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## 14. CRITICAL HITS & CRITICAL SPACES

*Roleplaying Games and Their Potential in  
Developing Critical Literacy and New Literacy Practices*

### ABSTRACT

In Roleplaying games (RPGs), players perform characters in a game-world based on fictional or non-fictional elements. With the aid of a narrator/referee, players take part in a type of shared-storytelling, engaging in conflict resolution through roleplay, interaction and exploration. This type of playful performance can provide meaningful opportunities for players to examine and critique various texts and the narrative and tropes they contain. More important, they have the potential to aid players in developing their critical literacy, which in turn can inform their understanding of the world and provide new opportunities for social action that may bring about positive social change in their immediate circumstances and beyond. In this chapter, I draw on my experiences as a secondary school teacher and mobilise a critical performative pedagogy in theorizing the potential of roleplaying games as creative and transformative practices of a critical pedagogy that accommodates and encourages the development of students' political literacy.

### INTRODUCTION

Pupils' lives include constant interaction with a multiplicity of texts. Film, novels, television and even various forms of gaming all provide opportunities for reflection, meaning-making and critique (Schwarz, 2010; Thomas, 2006). Roleplaying games (RPGs) offer players opportunities to interact with established settings, characters and plots from a variety of media and pop-culture sources. They also feature a cooperative, creative process where forms of expression, analysis and critique may take place within a collaborative and improvisational context. RPGs offer structures and frameworks for players to create and develop their own settings. Within these settings, players perform as agents in the narratives they co-construct and explore. As such, RPGs can allow players to create and interact in virtual worlds where they engage in, experiment upon, examine, analyse and critique various narratives and tropes not only found in literature, film and other cultural media, but also in their day-to-day social and political discourse (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012).

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A typical role-playing game involves players creating and performing various personas, or “player characters” (PCs), who serve as the protagonists in a form of shared storytelling. Individual players create PCs that satisfy their personal preferences while taking into consideration the needs and expectations of the other players in the group. Once characters are created, the players then work together in negotiating the elements of the game world, with one player acting as a referee and guide, and the others serving as “members of the cast.” The gaming world can be established upon existing fictional settings, such as *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and Marvel Comics, as well as settings created by game companies like Wizards of the Coast (WoTC) and their *The Forgotten Realms*, *Eberron* and *Greyhawk* settings. In each of these settings, players can follow the established narrative of a particular story or branch out into alternative narratives, and it is the potential of these alternative narratives that provide a potentially powerful opportunity for students to develop their critical literacy (Freire, 2006). While game settings are often set in fantastic or futuristic settings, they can also be based in the “real world,” and may provide players with opportunities to participate in historical or contemporary storylines that can accommodate critical investigations of power, culture and social landscapes. Popular RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* evolved from rules systems for wargames where conflict resolution was primarily conducted through simulated combat. However, as rules systems have grown in sophistication, and an emphasis on player collaboration over competition has emerged, alternative means of conflict resolution have been introduced. As such, RPGs demonstrate an elegant combination of structured rules-based-play that accommodates flexibility and broad interpretation, characteristics that can lend to their use in game-based pedagogy (Francis, 2006). The privileging of player collaboration lends to the creation of experimental and performative spaces in which players, while in character, engage with each other and elements of the game world.

In this chapter, I briefly discuss the recent rise in popularity and the norming of roleplaying games in popular culture and then utilize a performative studies perspective, and in particular, critical performance pedagogy (Boal, 1974; Denzin, 2003; Elliot, 2007; Harman & French, 2004; Harman & McClure, 2011) in theorizing the potential of roleplaying games and their elements as performative and potentially transformative practices in which students can collaboratively generate narratives for critical inquiry and reflection. In addition, I discuss lesson plan ideas for teachers who want to incorporate elements of RPGs in accommodating students’ development and application of their critical literacy.

#### THE ORIGINS OF RPGS

Modern roleplaying games (RPGs) emerged in the mid-1960s, where a number of committed “wargamers” worked together in promoting their favorite hobby. Wargames typically involved two or more players who commanded armies of plastic or metal figures as they engaged in mock combat scenarios. These scenarios were often re-enactments of historic battles, and depending on the players, the

scenes could even be played-out on miniaturized terrain meant to recreate that particular historical and military milieu. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were two wargaming enthusiasts who forever altered the landscape of wargaming by incorporating non-traditional game elements and methods of play into their own games. As the popularity of these changes resonated throughout their gaming communities, they eventually published rulebooks to support games incorporating these new, fantastic elements. Eventually, these publications grew in both sophistication and scope and not only laid the foundations for the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast, 2004), but also served as the inspiration for other “pen and pencil” and video-game based RPGs.

