Boston College
Lynch School of Education

Department of
Teaching, Curriculum, and Society

Curriculum and Instruction

COLLABORATIVE WORLDBUILDING: EXAMINING IDENTITIES, IDEOLOGIES, AND LITERACY PRACTICES IN A YOUTH ROLE-PLAYING COMMUNITY

Dissertation
by

ALEXANDER CORBITT

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

Abstract

Collaborative worldbuilding:
Examining identities, ideologies, and literacy practices in a youth role-playing community

Alexander Corbitt, Author

Dr. Jon M. Wargo, Chair

Dr. Bottema-Beutel, Boston College - Reader

Dr. Patrick Proctor, Boston College - Reader

Dr. Antero Garcia, Stanford University - Reader

Role-playing games (RPGs) are storytelling games that employ character generation, improvisational acting, and rule-based interactions to build worlds and coauthor narratives. Contemporary education research identifies RPGs as robust examples of school-based and extra-academic literacy practices. As sites of narrative possibility and precarity, RPGs are political projects that can resist and reify hegemonic ideologies of race, gender, and power. In this three-paper dissertation, I build upon game studies and literacy scholarship to nuance the ways six youth participants coauthored worlds, negotiated storytelling practices, and (re)produced Whiteness. In Paper 1, I highlight a phenomenon I call "liminal play" – moments of gameplay wherein the boundaries between players, characters, and texts converge. My findings illustrate how liminal moments of play forward social and compositional dimensions of collaborative storytelling. In Paper 2, I leverage conversation analysis to detail how participants' play-based talk oscillated across two participation frames: the game (i.e., their character roles) and the metagame (i.e., their player roles). My analysis examines the nested and contested processes of narrative negotiation inherent in RPG interactions. Finally, in Paper 3, I interrogate how participants' worldbuilding practices resisted and reified White racialized ideology. Oriented by critical Whiteness studies, I unmask how participants and I privileged Whiteness despite our efforts to resist hegemonic *Dungeons & Dragons* lore.

Dedicated to the cardinals that enter our lives.

Acknowledgments

To my family. **Cameron**, you are the love of my life. Building our relationship together has been my most cherished experience during our time in Boston. Your kindness, brilliance, and creativity are matched only by your humility. From dancing together in the kitchen on Friday nights to ugly crying together during sappy movies, life with you is a dream. **Justin**, you are my brother, best friend, and role model. Thank you for your service as an ICU nurse. From playing horror video games together to admiring the features of a new vacuum cleaner, I hope we can hold onto our nerdy interests while *reluctantly* becoming adults. You always have our family's back with a smile and, on occasion, a shovel. **Mom**, you are the best teacher in the world. All of the hours I spent in your classroom as a child inspired me to pursue a career in education. I dedicate my professional life to you. Beyond your prowess as a reading specialist, you teach our family how to love through laughter. You are always in my heart, particularly when I make sure the oven is off before leaving the house. **Dad**, what can I say? You taught me from an early age that learning and inquiry are ends unto themselves. And to avoid self-seriousness, you showed me that podcasts and lectures were best paired with YouTube clips of *Step Brothers* scenes. Even in the face of statistically insurmountable adversity, you have shown our family that living is predicated on faith, hope, service, silliness, and free throw practice at the public basketball court on frigid winter evenings. You are my hero. **Disco**, I acknowledge that your 5 AM meowing fits are screams of love. You are always welcome to the best seat on the couch.

To my committee. **Dr. Wargo**, thank you for showing me how research can be joyful, creative, and justice-oriented. You have been an advisor, a coach, a counselor, Reviewer 2, and a brotherly figure throughout our relationship. Most importantly, thank you for giving me honest and hard-hitting feedback on my work; pushing another person to become a better version of

themselves is a special kind of compassion. As an early-career scholar, I aspire to a countless number of your attributes. You and Tyler haven't gotten rid of Cameron and me in your lives . . . mark my words. **Dr. Bottema-Beutel**, you breathe life, and oftentimes hilarity, into research methods. There are a few times in life when a course or mentor opens up entirely new pathways through which to see and interpret the world. My understanding of discourse has been boundlessly complicated through your mentorship, and it is wonderfully daunting. Thank you, also, for always being such a grounded person amid the strange world of academia. **Dr. Proctor**, I am so grateful for your emphasis on human connection in your mentorship. Research and scholarship come second to checking in about our lives and families. You showed me what justice-oriented reading research looks like when applied to curricula and school spaces. When my head is abstracted in the clouds of theory, your influence reminds me to consider the implications of my work for educators and youth in classroom contexts. **Dr. Garcia**, your scholarship gave me permission to build a research agenda studying games and literacy. Thank you for pushing my thinking beyond a preoccupation with gamification toward more critical and radical forms of game-based learning. Your mentorship has intersected with my academic journey multiple times over the past five years, and it always seems to have occurred when I needed it most. You are a paragon of critical nerdery.

To my friends. **Xavier and Ryan**, our YouTube karaoke nights got me through this Ph.D. program. **Charloko**, you reminded me to stop lesson planning after 10 PM and watch the Mets. **Grace**, you are the most brilliant, compassionate, and innovative co-teacher in the world; thank you for your being an outstanding friend. **Fachler**, you lit the fire under my butt to hit the books and rigorously reflect on my literacy instruction. **Ms. Cruz, Mr. Lewis, and Mr. Monaco**, you are the best admin team in the NYCDOE. **Sarli, Palmisano, Weiss, and Rahman**, we know that

good teaching begins with a dedicated grade team and ends with a fierce game of poker. **Jen, Priscilla, Sara, Jason, and Shanetia**, you are life-long mentors, and I am forever grateful. **Melita, Joe, Ali, Marisa, Kyle, and Kierstin**, I shudder to think where I'd be without our quirky little academic family. **Mariana**, you taught me what it means to foster strong, meaningful relationships with participants and their families. **Alisha**, you paved an incredible academic path and left a trail for your peers to follow. **Cassie**, you will always be my academic aunt – I admire you so much. **Karis, Scott, and Laura**, you were my first nerd friends and co-authors in academia. **Reka, Tempestt, and Darlshawn,** you are my DSICG family for life. **Ankhi, Tairan, Stephanie, Dianne, and Daris**, without our Monday "escape grad school" crew, I'd still be drafting cover letters for jobs. **Sarah**, our Friday writing group gave me the momentum to keep chipping away at my dissertation. **Tatisha**, our friendship and collaboration have only just begun!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Games and gaming have been an important part of my life since I was a child. When I was in second grade, the Pokémon media franchise swept the world. My friends and I became enthusiastic Pokémon fans and learned to play franchise-related video games. The Pokémon television series introduced me to transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2010) and I followed the unfolding Pokémon narrative across multiple platforms and products. As my friends and I began to frequent hobby shops, we participated in larger Pokémon fandoms and were apprenticed (Lave & Wenger, 1991) – or informally, socially inducted – into rituals of Pokémon card trading. Spending time in the hobby shops also made us aware of the precarious, capital-driven relationship between fans and brands. These early experiences with games, communities of practice, and speculative worlds were precursors to a lifetime of participation in games and gaming culture.

In middle school, my friends and I learned to play analog games like Magic the Gathering and Warhammer 40,000. These games contained complex rules and lengthy codices (i.e., rulebooks) that detailed their nuanced game mechanics. My love for the Star Wars games launched my exploration across genres of video gaming from real-time strategy (i.e., RTS), to first-person shooter (i.e., FPS), to multiplayer online battle arena (i.e., MOBA) games. In high school, my friends and I became interested in role-playing games (i.e., RPGs) like *Dungeons and Dragons*. We read countless RPG handbooks. Beyond the breadth of low-frequency, discipline-specific words (Beck et al., 2002), these handbooks contained new worlds, new ways of knowing, and new ways of being. Our favorite RPG, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, challenged us to wrestle with weighty, existential issues of humanity, monstrosity, religion, and ethics. More

than idle play, the themes in *Vampire* intersected with our emerging understandings of race, gender, class, sexuality, and politics.

In my youth, games mediated how I understood myself and society. But by the time I became a teacher, my attention to the complexity and potential of gaming had been flattened. Instead of recreating the complex, exploratory games from my childhood, I subscribed to logics of gamification (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017) that employed play-based mechanics to reify what Freire (1970) termed the "banking" model of education (i.e., an instructional paradigm in which students are rendered passive receivers of knowledge). For example, I became the type of teacher that used an interactive Jeopardy board to review class content with my students. Although some students thought Jeopardy was engaging, it limited my instruction to close-ended questions and initiation, response, evaluation (i.e., IRE) discourse structures (Cazden, 2001). These rigid instructional protocols did not reflect the open, dynamic, and critical qualities of gaming in my youth. It wasn't until I enrolled in doctoral study at Boston College that I began to learn about game-based learning and the breadth of ethnographic research on the robust literacy practices within games (Garcia, 2019; Gee, 2003). This scholarship reignited my passion for gaming and game-based learning.

Taking my interest in games as the impetus for research, this dissertation project focuses on role-playing games (i.e., RPGs), young people, and worldbuilding. RPGs trace their history back to the popular *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) series. In RPGs, a game master (i.e., GM) designs an immersive world for other players to explore. Players design and participate as characters with unique attributes and abilities. The process of role-playing typically involves encountering quests and solving problems within the world. Whereas people in the 1970s played early RPGs with pens and paper, subsequent iterations of RPGs have become more

embodied (i.e., live action role-playing) and digitally mediated (i.e., massively multiplayer online role-playing games). In this project, I am interested in how six youth build and participate in worlds across a breadth of analog and digital tools.

Beyond my own interest in gaming, RPGs are currently a salient phenomenon in popular culture and modern politics. As of 2019, games have become the most popular form of media in the world (Entertainment Software Association, 2019). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, RPG sales have skyrocketed, bringing together serious and casual gamers on digital platforms such as Roll20 and DnDBeyond (Whitten, 2021). Creating and socializing within imagined worlds has allowed gamers a timely respite from the realities of physical distancing. But while RPGs can transport players to distant, magnificent worlds, they are also situated in a liminal space between imagination and reality. Indeed, the games we play and the stories we tell are inevitably informed by our real-world values and ideologies (Garcia 2017, 2021). The blurred boundary between play and reality has been particularly salient in modern United States politics.

Two examples of RPG-adjacent phenomena in modern politics include the emergence of QAnon – a hybrid community of right-wing conspiracy theorists – and the insurrection of the US Capitol Building on January 6th, 2021. Following the attack, social commentators compared QAnon and the insurrection to live action role-playing (Walther, 2021). Indeed, the insurrectionists engaged in worldbuilding (e.g., conspiracy theory message boards) and character generation (e.g., the QAnon Shaman) that resulted in real-world violence. While the insurrection is a troubling and insidious example, it is clear that RPGs have the potential to imagine and enact new realities in the modern world. This project works to critically examine *whose* worlds are centered and prioritized during the process of collaborative RPG worldbuilding.

I conceptualize RPGs as collaborative literacies events with real-world implications. Focusing on the purposes, processes, and products of worldbuilding, I examine *why* youth create new worlds, *how* they negotiate their worlds with friends, and *in what ways* their play intersects with various dimensions of their everyday lives.

Study Context

For the past three years, I have partnered with a nonprofit organization named EdQuest (all names pseudonyms). EdQuest was founded by a woman named Morgan and began as a martial arts and fencing school. Over time, however, Morgan became interested in how storytelling mediates learning, play, and composition. This interest was sparked by her experiences as a mother of two young girls. As a parent, Morgan used storytelling to inspire inquiry and creativity in her children. In one of our weekly, hour-long phone conversations she explained how,

> "When Trish – my oldest – was in grade school, all she ever wanted to draw were dragons – baby dragons, fierce dragons, all sorts of dragons. . . . [My husband] and I wanted to broaden her love for the arts, but we were so nervous that we might snuff out her passion . . . . [so] I began asking her, 'Where do these dragons live? What is their community like? What do they do?' And suddenly, a whole world opened up…" (Morgan, personal communication, May 21, 2020)

Morgan went on to explain how Trish's dragons became situated and contextualized within an emerging fantasy world of heroes and magic. At the end of our phone conversation, Morgan texted me a link to Trish's Instagram account. Now an adult, Trish had started her own leatherwork business. She stains, molds, and assembles leather to make dragon masks, purses, and other accessories. All of Trish's models (including Trish, herself) pose with the masks –

typically in the woods – wearing full fantasy regalia. “See what I mean?” said Morgan, “It all began with stories. That’s what I wanted EdQuest to be about: a place to feed your imagination… a place to feed your ‘dragon.’”

Given Morgan’s interest in storytelling, EdQuest evolved from a fencing school into an extracurricular live action role-playing (i.e., LARPing) space for youth (ages 8-17). LARPing is an embodied iteration of role-playing in which participants use costuming and foam weapons to engage in interactive storytelling. While some of Morgan’s staff continued to teach fencing, the majority of the foils and sabres were replaced with LARPing swords (i.e., thin PVC pipes encased in foam pool noodles). The storage closet in the back of the facility contained hundreds of costumes, including stilts that Morgan used to role-play a fire spirit. Slowly, Morgan and her faculty began including STEM elements in their LARPing campaigns to appeal to a larger audience of families. In one such STEM activity, the youth learned how lightbulb circuits worked in order to illuminate a dark, mysterious cavern. Beyond the afterschool programming, Morgan and her staff facilitated birthday parties and an eight-week LARPing camp every summer. The summer camp organized youth into houses with different abilities. From summer to summer, the outcomes of kids’ play would become permanent lore within the EdQuest mythos.

Sadly, EdQuest closed its campus in April 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As their enrollment dwindled, they discontinued their facility lease. Morgan and her staff ripped down the giant castle facade that had adorned their building (see Figure 1.). More than just a moment of material loss, this transition posed an existential quandary for the EdQuest staff: how would they facilitate immersive, physically distanced role-playing experiences for youth? I joined many EdQuest staff meetings as they brainstormed ways to design a hybrid role-playing experience that blended analog and digital tools. Within two months, David – EdQuest’s lead curriculum

developer – developed a 20-hour hybrid role-playing campaign. This was the organization's first iteration of a series of hybrid RPG offerings.

Figure 1

Morgan ripping down EdQuest's facade

In the winter of 2021, Morgan handed EdQuest over to David and went on to be a consultant for other organizations interested in game-based learning. While continuing to chat with Morgan on a weekly basis (totaling over 100 hours of informal interviews), I also began to work more closely with David. As the new Executive Director of EdQuest, David was interested in me facilitating an EdQuest course of my own. Having noticed that the majority of EdQuest's campaign design was organized by the staff, I was curious to teach a class that invited youth to run their own role-playing adventures. David agreed that a "Worldbuilding Workshop" would be an excellent course offering and began apprenticing me for three months to become an EdQuest instructor.

Between April and June of 2021, I observed David's EdQuest courses on Zoom. David and his students engaged in immersive campaigns across digital platforms (e.g. Inkarnate, Hero Forge, World Anvil, etc.) and analog tools (e.g., costuming, physical movement, acting, etc.). In

addition to watching David's classes, we met eight times (totaling 7.3 hours) to develop and playtest my own 8-week campaign. My 8-week adventure would become a model to demonstrate elements of worldbuilding (e.g., character generation, game mechanics, map making, etc.) to my study participants. In July and August of 2021, I recruited six youth from EdQuest into my Worldbuilding Workshop course. The goal of the course was to practice strategies of campaign design and allow each participant six to eight weeks to facilitate their own online role-playing adventure. This program ran from September 2021 to June 2022. I am particularly interested in the various youth-generated worlds, mechanics, ideologies, and characters that emerged from this course.

Dissertation Overview

Contemporary education research has identified role-playing games (i.e., RPGs) as robust examples of literacy practice in both schooling spaces (Jones et al., 2021) and extra-academic contexts (Garcia, 2020). RPGs are storytelling games that leverage character generation, improvisational acting, and rule-based interactions to build worlds and tell cohesive narratives collaboratively. *Dungeons & Dragons* (i.e., *D&D*), for example, is one of the original and most popular RPGs in the world. Given RPGs' extensive lore and customization, they are sites of both narrative precarity and possibility. As a precarious form of play, RPGs like *D&D* have long histories of hegemonic lore that perpetuates White supremacist, racist, and heterosexist storytelling (Flanagan & Jakobsson, 2023; Garcia, 2017, 2021; Kung et al., 2022; Limbong, 2020; Stang & Trammell, 2020). Conversely, youth and educators have leveraged the critical potential of RPGs toward humanizing and justice-oriented ends. Literacy scholars have highlighted classroom pedagogies that used RPGs to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies (Seltzer, 2019) and dream toward queer utopian futures (Storm & Jones, 2021). Thus, in this

project, I examine RPGs – as a genre of play imbued with risk and potential – to understand their complex, discursive processes of composition that mediate collaborative worldbuilding. In this three-paper dissertation, I follow the role-playing practices of six youths in a year-long worldbuilding course. Across the three papers, I examine the youths' coauthorship processes and how their play produced ideological renderings of race, gender, and power.

In Paper 1, I build on Garcia's (2020) three spatialities of play (i.e., "in the game," "at the table," and "beyond the table") to illustrate a phenomenon I call "liminal play" – moments of play when the game boundaries between players, characters, and texts converge. I ask: *How do six youth participants in a six-week role-playing campaign co-author narratives in the liminal spaces between the game, metagame, and intertext?* Oriented by theories of narratology (e.g., metalepsis and metadrama) and game studies (e.g., bleed and liminality), I analyzed the processes and purposes of liminal play to understand how they sustain the social practices of co-authorship. My findings explain how three types of liminal play – metalepsis, metadrama, and comparative ludology – shaped how participants coauthored immersive role-playing narratives.

In Paper 2, I detail how participants discursively oscillated across two states of play: the game (i.e., their character roles) and the metagame (i.e., their player roles). In so doing, I ask: a) *What conversational moves do six youths use to shift between game and metagame discourse during a six-week role-playing campaign?*, and b) *How do participants' oscillations between game and metagame talk function as discursive coauthorship practices?* Guided by concepts from conversation analysis (Goffman, 1974; Heritage, 1984; 2012; 2013; Sacks, 1987; Schegloff, 2001), I traced participants' movement between game and metagame discourses. In the findings, I illustrate how participants' discursive oscillations worked to negotiate knowledge,

fairness, relationships, and pacing. I conclude this paper with reflections on how play-based coauthorship emerges through negotiated ecologies of discourse.

In Paper 3, I interrogate how participants' worldbuilding practices represented ideologies of race, gender, and power. More specifically, I ask: *How do six youths and a researcher in a worldbuilding course resist and reify hegemonic renderings of race and gender in Dungeons & Dragons lore through play-based composing practices?* Drawing from Critical Whiteness Studies (Annamma et al., 2016; Applebaum, 2010; Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Jupp et al., 2016; Matias, 2016; McIntyre, 1997; Mills, 1997; Tanner, 2018), I examined how a single youth named Mark facilitated a role-playing campaign about a race of dark-skinned elves called the Drow. In the findings, I highlight ways that Mark, his peers, and I both resisted and reified White racialized ideologies. Reflecting on the implications of this work, I discuss the thin boundaries between building "worlds" in imagined and everyday contexts. Through a critique of my and my participants' play, I unmask how participants and I privileged Whiteness despite our efforts to resist hegemonic *Dungeons & Dragons* lore.

Across these three papers, I argue that games organized participants' interactions in ways that made their complex learning and literacy practices exceedingly visible. To this end, role-playing illuminated the layered and fluid ways they negotiated language, collaboration, intertextual models, and ideology to tell stories and render reality.

Chapter 2 - Liminal Play:

Coauthoring Narratives with Metadrama, Metalepsis, and Comparative Ludology

Five boys look on as the sixth - Olly - shares his Zoom screen. Olly's screen displays a map of a fantasy world. For the past six weeks, the participants have explored locations on the map and coauthored a play-based narrative. Now, they are about to encounter the final challenge.

"Alright," says Olly, "all of you are teleported to what looks like a giant open room. You see one giant person in the room, and it's HEVE STARVEY!"

"Steve Harvey?" asks a participant named Drew.

"Welcome to The Riddle Game!" continues Olly, "Answer two out of three riddles successfully and you may pass."

"It's Ste - oh we're playing Family Feud!" laughs another participant.

Role-playing games (RPGs) have had a resurgence in popularity in contemporary gaming and popular culture (Knight, 2022). RPGs, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, are storytelling games that leverage character generation, improvisational acting, and rule-based interactions to build worlds and tell cohesive narratives. From a game studies and education research perspective, participants employ countless, robust literacy practices across three domains of play: the game (i.e., the imaginary narrative world), metagame (i.e., the player-based discourses around rules and strategy), and intertextual references from beyond the game (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Fine, 1983; Garcia, 2020; Garfield, 2000). Taking up these three domains as phenomena of inquiry, I am interested in moments of play that blur and straddle these playspaces. As illustrated in the vignette above, RPGs often feature jarring moments when characters break the fourth wall, or players cite intertextual references that transgress the boundaries between distinct worlds (i.e., Family Feud, a fantasy world, etc.). I define these moments as "liminal play" when boundaries between players, characters, and texts converge. Interested in these moments as sites of purposeful storytelling, I will examine how coauthorship emerges through liminal play. To this end, I ask: *How do six youth participants in a six-week role-playing campaign coauthor narratives in the liminal spaces between the game, metagame, and intertext?*

Drawing on data from a year-long digital worldbuilding course, I analyze a six-week campaign facilitated by a youth participant named Olly. Oriented by theories of narratology (e.g., metalepsis and metadrama) and game studies (e.g., bleed and liminality), I trace the processes and purposes of liminal play to understand how they sustain the social practices of coauthorship. In the findings, I explain how three types of liminal play – metalepsis, metadrama, and comparative ludology – shaped how participants coauthored immersive role-playing narratives. The implications of this study highlight how liminal moments of play yielded social and compositional affordances in collaborative storytelling.

Literature Review

I situate this project in overlapping problem spaces of game studies and education scholarship. Building upon these fields' renderings of game-based learning, I emphasize the mediational affordances of liminal play as they pertain to coauthorship. Below, I review research on gaming as they relate to learning, literacy, and collaborative composition.

Games and Learning

Gameplay is a situated practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which participants convene around a shared repertoire of play-based rules and mechanics. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) defined games as "third places" outside of work and home life that afford players unique opportunities for learning and socialization. Recognizing games as sites of situated learning beyond the constraints of schooling, James Gee – a linguist and education researcher – wrote *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003). In it, Gee inventoried a breadth of video games and the processes by which they mediate in-game learning. From first-person shooter (FPS) games to role-playing games (RPGs), Gee gleaned how players encounter puzzles, make meaning within the game world, and progress through increasingly

complex play scenarios. Rather than advocate for "gamification" that repackages rote memorization and multiple choice questions into game contexts (e.g., using Jeopardy to review curricular content), Gee argued that popular video games contained innovative pedagogies that shifted school-based paradigms on teaching and learning. Whereas Gee's work focused primarily on literacy learning, Squire (2004) examined how video games – such as *Sid Meier's Civilization III* – engaged gamers in interactive investigations into history content. As a historical, geographical, and political simulator, Squire considered *Sid Meier's Civilization III* one of the most underutilized learning tools in the early 2000s. Beyond learning content, Squire (2006) acknowledged games as robust learning contexts to pursue inquiry, worldbuilding, and identity construction.

Beyond commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) games, there has been a wide range of games, called "serious games," explicitly created for educational purposes (Squire, 2007). Serious games – such as River City (Ketelhut et al., 2006) and Quest Atlantis (Barab et al., 2005) – employ skills-based learning in their game design to teach players about discipline-specific content in the sciences and social sciences. In addition, some serious games are alternate reality games (ARGs) in which the distinctions between gameplay and reality are blurred (Garcia, 2018). In ARGs, players engage in real-world, applied activities embedded in narratives that blend fact and fiction.

