However, there were obvious contrasts between Alex and myself: from the seven-century long time gap between our young adulthoods to our gender identities, nationalities, ethnicities, and job occupations. It took time for me to immerse myself into the language, scenery, and setting. This was my first time being introduced to the antique and nautical imagery that the Ancient Mariner conjured up— I was delighted by the character of the Ancient Mariner in this realm of 'reality.'

### *Exploring Alternate Identities*

During the gameplay, small groups of students were led by a "game master," or narrator, through situations from the poem, with each player given a chance to describe and resolve an action. Encounters that the crew had to navigate included tumultuous storms and becalmed oceans. They also had to interact with characters from the poem who were played by the game master. Through these interactions, students explored their characters and their own identities. Jennifer describes how she experienced the story through the persona of "Alex," the character she created:

To kick off the game, a forceful storm pulled on our ship's mast, dipping the ship into the sea—this immediately impacted two-thirds of our crewmen. The mariner, a young and skinny-appearing young man leapt into a heroic leadership role and directed my character to prepare a lifeboat. Unfortunately, I rolled a low number, and the lifeboat sustained damage—however, the mariner was surprisingly patient and understanding. After the frightening storm, my classmates opened up personally about their characters' backgrounds. As I discussed my own character's background, I eventually found myself seeing more similarities in spite of my stark differences with Alex. For example, he had an estranged relationship with his fictional family back in 1400's Italy for pursuing his lyre musicianship, leading him to leave everything behind for the Ancient Mariner's ship voyage. Likewise, as a first-generation American identifying with the LGBTQ+ community, entering the realm of higher education led me to pause estranged family relationships at home for a lively Greenwich Village subculture.

### *Imagining Relationships with Canonical Characters*

The game master played prominent characters such as the ancient mariner, the albatross, and Death. Players were invited to interact with these characters in imaginative ways and learn more about their motivations. A key moment in the plot is when the mariner shoots the albatross. The students playing had to reckon with the mariner's actions and decide how to respond, as Jennifer describes:

Alex's first time using his lyre musician skills to ease tensions was after the storm whiplash affected our ship. We had just finished

sharing background stories of our main characters, which often helped me empathize with their character motivations and actions. Cloaked in snow, ice, and coldness, we sailors spotted the great white albatross hovering above. I immediately thought the bird was a sign of hope due to its color, however most of the characters aboard were confused and tense. However, the mariner decided to single-handedly shoot down the albatross, which upset me. After the bird's death, the mariner got into a fight with my classmates, leaving the Captain to wisely express, "When we mess with nature, nature messes with us back." The song Alex decided to play (in A flat major to sound peppy and uplifting), proved worthy enough to please and calm the mariner and healer. Thanks to a favorable dice roll, Alex succeeded in healing everyone, which delighted both parties!

This activity shifted the focus of the class's collective learning from the text to their experiences interacting with the story elements and characters together. Through analyzing how the original text differed from the collective story that they made, students were able to interpret not just the text but also the RPG experience, opening up space for many more learning pathways than Karis had originally intended. As Jennifer reflected:

I learned that the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" characters are fiercely passionate in their actions even if their motivations are dealt out with each new turn. When it came to the text, I invested time in synthesizing the

imagery to understand literary devices through RPGs, like the dense narrative. I grew into my character of Alex, the Italian lyre musician who eased tensions between ship comrades while sailing the sea. This shows another personality trait I shared with Alex: being a moderator among cared ones. Unintendedly, I also learned much more about the universality of characteristics I hold personally. I encountered a vast spectrum of similarities and differences between myself and my character Alex. I also gained wisdom into the realm of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner— thanks to RPGs with my peers on this poem.

**"Through analyzing how the original text differed from the collective story that they made, students were able to interpret not just the text but also the RPG experience, opening up space for many more learning pathways."**

When Jennifer engaged with the original text of the poem for homework, she decided to listen to it out loud and read the words like lyrics. As she listened, she described creating vivid images in her head that were connected to the roleplaying experience that helped her to interpret emergent themes. For instance, when the storm happened in the text, she recalled Karis's narration

building up to the storm. She described thinking closely about the presence of the storm and wondering what it might symbolize. Additionally, drawing from her own experiences using RPGs to make connections with a more difficult text, Jennifer asked insightful questions to the class about using this technique to scaffold for future learners, as you can see from this forum posting:

This brings me to ask, how might we incorporate using several forms of differentiated learning in executing long poems (ballads, epics like Homer, or a poem

like "Howl") to make us as future English teachers (Game Masters, too) successful?