The introduction of fantastic elements into traditional wargaming was influenced by the explosive popularity of what is regarded by RPG players as “high fantasy” literature such as *The Lord of the Rings* and “pulp fantasy” or “sword & sorcery” literature such as Michael Moorcock’s *Elric of Melniboné* series, H.P. Lovecraft’s *The Call of Cthulu* and Jack Vance’s *The Dying Earth*. High and pulp fantasy share common roots in that the authors create imaginary characters in fantastic settings that usually involve magic, monsters and the supernatural. However, where “high” and “pulp” fantasy differ might be in the scope of the stories being told and by their critical and commercial success. For example, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is an epic tale of world-changing events that is reminiscent of ancient Nordic sagas, while Moorcock’s *Elric of Melniboné* series follows the exploits of a non-human, self-exiled monarch as he searches for a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* have enjoyed enormous critical and economic success, and have shifted from somewhat marginal texts in the mid 1960s to fixtures of contemporary popular culture. The popularity of these stories and the classical narrative they employ have encouraged schools to embrace them as examples of classical literature and have allowed them to be included in reading lists alongside the works of Fitzgerald and Steinbeck, but works of “pulp fantasy,” while often populating library shelves in the same schools, rarely become official elements of a school’s curriculum.

It is the alternative distinctiveness of “pulp fantasy” that inspired traditional wargamers like Gygax and Arneson to modify and transform their hobby from a battle-simulation exercise into a performance-based, collective form of storytelling. Where traditional wargaming was governed by rules intended to support historical re-enactments of famous military conflicts, Gygax and Arneson developed rules to incorporate fantastical elements such as elves, dwarves and magic. As Gygax published and distributed his rules for these changes, another shift in how these games were played was taking place. Like the narratives of high fantasy novels, wargaming was typically broad in scope in that players commanded armies and executed play on a larger, somewhat impersonal scale. However, Arneson, inspired by the narratives in pulp fantasy that focused more closely on individuals and their perspective on their fantasy-world, approached Gygax with a set of rules for wargaming where players assumed the roles of individual characters. With this new approach, players no longer played as faceless generals in opposition

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controlling a mass of un-named soldiers, but rather, they directly interacted with each other and the elements of the game world designed and performed by the referee (also called the dungeon master – DM or game master – GM) as they adopt and perform the persona of their PCs.

Equally important to the performance aspect of this type of play, is the concept of collaboration and teamwork. Unlike the games prior to RPGs, player collaboration now takes precedence over player competition. In this new iteration of the game, players work together in facing the encounters presented to them in the game world by the referee. The challenges placed before players can include anything the DM/GM can create and is appropriate to the setting. For example, if a game setting is a typical, “high fantasy” setting, the challenges developed by the DM could be combat scenarios against orcs and goblins, puzzles and traps the PCs face as they infiltrate ancient ruins, or even a diplomatic negotiation between rival NPCs, or non-player characters, that the DM performs. The collaborative, improvisational, performance-based approach to storytelling is supported by a sophisticated system of structured yet flexible rules that encourage roleplaying through dialogue and player interaction. Roleplaying supports creative and alternative pathways for problem-solving, reflection and expression, and it is this amalgamation of playful performance, analysis and interaction that is the most distinctive feature of such games and is where the pedagogical potential of RPGs lies.

The work of Gygax, Arneson and others eventually coalesced into the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, the first commercially successful roleplaying game. Since its introduction in the early 1970s, the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* has inspired the creation of other RPGs such as *Pathfinder*, *GURPS* and *Mutants & Masterminds*. However, in spite of the popularity of these games, often negative, stereotypical connotations have been applied to RPG enthusiasts – with references in popular culture representing this community of gamers as “geeks,” “nerds” and socially inept “loners.” In the 1980s, opposition to RPGs grew in response to a perceived connection to the occult. Advocacy groups such as BADD (Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons) created by Patricia Pulling, and Chick Publications, an evangelical Christian organization specializing in publishing cartoon religious tracts, made claims connecting *Dungeons & Dragons* to occultism and witchcraft ([http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046\\_01.ASP](http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0046/0046_01.ASP), 2013). Other allegations imposed against RPGs by Christian-based groups claimed RPGs encouraged drug use, violent behavior and suicide amongst players (Waldron, 2005). In the US, the fervor regarding roleplaying games and the occult made national headlines as it was promoted by news programs such as 60 Minutes, a news magazine broadcast on CBS (CBC Digital Archives, 2014). The allegations levied against RPGs contributed to the marginalization of RPG players, with long-lasting effects that continue to resonate in contemporary popular culture.