The Importance of Role-Play

Building on scholarship establishing games as sites of learning and inquiry, I turn to research on role-playing as a literacy practice. Burroughs (2014) explained how social gaming, such as role-play, leverages ritual performances to "construct and co-configure new possibilities

of a social order" (p. 155). To this end, role-playing is a social activity bound by rules, with the potential to imagine new worlds and modes of interaction.

Literacy and Schooling

Recently, role-playing games have become a burgeoning topic of inquiry in literacy research. Studying extracurricular literacy contexts, Garcia (2020) spent over two years in a community of adult *Dungeons & Dragons* players. Garcia inventoried the many literacy practices across three spatialities of role-play: in the game, at the table, and beyond the table. This work illustrated how moment-to-moment interactions in role-play contained complex, intertextual processes of literacy learning. Rejecting the ideological neutrality of role-playing games, Garcia (2017, 2021) also outlined and critiqued how role-players render issues of race, gender, and power across their storytelling practices.

Role-playing practices are commonly used in schooling contexts, too. For example, Simkins and Steinkuehler (2008) explain, "when a young person represents Uganda in Model U.N., they are role-playing for the purpose of learning. The same can be said for a history student participating in a mock trial" (p. 339). Indeed, learners can role-play as scientists, politicians, and lawyers to develop epistemic frames that contextualize literacy learning (Shaffer, 2005). Studying RPGs in language arts classrooms, Jones et al. (2021) examined how high schoolers explored their identities, resisted racist narratives, and embodied interactions between canonical literary characters. Building on this scholarship, Storm and Jones (2021) outlined how a group of students in a queer-led afterschool space leveraged role-playing to rethink problematic social norms as a method of dreaming toward queer utopian futures. Finally, Seltzer (2019) demonstrated how high school teachers mobilized critical translingual approaches to language and literacy learning by interrogating raciolinguistic ideologies through processes of role-

playing. These studies establish role-playing as both an existing and emergent context for critical literacy learning in schooling contexts.

Coauthorship

As a coauthored experience, role-playing is a collaborative activity that requires participants to negotiate their relationships and play trajectories (Tan et al., 2017). To this end, Simkins and Steinkuehler (2008) argued that RPGs, "have the unique ability of providing experiences that are entirely co-constructed by both designer and player. Not only is the experience of game play coproduced, but the meaning of the games is coproduced" (p. 339). Illustrating how role-playing is a coauthored practice between multiple stakeholders, Edmiston (2007) studied how children and adults engaged in ethical role-play scenarios. Similarly, de Souza e Silva and Delacruz (2006) illuminated how meaning is collectively constructed through play as participants share their perspectives to build shared understandings. Taken together, this body of scholarship highlights how play is a social activity in which meaning is coauthored through cultural and collective practices.

Building on the above scholarship, I seek to illuminate how role-playing is a couathored process mediated across a variety of liminal playspaces. Rather than conceptualizing "in-game" and "out-of-game" playspaces as entirely disparate, I highlight moments when they bleed across each other. Furthermore, through analyzing a six-week, youth-led RPG campaign, I will demonstrate how these sites of playful "bleed" served specific compositional functions for the study participants.

Conceptual Framework

To understand how participants coauthored narratives across liminal moments of role-playing, I developed a conceptual framework to guide my analysis. First, I thought with concepts

related to spatialities of gameplay to develop a heuristic of liminal play. Then, after creating a heuristic of liminal play, I thought with concepts of unnatural narratology to understand how transgressive, boundary-subverting moments of collaborative storytelling forwarded gameplay. The latter concepts helped me nuance my heuristic of liminal play in ways that informed my deductive coding methods that I will elaborate on in my methods section.

Spatialities of Gameplay

Game, Metagame, & Intertext

To understand how participants coauthored narratives across various domains of play, I first thought with Garcia's (2020) three spatialities of analog gaming: "in the game," "at the table," and "beyond the table." Each of these spatial categories is a site of robust literacy practices. Within the game world (i.e., "in the game"), for example, participants spoke in fantasy languages, discovered ancient lore, and engaged in local politics. Among the players (i.e., "at the table"), participants strategized their future actions, negotiated game-specific rules and mechanics, and reviewed relevant notes recorded during play. Drawing from prior knowledge and previous participations (i.e., "beyond the table"), participants made intertextual references to other fandoms (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Percy Jackson*, *Magic the Gathering*, etc.), texts, and activities that shaped their understanding and engagement with the current game. For this article, I will refer to these three gamespaces as the "game," "metagame," and "intertext" respectively. However, while these three categories are foundational to how I understand role-playing interactions, I must also acknowledge the extent to which these gamespaces became unbounded and blurred during play. To understand this curious phenomenon, I turned to the concept of "bleed" in role-playing game studies.

Bleed

Johan Huizinga (1949) described games as phenomena within a "magic circle" with unique rules and conditions distinct from the outside world. Bleed, as described in role-playing game studies, occurs when game elements and reality transgress the boundaries of the magic circle. Stenros and Bowman (2018) defined bleed as "the phenomenon when a player's thoughts and emotions influence the thoughts and emotions of the character they are role-playing (bleed-in) or a character's thoughts and emotions influence the player (bleed-out)" (p. 420). Scholars used the term to describe how role-playing impacted gamers' relationships—such as the romantic interest between characters bleeding out into their players' lives (Olmstead-Dean, 2007). Sometimes, bleed can be a byproduct of a game's immersion as players feel personal and psychological resonances between their lives and role-play (White et al., 2012). Recognizing that players can develop life skills through role-playing, such as leadership and teamwork abilities, scholars explain how players can experience *ego-bleed* (Beltrán, 2013) in which the identities of their characters shape their out-of-game identities. However, this type of identity work can also be problematic when players practice racism, sexism, violence, and other antisocial behaviors under the "alibi" of gameplay (Bessière et al., 2007). Acknowledging the promise and precarity of bleed, I am curious how game, metagame, and intertext spaces bleed across each other during role-play. While scholars typically examine bleed across game and metagame contexts, I also consider how intertextual bleed occurs during coauthored moments of role-play. Designating these moments of bleed as "liminal play," this study is also informed by the anthropological concept of liminality.

Liminality

Liminality is a concept first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909) to describe how individuals engaged in transformational rituals and rites of passage as they

developed from childhood to adolescence to adulthood (i.e., preliminal, liminal, and postliminal phases, respectively). Building on van Gennep's work, Victor Turner (1969) suggested that liminal phases of development "operate betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (p. 95). For Turner, liminality was an unbounded phenomenon that ruptured normativities of space, time, identity, community, and power. Adopting Turner's idea of liminality as a social anti-structure, feminist theorists have examined how liminal moments of play can unsettle and dismantle social hierarchies of gender and race (Harkin, 2021). More than a composite of game and non-game contexts, liminal moments of play can be sites of ontological and phenomenological transformation (Ramsay, 2020). While not all games are "liminal games" that blur game and non-game contexts (e.g., chess), and not all liminal-adjacent play is enduringly transformational (e.g., liminoid play), there is reason to believe that RPGs are sites of critical, transformational storywork (Harviainen, 2012; Horrigan, 2021). Rather than focus on players' relationships with their characters, I am interested in how bleed and liminal play signify moments of radical, negotiated coauthorship. Whereas evoking Steve Harvey in an RPG might not be personally transformational, for example, it might represent a significant, enduring method of narrative composition among participants. To this end, this paper's analysis centers specifically on participants' identities as coauthors of an RPG narrative.

Unnatural Narratology

Given my focus on narrative storytelling and coauthorship in RPGs, concepts of narratology guide my thinking. In particular, elements of unnatural narratology are particularly orienting as I consider liminal play at the elusive boundaries between game, metagame, and

intertext spaces. Below, I will describe how metalepsis and metadrama are significant narratological phenomena that guided the analysis of my data.

Metalepsis

Metalepsis is a phenomenon in which the characters, narrators, or story elements of a text transgress traditional narrative boundaries (Bell, 2013). While there are many types of metalepsis, this study specifically focuses on horizontal metalepsis (Bell & Alber, 2012). Horizontal metalepsis occurs when characters or narrative features jump from one text to another. An example of horizontal metalepsis would be if Darth Vader jumped from a Star Wars film to an Indiana Jones film. While both film franchises were created by the same author, George Lucas, Darth Vader's metaleptic transgression across texts would be a jarring instance of unnatural narratology since Star Wars and Indiana Jones occur in different universes, on varied timelines, and across genres. By examining moments of role-playing that feature metalepsis, I intend to glean how intertextual references are taken up and negotiated by participants as processes of liminal coauthorship.

Metadrama

Metadrama is a post-modern term in narratology that refers to moments of self-reflexive storytelling that disrupt the audience's position as omniscient observers (Lovrod, 1994). Put another way, metadrama entails moments of storytelling in which the characters become aware they are in a narrative and break the "fourth wall." For example, metadrama occurs when characters address narrators or audience members. Metadrama is an example of unnatural narratology because it dismantles the boundaries that distinguish a storyworld from the real world. Historically, metadrama has been employed as a narrative technique to investigate the extent to which characters and participants have free will within storytelling contexts (Stewart,

2002). For example, characters in metafiction will express a capacity for self-determination to demonstrate how the author does not control them like a puppet. Metadrama is particularly intriguing when examined in role-playing contexts. I recognize moments of metadrama in RPGs as examples of liminal play in which game and metagame spaces bleed into each other. I seek to understand how metadrama is a site of converging and conflicting wills of players, characters, and their liminal positionalities.

Method

Study Context

This case study is part of a three-year collaboration with an educational nonprofit organization named EdQuest (pseudonym). EdQuest facilitated educational programming that teaches social skills, storytelling practices, and science content through role-playing. In particular, EdQuest focused on learning through live-action role-playing (i.e., LARPing). LARPing is an embodied version of role-playing in which participants dress up as their characters and engage in embodied interactions rather than playing around a table with figurines and dice. EdQuest offered after-school programming during the school year and week-long summer camp sessions. The youth and young adult population enrolled at EdQuest ranged from seven to twenty years old. During 2019, most of the EdQuest staff and participants identified as White. The organization attracted a large population of youth who also identified as neurodiverse and lesbian, gay, trans, and queer (i.e., LGBTQ+). The organization's founder, Morgan (pseudonym), explained that one of the primary goals of EdQuest was to create an inclusive space where participants could participate in immersive stories and feel a strong sense of belonging and community with others. I began visiting EdQuest every week in 2019 to participate in their programs and become apprenticed by their staff.

In early April 2020, EdQuest paused its in-person programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, I regularly met with the EdQuest staff on Zoom to help transition their analog programs onto digital platforms. A few months later, the EdQuest director – David (all names pseudonyms) – asked if I would be interested in designing and facilitating an online course. I accepted the invitation and proposed a course titled The Worldbuilding Workshop. The goal of The Worldbuilding Workshop was to provide each participant with six weeks to tell an original story in a customized world. As each participant presented their campaign, their peers would create characters and collaborate as protagonists in the unfolding narrative. As I planned The Worldbuilding Workshop, I attended David's virtual courses for three months to glean insights into his pedagogical practice. David also met with me eight times (totaling 7.3 hours) to help me develop and play-test an eight-week campaign to model for my participants. This six-month apprenticeship process prepared me to run The Worldbuilding Workshop with fidelity to EdQuest's pedagogical approach and vision.

By August 2021, I recruited six adolescents to participate in The Worldbuilding Workshop. The participants enrolled in the course were named Olly (16 years old), Mark (13 years old), Drew (13 years old), Alec (13 years old), Kyle (13 years old), and Jacob (14 years old). All six participants identified as White males and used he/him pronouns. Mark, Alec, Olly, and Kyle identified as autistic. They were all experienced role-players and had enrolled in multiple EdQuest programs before my course. Mark, Alec, and Kyle knew each other before joining the program, whereas Olly, Drew, and Jacob were new members. While the group met online during the course, all participants lived within a 20-mile radius of each other.

Meeting every Wednesday afternoon for 90 minutes, the Worldbuilding Workshop ran from September 2021 to June 2022. The youth facilitated every Worldbuilding Workshop

session except for the first eight weeks when I modeled my campaign. After that, each participant invented imaginary worlds and game mechanics through which they told a story. I typically observed each youth-led session as an audience member, occasionally role-playing as characters when called upon by participants. For this study, I specifically focused on data collected from a six-week campaign facilitated by Olly. I chose to focus on Olly's campaign for three reasons. First, Olly's campaign was the first youth-led narrative and featured the most frequent negotiations of coauthorship as participants learned how to collaborate. Second, Olly's campaign served as the youth-generated model that subsequently served as a point of reference for the remaining participants' campaigns. Third, Olly's campaign incorporated the most GM-generated artifacts (e.g., maps, game mechanics, etc.). As I read across my broader corpus, these artifacts served as rich focal sites for negotiated coauthorship and liminal play.

Data Generation

Olly's campaign took place over six weeks, totaling nine hours of collaborative gameplay. In addition to the play sessions, I interviewed Olly four times, totaling 114 minutes of discussion. In addition to the play session recordings and interviews, I collected various play-based artifacts, such as participants' character sheets, a rulebook of Olly's game mechanics, and various maps of Olly's world. Below, I will describe my data corpus and elaborate on how it provided relevant insights into liminal play.

Play Session Recordings

Play sessions occurred weekly on Zoom. In the beginning of the sessions, Olly – the Game Master (henceforth, GM) – provided a narrative summary of the previous play session. Other participants clarified or elaborated on Olly's account during this summary. Then, Olly began the next chapter of his campaign and invited the players to begin role-playing.

Each recorded Zoom session captured an array of analog and digital phenomena. The analog phenomena included a variety of embodied and material interactions that mediated play. For example, there were many moments when participants engaged in physical challenges (e.g., running in place, moving to different quadrants of their screen) to accomplish game-based objectives (e.g., crossing a collapsing bridge or blocking enemy attacks). Participants also used costuming (e.g., masks) and props (e.g., brooms and sticks) to represent their characters. Beyond embodied play, participants also used material objects such as coins and dice to determine the outcomes of player-character interactions. Many of the GMs, for instance, used 20-sided dice (i.e., D20s) to decide the degree to which players' actions (e.g., attacks, evasive maneuvers, etc.) were effective. Rolling a "natural" 20 inevitably resulted in success, whereas rolling a 1 or 2 signified a failed action. Thus, embodiment and material objects shaped and propelled the role-playing narrative.

The digital phenomena in the session recordings included the platforms and screen-sharing practices in which participants engaged. Many GMs used websites such as Inkarnate and Hero Forge to build maps and character models. Beyond these design-based platforms for composing and performing play, participants regularly shared links to YouTube videos, memes, and fandom encyclopedias (e.g., Forgotten Realms Wiki). To organize game action and play, GMs sometimes used digital timers and dice-rolling programs to determine rule-based outcomes of role-playing.

I used Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence transcription service, to generate an initial transcript of the play session recordings. While Otter.ai only transcribed my recordings with roughly 70% accuracy, I retrospectively cleaned the data as I listened back to the recordings.

Retrospective Design Interviews

In addition to the weekly play session recordings, I conducted semi-structured (Spradley, 1979) weekly interviews with Olly. Specifically, these retrospective design interviews (Dalton et al., 2015) sought to understand how Olly interpreted the previous play session. Furthermore, these discussions illuminated Olly's thought process, ambitions, and negotiations as a GM. During our conversations, I would revisit important moments of plot development in his campaign and ask how he felt about them. Sometimes his story unfolded as he planned, and other times he expressed surprise at the adventure's direction. To this end, these interviews helped me understand how Olly made sense of the negotiated processes of game-based coauthorship.

Additional Game Artifacts

In my meetings with Olly, he shared additional artifacts he created for his campaign. These artifacts included multiple iterations of world maps, narrative outlines of his story, and a Google Document with a customized ruleset he used to facilitate gameplay. He spoke through these artifacts with me and explained how they helped him co-create his adventure with the other participants. These materials interested me because they served as additional actors and coauthors in storytelling. For example, Olly's Google Document of custom game mechanics served as programming "behind the scenes" of play. Whenever Olly rolled dice, he conferred with his notes of character statistics and abilities to determine how actions and scenes unfolded.

Data Analysis

My data analysis spanned three sequential phases. First, I coded the data for moments of game, metagame, and intertextual play. Then, I traced moments of liminal play – phenomena that did not cleanly fit into the latter three categories. Finally, I revisited moments of liminal play to determine the compositional function they served within the coauthored narrative of the role-playing game. I describe these three phases below.

Phase 1: Coding for Game, Metagame, and Intertext

I began Phase 1 of the analysis by coding the six-session transcripts of Olly's Worldbuilding Workshop campaign. I color-coded moments of participant play according to a "game," "metagame," and "intertext" heuristic based on Garcia's (2020) scholarship on analog gaming spatialities. I highlighted each type of play in yellow, green, and blue, respectively (see Figure 2.). Most of my participants' role-playing practices fit into the latter categories. The primary challenge of this phase of coding was tracing participants' rapid shifts between role-playing as characters (i.e., "in game" play), to strategizing as fellow players (i.e., "metagame" play), to making frequent connections to their favorite texts and fandoms from beyond the game (i.e., "intertextual" play). Within a minute of play, participants often shifted between these three playspaces multiple times. Coding for game, metagame, and intertext allowed me to understand the traditional structure and narratology of Olly's campaign. In addition to these familiar moments of role-play, however, there were instances of participant interactions that were difficult to categorize with my initial scheme. Thus, I proceeded to a second iteration of coding based on my conceptual framework of unnatural narratology.

Figure 2

Color-coded transcript based on forms of play

Olly 18:45: This is around the year 1430 AR

Kyle 18:55: After Iraq?

Olly 18:57: No. After Redemption. Which is when the gods of Luxa rose to protect us from the great evil of the Tsar. This was the last Tsar and now we're ruled by...

Alec 19:13: Is that like like a type of underwear or something? Like...

Mark 19:17: No, no, it's a type of ruler.

Alec 19:20: Oh, yeah, like Russia. Okay, Russian Tsars.

Mark 19:23: Yeah, yeah.

Olly 19:27: What is Russia?

Alec 19:29: Um, from the universe we're from.

Olly 19:32: Oh, okay. Yes, at any rate...

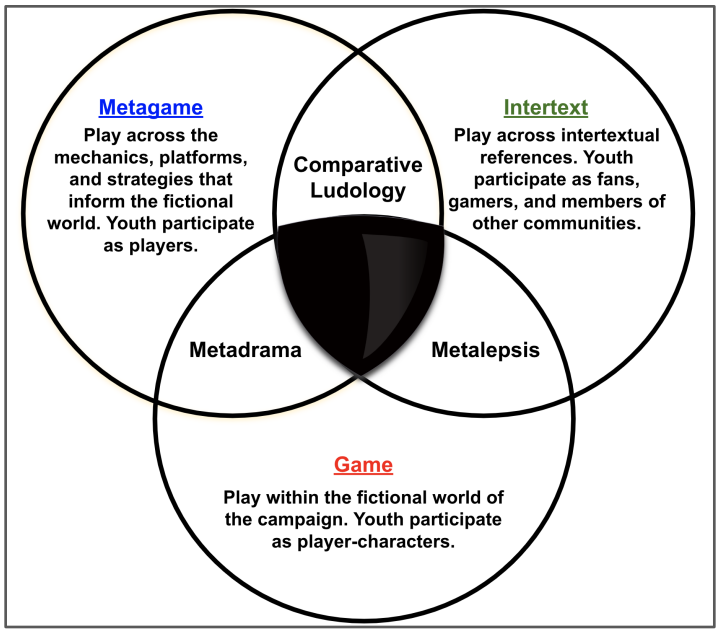
Note. I highlighted game talk in yellow, metagame talk in green, and metadramatic talk in purple.

Phase 2: Coding for Metalepsis, Metanarrative, and Comparative Ludology

After coding for moments of "game," "metagame," and "intertext" play, I was left with multiple lines of uncoded discourse that seemed to blur these playspace boundaries. So, I began thinking with concepts of unnatural narratology to understand these strange moments of what I understood as liminal play. When I noticed moments that blurred intertextual references with the gameplay narrative, for instance, I marked the line in orange and noted it as an example of metalepsis. When I noticed moments that blurred metagame discourse with game discourse, I marked the line in purple and noted it as an example of metadrama (see Figure 2.). By noting and positioning these phenomena across the boundaries between the game, metagame, and intertext, I began to piece together a heuristic of liminal play (see Figure 3.).

Figure 3

Liminal Play Heuristic



While creating my heuristic of liminal play, I inductively noticed a third liminal space between the metagame and intertext that I had not anticipated. Building on and adapting the language of Csikszentmihalyi (2014), I defined these moments as examples of "comparative ludology." Comparative ludology, most simply, is the practice of comparing two or more forms of play. In this paper, I use the term to describe moments of Olly's campaign wherein the rules and mechanics of other games and texts bled into metagame discourses. As I describe in the findings, comparative ludology was a strategic way that participants normed their interactions and made sense of the new rules of Olly's world.

Phase 3: Discerning Compositional Functions of Liminal Play

In Phase 3 of my analysis, I revisited moments of liminal play and determined their compositional functions. While liminal play often appeared to be silly, "off-task" behavior, I began considering how these moments forwarded coauthorship processes. To do this, I first researched the intertextual references to games and texts that students made throughout their gameplay. For example, to understand why Drew repeatedly shouted "Jumaji!" at the beginning of Olly's campaign, I had to re-read Chris Van Allsburg's (1981) *Jumanji*. After re-reading the

text, I could recognize that Drew had been testing his ability to escape Olly's world, Luxa. As I will explain in the findings, Drew's utterances served a function, helping him understand and participate in the rules of Olly's campaign. Thus, as a method of analysis, it was important to research participants' intertextual references from beyond the game and metagame.

Even after researching and understanding participants' cryptic intertextual references, the purpose of their liminal play was not always apparent. So, my subsequent analysis coded for the following three elements: a) participants' explanations of their liminal play, b) peers' uptake and responses to liminal play, and c) the impact of liminal play on the unfolding content and trajectory of the campaign. Coding for these three elements helped me better discern the social and compositional utility of liminal play. Finally, I worked to collapse examples of liminal play into shared categories of compositional function. The structure of my findings below mirrors how I organized and collapsed my codes.

Findings

As outlined in my methods, my findings are organized across three types of liminal play: metalepsis, metadrama, and comparative ludology. Presenting my data as a collage of role-playing vignettes, I organize my findings by the compositional functions these types of play serve as processes of coauthorship.

Metalepsis

While role-playing as characters within Olly's campaign, participants frequently evoked metaleptic connections to texts beyond Olly's fantasy world. As a result, characters and features from other texts transgressed traditional narrative boundaries into the reality of Olly's world. My analysis revealed that these jarring references served meaningful compositional functions that

advanced collaboration and play. Below, I describe three compositional functions of metalepsis in liminal play.

Metalepsis as Inter-Narrative Continuity

Before Olly facilitated his campaign, I led participants through an eight-week narrative in a world I created called Ravin. A recurring character in Ravin was a clumsy inventor named Goblin Greg. The participants loved Goblin Greg. Across the remainder of the campaign, the participants created additional lore for Goblin Greg and made many Goblin Greg jokes. When it was time to transition to Olly's campaign, Goblin Greg became a permanent fixture of our collective storytelling.

Olly's campaign took place in a world called Luxa. Luxa existed in an entirely separate universe from Ravin. Nevertheless, Olly playfully used Goblin Greg as metaleptic narrative tissue that connected our two worlds. After completing my campaign, Olly explained how the participants obtained a magical book from Goblin Greg. After accidentally spilling a magic can of seltzer on the book, its pages become a vortex that sucks the participants' characters into the entirely new world of Luxa.