Now a current student teacher, she is excited to try some of these techniques in her virtual classroom to engage her 10th grade ELA students.

### **Profile Three: Embodying Someone Else's Story**

While English educators often hope that texts will inspire empathy, sometimes empathy-building requires support beyond the text. As a student-teacher, Sasha taught 7th grade ELA to students in a Manhattan public school of which the majority of students came from white, socioeconomically privileged homes. In reading about the poverty, discrimination, misogyny, and domestic abuse present in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, some students wondered aloud why the characters didn't exert more agency to resolve their conflicts. Questions such as "why don't they just leave?" arose with worrying frequency in class discussion and student writing. While students knew about words like "stereotype" and "gender roles," they were not applying these concepts to the text. Even more troubling, some students condemned characters for their inaction in the face of oppression. Sasha and her mentor teacher struggled to have students understand how and why the characters acted the way they did and why it was important. Though her mentor teacher had explicitly chosen the book to explore diverse contexts and teach students to empathize with the characters in them, many of the students resisted putting themselves in the characters' shoes. Subsequently, Sasha and her mentor teacher decided this was not a student learning problem but a pedagogical problem.

Sasha wanted students, as writers and critical thinkers, to be able to see how identity can interact with contexts in a narrative space. To do so, she created a series of RPG-based lessons centered

around literary character agency, specifically the pernicious tropes that disempower female characters. She chose this topic because these tropes were pervasive in media and might serve as an introduction to critically examining the concept of agency.

Before Sasha began the activity, she defined "agency" in a presentation in order to provide students with the vocabulary to discuss the lesson and prime them to notice agency in the RPG. She defined agency as: "the power a person has to make choices and carry them out" and described that in narratives agentive characters "impact the plot and resolve conflicts through their choices." She then provided a non-example and an example both centered around the popular dystopian young adult novel *The Hunger Games*, which she'd learned most of the students were familiar with from a reading survey conducted at the beginning of the class. However, she did not expect her written definition or examples to be sufficient to explain agency, nor the patterned ways agency operates through narratives. She reasoned that one way for students to see agency and associated tropes was to experience them for themselves, so she designed a slideshow choose-your-own-adventure game in the style of a generic Arthurian Legend. In this intentionally trope-driven setting, the plot follows a knight who must save a princess. The following are Sasha's perceptions of youth takeaways from this activity.

### ***Inspiring Empathy***

As a class, students portrayed the role of a single character, democratically making choices that impacted both the character's actions and their personality. But there was a twist: while the students



**Figure 4**

***Presentation Stills for the Knight and the Princess***

A meeting is being held in the **King's** court. They are discussing what to do about the gallivanting **Green Bandit**.

**You are a knight named Sir Bannister.**

Looking around the room, you see the other knights and your noble **King**, all dressed in shining armor.

The only person not wearing armor is the Young **Princess Vestia** who you know has a keen interest in politics.

Listen to the meeting.

Take a power nap while everyone is talking.

You try to struggle against the rope but find it will not budge. You try to see if you can tip over the chair, but find it is bolted to the floor.

**“Great,”** you say aloud. **“I guess I’m stuck here for a week.”**

You wonder if he’ll even feed you.

Look to your left.

Look to your right.

would take control of the knight in the first playthrough, they would have to replay the story and take control of the captured princess in the second.

The activity is centered around the simple juxtaposition of these two perspectives. Where the knight has ample options to impact the plot and make meaningful decisions, the princess has virtually none. She is confined to a single spot for the duration of the plot, and players are confronted with limited

options as “Look Left | Look Right” – both leading to the same outcome.

Where embodying the knight had left many in the class energized and invested in the story, playing the princess left them more frustrated. Students were quick to voice their opinions on the knight’s choices. When it came time to decide whether the protagonist should diligently listen in on an important meeting or nap through it, an overwhelming majority of the

class voted to listen, with one student exclaiming, “what if there’s something important?” However, not every decision was unanimous: the decision to follow a treacherous quick path or a secure but long route necessitated some debate.

Students initially showed enthusiasm for the princess’s campaign. When the antagonistic Green Bandit appears, they eagerly chose the option that had the princess attempt to fight. However, they became more deflated when they found the princess lacked the training to attack the Green Bandit. Where every hand shot up quickly at every decision for the Knight, students were slower to decide for the princess. As the possible interesting decisions dwindled, so too did the debates. Halfway through the princess’ campaign, when encountering the choice to “Look Left | Look Right,” one of the 6<sup>th</sup>-grade boys boldly declared in a seemingly playful frustration “Hey! You’re just taking away our agency!” Sasha had only just introduced the term, yet this student was already applying it to levy critique at the story. The changes in body language, demeanor, and energy in the class suggested that for many, they were not just *seeing* the differences in the stories, they were *feeling* the effects of character agency. They felt how powerful it was to be a knight, and how powerless it was to be the princess in the story.