However, in spite of these accusations (and perhaps even in response to them), RPGs maintain a palpable presence through references in popular culture. For example, in the film *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* the character Elliot is shown playing an RPG with his brother and friends. The script for the film specifically mentions

Dungeons & Dragons, “Five boys are seated around a kitchen table. They are into the final hours of a late-night DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS (SIC) game” (Mathison, 1982, p. 7). Numerous episodes from a number of television programs including *The Simpsons*, *Dexter’s Laboratory*, *Futurama*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, and *The Big Bang Theory* have made multiple references to RPGs. While the narratives and tropes surrounding these references often continue to cast the players of RPGs as abnormal misfits, a competing geek-chic counter-narrative also celebrates the “gamer persona.” This is especially evident in the television sit-com *The Big Bang Theory* where the protagonists who are socially-awkward, intellectual gamers are presented as loveable, quirky “unlikely heroes.”

A similar perspective is maintained in Episode 14 of the second season of the television program *Community* entitled *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Guest, 2011). The main characters of this program are a group comprised of a variety of personality types, many of whom are not associated with being a “nerd” or “geek.” However, in this episode, the characters play *Dungeons & Dragons* to befriend and improve the self-esteem of a character who is an RPG player and clearly an outsider. In this episode, one of the main characters, described as socially awkward and even slightly autistic, is the “Dungeon Master” who quickly masters the rules of the game, even creating pre-generated characters for the rest of the players. Throughout the episode, the “social outsider” trope is firmly reinforced through the characterization of the DM and RPG player the main characters try to help. At the same time, the narrative of the plot underscores the potential collaborative/performative quality of RPGs as the group of characters play the game, understanding that their in-game decisions are performative, potential models for real-world actions that can have real and meaningful outcomes. At the same time, this sympathetic view of roleplayers exists in opposition to the stereotypical narrative that RPG players possess characteristics that keep them at the fringes of “normal” society.

#### CRITICAL PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY

In the paragraphs above, I’ve referenced the terms “performative” and “performance” in discussing RPGs. In the following, I discuss these terms and how they relate to theorizing the use of RPGs in developing critical literacy practices. Critical performance pedagogy (CPP) draws from the social foundations of performance studies, and in particular, performance pedagogy and critical pedagogy, in creating conditions for students and teachers to actively examine the ever-present (but not always observable) social, political, cultural and economic factors of their lives. Performance pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that privileges “the doing” – the performativity of knowing and learning that is gained through performance. Burke (cited in Denzin, 2003, p. 189) describes a performance as an interpretive event involving “actors, purposes, scripts, stories, stages, and interactions.” Langellier (cited in Denzin, 2003, p. 189) situates performance as an intervention “between experience and the story told” (2003, p.

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189). It is a representation of an experience interpreted through the body and language (Carlson, 1996).

A performance is embedded in language in that the act of speaking creates conditions and accomplishes tasks (Denzin, 2003). This creation and action is performative. In other words, performativity does not describe the potential or capacity of an event to be performed, but rather, it addresses “the reiterative power of discourse to reproduce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). In other words, the speech act produces the subject, with that production relying upon previous language and performances. This act of referencing, citing and then constructing a representation in our own performance means that every performance is an original and an imitation (Denzin, 2003). It also means that performativity references the doing – the construction of both identities and knowledge, and it is this doing – the constitutive engagement of action, creation and knowing that is sympathetic to a critical pedagogy and provides educators and students with the potential for a particularly powerful approach to critically-informed educational experiences.

As mentioned above, CPP draws from performance and critical theory studies, and at its foundation is an approach to learning and instruction that is primarily concerned with helping students (and teachers) to develop their critical literacy through a dialogical, kinesthetically-interactive, performance-based method of inquiry and expression. In describing the critical foundations of CPP, Pinaeu (2002) suggests that critical pedagogy is best understood as

a network of convictions and commitments that draw a ‘language of critique’ from the Marxist social theories of the Frankfurt School and a corresponding ‘language of possibility’ from John Dewey’s charge that schools should be public arenas that prepare citizens for active participation in a democratic society. (p. 42)

In this chapter, I situate the critical aspect of CPP specifically in reference to Freire’s (1985) concept of conscientization, or critical consciousness, where people learn to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality,” with the goal of such action to recognize our reality exists not as a limited, fixed reality, but as a world “in the making” (Freire, 1985, p. 67). This transformative perspective allows students and teachers to engage in actions that challenge socially unjust practices that limit their agency and inclusion in the public sphere. Ultimately, the transformative goal of actions informed through a critical pedagogy is not simply “an excision of unjust practices and worldviews, but the creation of a reality in which these practices and perspectives cannot exist” (Smith, 2013). Paramount to this process of transformation through a critical interaction and interpretation of the world is Freire’s (2006) concept of praxis, which “underscores the need to use action and reflection to challenge dominant educational practices” (Harman & McClure, 2011, p. 382). Action and reflection followed by a purposeful-doing enhanced through a critical awareness, is central to both critical and performance pedagogy and provides the robust theoretical landscape from which critical performance

pedagogy has emerged. The concept of the performative in schools – specifically, educational action and speech that constructs and produces critical agents and perspectives through performance provides what (Giroux, 1997) describes as

an articulating principle that signals the importance of translating theory into practice while reclaiming cultural texts as an important site in which theory is used to ‘think’ politics in the face of a pedagogy of representation that has implications for how to strategize and engage broader issues. (p. 2)

Critical performance pedagogy offers a compelling and fascinating rethinking of critical pedagogy that recognizes the “complexity, contradictions and messiness of educational practice ...” and situates critical pedagogy “as an aspirational practice akin to that of radical democracy.” (Avis & Bathmaker, 2004, p. 42)

#### PERFORMANCE, PLAY AND CRITICAL LITERACY

Roleplaying games find their origins in literature that is rarely regarded as “high quality” and is typically not included in the “Western canon.” For example, Appendix N entitled “Inspirational Reading” in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master’s Guide* (Gygax, 1979) lists over 20 texts generally considered as “sword & sorcery” literature, with no references to any of the great sagas or classical tales that comprise the typical body of literature students are required to study in school. With a significant portion of the gaming community being represented as abnormal, quirky – even subaltern, and with the tradition of RPGs stemming from non-classical, popular fiction, it seems fitting that RPGs can not only be an effective tool in exploring texts that exist outside of a school’s curriculum, but they can also be used as vehicles for developing critical literacy skills and emphasizing the importance of varying voices, views and texts that are excluded from the standardized, “classical” literature regularly foisted upon students. The importance of drawing upon a variety of different texts – in different forms such as film, comic books and roleplaying games is underscored by Gee (2003) who suggests that children often feel that they don’t belong, or can’t relate, to the worlds described in their textbooks and other officially endorsed texts in a school’s curriculum due to the depersonalized and abstract prose used to describe them. In other words, many of the texts schools use alienate students through the language employed, as well as the narratives produced, which is counterintuitive to creating an aesthetic and efficacious learning environment, particularly when educators are attempting to develop critical literacy practices as part of their pedagogy.

Roleplaying is not a new concept to teaching and learning. Shapiro and Leopold (2012) discuss the debate between opponents and proponents of roleplaying in education as they argue for the inclusion of roleplaying as a meaningful, aesthetically-charged component of the classroom that “resides in the middle ground between creative thought and real-world interaction” (p. 123). In their discussion, they elevate the status of roleplaying from an instructional method to a

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process of critical examination as they call for a “critical turn” in the use of roleplaying in school

Critical role-play requires students to embody voices and perspectives that may be quite different from their own. It asks them to speak and write using discourse that may be unfamiliar. It encourages them to explore relationships among people, texts, and contexts. (Ibid.)

Roleplay, and in particular RPGs, accommodate such critical explorations because they encourage a combination of play, performance, collaboration and examination. In discussing play, Jenkins (2013) builds upon and expands the concept in an educational setting as not simply a potential motivator for good behavior and reward for non-play activities, but rather as an approach to learning,

Through play, children try on roles, experiment with culturally central processes, manipulate core resources, and explore their immediate environments. (p. 22)

Play, as Jenkins (2013) suggests, and in particular games, can further accommodate a critical performance pedagogy in that they provide a context wherein play and performance are merged together within a system of rules and guidelines.

Games construct compelling worlds that players move through. Players feel a part of those worlds and have some stake in the events unfolding. Games not only provide a rationale for learning: what players learn is put immediately to use to solve compelling problems with real consequences in the world of the game. (p. 23)

Furthermore, Jenkins (2013) emphasises that the incorporation of play/games into the classroom encourages a participatory culture that possesses

... relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. (p. 3)

Conquergood (1989) provides a complimentary, performative conception of play as pedagogy in stating that the

metacognitive signal ‘this is play’ temporarily releases, but does not disconnect us, from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction. (p. 83)

In discussing performative research, Pinaeu (2002) reiterates Conquergood’s position and draws connections between performative research and performative pedagogy which enables not only a critically informed play pedagogy, but a critical performance pedagogy that includes play as a performative act



As a performative act, play enables the kinetic and kinesthetic understanding of real and imagined lived experience, set apart from the responsibilities and culpabilities that normally attend such experimentation. (p. 27)

Both Conquergood (1985) and Pinaeu (2002, 2005) remind us that performative approaches to learning, whether through research or in schools, are deeply concerned with issues of power and authority, and more important, since

performances are public events ..., they are a 'site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated.' (Pinaeu, 2005, p. 33)

These public struggles exist in the performative redefinition of performers, the texts they use in constructing their performances and even the audiences who witness these events.

The literature regarding critical performance pedagogy outlines the theoretical foundations, motivations and goals of such an approach to education, but what can a critical performance pedagogy that incorporates aspects of roleplaying games in developing critical literacy practices look like in the classroom? As mentioned in the lesson plan idea below, the incorporation of RPGs into the classroom requires some preparation in that RPGs can be comprised of complex rules systems. Part of the complexity of these rules stems from the necessity to replicate real-world activities and task-resolution in a game setting. Another factor is that the publication of rule books is a major revenue stream for RPG companies. Thus, the more rules that are published, the more books that are sold and the more profit is produced. However, a "rules-light" approach to RPGs in the classroom can provide students and teachers with a basic understanding of the game, and as outlined below, there are a number of resources for students and teachers to use in gaining these basics. However, how that game is then interpreted into the curriculum is up to the teacher and students. For example, as opposed to providing students with a text to read and then analyze, an RPG influenced curriculum could have students develop and then participate in stories that take place in the settings they establish and involving characters they create and perform. As another example, students could be introduced to a text and then asked to recreate that text in an RPG setting. When I use the word text, I mean any narrative including books, films, television shows and even commercials. In addition to creating RPG versions of these texts, students can then also redefine them by producing alternative narratives that are then performed within their game setting. However, while these are somewhat unconventional approaches to learning, they aren't particularly critical learning experiences. In order to transform a performance based pedagogy into a critical performance pedagogy, students and teachers must adopt and develop critical literacy practices that assist them in identifying what Quantz (2009) describes as

the contradictions that exist between the way people make meaning of their world and the way the world is materially organized through the structures and institutions and codes of social life. (p. 2)

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This can be accomplished through performing existing, unaltered texts that are re-imagined through alternative narratives, or original texts developed by students. For example, a scene in Tolkien's *Return of the King* describes King Theoden and his army as they encounter the "wild men," who are described as squat, gnarled men dressed in grass skirts using poison darts and speaking in broken English. In the scene, Theoden attempts to establish the wild men as his allies against the evil forces of Sauron. The presentation of the wild men is a complicated representation of the "ennobled savage" – the chief, although speaking in broken English, is also stately, sophisticated and eventually berates Theoden for speaking down to him. In a critical roleplaying experience, students can perform the characters in this scene, paying particular attention to how they perform a "king" and a "chief." Students can be asked to reflect on how they felt in reading Tolkien's script as they performed their roles, as well as how they physically responded to being "in character," considering what the physical interpretation of their characters means in regard to representations of the civilized king and the barbaric chief. Students also might be asked to re-write the scene, providing their own dialogue and reinterpreting the scene in ways that challenge the performers' and audience's orientation to the discourses of the "civilized" and the "primitive."

Moreover, a critical roleplaying experience should allow for the inclusion of the students' actual lived experiences, adopting texts that they normally interact with in their daily lives, and should assist and encourage students to envision new possibilities and hopeful solutions to injustices presented to them in the text as a means of preparing them for further engagement of the injustices they face in the real world. Such an approach could include cues from Boal's (1974) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. A full discussion of *Theatre of the Oppressed* is outside of the scope of this chapter, but in the simplest of terms, a *Theatre of the Oppressed* experience includes spectators/actors (called Spec-actors) who perform a scene involving a form of conflict. As the scene progresses, audience members can stop the performance and propose more just alternatives to what they are witnessing. The experience is facilitated by a "Joker" who, as a neutral party, assists the spec-actors in crafting their narrative. Boal (1974) underscored the performative – the doing that is necessary for the transformative quality of roleplay to be engaged – by asking "Should actors and characters go on dominating the stage, their domain, while I sit still in the audience?" His response:

I think not. We must invade. The audience mustn't just liberate its Critical Conscience (sic), but its body too. It needs to invade the stage and transform the images that are shown there. (p. xx)

A critical performance pedagogy incorporating RPG elements provides a sympathetic structure for students to engage in critical roleplay. The role of the DM/GM is a facilitator role that can easily adopt elements of Boal's "Joker." As participants in the game setting, the players are already spec-actors, viewing the performances of the DM and other players and responding to those performances and the setting with their own performance. In addition to the "gaming" of the curriculum, another element that can enhance a critical roleplaying experience is

the element of chance. Dice are important tools for conflict resolution in RPGs and often indicate the level of success a player has in performing a task. In fact, the title of this paper is derived from games based on a 20-sided die. For example, when a player rolls a “natural 20,” that signifies they have made a critical hit – it is the ultimate roll and most sought after result. Players and DMs role dice to determine how a number of tasks are resolved. For example, performing a skill-based task in an RPG can include roleplaying on behalf of the player and the DM, but it may also include a “skill check” wherein the player rolls a die. The result can be modified by the PC’s training in that skill (represented by a numeric bonus the player can add to the die roll) and other statistical and circumstantial factors. With the inclusion of chance, the players in a critical roleplaying experience can perform the resolution of a task and then incorporate a die roll to determine the level of success. A successful check can provide players with an opportunity to discuss their solution and the possible outcomes, while a failure can cause players to regroup and re-evaluate their approach, stimulating dialogue and causing students to challenge themselves in thinking about and performing alternative solutions that may not have presented themselves in their first attempt.

Irrespective of the actual mechanics used in enacting an RPG based pedagogy, the overall goal is to encourage students to find opportunities to performatively investigate and engage in texts they find compelling, engaging and important with a critical perspective that brings into clarity factors that obfuscate how social, political, economic and cultural factors negotiate and possibly limit their inclusion in society. Before describing how RPG elements can assist in this undertaking, I refer to Boal (1974) again as he describes the performative/transformatory potential of critically informed roleplay and how it can affect the individual, and hopefully, others as well

By taking possession of the stage, the Spect-Actor is consciously performing a responsible act. The stage is a representation of the reality, a fiction. But the Spect-Actor is not fictional. He (sic) exists in the scene and outside of it, in a dual reality. By taking possession of the stage in the fiction of the theatre he acts: not just in the fiction, but also in his social reality. By transforming fiction, he is transformed into himself. (p. xxi)

#### INCORPORATING RPG ELEMENTS INTO THE CLASSROOM

In the following paragraphs I’ll introduce an RPG-based idea for teachers to use in their work with students in developing critical literacy skills. The following is not a full-fledged lesson plan. As a teacher, I’ve come to appreciate a number of approaches to developing ways to teach students, and I don’t believe there is a singular, “fool-proof” formula for creating effective lesson plans. Instead, I describe one of the RPG-based concepts I’ve used in my own experience as a middle-school and high school technology teacher that I believe provided my students and me with opportunities to critique and question aspects of curriculum, schooling and certain elements of our personal lived experiences.

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While incorporating RPG elements into the classroom may seem most appropriate to an English or literary curriculum, they can also be used in history, social studies and even technology curricula. For example, I incorporated the “character sheet” concept described below into middle school and high school technology classes. I was able to address a number of curricular benchmarks for my middle school technology course, such as inserting tables, formatting text, managing pagination, and inserting pictures into a Word document, while at the same time creating spaces for my students and I to “resist” the limiting structure of the “official curriculum” as we examined, reflected-upon and discussed the choices we made in developing and performing the characters we created and re-created. In my high school technology courses, much of the “official” curriculum was concerned with conducting online research, how to locate and evaluate reliable information on the Internet, and developing the skill to effectively interpret and synthesize new information as students reported their findings. Both of the concepts I outline below not only helped us meet these curricular goals, but also provided us with rich, and often unexpected, opportunities to critically consider the subjects of our research.

Incorporating aspects of RPGs into the classroom may seem challenging, particularly if the teacher or students have little experience with playing RPGs. However, certain aspects of RPGs have crossed-over into other forms of media and as a result, may feel more accessible to teachers and students. For example, the “character sheet” – a simple synopsis of a player character’s game statistics and personal story or background originated in pen and pencil RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, but the popularity of video-game based RPGs, such as *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo) and *Skyrim* (Xbox) – games heavily influenced by pen and pencil RPGs – situate the concept of the character sheet as central to the overall gaming experience. The prevalence of the character sheet concept and its importance in video-game based RPGs has elevated it from the relative obscurity of pen and pencil gaming and has situated it as one of the most important and recognizable aspects of video-game based RPGs. In my experience, many students – even those who don’t play pen and pencil or video-game based RPGs, quickly grasp the concept and seemed comfortable with its use in the classroom.

For roleplayers, the character sheet is not only a type of quick reference crib-sheet; it is also a physical representation of their virtual character in the real-world. In video games like those mentioned above, the character sheet is usually found in an in-game menu where the player views the PC’s health status, abilities and inventory. However, in pen & pencil RPGs, the character sheet is more than a static representation of abilities and resources; it can also contain information about the PC’s personal history, background and alliances. In many cases, players record non-player characters (NPCs) their PCs come in contact with during the course of the game. They record the names of these NPCs, the location where they were first introduced into the game, their relationship to the PC and their connection to other parties in the game setting. Essentially, the character sheet provides a point of origin for a player’s orientation to the gaming world. It represents the introduction of the character into the setting, the character’s origins, motivations and overall

goals. It can document the PC's accomplishments and relationships to other PCs and NPCs. Most important, however, is it provides a personal description of the PC that represents the entirety of that character. It is the summation of the PC's physical, mental and social capabilities – and even his or her moral and ethical alignment in the game world – and provides players with the essential, performative foundation from which they interpret and perform that character.

The idea behind using a character sheet in class is to provide students with an opportunity to construct, examine and discuss a representation of a character or characters – either fictional or actual characters, and in some cases I've asked the students to complete their own character sheet representing themselves. A considerable portion of this section is spent on describing the elements of an RPG character sheet, with a less-significant portion on how I used this concept in class. I've done this intentionally because I feel that a more thorough treatment of the concept will allow the reader to understand how to incorporate this idea into their lesson plans on "their own terms." Introducing new elements to the classroom requires some careful preparation. Obviously, the teacher must be familiar enough with the idea to be able to describe it to the students. A helpful resource for learning more about RPGs can be online community forums such as those hosted by Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro and owners of the *Dungeons & Dragons* license ([community.wizards.com/](http://community.wizards.com/)) and Paizo, who publish the *Pathfinder* RPG (<http://paizo.com/paizo/messageboards>). Another resource is the System Reference Document (SRD), a set of roleplaying content created and distributed in open-license format by Wizards of the Coast. RPG enthusiasts have created a number of sites using the SRD ([www.d20srd.org](http://www.d20srd.org), [dndsrd.net](http://dndsrd.net)) as they modify their existing, and create new, RPGs. A basic understanding of RPGs and how they are played is important in ensuring that the inclusion of RPG elements in the classroom are relevant, appropriate and create opportunities for meaningful, educational experiences.

The character sheets I gave my students were comprised of five sections: Character description, Abilities, Skills, Feats and Background. I chose these sections because these are the typical categories found in most RPG character sheets and because I thought they would provide an interesting way for students to examine and think about real-world figures or construct fictional characters.

### *Abilities*

The following are the six abilities typically used in RPGs:

- Strength: Physical power
- Dexterity: Agility, reflexes and balance
- Constitution: Health and stamina
- Intelligence: Capacity for learning and reason
- Wisdom: Willpower, common-sense and intuition
- Charisma: Force of personality – leadership, persuasiveness and possibly physical attractiveness

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Initially, I relied on my experience in playing pen and pencil RPGs in setting parameters for the students. For example, traditionally *Dungeons & Dragons* has used a range of 3 – 18 (numbers usually generated by rolling sets of 6-sided dice) to establish a character's ability scores and I used these rules as a foundation for character creation with my students. However, we did not randomly roll dice to set the ability scores. Rather, students assigned their own ability scores on their sheet.

### *Skills*

Skills represent a player character's ability to complete a task or resolve conflict without necessarily resorting to combat. The introduction and subsequent emphasis on skills is one of the most notable shifts in the design of RPGs. Typical skills that are relevant to using a character sheet in the classroom might include Diplomacy, Sense Motive, Knowledge (which includes a number of categories such as history, religion, etc.) and Profession. In game, the level of skill a character might possess is determined by a PC's relevant ability score, experience level and training. However, for the classroom, I found it useful to use categories such as Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced and Expert. My students and I also worked together in creating new skills categories that were appropriate to our setting. For example, when creating their own character sheets, my students and I included skills such as "cooking," "computers," and "sports (including a number of categories such as football, cheerleading, etc.)."

### *Feats*

In RPGs, feats typically represent a special quality a character possesses or an enhanced ability to complete a task. A feat is typically associated with combat or skill resolution. However, in the classroom, I used this as an opportunity for students to either discuss special achievements or qualities their character might possess. For example, in completing a character sheet for Dr. Martin Luther King, a student might create a feat called "mighty orator" to represent Dr. King's talent for inspiring others. Feats also provide opportunities for students to express what they believe are special qualities they possess. In completing their own sheets, some of my students chose feats such as "critical thinker" and "resilient spirit." They also included accomplishments, some light-hearted and some more serious, such as "trampoline master" from a student who was a gymnast and "toughness" from a student who was battling cancer.

### *Background*

This section includes a historical synopsis of a real-world figure (including the student) or a fictional character and includes an origin story, important accomplishments, strengths and weaknesses, motivating factors and possibly even a discussion of the moral/ethical orientation of the character.

## CONSTRUCTION, DECONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE

As a teacher, I asked students to create their own character sheets where they would recreate themselves using the guidelines I mentioned above. Reading these character sheets enabled me to learn more about my students and who they were outside of the classroom. Later that semester, my students were asked to read Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in their English class. Many of the students mentioned their assignments in class and were frustrated by being "forced" to read the book. They also complained regularly about writing chapter synopses and worksheets. I used the character sheet from my class in helping students to deconstruct the characters in the text and then reconstruct them. Once the character sheets were developed, I suggested the student then perform the characters in scenes found in the book. The critical dimension came into play when the students and I incorporated practices that examined elements such as power, institutions and representations in the text and reflected on how such elements exist in the "real world." Apart from the actual formatting of the character sheets, as the technology teacher, the interpretation and portrayal of these characters was not part of my curriculum. However, the experience was rewarding as, through roleplaying *Of Mice and Men*, the students tried to investigate the economic conditions, social interactions and representations and expressions of identity of the characters in the text. Although our experience with performing these texts was limited, I echo Pinaeu's (2005) affirmation that

When engaging literary texts, performance methodology combines literary criticism with dramatic characterisation ... to the performance practitioner it is a rigorous and systematic exploration-through-enactment of actual and possible lived experiences. (p. 30)

This was my first attempt transitioning from simply creating character sheets to performing the personas described in those documents, which eventually led to including performance as a significant part of my curriculum. Later on, I would ask my students to create character sheets of figures they encountered in their research projects. The students would create character sheets for political figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as celebrities such as Lady Gaga and fictional characters such as Darth Vader from Star Wars and Eric Cartman from South Park. After the students constructed representations of these figures, we would discuss them in class, deconstructing the creation of the characters and asking questions about the choices made in assigning ability scores, skill ranks, feats and the characters' background information. From this exercise, students were given time to consider the variations and contradictions that exist in the presentation of historical and popular figures and how to begin to question the discourses that arrange and promote such presentations.

These were the first steps in our investigation of an RPG-based critical performance pedagogy that involved texts students selected, and I encourage

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teachers who enjoy incorporating play, performance and critical perspectives into their classroom to consider an approach to education that Pinaeu (2005) describes as

inherently, and exhilaratingly, countercultural at both the pedagogical and theoretical levels. The common practices of performance studies classrooms are often exemplars of critical pedagogy (p. 30)

as they experiment and expand on the suggestions listed above in developing effective and emancipative learning environments and critical literacy practices for them and their students.

#### CONCLUSION

An RPG-based critical performance pedagogy is an attempt to create opportunities for critical inquiry and the development of critical literacy skills through the interpretation and analysis of texts, including the “great books” of the Western canon, as well as popular texts erupting from the everyday lives of students, through a performative, performance-based model of inquiry. The goal is to enable students and teachers to develop the critical, analytical aplomb necessary to inform and infuse their action as agents of positive, social change in the world. The method through which this goal is achieved can be described as playful, and sometimes the performers are even described as “jokers” or “tricksters.” However, as Conquergood(1989) reminds us, these should be characteristics should be understood as empowering and liberating terms in that in

playing with the social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster’s playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step toward transformation. (p. 85)

Although the method is playful, the purpose and goals of a critical performance pedagogy are seriously committed to enabling students and teachers to act as empowered agents who strive to authentically know, interpret and act upon the positive transformation of the conditions of their everyday lived experiences.

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