Apart from Goblin Greg, there were no other narrative connections between my campaign and Olly's. My narrative focused on climate change and took place in a future version of Earth. Olly's story focused on defeating an evil god and took place in a fantasy realm. Olly's choice to include Goblin Greg in his adventure helped create narrative continuity across the campaign transition. Following Olly's lead, other participants also incorporated Goblin Greg into their campaigns. Drew included a thinly veiled version of Goblin Greg named "Robot Reg" who wore tin foil on his ears. Mark narrated his campaign wearing a squid mask under the moniker "Cthulu Craig." Finally, the antagonist of Alec's campaign was a character named "Dragon

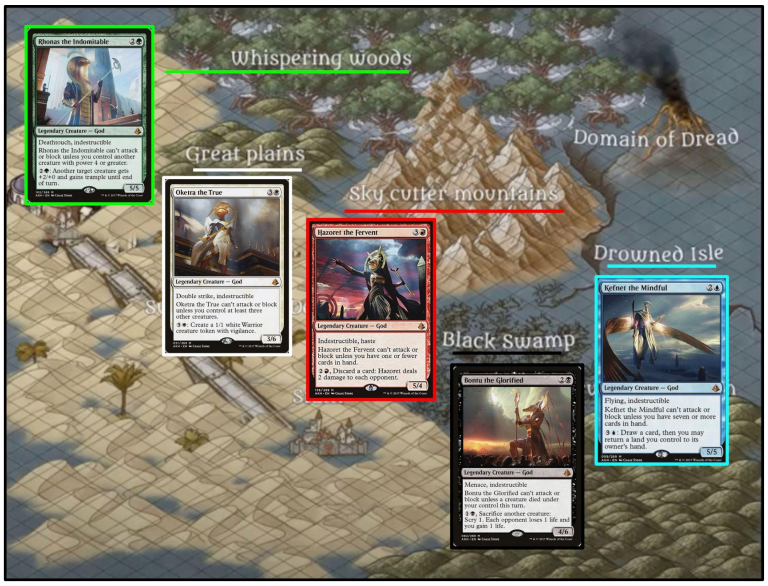
Dreg." While all of these narratives were distinct, Goblin Greg was a liminal subject woven across everyone's story in ways that infused continuity across the year-long Worldbuilding Workshop course.

Metalepsis as Mentor Text

The setting and theology of Olly's world, Luxa, were constructed through metaleptic adaptations of a trading card game called *Magic: The Gathering* (i.e., *Magic*). In *Magic*, the cards represent five suits: forests, plains, mountains, swamps, and islands. Similarly, Olly created his world around five environments: The Whispering Woods, The Great Plains, The Sky Cutter Mountains, The Black Swamp, and The Drowned Isle. Each environment was home to a god based on creatures from *Magic* (see Figure 4.). Like the cards, each god embodied an ideal (e.g., fervency, mindfulness, etc.). As the participants traveled from destination to destination, they encountered the gods and obtained magical items and blessings that symbolized their respective ideals. While *Magic* lore heavily shaped Olly's adventure, his world was independent of the *Magic* universe. Thus, the elements of *Magic* that bled into his campaign served as metaleptic mentor texts that helped him design the theme, setting, and narrative arc of the campaign.

Figure 4

Olly's Campaign Map (Edited to Feature Magic References)



Olly situated the metaleptic mentor texts of his campaign in a liminal space between explicit and implicit recognition. For example, the degree to which *Magic* inspired Olly's world went entirely unacknowledged by him and the other participants. I was unaware of the story's connection to *Magic* until Olly explicitly told me about it during one of our interviews. Similarly, other participants sometimes obfuscated the mentor texts that inspired their participation. In one scene of play, for example, Alec burst into a room and yelled, "FBI, open up! . . . . Fungus Brained Institution!" While Alec's actions and utterances mimicked television depictions of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, his playful remixing of the acronym simultaneously worked to hide this intertextual connection. Participants' metaleptic play was situated in a liminal compositional space between implicit storytelling frames and explicit allusions that guided and structured their coauthorship.

Metalepsis as Community Bridging

Metaleptic play also worked to bridge connections between participants' shared fandoms and fandom communities. For example, in Session Two of Olly's campaign, the participants encountered a challenge that pitted against a hoard of zombies. Before this challenge, however,

the participants' characters encountered a mist that also turned them into zombies. As a result, the characters had to distinguish friend zombies from foe zombies carefully. During this scene, Alec shouted, "Hey, is it Death Mist? Is it Death Mist from Percy Jackson?" I would later find out that Olly, Alec, and Kyle shared a deep admiration for Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series of novels. They all encountered the franchise in their English classes while attending different middle schools. The Percy Jackson mythos repeatedly made metaleptic transgressions into the participants' worlds and storytelling practices throughout the year-long Worldbuilding Workshop.

During moments of metaleptic encounters with shared fandoms, participants often expressed how they came to know and love certain franchises. Later in Session Two, for example, Olly narrated how the campaign's antagonist roared, "Resistance is futile!" In response to Olly's metaleptic evocation of Star Trek, Mark said, "As someone who has watched Star Trek . . . mostly because my parents made me, but then because it was actually a good show . . . I'm now just imagining I'm hearing this from a robot" (audio recording, November 11, 2021). Mark's and Alec's comments demonstrate how metalepsis created a liminal community space in which friend, family, and schooling experiences overlap during roleplay. Coauthorship and meaning-making occurred at the nexus of common interests and social histories.

Metadrama

Across Olly's six-week campaign, there were multiple moments when the divide between characters (i.e., subjects in the game) and the players (i.e., subjects in the metagame) dissolved. In these instances, the participants toggled across and between spatialities of play to accomplish specific compositional goals. As described below, metadrama facilitated inter-game knowledge, narrative momentum, and compositional negotiation.

Metadrama as Intra-Game Knowledge

A common problem in role-playing games is that there is a narrative boundary between what players know about a storyworld and what their characters know about a storyworld. For example, players will typically have preexisting knowledge of certain monsters or magical phenomena that their characters do not. Moreover, players might overhear a discovery made by a companion player in the metagame, but their in-game characters might not yet be aware of such information. This gap between player and character knowledge presents a conundrum in which players must role-play their characters in good faith, adhering to their characters' lack of omniscience. In certain circumstances, however, a GM might reveal information from the liminal space between the game (i.e., "in game") and the metagame (i.e., "out of game"). This type of inter-game knowledge was established multiple times throughout Olly's campaign.

In Session 2 of Olly's campaign, the players had to battle each other in a "battle royale" scenario in which only one character could survive and gain the gods' favor. This frustrated the players, however, because they loved their characters and did not want them to die. To ease the participants' angst, Olly said, "In game *and* out of game: whoever loses doesn't die. They just can't pass the trial, they can't reach Bontu" (audio recording, November 11, 2021). Olly's statement, positioned in the liminal space between the game and metagame, worked to notify the players and characters that the consequences of the battle were not as dire as they initially thought. By establishing this inter-game knowledge with all of the fictional and non-fictional participants, the players could relax and continue the scene without the anxiety of having their characters die. While Olly might have been able to communicate this information to the players and characters through more subtle developments within the narrative (e.g., showing another character lose the battle and getting safely transported elsewhere), his decision to reveal

information spontaneously "in game *and* out of game" functioned as liminal narrative triage to immediately quell the other participants' frustration.

Metadrama as Narrative Momentum

As experienced gamers know, the narrative momentum of role-playing games can be derailed by any number of factors (e.g., a side conversation about an unrelated fandom, eating snacks, etc.). During these moments, there are many strategies that GMs and players employ to refocus the group's attention back to coauthoring the game together. In his campaign, Olly used metadrama to pull his peers back into the storyworld and maintain the game's progress.

During Olly's campaign, his peers often trailed off on side conversations when discovering new locations or histories of Olly's world, Luxa. To keep their focus on the game, Olly employed metadrama to transition metagame discussions back into the game. In one scene, for example, Olly role-played as a townsperson, saying, "This is around the year 1430 AR . . . . after the gods of Luxa rose to protect us from the great evil of the Tsar" (audio recording, November 4, 2021). Not remembering what a Tsar was, Alec broke into metagame discourse, asking "Is that like a type of underwear or something?" upon which Mark clarified, "No, no, it's a type of ruler." Then, remembering what a Tsar is, Alec said, "Oh yeah, like Russia. Okay, Russian Tsars." At this point, Olly's in-game character interjected into Alec and Mark's metadrama conversation, asking, "What is Russia?" Surprised, Alec and Mark resumed role-playing their characters, saying, "Um, from [another] universe we're from." With everyone back "in-character," Olly could resume the scene as he intended.

In the above example of metadrama, Olly situated his comment "What is Russia?" in the liminal space between game and metagame play. Olly's character interjected into Mark and Alec's metagame sidebar to solicit an in-game response. As a result, Mark and Alec seamlessly

transitioned back into their characters so that the game could continue as planned. More than just rhetorical flair or postmodern storytelling, metadrama served the compositional function of keeping participants engaged in the coauthoring process of Olly's campaign.

Metadrama as Compositional Negotiation

Collaborative storytelling, such as role-playing, is always a negotiated practice between multiple stakeholders. In RPGs, the players and GM must work toward narrative outcomes that are both personally and collectively satisfying. During this process, moments of clarification, revision, and tension occur between participants. These compositional negotiations sometimes occur in liminal spaces between the game and metagame. Liminal, play-based negotiation can take various forms, from characters subtly conspiring against the narrator to explicit brokering between characters and players. In Olly's campaign, metadramatic negotiations helped participants' characters conspire against Olly and disrupt his control over the narrative.

Olly frequently used dice to determine the outcomes of his storytelling. For example, he would sometimes roll "perception checks" for characters to see if they noticed anything significant in their current location (e.g., a lurking foe or a hidden piece of treasure). In one scene during the middle of his campaign, Olly started abruptly rolling dice before saying, "Nothing seems unusual" (audio recording, November 18, 2021). This narration seemed suspicious to the characters, and they quickly began questioning Olly's reliability as a narrator. "Uh oh," began Drew as Alec shouted "Sus!"— an abbreviation of "suspicious." By breaking the fourth wall, the characters began to openly interrogate Olly's narration and explain how there is usually impending danger when the GM starts rolling random perception checks for the characters. During this time, Olly acted coy and prompted the characters to "just continue playing."

However, the characters already began to revise their next moves in anticipation of a plot twist in the story.

In other situations, participants' characters sometimes confronted Olly's narration directly. One such negotiation occurred when Olly tried to dictate the actions of Drew's character. It is typically a faux pas for a GM to co-opt a player's character because characters are among the only elements of an RPG over which players have agency and control. So, when Olly told Drew that his character was attempting to flee a battle, Drew replied, "No I'm not. I'm not attempting to leave." Nevertheless, Olly began to describe how Drew's character was retreating. When Drew protested again, Olly revised his narration and said, "Oh, ok. I'm only saying what it would be like *if* you decided to leave." This negotiation between a character and GM marks an interesting moment of compositional negotiation. By confronting Olly in the liminal space of metadrama, Drew's character witnessed two alternative timelines of the narrative unfold. In one timeline, the GM co-opted his character and fled from battle. In the revised timeline, Drew's character resumed combat beside his fictional comrades. This example of metadrama highlights how liminal play in Olly's campaign became a process of spontaneous clarification, revision, and occasional resistance. Through this liminal negotiation, the campaign could proceed in a pleasing direction for both Olly and Drew.

Comparative Ludology

Popular role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, mediate storytelling through rules and mechanics. Participants learn how to engage in collaborative play and composition through character generation, turn-taking, dice rolling, and more. As a coherent system, these rules and mechanics structure how players can engage with and impose change on the worlds generated by GMs. In the case of Olly's campaign, he customized the world and game

mechanics. To figure out the rules of Olly's world, the players had to collaboratively discover and norm how they participated in the storytelling process. To norm their interactions, the players engaged in comparative ludology and compared aspects of Olly's game to other games they had played. As I will describe below, this type of liminal play helped players better understand procedures for coauthoring Olly's world.

Comparative Ludology as Interactional Norming

Comparative ludology occurred almost immediately after the players began Olly's campaign. Upon being sucked into a book and falling into the world of Luxa, participants immediately needed to triangulate how Luxa worked compared to the mechanics of other intertextual worlds they knew. Drew, for example, immediately compared Luxa to the enchanted world of Chris Van Allsburg's (1981) *Jumanji*. This comparison made sense as Luxa and Jumanji were both immersive worlds that magically sprang out of a book and a board game, respectively. "We're in Jumanji!" exclaimed Drew, "In order to get out of here, we have to yell Jumanji very loudly" (audio recording, November 4, 2021). While Drew likely did not think Luxa was the same world as Jumanji, his comment served as an intertextual comparison intended to make sense of how Olly's world operated. In response to Drew, Olly said, "You yell up to the sky. Nothing happens. Except some people look at you a little strangely." Here, Olly's narration tactfully informed Drew that different rules governed Luxa and Jumanji.

In other instances of comparative ludology, players used intertextual references to understand character mechanics in the game. At the end of Session 1, for example, Olly invited each player to choose a specialization for their characters. Each player could make their character a healer, mage, thief, or fighter. After Olly described the attributes of the thief specialization, Kyle asked, "So a thief is pretty much a rogue from D&D?" (audio recording,

November 4, 2021). In response, Olly said, “Similar, yes. Although we’re operating on the first edition kind of style.” Here, Olly acknowledged that the rules of his world had similarities to the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This comparison gave Kyle a framework to understand his character’s specialization.

In the same way Olly integrated narrative elements from *Magic the Gathering* into his world through metalepsis, he also borrowed elements from *Dungeons & Dragons* to construct this world. Rather than debrief all of the rules and mechanics of his campaign prior to play, Olly preferred to let his peers gradually uncover how the world functioned through their participation. The comparative ludology process helped players flag Luxa's mechanics and tap into their gaming histories to discern how to interact in Olly’s campaign. Through constant references to other games, the players could norm their participation in ways that were conducive to collaborative play and authorship.

Discussion & Implications

Building on games studies scholarship (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Fine, 1983; Garfield, 2000; Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008) and literacy research on role-playing (Garcia, 2017, 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Seltzer, K., 2019; Storm & Jones, 2021), in this paper I worked to understand how six youth gamers engaged in the messy, contested, and unfolding processes of coauthorship during a six-week role-playing campaign. Analyzing the discrete boundaries of game, metagame, and intertext playspaces, I considered liminal moments of participant play that bled across the latter categories. Specifically, I identified metalepsis, metadrama, and comparative ludology as liminal practices produced among Olly and his peers. Though not an exhaustive list, I provided examples and vignettes of liminal play that forwarded participants’ collaborative storytelling. Similar to anthropological accounts of liminality as moments of social transition and adolescence

(Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909), these vignettes of liminal play were moments of social practice and narrative becoming for participants.

As a social practice, liminal play was "based on social contracts, open or implicit, that delimit[ed] the space of activity" (Harviainen, 2012, p. 509). Olly and his peers demonstrated a remarkable amount of social and interactional fluency as their play transitioned across innumerable liminal spaces. These various playspaces were complete with unique norms and communicable sign systems that coalesced around shared discourses between participants. Socially, these liminal moments provided unique opportunities for interpersonal bridging and buffering. As a connective force, liminal play built bonds between players and their joint fandoms. Establishing shared prior knowledge facilitated intimate moments of personal narratives, such as Mark sharing his family's practice of watching Star Trek. Conversely, liminal play was a buffering activity that allowed participants to communicate their needs in ways that circumvented interpersonal conflict. Olly demonstrated this when he tactfully transitioned Alec back into gameplay through the strategic usage of metadrama. Rather than confront Alec, Olly encountered him in a liminal playspace and redirected him toward the game. Amid the challenges of coauthorship, moments of bleed between game, metagame, and intertextual play yielded unique social affordances.

As a literacy practice, liminal play marked a composite of "fictional realit[ies] . . . resignification zone[s], that under[went] constant redefining, most of which [were] subtle and [took] place only inside the players' minds" (Harvanian, 2012, p. 513). Moments of liminal play were indeterminate spaces in which participants collaboratively ideated, drafted, and revised Olly's storyworld. As a method of ideation, liminal play functioned as a palimpsest of participants' favorite fandoms, references, and inspirations. As worlds from beyond Olly's

campaign bled into his narrative, they served as mentor texts that gave structure to participants' storytelling. As a method of drafting, liminal play was a site of narrative potential. Players rehearsed and experimented with multiple interactions before permanently inscribing a scene into the campaign. As a method of revision, liminal play held space for participants to contest narrative outcomes. Coauthorship was both a joyful and frictional project for the participants, and liminal play – such as metadramatic transgressions of the fourth wall – allowed players to negotiate storytelling power with Olly.

Understanding liminal play has important implications for both game studies and literacy scholarship. In game studies, scholars (Harvanian, 2012) argue that immersive, convincing play requires *boundary control*, "prevent[ing] unwelcome information from crossing [into play], either by blocking said information or by altering it to an acceptable form" (p. 511). Olly and his peers, however, demonstrated how intrusive moments of liminal play advanced their campaign. Rather than limit immersion, liminality allowed the players to participate in storytelling on their own terms. Accordingly, their liminal play yielded a variety of affordances in the complex process of coauthorship.

Studying liminal play also has unique implications for literacy research. Focusing on participants' liminal interactions revealed how Olly and his peers engaged in collaborative storytelling processes. Like a think-aloud, liminal play displayed the messy moments of narrative composing between the six participants. Throughout this process, the participants explicitly shared their desires, inspirations, and frustrations in ways that highlighted a polyvocality of authorial intent and composition. As a site of apprenticeship, friendship, and negotiation, liminal play was a space where Olly and his peers lay bare their storytelling practices.

Chapter 3 - Playing with Positionality:

Composing Narratives Across Game and Metagame Discourses

Print-based narratives use formalized grammar and punctuation conventions to organize ideas and delineate prose from character dialogue. Similarly, discourse-based narratives have identifiable features: an abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Labov, 2014). As an interactional activity, spoken narratives can unite people as they share experiences and build social relationships (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Ochs, 2004). In play-based contexts, such as role-playing games (RPGs), narratives are discursively more complex as participants toggle across speaking as characters in "game talk" and speaking as players in "metagame talk" (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Buchbinder, 2008; Fine, 1983; Garfield, 2000). Furthermore, RPGs are sites of countless literacies and narrative composing practices (Garcia, 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Salen, 2007; Storm & Jones, 2021). Building on this scholarship, I investigate how and why gamers shift between game and metagame conversations in play-based narrative discourse. In particular, I examine how six teenage boys in a youth-led role-playing campaign oscillated between their player and character identities to coauthor a fantasy narrative. In doing so, I ask the following two research questions:

1) *What conversational moves did six youths use to shift between game and metagame discourse during a six-week role-playing campaign?*
2) *How did participants' oscillations between game and metagame talk function as coauthorship practices?*

Drawing on data from a year-long digital worldbuilding course I co-facilitated with six teenage boys, I analyze a six-week campaign facilitated by a single youth participant named Olly. Oriented by theories of conversation analysis and game studies, I use a combination of

inductive and deductive coding to trace the processes and purposes of discursive shifts across game and metagame play. In the findings, I illustrate how participants' discursive oscillations worked to negotiate knowledge, fairness, relationships, and pacing. I conclude this paper with reflections on how play-based coauthorship emerges through negotiated ecologies of discourse.

Processes of Role-Based Narrative Discourse

Narrative discourse analysis is an expansive program of study (Bruner, 1991; Gee, 1985; Labov, 2014). However, research on how narratives are composed through play-based discourse is a smaller field of research. To understand how youth role-players composed narratives across game and metagame discourses, I first review and build upon a wide range of scholarship on play and gaming that examines how people coauthor narratives through talk.

Role-playing is rooted in imaginative play, or what Harris (2000) calls "pretense." Pretense, according to Harris, is comprised of pretend stipulations (e.g., using a tree branch as a symbolic substitution for a sword)., causal powers (e.g., a tree branch having the imagined characteristics of a real sword), suspension of objective truth (e.g., pretending that the blunt edges of a tree branch are razor sharp), and unfolding causal chains (e.g., imagining that a slash of a tree branch constitutes a deadly blow). Developmentally, children begin performing pretend stipulations around the age of two (Bosco et al., 2006). Sociodramatic play, in which people embody imagined characters and contexts, emerges in children's talk between the ages of three and six (Blum-Kulka, 2005). Tracing the human development of sociodramatic play, Deunk et al. (2008) examined how children between the ages of two and three engaged in early examples of discursive role-play. During these moments of joint pretense, participants leverage metacommunicative tools – such as phrases like "let's pretend" – to organize their shared narrative (Halliday-Scher et al., 1995). While negotiating a shared fantasy, participants will use

"mental flags" to communicate aspects of play and discourse that require imagined, alternative interpretations (Harris, 2000). For example, a child pretending to be a racecar driver might grip an imaginary steering wheel to flag their play. Children and adults often implicitly understand these discursive processes as they engage in pretend role-play scenarios.

Moving beyond speech act theory's (Austin, 1962) focus on single utterances, Bottema-Beutel et al. (2022) argued that conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974) could trace how play emerges across multiple turns of discourse. Examining how adolescents with autism and their neurotypical peers collaborated on a storyboarding project, Bottema-Beutel and White (2016) demonstrated how coauthorship unfolds across multiple utterances in a conversation. Examining role-play, Atkins (2019) used conversation analysis to understand the differences between real and simulated consultations between healthcare professionals and patients. Similarly, Buchbinder (2008) described how three children discursively made sense of their parents' cancer diagnoses through complex intertwinings of role-playing real and imagined dimensions of their lives. The above scholarship, taken together, highlights the ways that narrative composing is discursive, social, and mediated through various identities and positionalities.

Moving the focus to games and gaming, Ensslin (2012) described how conversation analysis can reveal how gamers interact across multiple ontological frames as they switch between affiliative talk (i.e., 'buddylects' with friendship-specific words and phrases) and rule-based strategizing during gameplay. Like Ensslin, Gee (2015) described how gamers engage in projected character identities in games that require navigating different social scripts – what Gee terms "big D" discourses. Steinkuehler (2006), a student of Gee, examined how massively multiplayer online (MMO) game communities developed shared discourse practices that shaped joint activity, performed identity, and communicated shared values. This program of scholarship

highlights how gaming introduces additional scripts, ontological frames, and compositional practices to the narrative composing process. Building on this work, I aim to highlight a specific conversational phenomenon in gaming: participants' oscillations between game and metagame talk. By examining the conversational movements and functions therein, I intend to glean insights into how transitions across player and gamer positionalities forward narrative composition.

Conceptual Framework

To understand how and why participants toggled across game and metagame discourses, I developed a conceptual framework to guide my analysis. First, I considered how Huizinga's (1949) concept of the "magic circle" of play related to theories of epistemics in conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984; 2012; 2013a). Then, I considered Goffman's (1974) concept of "keying" to understand how participants shifted across multiple talk frames during role-play. Finally, I reviewed discursive features in conversation analysis to make sense of how participants collaboratively constructed narrative and game-based meaning across multiple talk turns.

Huizinga's Magic Circle and Epistemics

According to Johan Huizinga (1949), play occurs within a magic circle – distinct from the outside world – in which participant interactions contain unique rules, norms, and mechanics. Games emerge from these constraints as players strategically navigate the terms of play to achieve their goals. During gameplay, players maintain a social contract agreeing to participate according to an established rule set (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). In role-playing games, multiple nested magic circles – or what Clark (1996) calls "layers of play" – delineate different forms of playful engagement. For example, players' actions in the metagame (e.g., negotiating dice rolls, referencing rule books, etc.) are separate from the game world in which participants speak and

interact as their characters. Granted, players' motivations, personas, and understandings can spill across the magic circle into their fantasy world characters as a type of "immersion into character" (Bowman, 2018) – or what Calleja (2011) refers to as "affective involvement." Thus, we must also consider issues of epistemics (i.e., players' and characters' ways of knowing) to understand participants' playful navigations across the magic circles of play.

In conversation analysis, research on epistemics examines how people discursively negotiate their knowledge, make their actions intelligible to others, and sequence their talk (Heritage, 2013a). As people converse, they draw from their domains of knowledge (i.e., epistemic statuses) to express different positions of knowing (i.e., epistemic stances) between conversational partners (Heritage, 2012). Heritage (1984), for example, examined how individuals used the phrase "oh" to indicate that a previous statement revealed new information. When speakers maintain "epistemic congruence," they consistently perform their positions as "knowledgeable" and "less knowledgeable" in a given sequence of talk (Heritage, 2013a). Furthermore, a person's epistemic status–their domain of *what* they know–shapes how others interpret their utterances. During a social event, for instance, the utterance "Isn't it late?" could be understood as a genuine question or a proposal to conclude the event depending on whether the speaker knows the time. Questions can also propel or redirect a sequence of talk as participants engage in the "epistemic seesaw" of positioning themselves as knowledgeable and less knowledgeable (Heritage, 2013a).

Epistemics are important in role-playing contexts because participants' epistemic statuses and stances change as they transition between players and characters. Players may know certain metagame information that their in-game characters do not. Thus, the way participants

discursively position themselves across the magic circle of play shapes how they interpret and interact with each other.

Frames and Keying

To understand how participants oscillated between game and metagame participation, I turn to frame analysis. According to Erving Goffman (1974), frames are "schemata of interpretation" through which we understand events and phenomena in our everyday lives. Frames shape how we know, interpret, and encounter the world. In daily life, people make meaning through countless, shifting frames. Transitions from frame to frame are facilitated by keys or "keying." Goffman defines keying as, "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (pp. 43-44). For example, a person's interpretation of a fight is keyed when it occurs on the stage of a theater. Rather than understand the altercation as a vicious brawl, audiences can understand the fight through the frame of a dramatic performance. Goffman explained how keying must: a) occur within a recognizable activity for which participants have a schema of interpretation, b) transform an activity in ways that are identifiable and acknowledged, and c) be bracketed by beginning and ending cues. This process of interpreting how people discursively key across different interpretive frames is a deeply cultural and ideological practice.

Fine (1983) built on Goffman's (1974) scholarship on keying and frame analysis to understand how role-playing participants oscillated between various characters, positionalities, and epistemic states. Fine explained how games contain multiple laminated frames that build upon participants' "primary frame" – their everyday understandings of the world as *people*. Laminated atop this primary frame is a *player* frame in which game-specific rules and mechanics

govern participants' actions. A third frame is the *character* frame in which participants embody and role-play as fictional characters. During role-playing campaigns, participants rapidly oscillate between "up-keying" to more imagined, abstracted versions of themselves and "down-keying" to their primary frames as people and players. This process entails various epistemic and ludic (i.e., game-based) challenges as participants negotiate what they know and how they interact across these various frames of gaming. While Fine explained that games could have countless additional frames that shape participant interactions, I primarily focused on conversational negotiations between player (i.e., metagame) and character (i.e., game) frames for this paper.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 2007) examines how meaning is constructed between conversational partners. Whereas speech act theory (Austin, 1962) locates discursive meaning at the utterance level (e.g., a request, an apology, an invitation, etc.), conversation analysis (CA) considers how conversational partners sequence communication across multiple turns of talk and interaction. In particular, there are a few conversational features that are relevant to my interest in role-playing epistemics and keying across multiple frames of play: adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007), turn-initial discourse markers (Heritage, 2013b), change of state markers (Shiffrin, 1987), and sequence closing devices (Schegloff, 2007). These phenomena, taken together, provide analytic insights into how oscillations between game and metagame talk occur.

Adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007) are the building blocks of CA. In their most basic form, adjacency pairs are two turns of talk, each turn by a different speaker, in sequential order. The first turn is called the "first pair part" (FPP), and the second turn is called the "second pair

part" (SPP). FPPs are utterances that initiate an interactional exchange with another speaker (e.g., a question). SPPs are corresponding responses to FPPs (e.g., an answer). A SPP must also be a type-fitted response to the FPP, meaning it should be a related and relevant utterance recognizably connected to the FPP. For example, an answer is a type-fitted response to a question. Sometimes there can be alternative SPPs – such as counters – that might change or subvert the intended response from the FPP. Responding to a question with another question (e.g., "what do *you* think?") is an example of an alternative SPP that shifts the trajectory of the conversation as intended by the initial speaker. In sum, adjacency pairs establish a conversation's social rhythm (e.g., who speaks next) and anticipated structure (e.g., connected, contiguous utterances). Adjacency pairs were relevant to analyzing role-playing, specifically, as I examined how FPP utterances sometimes marked invitations to transition across game and metagame conversation.

Turn-initial discourse markers were also relevant to role-playing conversations as they sometimes highlighted moments of tension and narrative negotiation between participants. Turn-initial discourse markers (Heritage, 2013b) are preparations in speech – typically a single lexeme – that precedes an utterance. Examples of turn-initial discourse markers include "oh," "wait," "um," and "well." These markers "can offer initial clues as to the broad turn-shape and turn-type that is about to be implemented" (Heritage, 2013, p. 333). For example, a turn-initial discourse marker like "wait" can be uttered to resist a course of action and forecast an alternative trajectory of interaction. Schegloff (2001) explained how the turn-initial "no" can sometimes indicate a transition from a joke statement (e.g., "We should order everything off the menu!") to a serious statement (e.g., "No, but we *should* order a couple of appetizers with our meal."). Thus, turn-

initial discourse markers can indicate a shift in conversational partners' interactional content and structure.

Schiffrin (1987) explained how change of state markers – such as "oh" – can demonstrate epistemic shifts in a speaker. "Oh," for example, can signify recognition of familiar information (e.g., "oh, that's right!"), a receipt of new information (e.g., "oh, interesting!"), a shift in orientation (e.g., "oh, now I see!), and much more. All of the latter examples highlight how "oh" is used to mark the different ways speakers manage information. While change of state markers can also be turn-initial markers, as demonstrated in the parentheticals above, they can also occur in the middle and end of utterances. Change of state markers like "oh" are important because they display information exchange and conversational partners' epistemic statuses. Epistemics are particularly relevant in role-playing as players negotiate information across game and metagame interactions.

Finally, sequence closing devices (Schegloff, 2007) are utterances that conclude a contiguous sequence of conversational turns. Sequence closing devices are utterances that, when spoken, require no further response. The most basic sequence closing devices are "sequence closing thirds" – a third turn in a conversational sequence following a SPP that ends the interaction. For example, if someone asked the question, "Why are you drinking oat milk?" and the conversational partner responded with the SPP, "Because I'm lactose intolerant," then the initial speaker's response, "I see," would be a sequence closing third. Rather than examine sequence closing devices that conclude talk entirely, I am interested in utterances that conclude a conversational frame and solicit a response from within a different conversational frame. For example, I want to know how a conversational moment in the game ends and oscillates to metagame talk.

The four CA concepts above – adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007), turn-initial discourse markers (Heritage, 2013b), change of state markers (Shiffrin, 1987), and sequence closing devices (Schegloff, 2007) – are concepts and analytic tools that help me answer my first research question. Namely, they help me understand how participants shifted between game and metagame discourse during a six-week role-playing campaign.

Method

Study Context

This study was part of a larger, three-year collaboration with an educational nonprofit organization named EdQuest (all names pseudonyms). EdQuest facilitated extracurricular educational programming that taught social skills, storytelling practices, and science content through role-playing. Unlike table-top roleplaying (i.e., TTRPing), the youth participants at EdQuest engaged in live-action role-playing (LARPing). LARPing is a physically embodied version of role-playing in which players dress and interact as their fictional characters. However, EdQuest discontinued its in-person programming in 2020 due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The organization transitioned to online role-playing courses to observe local physical distancing mandates. During this transition, David – the director of EdQuest – trained me for five months to become a volunteer staff member. During this time, I observed David's online courses and engaged in weekly game design meetings with him. Eventually, David allowed me to create an online role-playing program titled, The Worldbuilding Workshop.

Over the summer of 2021, six youths enrolled in The Worldbuilding Workshop: Olly (16 years old), Mark (13 years old), Drew (13 years old), Alec (13 years old), Kyle (13 years old), and Jacob (14 years old). All six participants identified as White cisgender boys and used he/him pronouns. Mark, Alec, Olly, and Kyle identified as autistic. Before enrolling in the study, all

participants were experienced role-players and had enrolled in multiple EdQuest programs. Their experiences discursively composing role-playing narratives surpassed my own. At the outset of the course, I explained how each participant would have between six and eight 90-minute sessions to introduce the class to a world and guide us through a role-playing narrative therein. The class aimed to critically examine how youth coauthored worlds through discourse and play.

This paper specifically focuses on the campaign facilitated by a participant named Olly. While the other campaigns featured interesting discursive practices worthy of analysis, Olly's nine-hour campaign reflected the most common interactional features of role-playing discourse and storytelling. In other campaigns, some participants were reluctant game masters (i.e., GMs) or worked together as co-GMs. In Olly's campaign, however, he was the sole GM. Across his six-week campaign, Olly guided his peers through the locations, civilizations, and theologies of an original world he created named Luxa.

Data Generation

Olly facilitated his campaign for six 90-minute role-playing sessions. The play sessions took place on Zoom. The participants coauthored Olly's campaign through talk, except for a few additional game artifacts (e.g., maps, word documents of customized game rules, etc.). Some participants joined with their Zoom screens off, verbally describing how their characters responded to unfolding scenes of play. Sometimes participants typed comments, jokes, or relevant hyperlinks into the Zoom chat, but these interactions were rare.

Given this study's focus on role-playing discourses across game and metagame play, the audio files from our Zoom recordings were the focal data for this paper. To transcribe the data, I first uploaded the audio files of our play sessions to Otter.ai–an artificial transcription program that transcribes audio and distinguishes speakers and turns using voice recognition software.

After Otter.ai did an initial pass on the audio data, I cleaned up the transcriptions by editing phrases and speakers the software misinterpreted. I then reviewed the transcripts for discursive phenomena of interest (I describe this process in depth in the data analysis section below). Finally, I transcribed focal moments of discourse using Jeffersonian (2004) transcription methods. These revised transcripts helped me examine how participants discursively situated themselves across game and metagame discourses.

Data Analysis

My data analysis followed three distinct phases. First, I reviewed the data to flag shifts between game and metagame discourse. Then, I determined the specific conversational moves the participants used to transition across these two playspaces. Finally, I examined how these oscillations across game and metagame talk functioned as discursive coauthorship practices. The latter two phases of analysis sought to sequentially address my research questions, respectively.

Phase 1: Flagging Shifts between Game and Metagame Discourse

I began my analysis by marking moments in my transcripts when participants transitioned between game and metagame talk. Game talk was usually entirely narrative-driven, with Olly narrating the unfolding events and the participants role-playing as their individual characters. Metagame talk was usually "table talk" in which the game narrative paused and the participants discussed strategies, rules, and prior knowledge related to the game. During metagame talk, participants stopped role-playing as their characters and conversed as players. When reviewing the data, it appeared that the participants usually understood these discursive shifts in play without having to explicitly flag whether their participations were situated in the game or metagame.

Two strategies guided my ability to code participants' talk as either "game discourse" or "metagame discourse." My first strategy was to pay attention to the narrative momentum of the conversations. I usually found that metagame discourse occurred every time there was an interruption in the participants' storytelling. Thus, I bounded the moments of metagame talk based on when the game narrative paused and resumed. Most of the transcripts excerpts I included in the findings feature an interruption in storytelling, a negotiation between participants, and a discursive transition back into in-game role-playing. As I will detail in the findings, Olly usually facilitated the transitions back into game-based play.

My second strategy to code for "game discourse" and "metagame discourse" was to trace changes in participants' discursive registers. When role-playing as their characters, participants used more stylized language and inflections in their speech. When engaging as players, participants engaged in sidebar conversations using their everyday forms of talk (e.g., inside jokes, meme references, etc.). By noticing shifts in participants' forms of speech, I could better determine whether their utterances were advancing the game narrative or engaging in metagame discussions about the game.

Despite identifying two general differences between game and metagame discourse, I still needed to analyze the exact conversational processes that facilitated shifts between these two domains of play. This led me to move on to Phase 2 of my analysis.

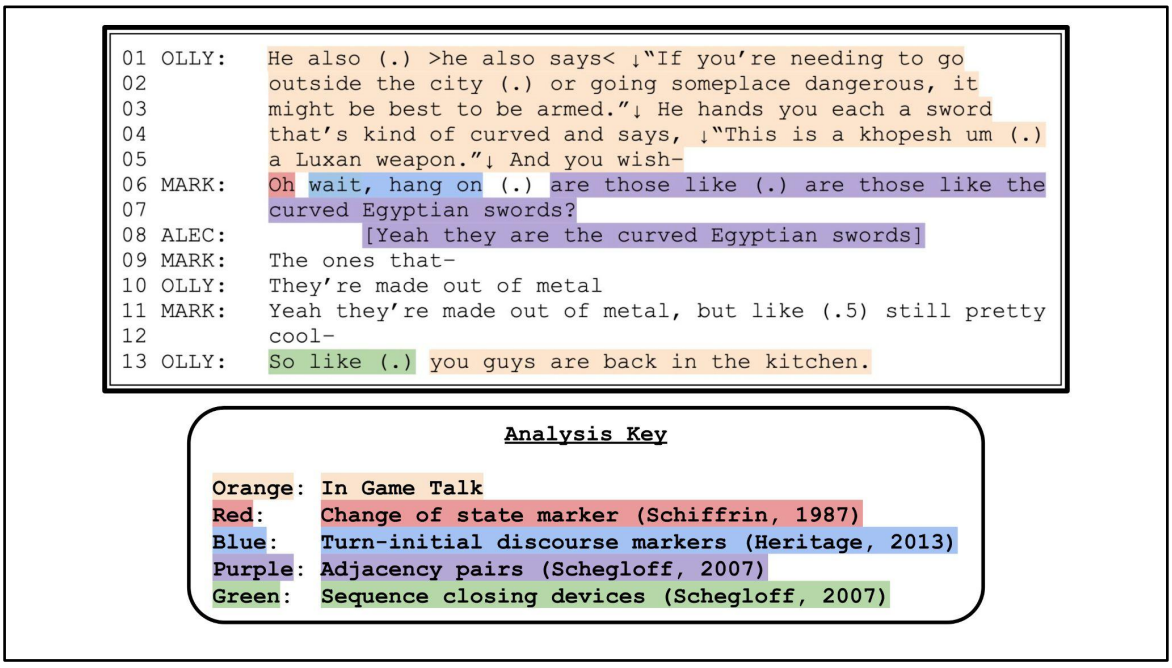
Phase 2: Determining the Processes of Conversational Shifts

Phase 2 of my analysis addressed my first research question: *What conversational moves did six youths use to shift between game and metagame discourse during a six-week role-playing campaign?* Building on Phase 1, I thought with the conversation analysis concepts previously cited in the conceptual framework. The first conversational features that stood out were the

variety of turn-initial phrases that explicitly signaled participants' discursive shifts. For example, there were 27 instances when participants began their utterances with the phrase "In game," or "Out of game." The phrase "in game" indicated when participants spoke from character perspectives, and the phrase "out of game" indicated when participants spoke from metagame player perspectives. Across the data corpus, I noted 16 turn-initial phrases that participants used to signal a shift in the discourse. In my analysis, I color-coded turn-initial phrases blue in the transcripts (see Figure 5.). Sometimes these turn-initial phrases were preceded by change of state markers (e.g., "Oh!"), indicating that a previous utterance (re)shaped how the speaker made sense of the game. I highlighted change of state markers in red across my transcripts.

Figure 5

Example of color-coded conversation analysis



After examining turn-initial phrases, I analyzed adjacency in the participants' uptake of conversational shifts. For example, participants usually accompanied a bid to shift the discourse (e.g., "Hang on,") with a question (e.g., "Are those like the curved Egyptian swords?"). Then,

Olly or another player would typically respond to the questions with an answer, thus taking up the discursive shift. I highlighted adjacency pairs in purple across the transcripts.

Finally, I focused on how participants' game and metagame discourse sequences ended with sequence closing devices (Schegloff, 2007). According to Goffman (1974), different speech frames are bracketed by beginning and ending queues. So, in addition to coding how new frames of discourse began, I also identified how conversational sequences concluded before keying into another frame. I color-coded sequence closing devices in green. In my findings and discussion, I explain how the ability to end a conversational sequence was power-laden and often determined by participants' positionalities.

Phase 3: Gleaning Coauthorship Practices from Conversational Oscillations

Phase 3 of my analysis addressed my second research question: *How did participants' oscillations between game and metagame talk function as coauthorship practices?* Building on Phase 2, I noted how participants conversational oscillations impacted their interpersonal relationships, interactional norms, and narrative storytelling. Sometimes participants explicitly flagged the purpose of their discursive shifts (e.g., engaging in metagame talk to renegotiate an in-game rule they thought was 'unfair.'). Other times, however, the functions of participants' discursive shifts were more implicit. In the latter situations, I noted how participants' talk affected their subsequent trajectories of role-play. In other words, when the intent of participants' conversational work was opaque, I examined the social and compositional effects of their talk.

Findings

My findings are organized by the coauthorship practices embedded in participants' conversational oscillations between game and metagame talk. For each finding, I provide example transcripts of participants' talk and analyze how socialization and composing practices

were co-constructed across discursive turns. The transcripts cited are not an exhaustive list of examples, but rather critical instance cases (Davey, 1991) – illustrative episodes – that exemplify the conversational phenomena I uncovered through my analysis.

Negotiating Game and Metagame Knowledge

The magic circle of role-playing presents an epistemological divide between participants' knowledge as players and characters (Bowman, 2018; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Fine (1983) explained how,

> The character is supposed to operate under the constraints of a closed awareness context with regard to his animator, although this of course is a pretense. Because player, person, and charac-ter share a brain, this separation of knowledge on occasion is ignored. Characters do draw on their animator's knowledge of contemporary reality when their character could not have this knowledge, or they can draw on their player's knowledge of game events outside of their own knowledge. Also players and persons are unaware of the specialized knowledge that their characters have. (p. 188)

In this study, all the participants were *Dungeons & Dragons* fans and had expansive prior knowledge of monsters and fantasy lore that their game characters did not. For example, while Drew encountered a Tarrasque (i.e., a titanic monster that resembles Godzilla) in a previous role-playing campaign, his new character in Olly's campaign had not yet come across such a creature. To role-play with epistemic fidelity, Drew and his peers had to negotiate what their characters did and did not know. To do this, participants frequently interrupted game narrative discourse to ask clarifying questions in the metagame.

At the beginning of Olly's campaign, participants often interrupted his narration to ask questions about their characters. These interruptions allowed players to understand how Olly

situated their characters in his imaginary world, Luxa. In Figure 6, I highlighted this shift to metagame discourse. Here, Drew cut off Olly's game storytelling to ask if his character had any money or possessions. Rather than asking *as* his character – who would have known what they possessed – Drew asked from the positionality of a player. Olly responded, "not really," before ignoring Drew's follow-up question and continuing the game narration. Nevertheless, Drew's shift to metagame discourse helped him establish that his character lacked any money or helpful equipment at the outset of Olly's campaign.

Figure 6

Drew asks if his character has any possessions

```
01 OLLY:   So you guys (2.0) are in Luxa, itself. (1.5) >It's a very
02         opulent city< (.) um-
03 DREW:   Do we have any money?
04 OLLY:   Um-
05 DREW:   What do we have?
06 OLLY:        [Not really] (laughs)
07 DREW:   Do we have anything?
08 OLLY:   As you go into the inn (.7) and get yourself seated down
09         (.) um the (.) um like someone comes over to you and is
10         like, ↓"I don't recognize you. Are you new here? Are you
11         new arrivers?"↓
```

A few minutes later in Olly's campaign, the participants' characters received items for their quest. One of these items was a sickle-shaped Egyptian sword called a khopesh. At this point, another participant named Mark interrupted Olly's narration to clarify the definition of a khopesh (see Figure 7.). Mark began his utterance with "Oh," indicating that Olly's narration had activated his prior knowledge. Then, Mark's turn-initial phrase "wait, hang on" paused the in-game narrative momentum. By asking a question (i.e., "Are those like the curved Egyptian swords?"), Mark invited his peers provide a SPP answer – thus, joining his in metagame talk. Engaging in player-to-player conversation, Olly, Alec, and Mark discussed the qualities of a khopesh. Finalky, Olly said "so like," – a turn-initial phrase used to pivot from the metagame

conversation – and resumed his in-game storytelling.

Figure 7

Mark clarifies the definition of a "khopesh"

```
01 OLLY:   He also (.) >he also says< ↓"If you're needing to go
02         outside the city (.) or going someplace dangerous, it
03         might be best to be armed."↓ He hands you each a sword
04         that's kind of curved and says, ↓"This is a khopesh um (.)
05         a Luxan weapon."↓ And you wish-
06 MARK:   Oh wait, hang on (.) are those like (.) are those like the
07         curved Egyptian swords?
08 ALEC:          [Yeah they are the curved Egyptian swords]
09 MARK:   The ones that-
10 OLLY:   They're made out of metal
11 MARK:   Yeah they're made out of metal, but like (.5) still pretty
12         cool-
13 OLLY:   So like (.) you guys are back in the kitchen.
```

In both transcripts, Drew and Mark transitioned game discourse to metagame discourse. However, the two discursive shifts served different epistemic functions. Drew interrupted Olly to understand his character's condition – knowledge that he did not yet know as a player. Mark, however, leveraged his prior knowledge of historic weaponry to contextualize how he – as a player – interpreted the unfolding events in Olly's campaign. Though slightly different, both examples highlight how the participants oscillated between game and metagame discourses to compose and make meaning of the unfolding story.

Negotiating Play-Based Rules and Fairness

In his campaign, Olly worked collaboratively with peers to tell a story. This required both narrative and rule-based cooperation. While it is a GM's job to introduce engaging puzzles and obstacles to players, Olly carefully avoided contentious "GM vs. Player" dynamics with his peers. To this end, Olly avoided creating "meat grinder" encounters for the players. "Meat grinders" – a term generated by the *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) community – are typically dungeons or campaigns with unforgiving challenges that are nearly impossible to complete

successfully. To avoid meat grinder situations, the participants used discourse to negotiate an elegant balance of challenge throughout the game. In particular, Olly and the players shifted to metagame discourse during moments of role-playing that were particularly deadly and difficult for their characters. By stepping back into metagame conversation, the players discursively performed fairness by reviewing the rules and showing empathy for each other. Below, I highlight how participants negotiated rules and fairness during high-stakes moments within the campaign.

While exploring a mysterious dungeon, Drew's character stepped on a broken floor tile and fell into a pit. Surprised, Drew shifted to metagame discourse (see Figure 8.) and asked Olly, "Did I just die?" Olly revealed that Drew's character sustained significant injury and was near death. In solidarity with Drew, Alec and Kyle expressed their surprise ("Oh") and dissapointment ("Rough man"). Following an awkward pause, Olly tried to close the sequence of metagame talk by saying "alright" and resuming story narration. However, the players remained silent and did not take up Olly's discursive shift. The players appeared to be concerned about Drew's misfortune and the dangerous floor tiles. So, Olly keyed back metagame talk with the turn initial phrase "out of game," and explained his GM method of rolling dice to determine which floor tiles were trapped. Seemingly satisfied that Olly wasn't trying to specifically harm his character, Drew began strategizing how to navigate the tiles safely. After an affirming response from Alec, Olly asked if the players wanted to pursue Drew's strategy– a FPP soliciting permission to close the metagame talk sequence and key back into in-game narration.

Figure 8

Olly explains the rules governing floor tile traps

```
01 OLLY:   You step on another tile which breaks, and you fall about
02         ten feet in a giant pit-
03 DREW:           [Did I just die?]
04 OLLY:   And you took two damage.
05 ALEC:   Oh, dang!
06 DREW:   I'm at one HP again.
07 OLLY:   Uh (.) you're at two, actually.
08 KYLE:   Rough, man, rough (2.0)
09 OLLY:   Alright. Now you guys (.) you've just s(ee)n (.) his
10         character's condition. It seems like this hallway is
11         definitely trapped. However, all of the tiles look pretty
12         much alike.
13 DREW:   Huh (1.5) it-
14 OLLY:   >Out of game, there are two traps and based on the role.
15         You either don't trigger one, trigger the better one which
16         is it just throws a spear, or the worst one which is you
17         fall into a pit.<
18 DREW:   Hmmm (.) ok. We should drop some spoons on the tiles to
19         see if they're safe or not.
20 ALEC:   Yeah, that's a great idea!
21 OLLY:   You want to drop spoons?
```

In another gameplay scene, Mark's character tried to search for treasure but tripped over a loose floorboard, instead (See Figure 9.). Frustrated, Mark confronted Olly asking, "why it gotta be me, though?" Transitioning to metagame discourse, Olly explained that he rolled dice to give everyone a fair chance to find treasure. In this case, the character with the highest dice roll discovered the treasure (i.e., spoons). As Olly resumed game discourse, he narrated that the loose floorboard revealed a hidden crevice. Intrigued, Mark resumed his role-play as a character hoping to find secret treasure beneath the floor.

Figure 9

Olly explains that he applies rules judiciously

```
01 OLLY:   Alright (.) Alec you are able to raid some of the stash
02         and get four spoons. But Mark, as you are searching, you
03         kind of trip over a loose board.
04 ALEC:   Ooo, I pick up-
05 MARK:   Why it gotta be me, though?
06 OLLY:   I (.) >I'm just rolling around for everyone.< Whoever got
07         the highest result found it.
08 KYLE:              [Gets the spoons!]
09 OLLY:   That floorboard seems to be loose. It's a pretty big one.
10         It looks like it can be moved.
11 MARK:   Oh, hey, we're gonna get a secret item.
```

The latter two transcripts reveal how participants oscillated between game and metagame discourse to ensure that the game narrative unfolded fairly. Given the players' affinity for their in-game characters, they were understandably disappointed when their characters endured injury or misfortune. In response to Olly's metagame explanations of his GM practices, the players acknowledged his judiciousness. After negotiating rule consistency and impartiality in the metagame, participants were willing to resume game discourse together. Thus, their conversational transitions to metagame talk served as a play-based checks and balances that mediated consensual and collaborative composing practices.

Negotiating Collaboration and Relationships

Participants' interpersonal relationships developed differently across game and metagame play. In the game, participants role-played the personalities of their characters and acted according to their imagined traits. In the metagame, participants strategized as players to determine how their characters should best engage in the game narrative. Participants' positionalities and interactions were subject to rapid change between role-playing and strategizing. This meant that the participants engaged in complex discursive balancing acts to maintain the RPG narrative's integrity while sustaining real-world friendships. Below, I describe how participants shifted across game and metagame discourse to collaborate and maintain their relationships.

The participants became frustrated upon encountering a difficult color-coded puzzle in Olly's campaign. The narrative came to a standstill as the characters struggled to properly arrange a series of glowing orbs. Drew's character expressed remorse, thinking the group missed a key to the puzzle earlier in the game (see Figure 10.). After watching the players strain to interpret the puzzle, Olly keyed into metagame discourse to give them a clarifying hint. In response, Kyle paused his role-playing by saying "wait," and joined Olly in metagame talk with the turn-initial phrase, "this is out of game." Then, Kyle devised and shared a new strategy to solve the puzzle. Olly asked, "want to try it?" – a sequence closing device that prompted a transition back to game discourse. Kyle subsequently agreed to "try it" – providing a SPP to Olly's question – and resumed in-game play.

Figure 10

Drew, Kyle, and Olly decode a puzzle

```
01 DREW:   Maybe we should have grabbed that stick.
02 KYLE:   "The color of the orbs matter. Rainbow save two." Eh- (.)
03 OLLY:   "Save two" means two of them are wrong. Just to clarify.
04 KYLE:   (5.0) Wait, this is out of game: I think red and yellow
05         are wrong. (2.0) Because the rainbow goes red, orange
06         yellow, green blue. Not yellow, red.
07 OLLY:   Want to try it?
```

In another scene, Olly told the players that their characters would engage in an unarmed arena battle (see Figure 11.). Olly provided a metagame overview that forecasted how the encounter would unfold. Alec's character scoffed that the battle was weaponless, responding, "what kind of fight is that?" Alec reminded Olly that his character was a "fighter," and flagged his comment as "in game." This clarification showed how Alec's disapproval was on behalf of his character, rather than his player self. Rather than genuinely criticizing Olly, Alec's utterance

was an exercise of fidelitous role-play. Even Alec's choice to repeat his clarification seemed to emphasize that he wanted to maintain a good rapport with Olly.

Figure 11

Alec flags his disapproval as "in game" discourse

```
01 OLLY:   It is a giant fight over lava. If you die, you cannot
02         reach Bontu (1.0) but you will still be brought back to
03         life once the test is concluded, which is after this
           fight. This is a fight with no weapons.
04 ALEC:   What kind of fight it THAT? >I'm a fighter, so::< That's
05         out of game. That's in game, I mean. I say that in game.
```

As participants negotiated their collaborations and relationships, they rapidly toggled across game and metagame discourse. Sometimes these shifts allowed Olly to be in solidarity with players and provide them insights into the game's mechanics. Other times, these shifts allowed participants to reinforce their friendship despite the unfolding campaign drama. Given the oscillating positionalities of the players and their characters, negotiating game and metagame discourse allowed them to maintain a high level of cooperation and collegiality throughout play.

Negotiating Time and Pacing

While playing Olly's campaign, participants constantly negotiated issues of time and pacing. Some players (e.g., Mark) liked to frequently engage peers in side conversations beyond the game, while others (e.g., Alec and Olly) preferred to maintain the narrative momentum of the game. Thus, the rhythm and speed at which Olly's campaign unfolded were constantly in flux. Furthermore, the participants acknowledged differences between game time and metagame time. For example, a tense minute of in-game battle could take the participants fifteen minutes to strategize in the metagame. By contrast, Olly's narration could summarize a week-long trek to a new in-game landmark in mere seconds. Participants frequently alternated between game and metagame conversations to negotiate these asymmetrical temporalities.

During Olly's campaign, participants used turn-initial phrases to shift between game and metagame discourse. Some of these turn-initial phrases used time-specific language. For example, when Olly wanted to resume the in-game momentum, he sometimes said "Ok, now" before continuing his narration. By saying "now," he signaled a discursive transition from metagame "table talk" to the present moment of the unfolding story. Conversely, when the story moved too quickly, some participants said "wait" to pause Olly's narration and ask clarifying questions in the metagame. Thus, these utterances had unique compositional implications as they strategically paused and resumed in-game play.

Olly frequently used metagame discourse to speed up play near the end of our 90-minute role-playing sessions. When Olly's story had not progressed as quickly as planned, he provided peers with metagame hints to propel game progress. For example, he told the players that "Kyle was very close" to solving his color-coded puzzle to "speed things up a little bit" (see Figure 12.). In response, Alec uttered "Oh!" – a change of state marker demonstrating that he understood Olly's hint – and successfully decoded the puzzle. Olly's discursive shift to metagame talk functioned as a form of play-based triage to help players complete a challenge that slowed the narrative pacing.

Figure 12

Olly provides a metagame hint to speed up play

```
01 DREW:   It's the rainbow, except it's missing two! (2.0) Humph.
02 ALEC:   Two are rainbow (.) so yellow, red, blue and green-
03 OLLY:                                                [Alright]
04         >Out of game, out of game, just to speed things up a
05         little bit,< Kyle was very close.
06 ALEC:   What did Kyle do?
07 OLLY:   He thinks yellow and (.) sorry (.) yellow and red are in
08         the wrong order.
09 ALEC:   Oh! I see, go in rainbow order!
```

In another session, Olly allowed players to explore one of two locations. The participants felt conflicted because they wanted to explore both locations. To allow participants opportunity to explore both locations, I offered Olly an additional session to extend his campaign (see Figure 13.). In response, Olly explained how there was not enough "in-game time" to explore both locations before the story's villain conquered Luxa. Despite my offer, Olly intentionally created in-game time constraints that required players to carefully determine their actions.

Figure 13

Comparing "in game" and "out of game" time

```
01 OLLY:   Where do you guys want to go?
02 ALEC:   There's literally no options since if I vote for something
03         else and it's just a tie we don't go anywhere.
04 ALEX:   Quick question, Olly.
05 OLLY:   Yeah?
06 ALEX:   Since you do have the option of extending the adventure,
07         you could do both locations if you want.
08 OLLY:   There's not enough time in the adventure.
09 ALEC:   So hang on, so in game time (.) there's not enough in game
10         time?
11 OLLY:   Yes, you will have to choose one of the options.
```

Olly's campaign underscored how players, characters, and GMs negotiated RPG temporalities. Beyond accelerating and decelerating the pace of the narrative, there were also interesting tensions between the amount of in-game and real-world time participants had to complete Olly's campaign. These factors inspired the participants to shift their conversations across game and metagame discourses rapidly.

Discussion & Implications

Through my analysis of participants' play-based conversational practices, I highlighted how shifts across game and metagame talk worked to negotiate knowledge, fairness, relationships, and narrative pacing. As a result, I gleaned two broader insights into participants' play-based storytelling practices. First, coauthorship was a nested phenomenon that occurred

across a series of laminated positionalities. Participants demonstrated how processes of play-based storytelling were distributed across a variety of complex configurations of perspectives, epistemologies, and relationships. Second, coauthorship was a contested phenomenon that was imbued with differentials in power and privilege. Participants' play-based negotiations, frustrations, and resolutions highlight the ways in which RPG storytelling can be a fraught endeavor. Below, I discuss these insights independently and then braid them together to reflect implications for this work.

Nested Coauthorship

Participants' conversational oscillations across game and metagame talk created multiple social worlds for storytelling. Fine (1983) wrote how "using awareness effectively is intimately connected to the keying of social worlds . . . . every social world has its own structure of meaning . . . . acting and storytelling provide similar instances of several personae being enacted by a single individual in different frames" (p. 195). As Olly and his peers negotiated their play, they inhabited multiple contexts, perspectives, and personas. They demonstrated how authorship – particularly coauthorship – is a complex process distributed across many laminated positionalities. Each lamination yielded different compositional and play-based affordances. For example, while players primarily negotiated the content of Olly's campaign in the metagame, their negotiations were inextricably situated in their characters' in-game interests. Furthermore, the success of participants' coauthorship relied on the group's ability to recognize and respond to rapid keying across interactional frames. Alec, for example, demonstrated how role-playing anger did not always represent anger on behalf of his "out-of-game" self. Thus, successful play-based composing required participants to skillfully "read" and account for their peers' hybrid ontologies and epistemologies.

In addition to storytelling, conversational oscillations across game and metagame talk accomplished complex affiliative work. Beyond creating compelling narratives, Olly and his peers performed collegiality through play-based conversation. Shifts to metagame talk allowed participants to check in and reaffirm their peer relationships during play. Sometimes participants established fairness in the metagame as an affiliative practice. Other times, participants demonstrated empathy and friendship by exchanging metagame apologies for a misfortune within the campaign. Furthermore, participants illustrated how relationality – like their composing – was ontologically and epistemologically hybrid. For example, Olly revealed hints in the campaign when it served participants' out-of-game emotions and priorities (i.e., frustration about a puzzle, or the desire to finish the campaign on time). This phenomenon highlighted how the youths' relationships were simultaneously distributed across and conditional upon a complex interconnection of positions and affiliations.

Contested Coauthorship

Participants' oscillations across game and metagame talk often appeared to be collegial – gentle pushes and pulls on the trajectory of the narrative that resembled how a potter forms a clay vessel on a lathe. Whereas the players typically shifted to metagame conversation to pause and negotiate in-game outcomes, and Olly usually closed metagame sequences of talk to resume narration. Olly frequently demonstrated an interest and willingness to compromise with the goals and needs of the other players. When the game did not meet the players' expectations, they generally felt comfortable voicing their concerns in the metagame conversation. By doing so, the players were able to guide the narrative trajectory alongside Olly. Thus, oscillations across game and metagame talk represented the ebb and flow of storytelling authority exchanged between the participants.

Despite participants' generally amiable storytelling practices, their gameplay also illuminated how RPGs are imbued with power differentials that can make play-based coauthorship a fraught experience. Throughout the campaign, Olly's role as the GM held a disproportionate amount of power and influence over the adventure. He had the unique authority to roll dice and determine the degree of characters' safety, success, and well-being. In the scene with trapped dungeon floor tiles, for example, Olly made the unilateral decision to have Drew's character fall into a pit and incur devastating injury. During this moment of play, the fate of Drew's character was not a negotiation. This underscores Trammell's (2023) assertion that,

> Interrogating the mediatory force of play challenges us to reconcile the violence that lies at the heart of innumerable social relationships . . . . Distinguishing whether negotiation is considered fundamental to play or games reflects a broader understanding of the consensuality of each phenomenon. To negotiate assumes that each player respects the other's ideas, positions, and sovereignty. When players negotiate, they treat one another as fellow humans, and not as objects. Yet, so often play defies negotiation. (p. 57-58).

Olly's decision to hurt Drew's character – regardless of Olly's "alibi" that dice determined the outcome – flouted Drew's consent. While Drew generally consented to participate in Olly's campaign, he did not specifically consent to every outcome of the campaign narrative. As evidenced in the transcript in Figure 8, Drew's merely resigned to his character's fate in metagame discourse. Thus, the plight of Drew's character demonstrates the limits of negotiation and consent in role-playing when characters are objectified and manipulated by GMs to advance the plot of a story. While this scene did not feature the same racialized, anti-Black violence that is the focus of Trammel's (2023) work, it underscores how power and violence can dwell within play-based composing practices.

Toward a Meta-Awareness of Play-Based Narrative Discourse

In this paper, conversation analysis helped me understand the nuanced ways six youth gamers navigated, negotiated, and contested play-based coauthorship. Specifically, I highlighted the subtle conversational moves that participants leveraged to key across different frames of participation (i.e., as players and characters). In my analysis and discussion, I have outlined the complex ways in which the youths situated composition and relationality across nested and contested positionalities. In sum, these findings forward a better understanding of how coauthorship is mediated play-based narrative discourse.

As an implication for this work, I am interested in how educators and researchers can collaborate with youth and adult gamers to develop a meta-awareness of coauthorship practices. In the same way that teachers use think-aloud protocols – metacognitive self-talk – to illuminate processes of composing and meaning-making, the participants' role-playing interactions lay bare their collaborative storytelling practices. To this end, I advocate for education researchers to engage gamers in metareflective analysis of their play-based talk to understand and reshape how their conversational interactions forward storytelling. Inspired by Stokoe's (2014) Conversational Analytic Role-Play Method (CARM), I am curious how analyzing transcripts with participants might help them develop interactional schemas that impact their play with peers. Thus, I hope to collaborate with youth toward a shared understanding of play-based conversation that forwards collaboration, socialization, and more explicit interrogations of power during play-based composing.

Chapter 4 - (Un)Critical Worldbuilding:

Composing (In)Justice through Play-Based Storytelling Practices

> *"So, weird thing – interesting thing – about Dark Elves is that they are matriarchal. So a lot of the people who are fighting against [them] probably might be the men because oftentimes the system in place isn't really that good for them," said Mark – the youth game master (GM) developing our current online role-playing campaign. Mark and I met on Zoom once a week to discuss the upcoming chapters of his emerging storyline.*
>
> *"Ok. So is that the route you want to take?" I asked.*
>
> *"I don't know, I don't know. I might not do that. Who knows. I just think it's an interesting fact," shrugged Mark.*
>
> *"What is a pro and a con of the 'good guys' rebelling being men?" I asked.*
>
> *"Yeah, the pros to it – I don't really see that many pros to it. There are a couple of cons, like, I don't want to be thought of as one of those people who is about men's rights and stuff," said Mark rocking side to side in his swivel chair, "Like, I don't really wanna be seen as – like – one of those kinda douchebags like that."*

In this vignette, Mark – a White eighth grader – brainstormed a narrative for his upcoming role-playing campaign. In this campaign, his peers would role-play as imaginary characters and embark on adventures organized by Mark. Interested in telling a story about a Black, matriarchal race of elves called "the Drow," Mark reflected on how he should navigate his storytelling in socially conscious, justice-oriented ways. His concern about coming across as a "men's rights . . . . douchebag" [sic] highlighted the ideological and political implications of narrative worldbuilding. As evidenced above, Mark called attention to the thin boundary between the stories we tell and our socio-political convictions in civic life. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) – the source material for Mark's campaign – includes expansive lore about different societies, races, and classes. However, a breadth of scholarship in games studies and education research unmasks *D&D*'s history of racist and sexist themes (Flanagan & Jakobsson, 2023; Garcia, 2017, 2021; Kung et al., 2022; Limbong, 2020; Stang & Trammell, 2020). Taking interest in how youth contend with the ideological dimensions of play-based worldbuilding, this study reflects

on how six White cisgender youth participants (re)storied White racialized ideology through collaborative storytelling practices. More specifically, I ask: *How do six youths and a researcher in a worldbuilding course resist and reify hegemonic renderings of race and gender in Dungeons & Dragons lore through play-based composing practices?*

Literature Review

Gaming and Critical Play

Recognizing that games are social technologies with rules and conditions under which people interact, it is important to critique how privilege and power operate within play spaces. Rather than ontologically separate from the "real world," games reflect the social and political values in which they occur. For example, The Landlord's Game – a precursor to Parker Brothers' *Monopoly* – exposed the mechanics of class struggle and the contemporary exploitation of housing tenants (Ollman, 1983). The Landlord's Game was an example of critical play, which Flanagan (2013) defined as "characterized by a careful examination of social, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces" (p. 6). According to Flanagan, taking a critical perspective on play is different from moralizing play. Rather than scrutinize games against unchecked moral codes (e.g., traditional Christian values), critical game scholars seek to interrogate the ideological assumptions of games and consider how play renders subjects (in)visible or (in)human.

A fundamental aspect of gaming is the ability for players to inhabit characters and negotiate their identities in imagined worlds. Gee (2015) explained how game avatars – the characters players encounter and inhabit – are imbued with identities and politics that intersect across a breadth of public Discourses. Furthermore, the problematic embodiment of avatars can lead to what Nakamura (1995) called "identity tourism" in which players "wear" other genders,

races, and cultures as a means of recreation. Female avatars and non-player characters are often rendered passive and weak in ways that starkly contrast male avatars (Flanagan, 2003). When women avatars are protagonists in games (e.g., Lara Croft in Eidos Interactive's *Tomb Raider*) they are frequently hyper-sexualized and objectified under the male gaze (Schleiner, 2001). Similarly, game often center Whiteness in ways that render characters of Color marginal and Other. After the September 11th attacks in the United States, online games emerged depicting anti-Muslim violence (Flanagan, 2013). Game franchises like *Call of Duty* regularly villainize characters across racialized boundaries – Russian and North Korean characters being common antagonists. These oppressive depictions of gender and race in games are partly a result of the over-representation of White male developers in the gaming industry (Bulut, 2021). In addition to the moral culpability of game developers and studios, gamer communities are also complicit in perpetuating racism and sexism within gaming worlds.

Gamer communities have a history of perpetuating racism and heterosexism within and beyond digital worlds. For example, Nakamura (2009) explained how gamers in *World of Warcraft* (WoW) engaged in anti-Asian hate in response to WoW's "farming" economy in which players exchanged fiat currency for in-game equipment and labor. Farming is widely considered cheating, and Asian gamers – particularly Chinese gamers – are unjust targets of the resulting vitriol. Similarly, Gray (2012) illustrated how Blackness is policed and attacked on Xbox Live servers. Unlike the anti-Asian hate in *World of Warcraft*, however, Black players are typically not accused of participating in cheating practices. Instead, Black players endure racism and violence simply for being and sounding Black. Gray explained how logics of racism assume that White masculinity is the "default" identity in digital worlds. Finally, Gamergate was – and continues to be – a racist, sexist, and transphobic phenomenon in which male gamers harass and

commit acts of violence against women gamers (Hurley, 2016). Originally Gamergate centered on three feminist, female-identifying gamers who spoke out against misogyny in gaming culture. Gamers participated in "doxing" the women (i.e., releasing their home addresses) and terrorizing them with threats of death and rape. These phenomena demonstrate how gaming communities have extensive histories of perpetuating violence and hate across digital and analog spaces.

Despite games and gaming culture being a hazardous space for women, people of Color, and other minoritized communities, Flanagan (2013) detailed a long history of playful resistance in her book *Critical Play*. She explained how play could be subversive and work to reskin, rewrite, and 'unplay' hegemonic games. Reskinning entails changing the physical appearance of an object or visual element of a game toward play-based justice. An example of reskinning is changing the race of game characters to tell critical counterstories. Rewriting involves remixing game narratives toward textual justice. Finally, unplaying involves playing games in unintended ways to disrupt hegemonic outcomes. Players can imagine new possibilities by unplaying and "breaking" a game (e.g., killing a main character, causing a program glitch, etc.). In Flanagan's (2014) subsequent book, *Values at Play in Digital Games*, she outlined 15 elements of gaming that players and game designers can critically interrogate. Building on this body of research, I examine how youth gamers encounter and contend with hegemonic ideologies of race and gender during play. Given *Dungeons & Dragons*' well-documented history of racist and sexist tropes (Flanagan & Jakobsson, 2023; Garcia, 2017, 2021; Kung et al., 2022; Limbong, 2020; Stang & Trammell, 2020), I am particularly interested in how youth gamers (re)story heteropatriarchal and White racialized ideology through their collaborative worldbuilding practices.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the extent to which Mark, his peers, and I engaged in critical role-playing work, I developed a conceptual framework to guide my analysis. First, I thought with Thomas and Stornaiuolo's (2016) restorying framework to understand how Mark and his peers remixed *Dungeons & Dragons* lore during their campaign. Then, I applied concepts from critical Whiteness studies (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Leonardo, 2009) to analyze how White racial ideologies shaped our storytelling practices. Despite participants' efforts to reimagine *Dungeons & Dragons'* lore toward justice, the latter theoretical perspective helped illuminate the ideological limits and precarities of their narrative-based play. In addition to providing critical tools to interrogate participants' play, critical Whiteness studies helped me reflexively interrogate my positionality as a researcher and critique how I facilitated the conditions in which the participants' composed their narrative and world.

Restorying

Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) defined restorying as the practice of "reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences" (p. 314). As an act of narrative justice, restorying works to *restore* historically minoritized ways of knowing and being that have been subjected to colonial violence (Montes, 2022). Restorying has radical implications in both civic and fandom spaces. In civic spaces, for example, Indigenous communities in Canada have leveraged restorying as a form of truth-telling that unmasked the country's history of residential schools that stripped Indigenous people of their languages and cultures (Corntassel, 2009). In fandom spaces – like fanfiction writing communities on Wattpad – fans restoried Hemoine Granger (i.e., a female protagonist in the *Harry Potter* series) into a Black woman. By bending Hermione's race, fans could center the Black experience in their beloved franchise. According to Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016), there are six narrative elements that readers can

bend toward narrative justice: the setting (e.g., an alterverse), character identities (e.g., racebending), time (e.g., alternate histories), mode (e.g., transmedia storytelling), metanarrative (e.g., collective storytelling), and perspective (e.g., counter-storytelling). These six dimensions of restorying comprise a repertoire of critical narrative reclamation.

Building on scholarship mobilizing restorying as justice-oriented pedagogy (Coleman, 2021; Coleman & Hall, 2019; Shaw et al., 2021), I sought to understand how youths leveraged critical storytelling practices to resist racist and misogynistic tropes in *Dungeons & Dragons* lore. Given that the study participants identified as White, cisgender boys, however, I also worked to recognize the limitations and precarities of their restorying practices. Since their positionalities were situated in White cis-heteropatriarchal privilege – as is my own – I tried to attend to how their role-playing interactions simultaneously subverted and reified White racial ideologies. I also turned to critical Whiteness studies to engage in this reflexive analysis.

Critical Whiteness Studies

The concept of "Whiteness" as examined in critical Whiteness studies (CWS) is "not a descriptor of, or equivalent to, white people as a homogenous racial group, but rather it is a term used to explain a system of policies and practices codified in law and maintained by society that conceptualize white ways of being and thinking to be superior and more deserving" (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019, p. 94). In educational spaces, White racialized ideologies constitute a hidden curriculum that centers White histories and values while rendering epistemologies of Color subaltern (Hairston, 2013). Rather than allowing ideologies of Whiteness to be hidden, assumed, and normative, CWS endeavors to unmask and disrupt the hegemony and social stratification of Whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). To this end, I follow Eve Ewing's (2020) call to capitalize the "W" in Whiteness as a grammatical rejection its neutrality. Ewing argued that

Whiteness is a socially constructed ideology with hegemonic power that should be grammatically flagged and umasked. She warned that spelling Whiteness with a lowercase "w" serves to reduce Whiteness to a complexion and render its histories of colonization invisible.

CWS has undergone two waves of theoretical and scholarly development (Jupp et al., 2016). In the first wave, the "field focused on documenting and describing all the ways that White teachers denied and resisted the significance of race and White privilege in their work and lives" (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016, p. 985). While identifying and acknowledging White privilege is important, Lensmire et al. (2013) questioned whether confessional-based pedagogies and scholarship accomplished anti-racist work that undermined the hegemony of Whiteness. Thus, second-wave CWS sought to critically engage White educators and researchers to nuance how they reify and resist White supremacy in their learning environments. Second-wave CWS orients my analysis of youth participants in the Worldbuilding Workshop course. Informed by Tanner's (2018) study of adolescents' coauthorship through theatrical improvisation, I am particularly interested in how youth rendered Whiteness and Blackness through role-play. Since *Dungeons & Dragons* is a fantasy franchise mired in White supremacist ideology (Flanagan & Jakobsson, 2023; Garcia, 2017, 2021; Kung et al., 2022; Limbong, 2020; Stang & Trammell, 2020), I seek to reflexively examine the subtle ways my participants and I were both critical of and complicit in anti-Black worldbuilding.

To leverage critical Whiteness studies as a method (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019), I focused my data analysis on epistemologies of Whiteness (i.e., *thinking Whitely*). Specifically, I think with the concepts of White ignorance (Applebaum, 2019; Dotson, 2011, 2012; Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997; Tuana, 2006) and color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2016). Studies on White ignorance,

> "[expose] the ways that power works through knowing and unknowing to maintain systems of social injustice . . . . ignorance is not understood as a passive absence of knowledge in isolated individuals that additional facts can remedy . . . . [but a] systemically produced and reproduced process" (Applebaum, 2019, p. 30).

By examining how people reify systems of oppression through selective knowledge, empathy, and witnessing, this work underscores the insidious and constructed nature of ignorance. Importantly, research on White ignorance takes an intersectional stance, applying its criticisms across issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Scholarship on color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2016) takes a similarly intersectional stance by reframing Gotanda's (1991) concept of "color-blindness" through a Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) framework. Like Gotanda, Annamma et al. (2016) critiqued how the obfuscation of race in public discourse works to hide how Whiteness is systemically privileged in society. However, Annamma et al. (2016) distinguished color-evasiveness from color-blindness by gently critiquing Gotanda's ableist assumption that "blindness" is a deficit. Moreover, Annamma et al. argued that the term "blindness" suggested that disregarding race is a passive act by individual actors. Instead, forwarded the term "color-evasion" as a term that underscores the deliberate, concerted erasure of Blackness among individuals and institutions.

Methods

Study Context

This study is part of a larger ten-month research project examining a Worldbuilding Workshop course I facilitated with six adolescent boys: Olly (16 years old), Mark (13 years old), Drew (13 years old), Alec (13 years old), Kyle (13 years old), and Jacob (14 years old). I invited each participant to develop and facilitate a six-week role-playing campaign during the course. As

participants took turns creating worlds and being game masters (i.e., GMs), their peers played in the campaign narratives as characters. I joined the role-playing campaigns as a participant-observer (Spradley, 1980) by observing quietly and occasionally role-playing as a character at the discretion of the GMs. All six participants identified as White males and used he/him series pronouns. Mark, Alec, Olly, and Kyle identified as autistic. Before enrolling in the program, all participants were experienced role-players and had enrolled in multiple EdQuest programs. This study focuses on the ideological dimensions of Mark's campaign, The Drow Civil War (DCW).

About Mark

Mark – a White, thirteen-year-old boy – often told me about middle school life during our interview sessions. We typically conducted our Zoom interviews when he got home from school, and his experiences from the day informed our discussions. Mark shared information about his moral, social, and political views during these conversations. One day, for example, Mark was frustrated because some of his peers made transphobic jokes in his English class. “A bunch of people in my middle school are blatantly – the things that they joke about definitely do not pass the vibe check,” he explained, “Like, a bunch of people in my English class call ‘zoophilia’ a gender . . . . I think they were saying it as a joke, but that’s still *very* transphobic” (audio recording, May 16, 2022). According to Mark, dehumanizing language and ideologies – particularly those against minoritized communities – were unacceptable. To this end, Mark argued that conservatism and Republican ideology failed to “pass the vibe check.” He later described Republicans as “bigoted” people who used homophobia, Islamaphobia, and anti-immigrant rhetoric to deflect public discourse away from their crimes – such as the January 6th attacks on the United States Capitol Building. Frustrated, Mark also lamented that one of his peers was an “anti-vaxxer” who blamed President Joe Biden for high gas prices. “Blaming

[Biden] about gas prices," he said, "[was] the typical Republican calling card" (audio recording, April 11, 2022). When I asked Mark to describe the cultural and systemic forces undergirding bigoted ideologies in the United States, he told me that his mother thought conservatives were "brainwashed." After asking Mark to clarify how conservatives became brainwashed, he explained that "not all conservatives are stupid, but most stupid people are conservative" (audio recording, April 11, 2022). Privately, I noted that Mark sometimes shirked nuanced analysis of the oppressive systems, histories, and institutions perpetuating the subjugation of minoritized communities in the United States.

While many of Mark's political views perpetuated binary social critiques, there were times when he provided more nuanced opinions of civic life. For example, he expressed skepticism of the United States' two-party system, saying, "I identify more Democrat, but I feel like part of me is starting to move out of the two-box system as I look at the state of the world. I mean, I feel like both sides need fixing up – one more than the other – but, like, the Democrat side needs to be a little more active because sometimes they promise all of this stuff and don't deliver on it" (audio recording, April 11, 2022). While Mark's critique of Democrats was vague, he acknowledged that Republicans and Democrats were mutually responsible for societal injustices. Mark also critiqued systems beyond partisan politics, holding Christianity responsible for anti-queer hate. He explained how people weaponized biblical scriptures to dehumanize and condemn lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) communities. Mark's reflections on religion gestured toward more complex, insidious ways that institutions – particularly White institutions – committed violence against minoritized communities.

Mark's identity as a progressive also intersected with his identity as an autistic teenager. Regarding his relationships with bigoted peers, he said, "my teachers are also having me work on

filtering my negative emotions when I'm around someone I dislike . . . I can filter my emotions just fine when I'm around people I'm ok with . . . but with someone I don't like, my brain kind of says, 'what's the point of hiding negative emotions if you don't ever want to be friends with them?'" (audio recording, April 11, 2022). During our talks, I sympathized with Mark's anger toward peers, politics, and religion. I did not, however, fully disclose my own views on politics to Mark. My primary mode of engaging with Mark was to ask clarifying questions that prompted him to elaborate on his views.

The Drow Civil War (DCW)

Mark's campaign occurred in a familiar *Dungeons & Dragons* (i.e., D&D) setting called the Underdark. As detailed in *D&D* sourcebook *Drow of the Underdark* (Marmell et al., 2007), the Underdark is a cavernous expanse below the world's surface. It is home to many evil and demonic beings. Among these evil beings is a race of elves called the Drow – or Dark Elves (see Figure 14.). The Drow are a notoriously problematic element of D&D lore. Unlike the male-dominated, light-skinned societies of elves above ground, the Drow are a matriarchal society of dark grey and black elves that worship a chaotic evil spider goddess named Lolth. Notably, all other matriarchal races in D&D are also monstrous and evil. The Drow are known to believe in racial supremacy and enslave non-Drow races. Furthermore, the Drow have a misogynistic reputation for being seductresses. In response, Mark was interested in creating a campaign that "erased" [sic] and restoried problematic elements of Drow lore.

Figure 14

Drow of the Underdark (Marmell et al., 2007)

Mark's Drow Civil War story began as players adventured to the Underdark, searching for gold and fortune. They were quickly intercepted, however, by a faction of Drow rebels who sought to overthrow the majority population of Lolth-worshiping Drow cultists. In a plan to defeat the Drow cultists, the rebels advised the players to return to the surface and solicit military support from the surface (read: White) elves. The players used diplomacy and persuasion to enlist surface elves to wage war against the Drow cultists. Then, in a twist of events, Mark revealed that the Drow "cultists" are a peaceful society led by a benevolent Lolth. The rebels were, in fact, the antagonists – tricksters who aimed to seize power and destroy everyone else. Mark intended this plot twist to restory Drow lore.

Mark's storyline lasted six 90-minute sessions on Zoom. He worked with participants to restory racist and sexist elements of D&D's lore and demonstrate how notions of "evil" and "monstrosity" are perspectival and value-laden. Reading against his campaign as text, I critically analyzed how Mark and his participants interrogated racism and sexism. I nuance the critical and problematic moves through which Mark and his peers confronted Drow lore. I also examined

how ideologies of racism and sexism in the United States intersected with and informed their play.

"It's your story" - Researcher Positionality

There were multiple times during my interviews with Mark when I invited him to reconsider the narrative trajectory of his campaign. In particular, I tried to prompt him to interrogate the thematic implications of Drow murdering other Drow. In one conversation, I asked Mark how his story might change if the "rebel" Drow were the surface elves in disguise. I suggested this plot point as a way to refocus the narrative toward a critique of the power and privilege of Whiteness in *D&D*. Mark responded, "What you're saying basically implies that the [surface] elves are doing magical blackface" (audio recording, April 11, 2022). I replied, "That does seem problematic, right? But would it also be problematic that it's Drow trying to murder Drow?" Mack said, "People often fight each other all the time even though they are the same." At this point, I relented and said, "Ok, it's your story. Not trying to hijack it." Throughout the study, I constantly reflected on how much I intervened in participants' play. In the case of collaborating with Mark, I tried to push his critical interrogations of *D&D* lore while allowing him the creative flexibility to tell a personalized story. While I was frustrated with the thematic trajectory of his adventure, I justified my complicity by defining the campaign as "Mark's story."

I also rarely intervened during Mark's facilitation of the DCW game sessions. I justified my detached observation style as a "constructivist" orientation. I wanted to understand how participants engaged in inquiry and (re)storying practices without the constraints of my intervention. While the majority of this paper examines the composing practices of Mark and his peers, I will also acknowledge some limitations of how I positioned myself in the study.

Data Generation

I generated two types of data for this study. First, I used Zoom's screen recording function to document the audio and visual components of Mark's weekly campaign sessions. Second, I conducted weekly interviews with Mark to understand his planning and campaign facilitation. These two data sources totaled 15.3 hours of video recordings. Below, I describe each data source in detail.

Weekly Play Sessions

Mark's 90-minute campaign sessions were hosted on Zoom every Wednesday afternoon. During these sessions, Mark provided a narrative recap of the previous game session before launching into the next chapter of his adventure. For this campaign, Mark's peers primarily participated verbally, describing how their characters responded to the unfolding events in the narrative. During the sessions, I observed participants' interactions and took field notes. Mark's campaign yielded nine hours of Zoom screen recording data. Finally, I transcribed the audio data for subsequent analysis.

Weekly Interviews with Mark

I interviewed Mark on Zoom for an average of 62 minutes every Monday during his campaign. During these interviews, I asked Mark to reflect on how the previous play session unfolded. Since role-playing is an improvisational form of gaming, Mark did not always anticipate how his peers would participate in his narrative. After reflecting on the previous play session, I would ask Mark about his ideas and plans for the upcoming session. Sometimes Mark had a clear idea of the narrative arc for his campaign, and sometimes Mark used our interview sessions to brainstorm the next steps in his story. Since Mark's world drew from *Dungeons & Dragons* lore, he provided me with extensive background knowledge about D&D lore. During

these conversations, I asked Mark questions about his processes of restorying the Drow. My interviews with Mark yielded nearly six and a half hours of video data.

Data Analysis

My data analysis followed an iterative framework of qualitative examination (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) across three recursive phases of coding. Taking heed of the "reflexive turn" (Mauthner, 2003) in qualitative inquiry, Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) wrote that, "reflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings" (p. 77). To this end, they created a data analysis framework organized around a sequence of three reflexive questions: 1) What are the data telling me? (Explicitly engaging with theoretical, subjective, ontological, epistemological, and field understandings), 2) What is it I want to know? (According to research objectives, questions, and theoretical points of interest), 3) What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know? (Refining the focus and linking back to research questions). Following the latter line of qualitative inquiry, I coded and recoded my data according to dialectical relationships and contradictions between participants' compositional goals and practices.

Phase 1: Analyzing Mark's Planning Meetings

In my first phase of analysis, I examined the transcripts from my planning meetings with Mark. I was particularly curious to uncover Mark's inspirations and goals for his campaign. Starting with Mark's personal influences, I coded moments when he spoke about the politics of everyday life as a middle schooler, noting his social, civic, and justice-oriented convictions. Then, I examined excerpts from the transcripts when Mark shared reflections about the various fandoms and story franchises (e.g., *Dungeons & Dragons* and H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulu Mythos)

that oriented his worldbuilding practices as a GM. Finally, I coded moments in our conversations when Mark explained his campaign design goals – namely, his goal to "erase" [sic] and "rewrite" [sic] racist and misogynistic Drow lore. These observations oriented me with an initial set of codes (e.g., "exposing anti-Drow racism," "composing Drow pacifism," "critiquing surface elf dominance") to analyze Mark and his peers' collaborative storytelling.

Phase 2: Analyzing Mark's Campaign Narrative

In my second phase of analysis, I examined how Mark and his peers (re)storied the Drow and surface elves. I began this phase by attempting to use my codes from Phase 1 to annotate participants' play. My initial coding scheme proved insufficient, so I engaged in an iterative process of comparing and contrasting participants' Phase 2 storytelling practices with Mark's Phase 1 campaign goals. Rather than code moments of participants' play as categorically aligned or misaligned with restorying the Drow, I tried to nuance how Mark and his peers simultaneously acknowledged and subverted elements of restorying. Thinking with concepts from critical Whiteness studies helped me interrogate how participants initiated and silenced conversations about Whiteness, anti-Blackness, and patriarchy. As a result, I developed a new set of codes to analyze Mark's campaign. These codes included concepts of *White ignorance* (Applebaum, 2019; Dotson, 2011, 2012; Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997; Tuana, 2006) and *color-evasiveness* (Annamma et al., 2016).

Phase 3: Analyzing Mark's Campaign Reflections

In my third phase of analysis, I reviewed my final two interviews with Mark to examine his reflections on the successes and failures of the DCW campaign. Again, I iteratively used his comments to reexamine key moments of his planning and facilitation. Mark's retrospective design analysis (Dalton et al., 2015) highlighted important storytelling phenomena (e.g., humor)

that I had previously ignored in my analysis. I then noted how his accounts of these moments (i.e., "humor wasting time") diverged from my interpretations (i.e., "humor shirking talk about race"). While reflecting on the entire data corpus, this phase left me with lingering questions about my role as a researcher and critiques of how I positioned myself as a participant-observer (Spradley, 1980) throughout the campaign.

Findings

In the findings below, I address the following research question: *How do six youths and a researcher in a worldbuilding course resist and reify hegemonic elements of Dungeons & Dragons lore through play-based composing practices?* To answer this question, I discuss the data across three phases of play: Mark's pre-campaign planning sessions ("planning (in)justice"), Mark's campaign sessions ("composing (in)justice"), and Mark's post-campaign reflections ("reflecting on (in)justice"). I describe these three phases of play as moments of "(in)justice" to highlight how participants both critiqued and reified hegemonic *D&D* lore. To move my analysis beyond a first-wave critical Whiteness studies confessional of power and privilege, I work to unmask the specific processes through which our play reified Whiteness.

Planning (In)Justice

Mark positioned himself as a youth committed to equity and inclusion during our planning meetings. When planning his campaign, however, Mark demonstrated difficulties critiquing the racist and sexist tropes in *D&D* lore.

"Is D&D racist?" - Beloved fandoms and contributory injustice

During our interviews, Mark readily critiqued H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulu Mythos – a horror universe with ancient, demonic monsters. Describing the Cthulu Mythos, Mark exclaimed, "cosmic existential horror with a dash of good ol' racism . . . straight from H. P. Lovecraft!"

(audio recording, March 28, 2022). When confronting *Dungeon & Dragon*'s history of patriarchal, White supremacist themes, however, Mark's critiques emerged slowly over five weeks. His decision to restory the Drow began with broad criticisms of *Dungeons & Dragons*' game mechanics and took shape through conversations contrasting the Drow with other *D&D* races.

In our first interview session, Mark demonstrated an encyclopedic knowledge of the various races in D&D lore. Without prompting, he lamented how *D&D*'s game mechanics dictated different physical and intellectual capabilities between races. For example, orcs (i.e., a race of large, muscular humanoids) typically had increased strength statistics at the expense of low wisdom and intelligence. Thus, people typically role-played orcs as brute fighters rather than intellectual wizards. Mark preferred to role-play different races based on their "coolness," disregarding how race dictated differentiated attributes. Furthermore, Mark was interested in bending the conventional moral alignments associated with certain races. *D&D* defined characters' morality from chaotic evil to lawful good. While certain races (e.g., goblins) were typically evil, others (e.g., dwarves) were typically good. Mark, however, preferred to break these prescribed *D&D* alignments. He also scoffed the humans were "blank slates" [sic] of attributes and alignment. This observation subtly underscored how privilege and humanity were products of "neutrality" and a lack of predetermined characterization. During these conversations, I was curious to discover how Mark's critique of race and prescribed characterization would transfer to his understanding of the Drow.

While planning his campaign, Mark said, "In a lot of the campaigns that I [led], I have a Dark Elf civil war" (audio recording, March 7, 2022). Since the Drow were a matriarchal race, Mark's initial campaign idea was to have a rebel faction of Drow men resisting the tyranny of

Drow women. As cited in the opening vignette of this paper, however, Mark quickly dropped the idea because it felt like a narrative about "men's rights." He did not want to come across as a men's rights "douchebag" [sic] by telling a story that antagonized women and centered a faction of oppressed male protagonists. Mark acknowledged through these statements that speculative storytelling was a political act. To build on this realization, I pressed Mark to interrogate how the Drow's characterization represented gendered and racialized ideologies within *D&D* lore.

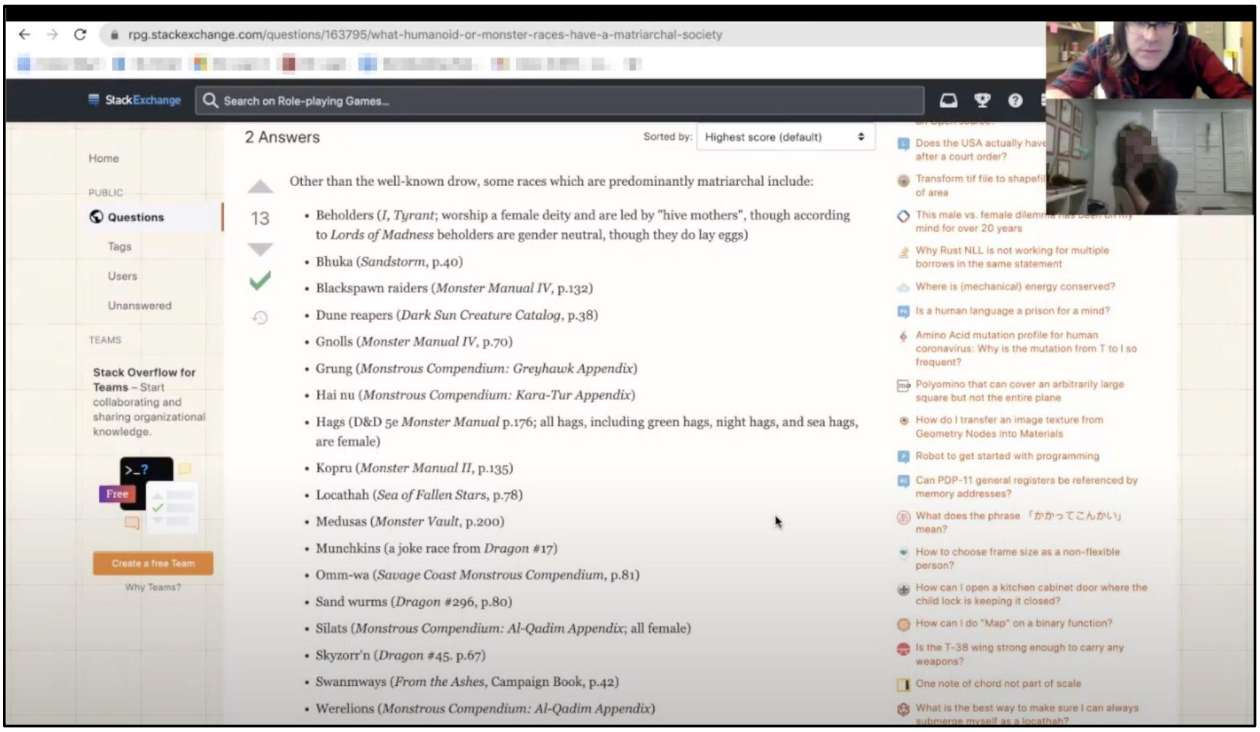
To unpack the racialization of the Drow in *D&D*, I asked Mark, "What do you think about *Dungeons and Dragons* making all the evil races of dwarves and elves dark-skinned?" (audio recording, March 14, 2022). Mark replied that it was a "weird" [sic] phenomenon. Then he explained various stereotypes about other races, such as Lizardfolk. Despite Mark's convictions about anti-racism in his civic life, his interpretations of *D&D* largely evaded discussions about race as they applied to Black-presenting characters. In response, I asked Mark about the Drow's relationship with surface elves – a White-presenting race of elves that banished the Drow to the subterranean Underdark. "Are the surface elves racist?" I asked (audio recording, March 14, 2022). Again, Mark evaded conversations about anti-Blackness, explaining how surface elves were wary of the Drow's xenophobia. Rather than characterize the White elves as racist, Mark suggested that their rivalry with the Drow resulted from the Drow's racism. Mark eventually described surface elves as "holier than thou" [sic], but this descriptor still shirked conversations about anti-Blackness. Mark's reluctance to discuss race directly contrasted with his readiness to discuss Republicanism and transphobia in daily life. His justice-oriented convictions likely reflected ideologies of the White suburban contexts in which he lived.

After multiple interviews, I pressed Mark to interrogate *D&D*'s characterization of the Drow again. This time, I wanted Mark to examine how race, gender, and moral alignment

intersected in the game. To do this, I gave Mark a list of all the matriarchal races in *D&D* lore. Then, I said, "I'm curious what you think about this [list]" (audio recording, April 11, 2022). Mark silently read over the list before saying, "It's interesting that [Hags] – another evil race that count as fiends – are matriarchal . . . . and [Gnolls] are also evil characters . . . . seems like a lot of the matriarchal societies are a bunch of really primitive ones . . . . yeah, all these seem to be either evil or sinister races." In response, I pointedly asked Mark if *D&D* was racist and sexist. Mark replied, "I'm pretty sure that bigotry can be present in those developers . . . . there's a name that comes to mind when I think of problematic *D&D* people, I believe his name is Gary Gygax." After I confirmed that Gary Gygax created *D&D*, Mark suggested that players could "erase" [sic] the racism and sexism in the game by creating new lore. This comment gestured toward Mark's burgeoning interest in restorying the Drow.

Figure 15

Critiquing D&D's characterization of matriarchal races with Mark



Despite Mark's expansive knowledge of *D&D*, it took him multiple weeks to acknowledge how *D&D* lore rendered a race of Black women monstrous. Mark's inability to unmask racism and sexism in *D&D* contrasted with his readiness to identify racism in H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulu Mythos. Dotson (2012) calls this phenomenon "contributory injustice" in which an "agent's situated ignorance, in the form of willful hermeneutical ignorance, maintain[s] and utiliz[es] structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources" (p. 31). While Mark had the critical scripts to condemn and interrogate *D&D* lore, it took us multiple interview sessions to develop mutual empathy for the Drow.

Composing (In)Justice

Mark and his peers attempted to restory the Drow multiple times during the DCW campaign. In each instance, their storytelling practices contained laminated dimensions of critical possibility and hegemonic precarity. Ultimately, however, their restorying practices (and lack thereof) reified White, patriarchal ideologies.

"That's logical" - Common sense as abstract liberalism

At the beginning of Mark's campaign, participants role-played as adventurers exploring the Underdark. During their explorations, a band of rebel Drow intercepted them and shared their plot to overthrow the "evil" Lolthists – Drow cultists who worshiped the spider god, Lolth. At this point, Mark revealed that the campaign would primarily explore Drow lore. In response, Drew shared his knowledge of Drow lore, saying, "I believe Elistraee is the only good – like, the only good deity in the Drow pantheon . . . at least according to *D&D* canon" (audio recording, April 6, 2022). Alec agreed with Drew, adding that the Drow were "not necessarily very fine." At this point, Mark interjected and said, "It seems really weird though, because the Drow are the only people who, like, have their skin color. So I thought, 'hmm that sounds like racism.' So I'm

altering it, because I'm not encouraging racism in my fantasy game." Mark initially used the muted adjective "weird" to describe *D&D* canon, but he eventually described it as overtly "racist." This was the first time Mark used the word "racist" to describe *D&D*.

While Mark attempted to outline a critique of Drow lore to his peers, his explanation was vague. There was a pause after Mark's statement, and it was unclear whether participants understood his argument. Was Mark claiming that the Drow were racist, or was he claiming that *D&D* was racist? Rather than interrogate the subject further, Drew said, "that's logical," and Alec mumbled, "you shouldn't encourage racism at any time." Mark agreed, and there was another prolonged silence. Rather than reach a nuanced understanding of how racism operated in Drow lore, silence prevailed in the wake of the common sense notion that racism should not be encouraged. Bonilla-Silva (2021) termed this common sense moral talk "abstract liberalism." He explained how "by framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear 'reasonable' and even 'moral,' while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto inequality" (p. 28). Indeed, this was the only time Mark overtly mentioned racism with his peers during the campaign.

"It's all minutiae" - Race as trivial in color-evasive play

A surprising debate occurred early in Mark's campaign. Alec and Kyle claimed that the Drow – also known as Dark Elves – were pale-skinned. They said the Drow were pale due to their lack of sun exposure. Mark disagreed, insisting that the Drow were Black. In response, Kyle said the Drow were "more grey." Pausing the game, Mark consulted the *Forgotten Realms Wiki* – his favorite online resource for *D&D* lore. As Mark consulted the wiki, Alec sighed, "I mean, I feel like we should get into [the game]" (audio recording, April 6, 2022). It appeared that Alec preferred discontinuing the conversation rather than winning the argument. At this point, I

screen-shared a Google image search of the Drow that showed a series of characters with dark skin. Reading from the *Forgotten Realms Wiki*, Mark announced, "The Drow are a dark-skinned, white-haired sub-race of elves." Alec reiterated his desire to end the discussion, saying, "it's all minutiae, so…" Nobody challenged Alec's statement, and the campaign moved on.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that the Drow were a Black race of elves, Alec and Kyle contested the Drow's Blackness during play. Alec and Kyle performed what Applebaum (2019) described as an "active adherence to false knowledge about race that is branded as truth . . . . [which] function[ed] to maintain racial privilege in ways that [were] camouflaged so that it d[id] not seem as if that is what it is doing" (p. 30). It was clear that Alec and Kyle preferred the Drow to be White. Ironically, Alec's interest in the Drow's color wanned the longer it spurred discourse about race. When participants agreed that the Drow were dark-skinned, Alec rendered the conversation trivial by calling it "minutiae." Tuana (2006) would call this response "determined ignorance" because Alec "did not want to know" more about the Drow once it disrupted his ability to disregard race.

"We've been brainwashed" - Storying White ignorance

Upon allying with the Drow rebels, the participants decided to travel aboveground to solicit military support from the surface elves. During this encounter, Mark explained how the surface elves harbored various anti-Drow stereotypes – such as assuming the Drow were unintelligent and lacked technological advancements. Then, Mark whispered to his peers, "Remember, you know [the Drow] have armor and weapons" (audio recording, April 13, 2022). When participants revoiced Mark's words to the surface elves, Mark responded, "The surface elves have agreed to ally with you and the rebels . . . . congratulations, you have succeeded in diplomacy!" In this scene, Mark's facilitation simultaneously acknowledged and avoided

complex analysis of the racial tensions between the Drow and surface elves. He seemed to suggest that dispelling stereotypes was a foil to the complexities of racism. Furthermore, Mark reified the power of the surface elves by requiring the players to appeal to their authority. Despite Mark's interest in problematizing anti-Drow hate in his campaign, the "win condition" of this scene was to mobilize an army of White-presenting characters against the Drow.

Soon after building an alliance between the Drow rebels and surface elves, the "evil" Drow cultists intercepted the players. To the players' surprise, the cultists were peaceful and empathetic. Rather than kidnap or harm the players, the cultists shared a narrative-shifting revelation: the Drow rebels had deceived the players. The players were under the spell of powerful "illusion magic" that concealed the rebels' deadly coup on the pacifist Drow society. After dispelling the effects of the illusion magic, the players saw that the Drow city was in flames. Innocent Drow citizens – including Drow children – were fleeing the rampaging rebels.

Mark conveniently storied White ignorance by brainwashing players into plotting against the pacifist Drow society. He never challenged his peers to question their alliances with the rebels or surface elves. Players did not have the opportunity to consider life from the perspective of Drow society. Rather than contend with the complexities of empathy and perspective-taking, "illusion magic" camouflaged the oppression of the Drow. Like magic, Applebaum (2019) explained how,

> White ignorance functions to mystify the consequences of unjust systems that systemically marginalized groups endure so that those who benefit from the system do not have to consider their complicity in perpetuating them . . . . result[ing] in safeguarding white moral innocence while at the same time shielding unjust systems from contestation. (p. 30)

Indeed, the illusion magic – a storied manifestation of White ignorance – absolved players from accountability or guilt for conspiring against Drow society. Instead, the players were *victims* of the rebels' insidious plot. Worst of all, Mark "shield[ed] unjust systems from contestation" by preventing opportunities to unmask White ideology throughout the campaign. He determined that the players would be magically complicit in anti-Drow violence. While the players eventually had the choice to defend Drow society, the Drow cities were predestined to burn.

"The city is on fire!" - On culpability and tortuous play

In the final battle of Mark's campaign, the players defended Drow society from an onslaught of "rebel" Drow. Thus, Mark's attempt to restory Drow lore resulted in the antagonism of a sub-group of Drow. The rebels' desire for power reinscribed the same villainous Drow characteristics that Mark intended to disrupt. Furthermore, Mark's campaign held the Drow culpable for intraracial violence. Mark revealed that the surface elves were also victims of illusion magic and magically "forgiven." As a result, Mark's campaign thematically positioned players as saviors who protected the Drow from their own racial inclinations toward evil.

Mark and his peers also fetishized and bantered about anti-Black violence. At the end of the campaign, the players learned that many Drow children has been unjustly slaughtered in the wake of the Drow Civil War. Mark posed the players with a faux moral dillema: should they allow the brainwashed surface elves to continue murdering Drow children (Figure 16.). While Mark guided Drew and Alec toward saving the Drow children, the scene featured gratuitous jokes and depictions of pedicide. This scene was all too reminiscent of the brutal murder of Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio in 2014. But rather than reckon with Whiteness, military violence, and the killing of Black bodies, the participants demonstrated moral ambivalence. Trammell (2023) describes this kind of play as torture, explaining how,

> Torture *is* play, and approaching it as such reveals a good deal about how play subjugates and disciplines people . . . . Recognizing how play is often experienced as torture might also help us better understand how the application of the term has been historically used to exclude BIPOC, women, trans people, and nonbinary folk from historically White and masculine spaces of play. (p. 14)

This critique underscores how – beyond a failure to restory Drow lore – Mark and his peers actively leveraged play to reify Whiteness and vanquish Black bodies.

Figure 16

Mark and his peers role-play the brutalization of Drow children.

Mark 30:05: You guys see the surface selves. And a bunch of surface elves are utterly confused. One of them is holding an axe and is just like, "Is that a child!? They didn't look like a child a minute ago. Is this a trick? Should I swing?"

Mark (role-playing a Drow child) 30:32: Mom, can I . . . can I go home?

Mark 30:50: Um, so what are you guys gonna do? As they're just huddling in a circle like,

Drew 31:10: Let's just leave.

Mark 31:14: You want . . . the child could die!

Alec 31:20: And I'm just saying, "Not my problem."

Mark 31:24: A child is about to die and you could stop it by telling them, "Yeah, this is real guys." But you're just like, "No, let's just let them cleave a child in half."

Drew 31:38: Where did the child come from? Oh, illusion magic! Oh, okay, sure. We tell them not to attack the child.

Mark 31:52: They immediately look at each other. And the first thing that one of them says is just like, "I think this is going to be a PR nightmare." And then they're just like, "Of course it is, we just killed like 15 kids!"

Notably, Mark had the resources to restory Drow lore and create a campaign that countered misogynoir tropes in *D&D*. The *Forgotten Realms Wiki* – Mark's favorite *D&D* resource – included a section describing Drow perspectives on the surface elves. The Drow

believed, “the surface elves were . . . living embodiments of deception and malice, merciless killers that responded to the requests for peace of their innocent and naive kin with ceaseless violence . . . massacr[ing] children and the elderly alike in an insane quest to take a horrid and painful surface world for themselves” (“Drow,” 2023). Unfortunately, Mark’s campaign did not do any thematic work to critique or recast the surface elves as genocidal colonizers. The only element of the latter description that Mark maintained in his narrative was the massacring of Drow children. This reveals how, beyond mere color-evasion and White ignorance, Mark and his peers engaged in role-play that was specifically designed to witness and perpetuate the suffering of the Drow.

Reflecting on (In)Justice

When reflecting on his campaign, Mack explained that “nonsense shenanigans” and a lack of racism game mechanics impeded his ability to restory the Drow.

“Too much nonsense shenanigans” - Humor undermining critical play

After the conclusion of Mark’s campaign, I asked him to reflect on the success of his narrative. He responded, “It feels like I kind of rushed it and filled it with too much nonsense shenanigans that might not have fit” (audio recording, May 16, 2022). During the campaign, Mark and his peers created a lot of recurring jokes that permeated the adventure. After repairing a broken wheel on their wagon, the participants became obsessed with obtaining wagon wheels. In almost every interaction with a new character, the players asked where they could find more wheels. Rather than being relevant or strategic to the narrative, the endeavor to find wheels became a joke among the players. While such jokes bolstered camaraderie among the participants, they also derailed Mark’s storytelling and the group's overall narrative progress.

The participants' "nonesense shenanigans" consumed valuable play time and undoubtedly contributed to Mark's feeling that the campaign felt rushed.

Mark had a history of facilitating role-playing campaigns that dissolved into "meme" (i.e., joke) campaigns. He explained how "one of the first times I GM'd, it was – like – a very meme-y campaign . . . . there was a lot of random and stupid stuff that happened" (audio recording, March 7, 2022). When creating his new Drow campaign, he wanted to "try doing a more serious thing." Unfortunately, Mark's Drow Civil War narrative became more humor-centric than he anticipated. As a participant-observer, I realized the subtle ways that humor undermined critical play. Turning the narrative into a joke relinquished participants from the responsibility of reckoning with hegemonic *D&D* lore. As Trammell (2023) argues, "doing it 'for the lulz' has become a collaous expression of how the rhetoric of play as 'free' is often used to defend the most egregious instances of play and violence" (p. 28). Ultimately, restorying and anti-racist storytelling was "serious" work that infringed on participants' alibi to "just have fun."

"There's no status debuff for racism" - The mechanics of moral fatalism

The surface elves were an afterthought by the end of Mark's campaign. The participants forgot to discuss them during the final battle against the Drow rebels. In my final interview with Mark, I asked him how the campaign changed the Drow's characterization. I was particularly curious to know if the surface elves' perceptions of the Drow shifted. Mark responded,

> "Well, it might not change their opinion right away. I mean honestly, there's a lot of people who don't exactly change their opinion on these things very easily . . . . there are so many people who will do blatantly racist things and then just say, 'I'm not racist, but…' . . . . so it's not exactly this thing like, 'oh my god, you cured racism!' There's no status debuff for racism" (audio recording, May 16, 2022).

Mark's understanding of racism was surprising given our prior conversations about hegemonic tropes in *D&D*. In most of our interviews, we discussed how *D&D* lore subtly perpetuated White ideology, misogyny, and anti-Blackness. So Mark's depiction of racism as a "blatant" phenomenon that could not be "cured" was a departure from his initial intent to "delete" [sic] racist themes by "creating new lore." By depicting racism as a static, unchanging ideology, Mark's argument endorsed a kind of moral fatalism. He opined on the absurdity of a "status debuff" for racism – a kind of game-based "racism meter" that players could manage for their characters. While his critique was insightful – highlighting how racism and ideology cannot be easily measured on a linear scale – his argument also shut down previous conversations about restorying *D&D*. The pessimistic, fatalist notion that racism was a fixed epistemology seemed to preclude Mark from contending with Whiteness and racism in his campaign.

Ironically, Mark's dismissal of a "racism meter" caused him to pause, revise his thinking, and reflect on how such a game mechanic would work. Thinking aloud, he explained how a character with a low score would not perpetuate racist stereotypes, whereas a character with a moderate score would be guilty of committing microaggressions. While a racism meter was absurd – even problematic – the idea pushed Mark to reflect on race in his campaign more than ever. Rather than considering people as "racist or "not racist," Mark began to acknowledge subtle, insidious ways racism operated in people and systems. Unfortunately, this line of reflection surfaced after Mark's campaign concluded.

Discussion & Implications

Following the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, social commentators compared the insurrection to a live action role-play (Walther, 2021). Like in RPGs, the insurrectionists wore costumes (e.g., horns and fur), assumed characters (e.g., the QAnon Shaman), and engaged

in a violent fantasy campaign. While the insurrection was built upon conspiracy theories rather than *Dungeons & Dragons* lore, it was a sobering example of how fiction can intertwine with political ideology to mobilize civic action. Put another way, the insurrectionists exemplified how White ideology can be storied and enacted toward violent ends in civic life. Just the same, the stories educators and learners compose are ideological reflections and renderings of civic life.

Before data analysis, I believed Mark's campaign to be an imperfect yet good-faith attempt at restorying Drow lore. My belief was not blinded by "illusion magic," but rather a naive assumption that Mark's daily convictions against transphobia, anti-Muslim hate, and men's rights would translate into an anti-racist campaign that humanized and restoried a fictional Black matriarchal society. Although the participants established the common sense notion that there "[wouldn't] be racism in [the] story," this proclamation exemplified an abstract liberalism orientation (Bonilla-Silva, 2021) that undermined critical conversations about race, gender, and Whiteness. Participants were particularly deft at avoiding conversations about Blackness. Through "willful hermeneutical ignorance" (Dotson, 2012), Mark and his peers repressed their encyclopedic knowledge of the Drow, Drow histories of persecution, and their Blackness to shirk their responsibility to address injustice through restorying role-play. Conveniently, Mark integrated storied elements of White ignorance into the campaign, such as brainwashing, to avoid contesting the White hegemony of the surface elves or foiling the genocidal plot of the rebel Drow. As the pacifist Drow society lay in ruin with murdered civilians and displaced Drow children, the participants celebrated the "successful" completion of Mark's campaign. Mark's claim to restory Drow lore was, itself, a kind of "illusion magic" that veiled the ways participants repeatedly – and gleefully – reinscribed violence on Black bodies.

From the perspective of a researcher, I believe constructivist pedagogy, unacknowledged positivism, and White ignorance informed my facilitation of the study. Indeed, I was complicit in the participants' unwillingness to confront racism, sexism, and White ideology. Perhaps unknowingly, I justified my withdrawals as post-positivist objectivity, "characterized by a detached and impartial relationship between researcher and participant" (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019, p. 95). Through a constructivist frame, I sought to witness how participants grappled with weighty themes of race, gender, and power – allowing for ideological "messiness" in pursuit of critical inquiry. My findings, however, demonstrated that "while a constructivist paradigm may appear to offer greater opportunity for the open exploration of social dynamics, the reality is that in its own way such an approach also upholds racial bias and white supremacy" (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019, p. 95). Under the pretense of "open exploration" and play, I failed to intervene when conversations reified White supremacist logics and themes. At the risk of suggesting the youth were entirely culpable for reifying hegemonic *D&D* lore, I explicitly assume responsibility for the participants' failure to restory Drow characterization. As an implication for my own research – and in an effort to move critiques of my scholarly practice beyond confessional – I seek to do more reflexive analysis on the ways that I undermined critical literacy pedagogies through constructivist teaching practices and White ignorance.

I believe that participants' ambitions to restory the Drow would have been more successful had we all explicitly and collectively addressed the thematic implications of Mark's campaign. In addition to being color-evasive, participants' conversations were theme-evasive. Their preoccupation with playing across narrative beats ultimately avoided broad conversations about the campaign's rendering of race, gender, and Whiteness. Like the infamous "meat grinder" campaigns (e.g., Tomb of Horrors) written by Gary Gygax in the 1970s and 1980s, the

DCW campaign often privileged accomplishing a series of tasks rather than considering how the events came together to communicate messages about Drow and elven society. Moreover, Mark's campaign never considered Drow lore from the Drow perspective. Dotson (2011) called this type of evasion "testimonial quieting" in which "an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower . . . . in order to offer testimony . . . . to under value a black woman speaker [and] take her status as a knower to be less than plausible" (p. 242). Since the DCW campaign did not acknowledge Drow society as worth listening to and knowing, the narrative was never a genuine attempt to witness Drow testimony and identify Drow society as more than a victim of White violence.

Rather than conflate Mark and his peers with the alt-right insurrectionists I described earlier, I intend to emphasize that games and role-play *matter*. They are inextricably linked to ideology and civic consciousness. As evidenced in this paper, creativity and worldbuilding are not necessarily acts of freedom and justice. As Garcia and Mirra (2023) note, "Acts of autocracy, new uses of technologies for surveillance and control, insurrectionary alt-right organizing that sweep individuals to perpetually threaten freedoms: these all stem from imaginative thinking" (p. 7). In light of the rapid rise of alt-right Discourse in online gaming spaces (Anti-Defamation League, 2021), there is a pressing urgency to compose justice-oriented worlds with youth and adult gamers. Through this process of orienting toward justice, educators and gamers must consider how to construct worlds that are built beyond histories and logics of violence. Enciso and Krone (2022) describe this process as "opening proleptic gaps" in which storytellers imagine and rescript worlds displaced from "historically formed constraints that tie us to the past, [in order to] project innovative material, social, and power relations into the future" (p. 433). To this

end, perhaps closing the pages of *D&D* sourcebooks is a step forward in helping youth gamers imagine toward an otherwise in which racial justice and gender equity take priority.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

My goal in this dissertation was to highlight how role-playing games mediated six youths' worldbuilding practices through complex demonstrations of play, talk, and ideology. Although the etymology of "game" is rooted in the Old English word *gamen* meaning "amusement," I believe the implications of gameplay transcend mere leisure. Indeed, I have made an attempt to take games *seriously* – not as "serious games" (Barab et al., 2005; Ketelhut et al., 2006) that teach discipline-specific content knowledge, but as intricate social technologies that shape how we come to understand and participate in the world. Indeed, I believe that games organize human interaction in ways that make learning and literacy practices exceedingly visible. In other words, games are a bloody mess! Like blood, games can drill beneath the shallow conventions – the skin – of narrative composing to illuminate the complex and *fluid* ways humans negotiate language, collaboration, intertextual models, and ideology to tell stories and render reality. As sites of profound bleed (Olmstead-Dean, 2007; Stenros & Bowman, 2018; White et al., 2012), role-playing games uncovered the ways Mark, Olly, Alec, Drew, Kyle, and Jacob engaged in liminal play, laminated positionalities, and reified White racialized ideologies.

Summary of Dissertation Papers

In Paper 1, I examined how six youths engaged in liminal play during a six-week campaign facilitated by a participant named Olly. Inspired by Garcia's (2020) three spatialities of analog gaming – "in the game," "at the table," and "beyond the table" – I endeavored to highlight moments of participants' play that bled (Olmstead-Dean, 2007; Stenros & Bowman, 2018; White et al., 2012) across game, metagame, and intertext playspaces. Proposing a heuristic of "liminal play," I detailed the ways participants leveraged metalepsis, metadrama, and comparative ludology as means of boundary-defying storytelling. Moreover, I examined how

participants' liminal play facilitated coauthorship among the youth. Indeed, liminal play allowed participants multiple access points to ideate, draft, and revise Olly's campaign. As an ideational practice, liminal play allowed participants to evoke characters, settings, and lore, settings that traversed narrative boundaries and served as communal mentor texts. As a drafting practice, liminal play created opportunities for improvisational and unbounded storytelling that traversed multiple timelines and potentialities. This created space for participants to offer many storied elements to Olly's campaign before collectively inscribing an event permanently in the campaign. Finally, as a revision practice, liminal play allowed participants to gently contest Olly's power as a GM and rewrite scenes in ways that better represented their characters. While liminal play contests the bounded game, metagame, and intertext dimensions of play, I argued that liminal play was instrumental in the project of coauthorship.

In Paper 2, I examined how study participants oscillated between game and metagame discourse during Olly's six-week campaign. Building upon scholarship on play-based discourse (Atkins, 2019; Buchbinder, 2008; Halliday-Scher et al., 1995; Harris, 2000), I sought to understand how participants leveraged conversation to transition between game talk (i.e., from their positionalities as characters) and metagame talk (i.e., from their positionalities as players). Using conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974), I examined adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007), turn-initial discourse markers (Heritage, 2012, 2013), change of state markers (Shiffrin, 1987), and sequence closing devices (Schegloff, 2007) in participants' conversational play to understand how they sequenced and made sense of each other's positional shifts. Beyond identifying *how* participants oscillated between game and metagame talk, I analyzed *how* these transitions forwarded their collaborative storytelling. In my findings, I highlighted how shifts across game and metagame talk worked to negotiate knowledge, fairness, relationships, and

narrative pacing. Taken together, these findings displayed the ways participants' coauthorship and relationships were ontologically and epistemologically hybrid. By rapidly traversing between their player and character positionalities, the participants negotiated storytelling and affiliative work across laminated layers of interaction and relationality.

In Paper 3, I examined how a participant named Mark – a White eighth grader – planned, facilitated, and reflected on a six-week role-playing campaign titled *The Drow Civil War* (DCW). Across multiple one-on-one interviews, Mark planned to restory (Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) hegemonic *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) lore. Specifically, Mark decided to create a campaign that humanized a canonically evil race of Black matriarchal elves called the Drow. Oriented by critical Whiteness studies (Hairston, 2013; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Tanner, 2018), I traced how Mark and his peers mobilized White ignorance (Applebaum, 2019; Dotson, 2011, 2012; Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997; Tuana, 2006) and color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2016) to ultimately reify the villainization and victimization of the Drow. In particular, I analyzed how participants leveraged abstract liberalism to shirk conversations about race, refused to acknowledge Drow Blackness, and storied White ignorance to avoid culpability for anti-Drow violence. Acknowledging my own complicity in Mark's campaign, I discussed how constructivist pedagogy, unacknowledged positivism, and White ignorance informed my participation in the study. Having collectively participated in "testimonial quieting" (Dotson, 2011), the participants and I silenced Drow characterization and refused to consider Drow lore from the Drow perspective.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Across all three of my dissertation papers, participants' play traversed ontological and epistemic boundaries – whether the narrative boundaries of texts, the positional boundaries of

players and characters, or the ideological boundaries of real and storied hegemony. Rather than pedagogical tools to "gamify" (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017) and reinscribe school-based learning, role-playing games are mediums through which we can make our complex stories, identities, and relationships known. In order to acknowledge role-playing games as technologies for literacy learning, we must necessarily expand our conceptualizations of what "counts" as literacy practice. I hope that this dissertation project makes it abundantly clear that Mark, Olly, Alec, Drew, Kyle, and Jacob engaged in robust literacy practices – including reading, writing, speaking, and listening broadly defined.

To conclude this project, I take up Steinkuehler's (2022) call to action for game studies scholars and literacy researchers,

> This is the essential challenge of our next decade of games and learning research. If games are powerful engines for literacy and language learning, then how do we ensure that the games students play promote the discourses and cultural models that society, nationally and internationally, value? (p. 24)

Accordingly, I am interested in pursuing a program of research that interrogates and problematizes White racialized ideologies in gaming communities. My findings in Paper 3, paired with the rapid rise of alt-right Discourse in online gaming spaces (Anti-Defamation League, 2021), underscore the importance of anti-racist work with youth gamers. Given that nearly 10% of online gamers are subjected to White supremacist rhetoric and ideology in the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 2019), there is a pressing need for educators to coauthor justice-oriented worlds and narratives with youth and adults. Civic life bleeds into our play, and our play bleeds into our civic life. Therefore, the call to build justice-oriented game worlds is – quite literally – a call to build a more just society.

References

Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D., & Morrison, D. (2016). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using sis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind ideology in education and society. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 20(2), 147-162. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248837

Anti-Defamation League. (2019). *Free to play? Hate, harassment, and positive social experiences in online games*. https://www.adl.org/resources/report/free-play-hate-harassment-and-positive-social-experiences-online-games

Anti-Defamation League. (2021a). *Hate is no game: Harassment and positive social experiences in online games*. https://www.adl.org/hateisnogame

Applebaum, B. (2019). White ignorance, epistemic injustice and the challenges of teaching for critical social consciousness. In G. Yancy (Ed.), Educating for critical consciousness (pp. 28-44). Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780429431654-3

Atkins, S. (2019). Assessing health professionals' communication through role-play: An interactional analysis of simulated versus actual general practice consultations. *Discourse Studies*, 21(1), 109-134. http://doi.org/10.1177/1461445618802659

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press. http://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198245537.001.0001

Barab, S. A., Thomas, M., Dodge, T., Carteaux, R., & Tuzun, H. (2005). Making learning fun: Quest Atlantis, a game without guns. *Educational Technology, Research and Development*, 53, 86-107. http://doi.org/10.1007/BF02504859

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. Guilford Publications.

Bell, A. (2013). Unnatural narrative in hypertext fiction. In J. Alber, H. S. Nielsen, & B. Richardson (Eds.), *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* (pp. 185–198). Ohio State University Press.

Bell, A., Alber, J. (2012). Ontological metalepsis and unnatural narratology. *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 42(2), 166–192. http://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2012.0005

Beltrán, W. S. (2013). Shadow work: A Jungian perspective on the underside of live action role-play in the united states. In S. L. Bowman & A. Vanek (Eds.), *Wyrd Con companion book 2013*. Wyrd Con.

Bessiére, K., Seay, A. F., Kiesler, S. (2007). The ideal elf: Identity exploration in World of Warcraft. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 10(1), 530-535. http://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2007.9994

Blum-Kulka, S. (2005). ‘‘I will tell you the whole true story now’’: Sequencing the past, present and future in children’s conversational narratives. In D. Ravid & H. Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot (Eds.), *Perspectives on Language and Language Development* (pp. 275–88). Springer. http://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-7911-7_20

Boluk, S., Lemieux, P. (2017). *Metagaming: Playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, making, and breaking videogames*. University of Minnesota Press. http://doi.org/10.5749/9781452958354

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (6th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Bottema-Beutel, K., & White, R. (2016). By the book: An analysis of adolescents with autism spectrum condition co-constructing fictional narratives with peers. *Journal of Autism and*

Developmental Disorders, 46, 361–377. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2524-4

Bottema-Beutel, K., Crowley, S., & Kim, S. Y. (2022). Sequence organization of autistic children's play with caregivers: Rethinking follow-in directives. *Autism*, 26(5), 1267-1281. http://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211046799

Bosco, F .M., Friedman, O. & Leslie, A.M. (2006). Recognition of pretend and real actions in play by 1- and 2-year-olds: Early success and why they fail. *Cognitive Development*, 21, 3-10. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2005.09.006

Bowman, S. L. (2018). Immersion and shared imagination in role-playing games. In J. P. Zagal & S. Deterding (Eds.), *Role-playing game studies: A transmedia approach* (pp. 379-394). Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637532-22

Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1-21. http://doi.org/10.1086/448619

Buchbinder, M. H. (2008). 'You're still sick!' Framing, footing, and participation in children's medical play. Discourse Studies, 10(2), 139-159. http://doi.org/10.1177/1461445607087018

Bulut, E. (2021). White Masculinity, Creative Desires, and Production Ideology in Video Game Development. *Games and Culture*, 16(3), 329–341. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020939873

Burroughs, B. (2014). Facebook and FarmVille: A digital ritual analysis of social gaming. *Games and Culture*, 9(3), 151-166. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014535663

Calleja, G. (2011). *In-game: From immersion to incorporation*. MIT Press. http://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8429.001.0001

Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning* (2nd ed.).

Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using Language*. Cambridge University Press. http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620539

Coleman, J. J. (2021). Restorying with the ancestors: Historically rooted speculative composing practices and alternative rhetorics of queer futurity. *Written Communication*, 38(4), 512-543. https://doi.org/10.1177/07410883211028230

Coleman, J. J., & Hall, L. A. (2019). What story, what identity, Wattpad?: Teaching youth to restory YA literature. *The ALAN Review*, 65-70.

Corces-Zimmerman, C., Guida, T. F. (2019). Toward a critical whiteness methodology: Challenging whiteness through qualitative research. *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, 5(1), 91-109. http://doi.org/10.1108/S2056-375220190000005007

Corntassel, J., Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi (2009). Indigenous storytelling, truth-telling, and community approaches to reconciliation. *English Studies in Canada*, 35(1), 137-159. http://doi.org/10.1353/esc.0.0163

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). *Applications of Flow in Human Development and Education*. Springer, New York. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9094-9

Dalton, B., Robinson, K., Lovvorn, J., Smith, B., Alvey, T., Mo, E., Uccelli, P., & Proctor, C. (2015). Fifth-grade students' digital retellings and the common core. *The Elementary School Journal*, 115(4), 548-569. https://doi.org/10.1086/681969

Davey, L. (1991). The application of case study evaluations. Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 2(9), 1–2. https://doi.org/10.7275/02g8-bb93

de Souza e Silva, A., & Delacruz, G. C. (2006). Hybrid reality games reframed: Potential uses in

educational contexts. *Games and Culture*, 1(3), 231-251. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555412006290443

Deunk, M., Berenst, J., & De Glopper, K. (2008). The development of early sociodramatic play. *Discourse Studies*, 10(5), 615-633. http://doi.org/10.1177/1461445608094215

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2019.1655383

Dichev, C., & Dicheva, D. (2017). Gamifying education: what is known, what is believed and what remains uncertain: A critical review. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 14(9), 1-36. http://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-017-0042-5

Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia*, 26(2), 236-257. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x

Dotson, K. (2012). A cautionary tale: On limiting epistemic oppression. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 33(1), 24-47. https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2012.0008

Drow. (2023). In *Forgotten Realms Wiki*. Retrieved from https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Drow

Edmiston, B. (2007). *Forming ethical identities in early childhood play*. Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203934739

Enciso, P., & Krone, B. (2022). Storytelling and proleptic gaps: Reimagining inequities in the mount. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 56(4), 432-456.

Ensslin, A. (2012). *The language of gaming*. Palgrave Macmillan. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-35708-2

Entertainment Software Association (2019). 2019 essential facts: About the computer and video

game industry. ESA. https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Essential-Facts-About-the-Computer-and-Video-Game-Industry.pdf

Ewing, E. L. (2020, July 2). I'm a Black scholar who studies race. Here's why I capitalize 'White.' *Medium*. https://zora.medium.com/im-a-black-scholar-who-studies-race-here-s-why-i-capitalize-white-f94883aa2dd3

Fine, G.A. (1983). *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Flanagan, M. (2013). *Critical play: Radical game design.* MIT Press. http://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7678.001.0001

Flanagan, M. (2014). *Values at Play in Digital Games*. MIT Press. http://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9016.001.0001

Flanagan, M., & Jakobsson, M. (2023). *Playing oppression: The legacy of conquest and empire in colonialist board games*. MIT Press. http://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11779.001.0001

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780429269400-8

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. http://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2017.1293691

Garcia, A. (2020). Gaming literacies: Spatiality, materiality, and analog learning in a digital age. Reading Research Quarterly, 55(1), 9-27. http://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.260

Garcia, A. (2021). Chapter 1: "I piss a lot of people off when I play dwarves like dwarves": Race, gender, and critical systems in tabletop role-playing games. *Teachers College*

Record, 123(13), 1-26. http://doi.org/10.1177/016146812112301302

Garcia, A., & Mirra, N. (2023). Other suns: Designing for racial equity through speculative education. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2023.2166764

Garcia, A., & Niemeyer, G. (Eds.) (2018). *Alternate reality games and the cusp of digital gameplay*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Garfield, R. (2000). Metagames. In J. Dietz (Ed.), *Horsemen of the apocalypse: Essays on roleplaying* (pp. 14–21). Charleston, IL: Jolly Rogers Games.

Gee, J. P. (1985). The narrativization of experience in the oral style. *Journal of Education*, 167(1), 9–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748516700103

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan. http://doi.org/10.1145/950566.950595

Gee, J. P. (2015). *Unified discourse analysis: Language, reality, virtual worlds, and video games*. Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9781315774459

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Northeastern University Press, Boston.

Gotanda, N. (1991). A critique of 'our constitution is color-blind'. *Stanford Law Review*, 44, 1–68. http://doi.org/10.2307/1228940

Gray, K. (2012). Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live. *The New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 18(4), 261–276. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2012.746740

Gygax, G., & Arneson, D. (1974). *Dungeons & dragons*. Tactical Studies Rules.

Hairston, T. W. (2013). Continuing inequity through neoliberalism: The conveyance of white dominance in the educational policy speeches of President Barack Obama. Interchange: A Quarterly Review of Education, 43(3), 229–244. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-013-9180-4

Halliday-Scher, K., Urberg, K. A., & Kaplan-Estrin, M. (1995). Learning to pretend: Preschoolers' use of meta-communication in sociodramatic play. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 18, 451–61. http://doi.org/10.1177/016502549501800304

Harris, P. L. (2000). *The work of the imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Harviainen, J. T. (2012). Ritualistic games, boundary control, and information uncertainty. *Simulation & Gaming*, 43(4), 506-27. http://doi.org/10.1177/1046878111435395

Harviainen, J. T., & Lieberoth, A. (2012). Similarity of social information processes in games and rituals: Magical interfaces. Simulation & Gaming, 43(4), 528-549. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878110392703

Harkin, S. (2021). Liminal rhetoric in girlhood games: Developmental disruption in Night School Studio's Oxenfree. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 21(2), 1-16.

Heritage, J. (1984). A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 299-345). Cambridge University Press. http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511665868.020

Heritage, J. (2012). The epistemic engine: Sequence organization and territories of knowledge. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 45, 25-50.

http://doi.org/10.1080/08351813.2012.646685

Heritage, J. (2013a). Epistemics in conversation. In J. Sidnell &T. Stivers (Eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis* (pp. 370-394). Blackwell Publishing. http://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325001.ch18

Heritage, J. (2013b). Turn-initial position and some of its occupants. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 57, 331-337. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.08.025

Horrigan, M. (2021). The liminoid in single-player videogaming: A critical and collaborative response to recent work on liminality and ritual. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 21(2), 1-17.

Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Routledge. http://doi.org/10.30965/9783846766781

Hurley, K. (2016). The geek feminist revolution. Tor.

Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G. H. Lerner (Ed), *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation* (pp: 13-31). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. http://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.125.02jef

Jones, K., Storm, S., Castillo, J., Karbachinskiy, S. (2021). Chasing new worlds: Stories of roleplaying in classroom spaces. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 17(1), 1-17.

Jupp, J. C., & Lensmire, T. J. (2016). Second-wave white teacher identity studies: Toward complexity and reflexivity in the racial conscientization of white teachers. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 29(8), 985–988. http://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1189621

Jupp, J. C., Berry, T. R., & Lensmire, T. J. (2016). Second-wave white teacher identity studies: A review of white teacher identity literatures from 2004 through 2014. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1151–1191. http://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316629798

Jenkins, H. (2010). Transmedia storytelling and entertainment: An annotated syllabus. *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24(6), 943-958. http://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2010.510599

Ketelhut, D. J., Clarke, J., & Nelson, B. (2010). The development of River City, a multi-user virtual environment-based scientific inquiry curriculum: Historical and design evolutions. In M. J. Jacobson & P. Reimann (Eds.), *Designs for learning environments of the future: International perspectives from the learning sciences* (pp. 89-110). Springer. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-88279-6_4

Knight, B. (2022, October 11). Could Dungeons & Dragons be the next Harry Potter? Stranger things have happened. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettknight/2022/10/11/could-dungeons--dragons-be-the-next-harry-potter-stranger-things-have-happened/?sh=65e649d2e6f9

Kung, J., Demby, G., Mortada, D., & Donnella, L. (2022, September, 28). Rolling the dice on race in Dungeons & Dragons. NPR. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2022/09/26/1125115438/what-dungeons-and-dragons-tells-us-about-race

Labov, W. (2014). The transformation of experience in narrative. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (3rd ed, pp. 200-212). Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203597071

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge,
UK: Cambridge University Press. http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Lensmire, T. J., McManimon, S., Tierney, J. D., Lee-Nichols, M., Casey, Z., Lensmire, A., & Davis, B. (2013). McIntosh as synecdoche: How teacher education's focus on white privilege undermines antiracism. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83(3), 410–431. http://doi.org/10.17763/haer.83.3.35054h14l8230574

Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness, and education*. New York, NY: Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203880371

Limbong, A. (2020, June 29). 'Dungeons & Dragons' tries to banish racist stereotypes. NPR. https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/29/884824236/dungeons-dragons-tries-to-banish-racist-stereotypes

Lovrod. M. (1994). The rise of metadrama and the fall of the omniscient observer. *Modern Drama*, 37(3), 497–508. https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1994.0017

Marmell, A., Pryor, A., Schwalb, R., & Vaughan, G. (2007). *Drow of the underdark*. Wizards of the Coast.

Matias, C. E. (2016). Feeling white: Whiteness, emotionality, and education. New York, NY: Springer. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-450-3

Mauthner, N. S. (2003). Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis, *Sociology*, 37(3), 413-431. http://doi.org/10.1177/00380385030373002

McIntyre, A. (1997). *Making meaning of whiteness: Exploring racial identity with white teachers*. Albany, NY: Suny Press.

Medina, J. (2013). Color blindness, meta-ignorance, and the racial imagination. *Critical*

Philosophy of Race, 1(1), 38-67. http://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.1.1.0038

Mills, C. W. (1997). *The racial contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. http://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471353

Montes, P. (2022). Picking blue dawns: Community epistemologies, dreams, and (re)storying Indigenous autoethnography. *Texas Education Review*, 10(2), 1-15. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/41909

Nakamura, L. (1995). Race in/for cyberspace: Identity tourism and racial passing on the internet. *Works and Days*, 13, 181-193.

Nakamura, L. (2009). Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26(2), 128–144. http://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860252

Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (2001). *Living narrative: Creating lives in everyday storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. http://doi.org/10.4159/9780674041592

Ochs, E. (2004). Narrative lessons. In A. Duranti (Ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 269–289). Malden, MA: Blackwell. http://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996522.ch12

Ollman, B. (1983). *Class Struggle is the name of the game: True confessions of a Marxist businessman.* William Morrow and Company.

Olmstead-Dean, G. (2007). Impact of relationships in games. In J. Donnis, M. Gade, & L. Thoup (Eds.), *Lifeline*. Projektgruppen KP07.

Ramsay, D. (2020). Liminality and the smearing of war and play in Battlefield 1. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 20(1), 1-15.

Sacks, H. (1987). On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and social organisation* (pp. 54-69). Multilingual

Matters LTD. http://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060994-2

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50, 696–735. http://doi.org/10.2307/412243

Salen, K. (2007). Gaming literacies: a game design study in action. Journal of Multimedia and Hypermedia, 16(3), 301-322.

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. MIT Press.

Schegloff, E. A. (2001). Getting serious: Joke → serious 'no'. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33, 1947-1955. http://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(00)00073-4

Schegloff, E. A. (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge University Press. http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791208

Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers*. Cambridge University Press. http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611841

Schleiner, A. (2001). Does Lara Croft wear fake polygons? Gender and gender-role subversion in computer adventure games. *Leonardo*, 34(2), 221-226. http://doi.org/10.1162/002409401750286976

Seltzer, K. (2019). Performing ideologies: Fostering raciolinguistic literacies through role-play in a high school English classroom. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 63(2), 147-155. http://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.966

Shaffer, D. W. (2005). Epistemic games. *Innovate*, 1(6), 1-8.

Shaw, M. S., Ji, G., Zhang, Y., & Kafai, Y. B. (2021, May). *Promoting socio-political*

identification with computer science: How high school youth restory their identities through electronic textile quilts [Paper presentation]. Conference on Research in Equitable and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT). https://doi.org/10.1109/RESPECT51740.2021.9620625

Simkins, D. W., Steinkuehler, C. (2008). Critical ethical reasoning and role-play. *Games and Culture*, 3(4), 333-355. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008317313

Spelman, E. (2007). Managing ignorance. In S. Sullivan & N. Tuana (Eds.), Race and epistemologies of ignorance (pp. 119-131). State University of New York Press.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). The ethnographic interview. London: Wadsworth.

Spradley, J. (1980). Participant observation. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical iterative framework for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 76-84. http://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800107

Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The ludic bestiary: Misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games and Culture*, 15(6), 730-747. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059

Steinkuehler, C. A. (2006). Massively multiplayer online video gaming as participation in a discourse. Mind, Culture, and Activity, 13(1), 38-52. http://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1301_4

Steinkuehler, C. (2022). Language and literacy in games. *The English Connection*, 26(1), 22-24.

Steinkuehler, C., & Williams, D. (2006). Where everybody knows your (screen) name: Online games as "third places." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(4), 885–909. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00300.x

Stenros, J., & Bowman, S. L. (2018). Transgressive play. In J. P. Zagal & S. Deterding (Eds.), *Role-playing game studies: A transmedia approach*. Routledge.

Stewart, J. (2002). Metafiction, metadrama, and the god-game in Murdoch's The Unicorn. *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 32(1), 77-96. https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2011.0000

Stokoe, E. (2014). The conversation analytic role-play Method (CARM): A method for training communication skills as an alternative to simulated role-play. Research on Language and Social Interaction, 47(3), 1-9. http://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04bkj.8

Storm, S., & Jones, K. (2021). Queering critical literacies: disidentifications and queer futurity in an afterschool storytelling and roleplaying game. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 20(4), 534-548. http://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-10-2020-0131

Squire, K. D. (2004). Sid Meier's civilization III. *Simulations and Gaming*, 35(1), 135-140.

Squire, K. D. (2006). From content to context: Videogames as designed experience. *Educational Researcher*, 35(8), 19-29. http://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X035008019

Squire, K. D. (2007). Games, learning, and society: Building a field. *Educational Technology, September-October*, 4, 51-54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44429444

Tan, W. K., Yeh, Y. D., Chen, S. H. (2017). The role of social interaction element on intention to play MMORPG in the future: From the perspective of leisure constraint negotiation process. *Games and Culture*, 12(1), 28-55. http://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015574942

Tanner, S. J. (2018). *Whiteness, pedagogy, and youth in America: Critical whiteness studies in the classroom*. Routledge. http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203702437

Thomas, E. E. (2019). *The dark fantastic: Race and the imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. New York University Press. http://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479864195.001.0001

Thomas, E. E., & Stornaiuolo, A. (2016). Restorying the self: Bending toward textual justice. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(3), 313-338. http://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-86.3.313

Trammell, A. (2023). *Repairing play: A black phenomenology*. The MIT Press. http://.doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14656.001.0001

Tuana, M. (2006). The speculum of ignorance: The women's health movement and epistemologies of ignorance. Hypatia, 21(3), 1-19. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01110.x

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Cornell University Press.

Van Allsburg, C. (1981). *Jumanji*. Houghton Mifflin. http://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134666

Walther, M. (2021, January 7). The limits of LARPing: America's play-acting of civil war briefly turns real. The Week. https://theweek.com/articles/959235/limits-larping

White, W. J., Boss, E. C., & Harviainen, J. T. (2012). Role-playing communities, cultures of play, and the discourse of immersion. In E. Torner & W. J. White (Eds.), *Immersive gameplay* (pp. 71-86). McFarland and Company, Inc.

Whitten, S. (2019, March 13). Dungeons & Dragons had its biggest year ever as Covid forced the game off tables and onto the web. CNBC. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/13/dungeons-dragons-had-its-biggest-year-despite-the-coronavirus.html