### ***Fostering Critical Reflection***

Following this RPG-based lesson, Sasha was delighted by the many compelling questions she received from the students in the creative writing class around the concept of agency and how it gets applied in stories. She made space for these questions and invited students to experiment with these ideas in their writing. She was also able to bring *The House on Mango Street* directly into the class conversation and help students apply their new framework for agency to the characters and their scenarios in the book. Students could begin to address the questions

of who does and doesn’t have agency in the book, and why that might be the case in each scenario. We could begin to shift the conversation away from questions like “why don’t they just leave?” towards questions like “why do the women feel trapped?” With the class having all gone through the experience together, they could begin to better answer these questions around agency, and perhaps more importantly, *ask* them, suggesting a possible strengthening of critical consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

Through RPGs, we see the emergent possibilities of embodying different characters and creating alternate worlds. From the first profile, we learn that YPAR and discourse analysis may be used in conjunction with already existing RPGs in order to create spaces for youth to unpack assumptions, restory problematic narratives, and envision new utopian worlds. From the second profile, we learn how RPGs can help students to explore unfamiliar settings as well as bring their own identities in conversation with the text. RPGs can also help players to build empathy as well as a critical consideration for choices that other players and characters make. From the third profile, we learn that asking students to embody characters can also help them more deeply understand unfamiliar experiences and that in living the worlds of the texts, students can begin to have a better vision of their own lived worlds.

These experiences can help students—and teachers—engage in the critical thought necessary for change-making. We invite readers to ask:

- How am I making space for students to bring themselves into various stories and explore their beliefs and commitments?
- How can I help students to experience this text in a different way?

- What stories are going unheard, and how can we change the rules of storying together to make them heard?
- Am I reproducing inequitable structures or reifying hierarchies?

We hope to have sparked interest about RPGs— a tool for students to emerge into new alternate worlds and co-construct more equitable environments. As readers consider these questions, consider this as well: learning through RPGs opens up space for

emotional investment, creativity, and even joy! As we support youth in creating worlds, we also empower youth to not only read the word and the world, but to make new worlds too.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to note that all authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

## References

- Blum, J. (2020). "Dungeons & Dragons" race issues have deep roots in the world of fantasy. *HuffPost*. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/dungeons-and-dragons-diversity-evil-races\\_n\\_5ef3b7cac5b643f5b22eb22a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/dungeons-and-dragons-diversity-evil-races_n_5ef3b7cac5b643f5b22eb22a)
- Cammarota, J. & Fine, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. Routledge.
- Coles, J. A. (2020). A BlackCrit re/imagining of urban schooling social education through Black youth enactments of Black storywork. *Urban Education*, 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920908919>
- Cook, M. P., Gremo, M., & Morgan, R. (2017). We're just playing: The influence of a modified tabletop role-playing game on ELA students' in-class reading. *Simulation & Gaming*, 48(2), 199-218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878116684570>
- Enciso, P. E. (2017). Stories lost and found: Mobilizing imagination in literacy research and practice. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 66(1), 29-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2381336917718813>
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge.
- Garcia, A. (2017). Privilege, power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How systems shape racial and gender identities in tabletop role-playing games. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 24(3), 232-246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691>
- Garcia, A. (2019). Gaming literacies: Spatiality, materiality, and analog learning in a digital age. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(1), 9-27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.260>
- Gee, J. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Routledge.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2013). *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*. Teachers College Press.
- Lu, F. C., & Chang, B. (2016). Role-play game-enhanced English for a specific-purpose vocabulary-acquisition framework. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 19(2), 367-377.
- Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Routledge.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.9821873k2ht16m77>
- Quevedo da Rocha, F. (2018). Roll a D6: A role-playing game based approach to the EFL classroom. *Role am D6: Uma abordagem baseada em role-playing games para a sala de aula de Inglês como língua estrangeira.*, 9(2), 535-546. <https://doi.org/10.15448/2178-3640.2018.2.31960>
- Thomas, E. E., & Stornaiuolo, A. (2016). Restorying the self: Bending toward textual justice. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(3), 313-338. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-86.3.313>



Wizards of the Coast. (2014). *Dungeons & Dragons: Player's handbook* (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Hasbro.

Wizards of the Coast. (2020). Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons.  
<https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd>