

Those Who Play, Emerge Together:  
Toward a Community-Building Framework Through Table-Top Role Playing

by

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative dissertation explores the use of an original table-top role-playing game as a framework for community-building among independent community educators who lack a central geographic nexus. The study utilized an action research approach, involving the creation and development of the game in collaboration with participants for a period of many months, using an iterative, emergent design process that emphasized collaboration and feedback. The research sought to answer the following questions: 1) How can a table-top role-playing game establish and build community among independent community educators? 2) By engaging in an emergent design-informed table-top role-playing game, what kinds of community-building frameworks can be produced by independent community educators playing the game?

The game, called "New School," was designed to facilitate communication and connection among educators working in a variety of communities, contexts, and geographic locations. Through a series of playtesting sessions and a reflective feedback loop, the researcher and participants identified key features of the game that supported community-building, including opportunities for storytelling, shared problem-solving, and connection with personal and professional experiences. The findings suggest that the game has potential to serve as a framework for community-building, promoting emergent collaboration and knowledge-sharing among participants. Implications for future research and practice in this area are discussed.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all folks, seen and unseen, from the past, present, or future, upon whose hard work my success has been made possible. May the racist, capitalist systems that designed these perpetuating inequities perish into oblivion, and the systems that arise from abolition fortify and heal us all.

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## LIST OF COMMON ACRONYMS

D&D = Dungeons & Dragons

DM = Dungeon Master

GM = Game Master

NPC = Non-Player Character

PC = Player Character

TRPG = Table-top Role-Playing Game

## CHAPTER 1

### SETTING THE SCENE

Educators are defined by their students: who educates depends on to whom the learner decides they will pay attention. If we limit our thinking and definition of an educator to the narrowly defined profession of ‘classroom teacher,’ then we not only lose the abundant resources of nontraditional educators but we alienate them as well, perpetuating the deficit-oriented nature of the professional development of most uncertified or non-classroom teachers and educators. These *independent community educators* are still teachers, often working after school part-time within the walls of traditional school buildings or education centers. What they do and how they do it matters, and so does each strand of the connective threads they share.

This qualitative doctoral dissertation investigates the use of a table-top role-playing game as a means of community-building among independent community educators who lack a central geographic nexus. The study involved an action research approach where the game was collaboratively created and developed over several months to understand how a table-top role-playing game could build community, and what kinds of frameworks could be developed from such gameplay. The game was designed to promote communication and connection among educators in different contexts and geographic locations, and through playtesting and feedback, key features were identified that supported community-building. The study's findings indicate that the game has potential as a framework for community-building, encouraging collaboration and knowledge-sharing among participants. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

The notion of which individuals are included in this population of educators is nebulous at best, especially when considering their collective absence from any contemporary discussion of education. Rarely if ever do these educators appear in the literature, and when they do, they are likely secondary to the study's concern for its student population - almost never are these educators *all* included in the subject of study. Although formal training and education are not required as is the standard with classroom teachers, these educators have unique experiences and perspectives that need to be seen, heard, read, shared, and shouted from the proverbial rooftops. The fact that the mere number of these *independent community educators* is unquantifiable is indicative of a specific research need in innovative leadership.

Although they operate within many schools and spheres of education, *independent community educators* often operate peripherally within school communities and are not afforded the material and immaterial benefits of being full-time school employees. Said benefits may include but are not limited to professional development opportunities, institutional knowledge, familiarity with school policies and norms, and union membership (Friedman, 2009). Furthermore, by not having a singular institutional or organizational affiliation, their ability to advocate for themselves is diminished. For example, there is no collection of data that includes the salaries or pay-rate averages of afterschool teachers (Friedman, 2009); this fact, not to mention that it still remains true over ten years later, further demonstrates the degree to which these educators are economically isolated in the professional field.

The nature of their profession often means these educators enter into and participate in multiple communities of practice. Without a central location, each educator

maintaining their own unique orbit, it stands to reason that developing and building a strong, supportive community among themselves would not be without its challenges. Even afterschool programs that organize and train their instructors and community educators often do so within a closed system that still operates in an exclusive manner; the same can be said for part-time staff at educational community centers. The irony of community educators not having an established, open community of their own is not lost on this research study. However, with the use of technology and innovative research these educators can now purposefully enter into communion with one another.

With the additional context of the global pandemic, most independent community educators were not able to engage with students in-person as they have been accustomed to. Their lack of physical access to educational spaces, temporary immobility, and loss of income experienced as a result has undermined many both professionally and socioeconomically. Now that they are beginning to re-enter physical educational spaces, the strengthening of their skills, confidence, and sense of belonging with specific intention and care is more important than ever.

This research first proposes the inherent value of the communion of such a group of educators, and next considers the framework, mode, and patterns of community members' interactions. The often-punctuated nature of independent community educators' presence in schools means they are constantly navigating shifts to and from varying cultures of their respective communities. These diverse geographies are both embraced and make essential the consideration of fellowship among practitioners. These practitioners are in possession of such tremendous assets and insights, a true abundance of knowledge and enduring understandings; teaching and learning from one another can

only strengthen their individual practices. Perhaps, even, a collective practice could emerge from this unexamined population, once united.

### **Situated Context**

I have been a primary school classroom teacher at BASIS Independent Brooklyn, a PreK–12 private, secular school located in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, since the 2016-17 school year. BASIS Independent Brooklyn (BIB) opened in 2014 and provides educational services to almost 805 students in grades 1-12 (BASIS Independent Brooklyn, n.d.). The school has proved to be remarkably ethnically and culturally diverse: 48% of BIB students identify as a person of color and 41 languages were spoken by students from the 89 countries represented in the school community (BASIS Independent Brooklyn, n.d.). As a for-profit school charging tuition, the student body and their families have been rather homogenous with respect to their socioeconomic status.

In addition to my teaching position, I served for two years as the subject advisor for two BASIS courses: kindergarten mathematics and kindergarten civics, science, and history. In this capacity, I advised all kindergarten teachers and teaching fellows on best pedagogical practices, representing four BASIS Independent Schools located in the United States and five BASIS International Schools located in China and Thailand. Although it has been my responsibility to actively support my colleagues, they too have served as valuable pedagogical resources for one another.

My initial interest in pursuing my teaching degree grew from my experience working as a teaching artist at the Third Street Music School Settlement Preschool, where I taught movement and music classes for children and their caregivers. While pursuing

and completing my M.S.Ed. at CUNY Hunter College in 2018, I was a preschool teacher in New York City at the 14th Street Y Preschool. Before teaching at the 14th Street Y, I was closely involved in their summer camp program located in Staten Island, NY - New Country Day Camp - serving for three summers first as the third grade Division Head and then as a member of the Key Staff, Program Coordinator, for two years. My initial relationship with New Country Day Camp was established through a colleague and fellow teaching artist I have collaborated and performed with in the New York City area; this friend is a visual artist, and I received my MFA in dance choreography from the University of Iowa in 2013. Before then, I was working part time as a teaching artist at Third Street Music School Settlement while also interning at two arts organizations, Gibney Dance and Trisha Brown Dance Company.

This brief, skeletal description of my own entrance into the field of teaching provides a glimpse of the complex networks and gig-like nature of many part-time, independent community educators' work. Truthfully, in order to meet my own unique needs as both a teacher *and* a student simultaneously speaking, I longed for one singular location at which I could rest and belong, rather than trying to carefully construct my work schedule and thus income piecemeal. Status as a member of the independent community educator community should not just be a rite of passage or segue into classroom teaching, something you informally graduate from or attribute to hard knocks - it has its own place in the workforce, one it deserves, and one that is consistently under pressure from shifting authorities, bureaucracies, and hierarchies present at each educational site they visit.

## **Larger Context**

In the face of COVID, many of my independent educator and artist colleagues have left the city, either temporarily or permanently due to lack of employment or financial instability. Many folks were furloughed as the financial constraints of the pandemic squeezed budgets, and those who remained experienced the challenges of teaching virtually. As many have now re-entered schools post-COVID, we find ourselves in an ideal time to reshape the way we think about this part of children's schooling and should approach student re-engagement with specific intention. Though I acknowledge that what I witness at BIB is a limited window and merely a fraction of what is occurring in most schools (i.e., public or charter), the overall quality of programs, organization, and care given to the teachers in these auxiliary programs indeed deserves a second look, holistically. In my own pre-pandemic experience as a teaching artist and independent community educator, even then I felt like a resident in the school's blind spot at times. *Independent community educators* are deeply present, relevant, and mistakenly overlooked by schools and scholars, who have much to learn from engaging with them.

These educators often lack the material benefits of full-time employee status (e.g., healthcare), not to mention the community benefits (staff collaboration, social interaction, support). With the additional context of the global pandemic, most gig educators were not able to engage with students in-person as they have been accustomed to, as all visitation was prohibited. Their lack of physical access to educational spaces and immobility experienced, as a result of the pandemic, has pushed them to the edge of society and the ways in which they are socio-economically undermined. In this way, connective



marginality resonates with all disenfranchised educators and teachers, and sets the space for a critical gathering, perhaps even a reclamation of power and agency.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The Doctor of Education degree in Leadership and Innovation at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College is designed for educator-leaders to improve their local contexts through systems change and leadership-oriented action research. This doctoral research is the culmination of my work to "lead change and implement innovation" (Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, 2021, p. 3) through the identification of a problem of practice, not to mention an underserved section of the educator workforce. Throughout the cycles of action research, my studies have fulfilled the program expectation of pursuing continuous improvement, driven by my research reflections and the prioritization of benefitting my community and its teacher-members.

Returning to the question of, "Who teaches?" my research aims to look at those who are already *doing* the teaching but have yet to come into our collective conscious understanding and definition, even schema, of a *teacher*. This dis-appearance of this section of the educator workforce community is isolating, even more so than teaching generally is already. These educators are invisible to the systems that house them, overlooked, and disconnected in this way from many of their immediate professional surroundings. This reality means that there is an entire body of knowledge that has not been researched and the assets contained within that cultural capital are untapped as a whole.

The Next Education Workforce is a "comprehensive, cross-functional objective of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College" (Next Education

Workforce, n.d.a.), that works to rethink and reimagine traditional models of education. On a mission to empower educators, The Next Education Workforce acknowledges many elements of the education profession need revisiting; in other words, “We face a workforce design problem” (Basile & Maddin, 2022, p. 5). The Next Education Workforce seeks to reconceptualize the life cycle of an educator in schools, with the ultimate goal of strengthening the profession thus and thereby improving the educational quality provided to schoolchildren. Whereas “[t]he after-school field has been overlooked as a part of national strategy to boost employment and create new career paths[...] because many positions are part-time and low-wage” (Friedman, 2009), the Next Education Workforce embraces a multitude of possible permutations in regards to who is present and working in the classroom, the nature of their work, and their role and responsibilities; here their goal that most closely aligns with my interest in independent community educators is their commitment to “deeper and personalized professional learning” (Next Education Workforce, n.d.b.). One of the organization’s research questions, “How do schools and systems move from more traditional models to sustainable Next Education Workforce models?” (Next Education Workforce, n.d.c.) resonates with this study’s pursuit of sustainable working models of community building among underserved educators.

In their comprehensive work concerning community educators and collaboration among *all* community members in educating children, Harbour (2012) describes the role of community educators as those “designed to supplement, and not supplant the school system” (p. 78), also distinguishing them from traditional classroom teachers. Within the literature composed by the New York City Department of Youth & Community

Development, the term *youth work professionals* is used to describe “individuals who work with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social and educational development to enable them to gain voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (NYC DYCD, 2009). The Next Education Workforce outlines four distinct categories of educators that work in schools: community educators, paraeducators, professional educators, and educational leaders (Next Education Workforce, n.d.b.); here community educators are defined as “prepared members of the community” (Next Education Workforce, n.d.b.). In their recent study, Hwang et al. (2020) position “afterschool instructors (ASI)” (p. 2457) at the center of their research, remarking on the influence and effects of the multiple locales, roles, and responsibilities of these educators. A coherence of professional identities is a needed and useful component of the purpose and significance of this study.

In this study, the use of *independent community educator* is intended to be an inclusive term, including but not limited to teaching artists, community educators, and other educators that for various reasons does not fit the profile of a full-time, traditional classroom teacher. With the ultimate goal of fortifying my professional community by providing support to folks who have been marginalized by and isolated from educational communities, this study’s innovation lies within the emergent co-creation of a community-building framework, one that could potentially be applied in a multitude of educational or organizational contexts. In addition to the knowledge and community produced during gatherings, participating educators may later synthesize the effects of the process into their own teaching practices, thereby enhancing the field with their renewed expertise as well as the quality of educational experience provided to their students.

## Guiding Conceptual Framework

Emergent design has been applied in many organizational contexts and settings; most notably and recently it has appeared in agile software development. In this manner, a team of programmers write new code in small, discrete increments with intermittent testing for functionality, working independently and interdependently simultaneously with a shared goal of completing a given project (Nicolette, 2017). Though the goals may differ, the essential principles demonstrated have been successful in educational contexts, affirming the notion that emergent design's presence indicates future growth and success, as "large-scale growth comes from the basis of many little contributions" (Cavallo, 2004, p. 100).

Inherent in an emergent approach is its flexibility, in addition to acceptance and anticipation of change. Within a contemporary imagination of *emergent strategy*, brown (2017) has developed foundational tools, principles, protocols, and intentional modes of facilitating, including practices for developing trust among participants with a specific, laser-like focus on radical liberation from fear and oppression, also known as freedom. Here, brown has also collected and honored the work and core beliefs of others, including the "Jemez Principles" (1996) for democratic organizing, Allied Media Projects' (AMP) "shared principles for adaptation with intention and interdependence" (brown, 2017, p. 98), and core elements of consensus-building and decision-making. brown and her colleagues at the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute (ESII) define emergent strategy as a path, one that "invites us to think about change as a constant state of being and how to align and direct it" (ESII, 2022). The collaborative nature of this inductive approach to building community, embracing, and empowering community voices in the development

of a possible framework, has deeply informed the formation and mode of this study's innovation.

Furthermore, the intention of emergent strategy is woven into the *how* and *why* of this research study with respect to its formation of a virtual community of practice. brown identifies herself in this text as a “woe,” (2017, p. 26), a term she attributes to Canadian rapper Drake for sharing and making more known. The term is an acronym for Working on Excellence and is emblematic of a group of folks growing together with intention. The purpose of a group such as this is to pursue and celebrate alongside one another the challenges involved in the development of self-awareness, including accountability through mutual transparency, something brown calls, *co-evolution through friendship*, meaning “we evolve in relationships of mutual transformation” (brown, 2017, p. 149). Upon reflecting on her own community in practice, brown shares some elements of her woes' journey: Self-transformation, curiosity, vulnerable reflection, pattern disrupting, and being present and intentional (2017). Additionally, brown recommends the following with regards to “visionary fiction” (2017, p. 152), something that, upon reading it, reached out and grabbed me by the collar, shook me vigorously, and moved me forward with purpose, clear eyes, and a full heart:

Art is not neutral. It either upholds or disrupts the status quo, advancing or regressing justice... All organizing is science fiction. If you are shaping the future, you are a futurist. And visionary fiction is a way to practice the future in our minds, alone and together. Visionary fiction is neither utopian nor dystopian, instead it is like real life: Hard, realistic... Hopeful as a strategy. Visionary fiction disrupts the hero narrative concept that one person (often one white man, often Matt Damon) alone has the skills to save the world. Cultivate fiction that explores change as a collective, bottom-up process. Fiction that centers those who are currently marginalized - not to be nice, but because those who survive on the margins tend to be the most experientially innovative - practicing survival-based efficiency, doing the most with the least, an important skill area on a planet whose

resources are under assault by less marginalized people. Visionary fiction is constantly applying lessons from our past to our future(s). (p. 152).

### **Research Questions, Innovation, and Relevant Terms**

With the idea of visionary fiction as a bottom-up collective process, I decided to move into this new foray as a novice game-designer, clinging tightly to the abundance of relevant knowledge I already have at my disposal. In both of my previous graduate studies, earning an M.F.A. in Dance and an M.S.Ed. in Early Childhood Ed., improvisation has been a continuous thread woven into culminating components of my studies. While studying dance at the University of Iowa, I rigorously studied and practiced improvisational forms, including partaking in a months-long learning, improvising, choreographic process along with eight other dancers while learning/making *Set and Reset/Reset* under the direction of two former company members of Trisha Brown Dance Company. *Set and Reset* (1983) is an original work of choreography by Trisha Brown, now performed as repertory by Trisha Brown Dance Company. Additionally, it is licensed for educational purposes, most often to professional dance companies and universities, wherein the student/company member dancers learn *and* create their own version of *Set and Reset*, based on their collective improvisations of four specific sections or “walls” of an original base phrase by Trisha Brown; this new production as a result of their unique choreographic process thus has a new title: *Set and Reset/Reset*.

Thus began my deepest dive into the collective power of improvisation. Later, while simultaneously working as a Development Intern for Trisha Brown Dance Company and completing my graduate studies in education at Hunter College, I decided

to write my master's thesis about improvisation; more specifically, its title was: *A Labor of Praxis: New York City Teaching Fellows' Training in Improvisational Theatre*. The essential idea presented in this proposal-type thesis was that NYC Teaching Fellows, a group of folks that largely consist of career changers that already have an undergraduate degree and are going to be returning for a *gratis* Master's degree in teaching, provided that they work in the areas of the five boroughs that are in the highest need, with students experiencing the highest risk. Rather unjustly and unfairly to both parties, it gives the children that need the most, the teachers who have the least! My thesis was designed to ameliorate this chasm of logic in terms of how to prepare folks more properly from the regular workforce to teach children who are hurting, are struggling, and need an intense amount of care and consideration. Flexibility and being ready are a must here, at the very least.

When deciding on the medium for my visionary fiction, I knew I could not reach teachers with dance, nor probably with improv theater classes. In search of a transferable container for improvisation - I found my Tupperware: table-top role playing games. Table-top role-playing games (TRPGs) are social games, "like improvising a story for a play, television show, or movie" (Durall, 2009, p. 4). As a person who has studied both anthropology and early childhood development, and is a professionally trained dancer and improviser, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that, "playing roles is fundamental to human society and culture" (Burn, 2013, p. 241) from a multitude of perspectives and in a variety of academic and professional contexts. Indeed, role-playing activities, scenarios, and games are present and active in a variety of communal contexts, including educational approaches, psychological therapies, games, and entertainment. Furthermore,

it is of the utmost importance to me that the building of this framework is done so with democratic, active, and orderly participation. The transformative nature of role-playing and its predilection to community-building led to my decision to develop a community framework through the interactions that take place as I facilitate a table-top role-playing game of my original design.

*(RQ1): How can a Table-top Role-playing Game establish and build community among independent community educators?*

*(RQ2): By engaging in an emergent design-informed Table-top Role-playing Game, what kinds of community-building frameworks can be produced by independent community educators playing the game?*

In alignment with the theoretical underpinnings of this project and its emergent design approach to community building, the innovation centers around the playing of a tabletop role-playing game (TRPG): “a type of game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience” (Cover, 2010, p. 168). Alongside the participants of this study, I have created an original TRPG relevant to participants’ work experiences as teachers, each research cycle consisting of a session of gameplay with participants via online video chat and other digital media.

The most iconic, archetypal TRPG is the game *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), created in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson; this game will serve as a basic framework upon which my innovation will build. Indeed, the D&D framework has served as a springboard for many commercially produced TRPGs like *Kids on Bikes*, *Honey Heist*, *Stars Without Number* (El-Tayib, 2020), as well as television series such as



Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (Carroll, 2011) and innumerable home-made versions. The most essential element of the D&D framework with respect to this research study is its production of an *emergent narrative*, an “[attempt] to produce narrative structure directly from interaction between entities that autonomously generate their own actions” (Aylett & Louchart, 2013, p. 337), as a result of gameplay. This is different from ‘choose your adventure’ types of games and novels, ones in which a finite number of stories can be told, in a finite number of possible permutations. In this study, *independent community educators* will not only make their own individual choices, but the entire group is held accountable for the actions of the individual.

### **Prior Cycles of Research**

While Cycle 0 and Cycle 1 of my action research studies did not seek to answer the same exact research questions at which I have now arrived, there are strong connections that remain at the core of my research interests and scholarly pursuits. At its most basic, the mode of interaction with the participants during both of the aforementioned cycles, recorded Zoom sessions, seems to be a format with which participants are open to (even prefer), and one that affords itself to be subject to a variety of analyses (especially transcribed video recordings). Additionally, the experience of mapping and re-mapping has served as a springboard for my innovation's TRPG maps. What follows is a summary of my two seminal experiences conducting action research, and the assets I gained during the process of reflection.

#### ***Cycle 0: Project SEL Reconnaissance (spring 2020)***

With one semester of the Leadership & Innovation Ed.D. program under my belt, my initial foray into action research began with a desire to examine what kinds of

interactions teachers described with respect to collaboration, storytelling, and the co-construction of knowledge, any factors affecting these approaches to teaching, and how they could be used in order to foster the development of social-emotional skills in young children. The participants in this study were three colleagues and fellow early learning teachers (Pre-K - 2nd grade) at BIB, with whom I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews consisting of a nine-item questionnaire. As a result of this study, I discovered that collaborative storytelling was not a current practice of any teacher participant, insofar as single storylines with longevity akin to an oral tradition are concerned. I thought perhaps this could be an area in which I might provide some insights during Cycle 1 professional development workshops and/or collaborative planning sessions, as at the time I was serving as the BASIS network's Subject Adviser for Kindergarten Civics, Science, and History, but alas this did not come to be.

***Cycle 1: Project Collaborative Mentorship (spring 2021)***

Due to a variety of factors, it became necessary to the continuation of my research that my local context broadened to include educators in private, independent schools throughout the five boroughs; this was possible because I have built and maintained a strong professional network of teachers through my years of teaching. The intervention consisted of two, 30-minute Zoom sessions I titled "Research and Practice." During the sessions, the four participants were invited to both examine their own missteps and successes, but furthermore to question and examine their relationship with systemic oppression and privilege. The education journey mapping process, described in Annamma (2017), was implemented as a tool for self-excavation, both to highlight the ways in which forces with and against oneself and to acknowledge and describe the

inscribing forces of social geography and space. I first shared and described the process of creating the initial drafts of my own education journey map and gave them the homework assignment of completing their first draft to share back on at the second Zoom session, which they all completed and shared. Upon reflecting on the categories produced by the qualitative interview transcripts, I began organizing and describing three themes: (1) *Seeking, listening, thinking, and reflecting as preparation for teaching*, (2) *Voicing and un-voicing as a community-building and leadership strategy*, and (3) *Fortifying oneself and one's community by being open and available to change*. These themes are considered in terms of what we are to gather and learn from the explicit and implicit contents of the two aforementioned qualitative interviews.

I feel confident in what I have applied from my prior cycles of action research, but mostly in what I learned in-between Cycle 0 and Cycle 1. This period of time was one in which I had to radically shift my approach and perspective on how I would conduct research. I spoke about this during my first Doctoral Research Conference presentation and referred to it as a “practice of problems.” Because I reflected on the possibilities and created an organized strategy to overcome the obstacle of no longer being able to exclusively work with BIB faculty, my vision was shifted to an overlooked group of educators. I owe my research study to the powers that be who made it impossible for me to follow my initial research interest and am grateful for the opportunity to shift my focus to working for *independent community educators* and maintain a critical eye toward the educational places and spaces in which they exist.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Critical social theories have the “power to change the pedagogical process from one of knowledge transmission to knowledge transformation” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 11). This kind of approach implies the reification and reorganization of collective knowledge upon critical, social analysis. If the practice of critique, questioning what has come before and what has long been assumed to be fundamental, is also “a never-ending process of liberation, of deferred and multiple emancipations” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 16), the freedom as revelation that lies on the other side of critique is part of what my research hopes to unearth. It is with this intention that my research has sought to develop a critical framework for building community among educators. The guiding theories of critical constructivism and of critical gaming and role-playing pedagogies are at the core of all aspects of the design, formation, and execution of this study.

*Critical constructivism, critical gaming, and critical role-playing pedagogies* guide my work and its “why,” whereas *emergent design* and the review of the research guides the “how” of my innovation. The word “critical” can send up literal *red* flags; it acts as a signifier of something “liberal” or “leftist” for politicians to attack, ban, or use as general ammunition. However, the word “critical” in academic contexts serves to denote self-reflection and reflexivity (the *doing* something about what you noticed). Here, critical applications were necessary in order to achieve my goal of building a community that can look at and alter itself as it sees fit, transparent for all to see. In this study, critical constructivism (making, shaping, and forming of the community by its members) and critical gaming and role-playing pedagogies (gathering and play format inherent in innovation) have guided and grounded the study, tethering it to something akin to a moral center, a reference point of purpose and duty in the playing of games.

### *Critical Constructivism*

Critical constructivism is rooted in constructivism and constructivist teaching practices, theories of learning and cognitive development that hold as their core belief that knowledge is created through interactions with others. Both the parent philosophy and its critical development value students' prior knowledge and acknowledge, "not only the acquisition and extension of new concepts but also the reorganization of old ones" (Jofili et al., 1999, p. 7). Critical constructivism asks educators to examine the ways in which they *re-construct* knowledge, actively working to avoid perpetuating systemic, hegemonic, or dominant hierarchies (e.g., white supremacy). A critical constructivist pedagogy is concerned with identifying and examining the reasons and forces behind oppression in co-constructions of knowledge, and the ways in which to "move beyond the formal style of thinking which emerged from empiricism and rationalism" (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 58). Critical constructivist practices "[seek] to render the contingency of construction and the play of power as visible as possible" (Fleury & Garrison, 2014, p. 32).

My research has, in part, emerged from my own experience as an independent contractor working among a variety of educational contexts and communities, participating in the gig economy of part-time teaching work. I have personally felt the tensions of not being a full-fledged employee, lacking nuanced knowledge privileged to full-time faculty and staff. Access is restricted to an "invisible curriculum" (Hicks, 1969); in their contemporary definition Reese (2022) describes it as "a more implicit dimension often based on meaningful connections with faculty and peers" (p. 57). These implicit, coded ways of being are embedded in all educational, organizational spaces and contexts,

and as such are ripe for excavation. With a critical eye toward education and its privileged spaces, and specific consideration for educators inhabiting marginal spaces with(in) schools, the attention paid to the space that these educators inhabit and/or are provided needs “re-vision” (hooks, 1989, p. 203). Critical constructivism establishes the value and type of knowledge creation that will likely come to being during the innovation, and the community building during gameplay will be situated within this larger paradigm.

### ***Critical Gaming and Role-Playing Pedagogies***

A theory and praxis proposed by Crocco (2011), critical gaming pedagogy is “[when] the valuable learning principles embodied by games (digital or otherwise) are used to promote critical thinking about hegemonic ideas and institutions rather than to propagate them” (p. 29). The author describes their own research regarding the analysis and codification of *existing* games and offers a second way to practice critical gaming pedagogy: the playing of “serious games, games specially designed for a primary purpose other than entertainment” (Crocco, 2011, p. 29). These games are also designed with the intention of generating “empathy that provokes critical thinking” (Crocco, 2011, p. 30), and gameplay experiences that contain issues that must be resolved with the formation of new knowledge.

When discussing the implications of their research with role-playing pedagogies in leadership training, Sogunro (2004) maintains that role-playing is practical and pragmatic, provides participants with an opportunity to stretch their way of thinking, learning, and relating to ourselves and others, and is empowering. A *critical* role-playing pedagogy will be the most appropriate theoretical framework to adopt for the proposed

innovation at hand, as critical role-playing games encourage players to “embody voices and perspectives that may be quite different from their own[...] to speak and write using discourse that may be unfamiliar[...] to explore relationships among people, texts, and contexts” (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012, p. 123). Role-playing can also develop participants’ ability to solve social problems, and actively cultivates empathy in and among player participants (Bowman, 2011). Being that an overwhelming majority of research indicates that role-playing does “build an overall sense of connection and community amongst participants” (Bowman, 2011, p. 34), one aspect of what this research has hoped to develop is a critical positioning toward the connective threads of the communities’ nexus. Furthermore, explicit steps will be taken in the structure of the proposed game to probe players’ empathetic capacities.

### **Review of Research**

What follows is a description of contemporary research with respect to A) table-top role-playing games and their use as an educational tool and intervention in adult learning, and B) the value and nature of virtual communities of practice for educators. While the studies from Strand A were collected from various fields adjacent to mine, they serve both to legitimize my innovation’s format as a TRPG, and demonstrate its effective use outside of pure gaming. In the pursuit of community building, the studies from Strand B guide best practices when creating virtual communities of practice (VCoP) in education. However, the learning community platforms in these studies are often delivered as an LMS (Learning Management System). The development of the study’s virtual community of practice incorporated and applied many lessons learned and expressed by the various authors, and to them I attribute many decisions made in terms of

the format and mode of community building my research will engage in (online, mediated TRPGs), and in personal preparation necessary after having read and digested this research, in order to successfully fulfill my obligations as a community builder, game master, and researcher.

### ***Strand A: Table-Top Role-Playing Games and Adult Learning***

TRPGs have been used to educate a wide variety of audiences, from children with disabilities to businessmen, about ethics and social responsibility (Zdravkova, 2014). Though our fields are tangential, the application of and importance of the use of TRPGs in an innovative way are very much alive in this body of research and have been instrumental in legitimizing and undergirding this research study.

Wright et al. (2020) conducted a research study of 12 college student participants, who all played a series of six, four-hour D&D sessions with one another. The specific curiosity of this psychological inquiry was measuring participants' moral growth and development, and whether or not TRPGs could "function as a medium for moral development" (Wright et al., 2020, p. 101). Data was collected with two psychological instruments: the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2) and the Self-Understanding Interview (SUI), the latter a framework for gathering qualitative narratives from participants. These responses were coded using the Values Embedded in Narrative (VEiN) coding manual. The researchers determined that the structure of the game encouraged players to "cooperate and otherwise behave in ways that are supportive of and loyal to their fellow-group members and[...] a collective discussion and negotiation of social and moral norms and active moral decision making within the context of the game" (Wright et al., 2020, p. 101). Despite the difference in approach between these researchers' inquiry and my own,



their conclusion that TRPGs “can serve as a form of moral practice” (Wright et al., 2020, p. 119), bolsters the legitimacy of my study: if *moral* practice makes progress, surely a TRPG could function as a medium for *justice*-oriented community development?

In their 2021 study, Sidhu & Carter sought to gain more knowledge surrounding *meaningful play*, a concept described originally by Salen & Zimmerman (2003) as “the goal of successful game design” (p. 34). Additionally, these researchers maintain that “the meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 34). Sidhu & Carter’s primary critique of this definition is that it “does not consider play to be meaningful outside the context of the game” (Sidhu & Carter, 2020, p. 1047). They observed gameplay of and conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 D&D players belonging to one of four different campaigns. Their data suggested that most commonly, players would experience *meaningful play* during events surrounding a death event that had occurred during gameplay. The researchers propose a new concept of *pivotal play*, typified by a death in D&D, defined as “appealing, memorable, and transformative play that transcends game boundaries” (Sidhu & Carter, 2021, p. 1052). Though death events weren’t the focus of my own research, this study demonstrates that D&D gameplay can have a transformational, trans-environmental impact and yield serious results, even in adults. Moreover, the researchers highlight the significance of these types of experiences with respect to future game design.

Abbot et al. (2022) recently published their clinical study, during which seven adults with social anxiety disorder engaged in weekly, 90-minute D&D sessions for one year. The social worker-researchers hoped these sessions would serve as therapeutic

supplements for their patient clients. Participants in the study indeed developed a greater sense of ease in social situations, as they described to researchers during interviews. Further concretizing the concepts developed in the aforementioned study by Sidhu & Carter (2021), the participants were able to transfer the skills they practiced and learned during gameplay into their everyday lives (Abbo et al., 2022). Most notably, this study serves as a valuable resource for potential practitioners, as “[the] model presented provides an alternative framework for clinicians to implement a creative group intervention for difficult to engage populations” (Abbot et al., 2022, p. 29). Even though my own research is not clinical in nature, the structure of the social worker-researchers’ game informed my own research design in terms of game session and game jam length, hopefully contributing to its success with participants.

The aforementioned contemporary research studies all maintain the shared goal of developing adult participants and their learning via TRPGs. I did not implement a strictly D&D rule system during my innovation; rather, I created my own version using D&D as a template. However, plenty of research suggests that TRPGs, in general, are successful in community-building endeavors. Though their research goal was to educate adults about drought and to build community resilience, Podebradska et al. (2020) successfully designed their own TRPG *Ready for Drought?* within a similar “serious games” paradigm (p. 2490). In their collection of research Zdravkova (2014) draws similarities among other studies and their own in which TRPGs were instrumental in achieving adult education including in college computer-ethics courses, both in-person and through LMS “table talk” (p. 64).

***Strand B: Virtual Communities of Practice in Education***

In their 2015 study, Booth & Kellogg conducted a multiple case study of educators' participation in virtual communities of practice through the lens of a value-creation framework. Although the purpose of the study was largely directed at viability, the researchers did find that online communities can act as a crucible for educators to “co-construct new forms of meaning and understanding in ways that are individually and collectively valuable” (Booth & Kellogg, 2015, p. 695). They accomplished these educational research initiatives in partnership with Teach for America Net (TFANet), the Center for Teaching Quality's (CTQ) Teacher Leaders Network (TLN), the National Science Teaching Association Learning Center (NSTA LC), and English Companion Ning (ECN), and gained specific insights into what creates value in these organizations' online communities. The results of their analysis outline *structured activities, tangible products, leadership opportunities, and resource repositories and robust tools* as common ways of creating a more valuable online community from the perspective of teacher-participants (Booth & Kellogg, 2015).

In their 2018 study, Hajisoteriou et al., developed their own virtual community of practice (VCoP) platform called INTERACT, in order to develop the intercultural competencies of more than a hundred teachers. The researchers list the positive potential opportunities afforded by participating in such VCoPs, including “joint learning and application of learning; engaging in supportive and shared leadership; developing a sense of ownership among participants; enhancing teachers' commitment; producing and disseminating tacit knowledge, reflecting on teachers' practice in a collaborative and supporting learning environment, and offering opportunities for providing immediate feedback to community members” (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018, p. 31). Additionally, the

researchers proclaimed the absolute necessity of developing a common practice of VCoPs for educators, as both technology advances in classrooms and as the demands on teachers shift and progress, digital communities allow for more mobile and flexible frameworks of engagement. This research, among many others, supports the belief that VCoPs themselves arise out of a need for a “new mode of learning and knowledge development platform” (Ogbmichael & Warden, 2018, p. 1).

### ***Summary and Implications of Literature***

The critical orientation of the guiding theories in this study existed as a failsafe, one that ensured that the participants and I were engaging in creating a *responsible* community framework, as opposed to an *irresponsible* framework - one that allows itself to become addicted to confirmation bias, even if it is cyclical. If a community builds itself with *intention* and *attention*, then these blind spots are lit - we can step back and ask ourselves, well, anything. Critical constructivism, critical gaming, and critical role-playing pedagogies come to life in my research study through its conscious design and facilitation during gameplay. For example, one of the six character-ability categories in my TRPG is *empathy*. This required players to check their assumptions about how they interact with NPCs, and increased their awareness of how they make space for one another during gameplay.

As facilitator and GM, it was my duty to make sure that these imaginative explorations beyond the self were, while co-constructed, not harmful, or detrimental to the overall goal of critical community building. It was necessary that I prepared rigorously for this role, sharpening my understanding and ability to implement emergent strategy and design principles into practice. Many of the guiding principles of emergent

strategy, specifically adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, nonlinear and iterative change, and creating possibility (brown, 2017), were present in the game's designs, and in player actions and choices that were presented, encouraged, and rewarded.

Research indicates my study was likely to be both valuable and viable - it was an unexamined area of study, in both participants and product. Although the game itself is not nearly as structured as the board games an average person might be accustomed to, a robust resource guide will support the success of the game's effect titled the Players Handbook. Not to mention, the format of the game itself is engaging and innovative. More importantly, the research indicates that playing a TRPG has the power to change a person for the better, not simply entertain them. The consciousness in intention of the facilitator and game-designer's (my) approach is what bridges the gap between play and serious play in this context and was perhaps the largest challenge.

## CHAPTER 2

### INNOVATION AND METHODS

In this chapter I will outline the components of this qualitative action research study, including its innovation and research design, data collection and analysis procedures, boundaries of inquiry, ethical considerations, and timeline. The *problem of practice* that guides this investigation is that independent community educators lack a uniting community. The innovation created to address this problem of practice was an original table-top roleplaying game (TRPG) called *New School*, designed for such educators to be played in a series of sessions. Its name is sourced from the experience of each session of game play, meant to mirror the regular experience of independent community educators: entering into new school environments. Qualitative data was sourced from interviews, questionnaires, researcher journal reflections, video recordings of gameplay sessions (observations), and game artifacts/ephemera.

#### **Innovation Design**

The most iconic, archetypal TRPG is Dungeons & Dragons (D&D); it was created in 1974, but as of January 2023 it has been updated to version 5.1. It would be nearly impossible, dare I say arrogant, to have completely bypassed the norms and conventions of the roleplaying game heralded as the ‘world’s greatest’ (Crawford, 2014). Yet, I am not alone or unique in my desire to extend upon D&D, creating my own game that takes into consideration all or part of the concepts, precepts, rules, and regulations of D&D. Indeed, entire sections of electronic retail are devoted to this enterprise, namely DriveThruRPG.com, the largest RPG-devoted online marketplace (Montgomery, 2023). Although there has been some recent esoteric drama surrounding its copyright, the

publishers of D&D, Wizards of the Coast, have recently renewed the System Reference Documents for the most recent version under the Creative Commons, maintaining D&D's open game licensing. This allows game designers such as me to develop on the game as long as appropriate acknowledgments are made. Now might be the appropriate time to acknowledge that his work includes material taken from the System Reference Document 5.1 ("SRD 5.1") by Wizards of the Coast LLC (available at <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document>). The SRD 5.1 is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License allowing for adaptation with attribution.

There are many ways in which *New School* and D&D align. At its core, D&D "shares elements with childhood games of make-believe... [and] is driven by imagination" (Crawford, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, both games require a facilitator, "lead storyteller and referee" (Crawford, 2014, p.5). In D&D this role is referred to as a Dungeon Master (DM), in *New School* it is called Game Master (GM). The DM/GM decides the outcome of other players' declared actions. For example, if I were acting GM and a player declared that they wanted to approach a door, I would narrate the outcome of them approaching that door, including descriptions of what they might see, feel, or otherwise experience. I could not, as GM, further elaborate upon that action, for example, by narrating the player into having had approached the door *and then* turned the handle; however, "Because the GM can improvise to react to anything the players attempt, D&D is infinitely flexible, and each adventure can be exciting and unexpected" (Crawford, 2014, p. 5).

### ***How to Play***

Despite this limitless field of possibility, both aforementioned games' instructions are essentially the same:

1. The DM describes the environment.
2. The players describe what they want to do.
3. The DM narrates the results of the adventurers' actions. (Crawford, 2014, p. 6).

The essential structure of the games requires the mediation of a GM/DM, but the outcomes of dice rolls are just as key, if not more so. In order to resolve some declared actions, players will roll a 20-sided die; the probabilities of dice rolls' outcomes also consider the stats of each character with regards to certain applicable characteristics, skills, or abilities as indicated on their respective character sheets. In both D&D and *New School*, "Anything is possible, but the dice make some outcomes more probable than others" (Crawford, 2014, p. 5). Yet in neither D&D nor *New School* are their standardized arcs of game play, or traditional ideas of winning or losing. In D&D a total loss of personal points would lead to a character's death, and in *New School* such a loss would result in the character being fired. Still, success is not determined by points, communal or individually earned, it is generally determined by how good of a time was had by each individual involved.

For simplification purposes, instead of assigning the attributes numbers as is typical of D&D, each is represented on a scale of 1, 2, or 3 stars that correlate mathematically in terms of probability for resolving an action (e.g., 5, 10, 15). Additional factors influencing the success of a declared action include how skilled the character is in various fields, their impact points, as well as other situational modifiers (impact points in this game are what one might imagine as "health" in a video game-like scenario). If the



result is greater than or equal to a target number called an Upper Limit (UL), then the action succeeds; the GM will do the math for players so that they know what the UL target roll is beforehand. Each player's stats, skills, and background were indicated on their character sheet.

### ***What is Play?***

Dungeons & Dragons is underpinned by "The Three Pillars of Adventure" (Crawford, 2014, p. 8): Exploration, Social interaction, and Combat. These broad categories describe the three kinds of activities most common for players to engage in during a game: Exploration is indicative of interactions with an environment or its contents, typified by a player expressing they want their character to 'do X;' Social interactions are inclusive of in-game dialogue and roleplaying; Combat is an organized portion of D&D, measured and mathematical in terms of distance, weapons, spells, damage, and upper limits for rolls in order to reach the threshold of success numerically (Crawford, 2014). In *New School*, much of this remains the same - combat is not always physically violent, but most often interpreted as problem solving, especially one in which player characters summon or invoke the unique skills, abilities, and strengths of their characters as indicated on their character sheet, operating parallel to the idea of spellcasting or magic in D&D.

### ***Who is Playing?***

In any tabletop role playing game (TRPG), the first item of order is to select, create, and/or modify player characters. In fact, the first 170 pages of the D&D Player's Handbook are dedicated to character creation (Crawford, 2014). The components of a D&D player character include race, class, background, and personality; there are a vast

number of creatures a player could elect to be. Here, race could refer to elves, gnomes, humans, and more; classes include but are not limited to sorcerers, monks, wizards, warlocks, clerics, and fighters. In *New School*, the identity selection and development process is much simpler, in that there are no other worldly selections; class has been interpreted as occupation, and all players are of the human race. In this way, the world of *New School* is ordinary - we may have greater predilections, more appreciated and socially accepted behavioral tendencies, or vary in our strengths and abilities, but we share the baseline of species. Whereas D&D is about “storytelling in the worlds of swords and sorcery” (Crawford, 2014, p. 5), entertaining battles across the vast cosmos of the multiverse, multiple planes of existence, and the infinite depths of the abyss, *New School* is settled down to Earth. The game’s initial fictional setting was similar to that of the participants in their professional lives: an independent school within the five boroughs of New York City. Each of the schools in the series of three were initially intended to be representative of various types of schools or educational communities one of the participants may have encountered as an independent community educator, although it did become necessary that the in-game environmental and occupational constraints lessened with each cycle of game play.

### ***How We Got Ready***

The participants were provided with a Player’s Handbook prior to each session of game play (see Chapter 3 for this initial, beta version), which included possible player characters, list of necessary materials, and general rules of game play. At the start of each session, active participants also received, via email, a selection of potential characters for them to choose from. Each constructed player character had its own pre-populated (to

varying degrees per session) character sheet, describing the motivations, strengths, habits, and weaknesses of the player characters; the aspects of the given character identity were designed to influence the participants' choices within the game itself (see Appendix D). This Player's Handbook has been updated and extended upon to serve as the framework for which this research study was designed to produce, the material result of the innovation's process of becoming (see *New School Player's Handbook*, Second Edition on p. 126).

As the designated GM of the three sessions of game play, I had quite a bit to consider in terms of my role and responsibility. According to Daniau (2016), a qualified TRPG facilitator is responsible for the context (world), a good story (narrative), properties (rules), game progression (scenarios), an inspiring role-play (simulation), functions (group cohesion), and the group's shared imagination (coherence). Without a doubt, this is quite a large amount of responsibility. I designed an amusing but challenging scenario for the players to engage in and consider, weighing their character's predilections before making choices that not only affected their success but those of their fellow players. In honoring the emergent strategy embedded in the guiding frameworks, a science fiction mystery was chosen as the first episode's genre. According to brown (2017), "All organizing is science fiction. If you are shaping the future, you are a futurist. And visionary fiction is a way to practice the future in our minds, alone and together" (p. 152). The challenges players faced were hyperbolic and sci-fi-esque, but not to the point of caricature; they were meant to carry on a thread of applicable truth, keep momentum, and provide an opportunity for the crafting of an emergent narrative. In this and many TRPGs, the choices and actions of an individual often have a whole-group consequences.

Throughout the game, players were faced with moral, logical, and ethical dilemmas, the navigation through which provided the opportunity for groupthink and the critical co-construction of the codes players enact with their choices. As GM, I did scaffold players through this process but was just as on the edge of possibility as they were, all of us with front row seats for the unfolding of our stories.

As a novice game designer, a researcher arriving at the medium of my innovation as a continuation of personal and professional experiential knowledge, not familiar with DM/GM-ing, I had quite a bit of personal research and catching up to do in order to properly prepare to run a three-session game jam. In addition to participating as a player in two other friends' one-shot D&D games, at the recommendation of my committee member, Dr. Boltz, I joined the Games Based Summer Reading Group offered through DISC (Digital Instruction Support Community) at Michigan State University. This suggestion proved tremendously valuable, with particular respect to *Resonant Games* (Klopfer et al., 2018), a text that adheres to a guiding definition of these types of games - they are situated in meaningful contexts in relation to the individual players, their connection among one another, and in the context of the world around them.

*Resonant Games* (2018) also outlines four freedoms of play, the one most salient in this research study being the freedom of identity: “the capacity to investigate your own identity by trying on other identities and learning what it feels like to perform different types of actions and to ask all sorts of questions” (Klopfer et al., p. 22), the result of which was my offering player characters the option to add, subtract, alter, or enhance their character (sheet) in any way before the start of game play. Furthermore, the

emphasis on identity as a transformative component of the innovation's design was a central nexus for meaning making.

Another influential portion of this text was one of the described game features for deep learning, "either by granting [players] a powerful, all-seeing status in which they manage key parts of the world, or from an on-the-ground perspective, connecting with an avatar and that character's experiences of the systems" (Klopfer et al., 2018, pp. 23-24). This manifested itself in the first episode with my creation of a non-player character (NPC), clay golem (which later became colloquially known as clay being), one of whose features which was the ability to search for and find anything in the game environment (school) that the players needed. Immersing myself in the mind of a game designer worked successfully to prepare me for my role, but only in tandem with my preparations to improvise. In *Play Unsafe* (2009), author Walmsley, a veteran DM/GM, shares recommendations for other improvising GMs: Create platforms and add a tilt; Create a status relationship and alter it; Create a mystery and solve it. This text was essential for me, a novice GM, and I did my best to heed the advice, particularly with the construction of the initial episode's mystery genre and situational, environmental modifications like light and time.

### ***How We Played***

This study's innovation consisted of three (3), 180-minute online Zoom sessions in which participants played a table-top role-playing game (TRPG) developed and facilitated by me. Maps served as the game board (see Appendices A, B, or C) via document camera. Many TRPGs, including D&D, are played as 'campaigns' that are larger time commitments (play goes on for typically three hours, players meeting

regularly usually until commitments change). This innovation, however, was designed to be played as a series of three developing ‘one-shot’ games, each session serving as a mini-game, in and of itself, of which the storylines, actions, names, and results of the players’ choices remained contained. Many research studies have demonstrated success implementing one-shot games, including those collected in studies by Hedge & Grouling (2021) and the doctoral dissertation research of Kosof (2021); there is even a podcast called *One Shot* that “explores different role playing systems with self-contained one shot stories” (2020), further demonstrating the viability, not to mention a valuable resource for, this aspect of my research design. Given this aspect of logistical design, a truncated concept of player character identity seemed the appropriate choice, given that the participants were not committing to an identity that would last for months, sometimes even years-long campaigns.

### ***Why We Play***

One of the purposes and core functions of role-playing games is to create community, establish bonds, develop meaningful relationships, and cultivate friendships. Inherent in this is a meaningful exchange, a problem to solve, and an identity to explore. In a TRPG, a group of like-minded individuals, at the very least because they all chose to show up to play the game, solve a problem with one another while individually working through the perspective (or perceived lens of thought and action) of their player character. In other words, a participant is not only of themselves, but is making decisions as if they were someone else, a completely different thing than actually *being* the other person. The game space is meant to act as a container for the development of meaningful relationships

with other educational professionals, one that is centered around the experience of being an educator, being in a school, but not being alone.

Cooperation is not synonymous with collaboration or critical co-construction - there is an element essential within an *emergent* narrative that implies, perhaps hopes, that players will not merely get along with one another. This kind of collaboration is more improvisatory and relies on (tacit or explicit) shared values among players to *work*, *think*, and *feel* together. The group ethics emerge during gameplay, and the critical values embedded in the narrative served as a primary source of data. These emergent values were excavated by conducting narrative analysis on the transcribed contents of the innovation's sessions. Furthermore, ideal skills and dispositions of community educators, as defined by the Next Education Workforce, directly informed the game's design and intention with which it asked players to collaborate with one another. In their 2020 evaluation report, ASU's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College outlined the following desirable capabilities and characteristics of community educators:

Skills:

- Understand learners of different ages
- Communicate well with students
- Build relationships with students
- Teach in an interactive and engaging way
- Exhibit creativity and imagination
- Communicate with faculty and be prepared
- Support students appropriately and set boundaries

Dispositions:

- Open-minded, flexible and adaptable
- Committed, consistent and invested
- Confident and resilient
- Energetic, passionate and positive
- Caring, empathetic and patient
- Reflective (p. 10).

While the core mechanics of gameplay are similar to the basic rules of D&D (to resolve an action, a player rolls a 20-sided die and adds modifiers based on a variety of factors), the natural aptitude of the character is defined by six slightly modified

attributes/abilities: *Resiliency, Empathy, Adaptability, Intelligence, and Wisdom*. For reference, the six canonical characteristics in D&D include *intelligence, wisdom, charisma, constitution, dexterity, and strength*. In this game, *constitution* (also what influences impact point vulnerability) has been interpreted as *adaptability*, *dexterity* is now *empathy*, and *strength* has been reinterpreted as *resilience*. This choice was made directly in reference to the idealized characteristics and demeanor of independent community educators, as listed above. Beyond analysis of a framework, the research hopes that the components and desirable traits of independent community educators are shared, considered, and enhanced by players' experiences.

### **Setting, Population, and Recruitment**

The setting for this innovation was entirely online and synchronously conducted through Zoom. Artificial settings were introduced and shared during the innovation process in the form of maps via document camera and verbal descriptions. With respect to the time and equitable gameplay among participants, each session was capped at 4 participants (not including the researcher-facilitator), though interest in excess of this number did not occur. In order to further define the *independent community educators'* community, this research study implemented the following criteria in order to determine eligibility for participation: With regards to employment status, a participant may be a full-time or part-time educator. However, if they are indeed full-time, they may only participate *if* their time is distributed among various satellite locations. For example, a full-time teaching artist employed by a state department of education could be eligible for participation, *if* said teaching artist taught in multiple schools throughout the week.



Participants were recruited online, by sharing an IRB-approved flier and subsequently a recruitment consent letter (see Appendix E). I first reached out to various organizations familiar to me either as an alum or professional relationships, including CUNY Hunter College’s Career, Professional and Partnership Development (CPPD), the Teaching Artist Guild (TAG), ASU’s Next Educator Workforce, Partner for After School Education (PASE), and Team Esteem (a Special Education Itinerant Teacher agency). CPPD and TAG directed me to their respective online message boards where the flier was shared, and two individuals from this effort replied. However, after receiving the consent letter both potential participants expressed their regrets due to the time commitment of play. With the intention of reaching more potential participants online in a timely manner and directly, I joined and shared the flier with each of these Facebook groups:

- Adjunct Professors United-Taking Action!
- After-School Educators
- AZ Substitute Teachers
- Before/After School Care Professionals
- Boston Area Network of Teaching Artists (BANTA)
- Classroom Resources & Teachers Forum
- Help a Teacher Community
- Itinerant Arts Teachers
- Itinerant PreK Teachers
- Itinerant Teachers of the Deaf
- K-12 Online Learning Collective
- NY Speech and Language Pathologists
- NYC DOE Paraprofessional
- NYC SLP
- NYC Therapists (OT, PT, SLP, COTA, PTA)
- NYS teachers
- PreK Itinerant Teachers Group
- RPG Tabletop Creations
- SEIT/EI Therapists
- SEIT/SETSS/EI/ABA
- Sharing Best Practices EI/SEIT/SETSS/SLP/OT/PT
- Substitute Teacher Cafe
- Substitute Teachers Resource & Support
- Tabletop RPG Game Creators
- Tabletop RPG Gamers
- Tabletop RPG Network
- TableTop RPG Paradise
- Tabletop RPG Resource Sharing
- Teacher Side Hustle
- Teachers of New York City
- Teaching Artists of NY GIG hub
- Teaching Artists of New York City - NYC Arts in Education Roundtable

- Itinerant Support Teachers - Hearing (Teachers of the Deaf)
- Itinerant Teachers for Deaf and HOH Students
- Substitute Teachers Lounge
- Substitute Teachers support and resources
- Tabletop Role-Playing Games
- The Adjunct Lounge: A Support Group for Adjunct Faculty

From the thousands of members invited to complete an initial interest form, I received 19 responses from eligible participants. Ten of these participants were currently working as an itinerant teacher or provider, three identified as teaching artists, three as substitute teachers, one SLP and one after school instructor replied, and so did one educator who identified as carrying out a multitude of the aforementioned roles. Four of these participants completed the Availability Survey shared with them, and alas none of those four agreed to participate when the schedule of game play sessions was announced. Ultimately, the sample was determined by shared schedules and availability among the majority of interested respondents, all recruited from a variety of sources reflective of my personal and professional experience and background - teaching artists of New York City and virtual educators.

### **Organization of the Study**

This qualitative action research study was reflexive in nature, as while acting as the facilitator, I maintained a research journal after each session of gameplay, reflecting on the emergent events that unfolded. Likewise, participants completed questionnaires after each session that each served as prompts for further reflection in an intermittent feedback loop. Each session of virtual gameplay was video recorded and analyzed as a source of qualitative data for later analysis. After the series of games, I organized virtual

participant interviews and a virtual mini-focus group. All aforementioned contents were recorded and transcribed, their contents containing the precious, collective insights that cohered in the form of narrative data analysis. Table 1 below illustrates the sources from which collected data, when collection occurred within the scope of the study, and the plan for analysis.

**Table 1**

*Research data plan*

<b>Data source</b>	<i>Observations (video recorded sessions) + Game artifacts and ephemera</i>	<i>Questionnaires + Researcher journal reflections</i>	<i>Semistructured interviews</i>	<i>Mini-focus group interview</i>
<b>When collected</b>	October 12, 19, and 26, 2022	October 17, 24, and 30, 2022	December 14 and 21, 2022	December 22, 2022
<b>Method of analysis</b>	Narrative Analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995; Kim, 2016; Esin, et al., 2014))			

**Qualitative Methodology and Instrumentation**

This study integrated both formative and summative evaluations, as “[formative] evaluation occurs during the implementation phase; summative evaluation occurs following the completion of the implementation phase” (Mertler, 2020, p. 25). Formative evaluations occurred in-between each session of gameplay in the form of open-ended, unstructured questionnaires completed after each session by each player participant. Data collected from questionnaires informed each following session, particularly in terms of

researcher-facilitator pre-planning, game preparation, and tailoring the player's handbook. These questionnaires asked participants to reflect on gameplay and to provide feedback on what worked for them, what they could have done without, and their overall satisfaction with the facilitator's role-fulfillment. I, in turn, reflected on the data from these questionnaires in my own reflective research journal, whose entries served as an additional source of formative data. Journal entries were subject to narrative analysis and served as a point of departure for my reflexive practice, informing any changes, additions, deletions, or otherwise to the game and its handbook, in addition to telling the story of the participant/facilitator exchange and co-creation.

Summative evaluations occurred in a variety of forms: narrative analysis of transcripts from video-recorded sessions, participant interviews, and an online focus group of participants at the end of the innovation's series. Video-recorded sessions of gameplay (observations) were transcribed in order to prepare them for coding and analysis, the source for the bulk of the data collected for analysis and interpretation; interviews, the focus group, and artifacts/ephemera were also analyzed in this way. Both narrative analysis and action research actively incorporate the participants into the research process, and both approaches are interpretive, reflective, and practical (Druckman, 2005). Data collected from observations, interviews, and focus groups in the form of transcripts were subject to narrative analysis, with an orientation toward indications of emergent community-building. The transcripts as text liken themselves most closely to oral stories, practical ones that are "told (indeed performed) with the active participation of an audience and are designed to accomplish particular aims" (Given, 2008, p. 568).

According to Mertler (2020), “When gathering truly qualitative data, interviews are probably best conducted following semi structured or open-ended formats” (p. 134). The post-series semi structured interviews with individual participants were centered around the community-building aspects of the game, the goal to gain more knowledge about the participants’ experiences, thoughts, and feedback regarding the innovation. I also provided participants with the “opportunity to authenticate or repudiate the subjective interpretations of the researcher” (Druckman, 2005, p. 284), including shared understandings of the story as retold.

There are many intentional components of this study that wish to lend credibility and validity to the data collection. Mertler (2020) indicates keyways in which to establish the validity of one’s study, including implementing a variety of instruments, methods, and sources, to collect data, conducting member checks, and engaging in reflexivity with oneself and with a critical friend. The practice of cross-checking the narrative for discrepancies established the descriptive and interpretive validity of our text(s) to be analyzed. Additional triangulating data was collected from the mini focus group. Akin to a constructionist group interview, this data production site served as a locus of critical co-constructions of knowledge for each of the three sessions of game play.

Indicative of a qualitative action research study, the researcher is one of the most key instruments. In order to maintain evaluative validity, I took measures to purposefully remain objective and unbiased. Throughout this study, I maintained a reflective researcher journal, a reflexive tool in decision-making processes. An intentional product of this study is the proposition of a new instrumentation - a framework for community-building. Future cycles of extended research could test to see if the framework indeed can

be defined as something that can be used with another population, that would lend credibility to the generalizability of the framework, its ability to “extend and apply within and beyond the community studied by the researcher” (Mertler, 2020, p. 142).

### **Boundaries of the Inquiry**

The most pragmatic challenges of the study were preparing myself to act as GM and the efforts made toward recruitment of participants; the difficulties associated with the latter challenge described in further detail, including mitigation, in the previous section on population and recruitment. Fortunately, these obstacles did not prove insurmountable. As predicted, a quiet, dedicated workspace from which to engage in online gameplay was not always present - myself included (doorbells ringing during game play, loud cars, various other Brooklyn sounds). Most participants were already either experienced or familiar with Dungeons & Dragons, so the references to canonical norms were highly successful and welcomed, according to participants.

### **Positionality**

In order to adhere to the “principle of accurate disclosure” (Mertler, 2020, p. 110), I submitted my research proposal to the IRB outlining my research plan for data collection and storage; participants all submitted consent forms approved by the IRB in order to protect their best interests. Measures were taken in order to ensure anonymity and to protect the privacy of participants, including secured locations for storing data. There were no inherent risks in participating in the study; participants were not compensated or credited for their time. Data was collected from a variety of sources, strengthening its overall potency and positionality by triangulation (Mertler, 2020). Additionally, the researcher reflection journal and participant questionnaire response

cycles worked in order to continuously improve upon the innovation, contributed to its critical co-constructions of knowledge, and provided an opportunity for balance in control of the narrative or story in production.

In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledge my orientation to the project, others, and the world as a neurodivergent White American cis woman in my mid-thirties. My first home from the hospital was in Section 8 housing, and my last before leaving the nest for college was in a trailer park. I am both highly educated and a first-generation college student. I am a fierce queer ally and deeply committed to anti-racism. I have been highly influenced by the choreographic arts and have been dancing since I can remember. I am not a highly experienced game designer; rather, I am someone who is extremely passionate about the transformative power of improvisation. In other words, I take imagination very seriously. I am intrigued by the potential of a TRPG as a medium for this transformational process, with a specific goal of community building among independent community educator participants.

I also wish to acknowledge that my positionality influenced this project to a great extent, especially in terms of the innovation design and facilitation. In anticipation of this, certain components of the research study were constructed to mediate any potential imbalances of power and influence. I wrote reflection journal entries after each session of game play, using contents of player feedback questionnaire responses as prompts to improve and enhance the next round of game play and subsequent modifications. The extension of this reflexivity reached not only myself in-game and as a participant-researcher, but what I also brought into the research process from my positionality within the world.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

As a result of the intersections among this innovation's guiding framework of emergent strategy and its alignment with critical theories of role-playing pedagogy, gaming, and constructivism, I decided to design an original game intended for independent community educators to play with one another and build a community at the same time. My own acknowledged positionality and proposed framework to address the lack of community among independent community educators, as deeply informed by my personal and professional experiences with improvisation, my innovation consists of both the table-top role-playing game; the co-constructed narrative that emerges as a result that will serve as informative framework for future or further editions of the Player's Handbook. The data produced during the life cycle of this innovation consists of video-recorded observations of three sessions of game play, intermittent participant questionnaires that serve as prompts for the researcher's reflective journal. Upon the conclusion of all three sessions, select participants were interviewed individually, and together in a mini focus group.

*(RQ1): How can a Table-top Role-playing Game establish and build community among independent community educators?*

Data collected in the form of observations, interviews, reflections, and questionnaire responses served to answer (RQ1). Researcher journal reflections and questionnaire responses formed their own cycle of co-construction throughout the series and were treated as an additional entity to be taken into consideration for analysis along with gameplay transcripts and interviews; the stories that unfolded were treated and



analyzed as narrative, in this case an emergent story that continued to co-construct and evaluate itself simultaneously (Esin et al., 2014).

*(RQ2): By engaging in an emergent design-informed Table-top Role-playing Game, what kinds of community-building frameworks can be produced by independent community educators playing the game?*

Data collected and compiled into the form of the Player's Handbook, 2nd Edition (see p. 114) serves to answer (RQ2). This handbook was subject to being informed and improved throughout the duration of the research process, through the input of both participant and researcher. Akin to a 'how-to,' this handbook reveals an internal framework to be analyzed and interpreted, with the ultimate goal of being a modifiable and shareable model for community building through playing the TRPG innovation.

Narrative analysis, operating within the frameworks presented by Polkinghorne (1995), Kim (2016), and Esin et al., (2014), framed the approach to analyzing the data produced by this study. Narrative analysis was determined to be the best approach for working with the results and objectives of this research study, as it requires the study of a text as a narrative for analysis and studying the understanding of an experience as a story (Adu, 2019). I employed Kim's extension (2016) of Polkinghorne's seminal work (1995), when engaging in a *paradigmatic mode of analysis*, an approach in which the analysis "is derived from the predetermined foci of one's study" (Kim, 2016, p. 196). This allowed for the predetermining of relevance and the emergence of "commonalities that exist across the multiple sources of data" (Kim, 2016, p. 197). In this study, the focus is critical community-building, or any evidence thereof. Polkinghorne's *narrative mode of analysis* (1995) was applied to the data, especially when working to make sense of the wide range

of data collection sources and methods. This approach uses “to-and-fro, recursive movement from parts to whole or from whole to parts” (Kim, 2016, p. 197), an approach that is reflected in the researcher journal-questionnaire cycle of information, and also to the way in which the narrative analysis was formed and informed by the data.

The qualitative data collected was treated as “social phenomena” (Esin et al., 2014, p. 206), and subject to narrative analysis, where “researchers are not out to validate the [accuracy] of the person's story, but rather to discover the meaning of it” (Druckman, 2005, p. 282). Individual participant interviews posed as checkpoints for corroborating the events of the story as understood by the players and facilitator. Linear and summarized “books” of each narrative were co-constructed by players and me during the mini-focus group and were included in the *Our story* summaries. For example, the three “chapters” of Episode I are *Darkness!*, *Clay Creation & a Horde*, and *Mystery Solved?*

There is indeed a difference between collaboration and co-construction, the latter containing the implication of a critical creation as a result of the group action. Due to the nature of the game, collaboration is required in order to have the game’s action continue forward. The sessions’ transcripts are loaded with moments of exemplary collaboration among players, and while they were extraordinarily important in the development of trust, rapport, and community among the player participants, their content and focus on *puzzle* solving rather than *problem* solving are acknowledged but not a focal point.

Esin et al. (2014) outline their constructionist approach to narrative analysis, which additionally consists of the analysis of power structures present and thus resonates with the critical, theoretical underpinnings of this study. Furthermore, this model accounts for co-construction of narrative, emphasizing the “constantly changing elements

in the construction of narratives” (Esin et al., 2014, p. 207). Following, the power exchange and dynamics between and among players is the appropriate locus for a constructionist narrative analysis. Given the authority dynamic between myself as GM and the player participants, much of what follows in the episodic format are analyses of emblematic, critical co-constructed narratives within this session of gameplay. Additionally, the challenging and carving out of oneself and this personal confrontation was noted and examined, as the challenging of self in the metanarrative purports a metacognition ripe for a transformative experience. Here, these scenes have become most useful as co-constructed focal points for analysis, illuminating a roadmap of critical points as the story unfolded.

The synthesis of these focal points into the structure and decision-making process for the next iteration and session of gameplay are reflected under the umbrella of the action research cycle’s narrative, later manifesting as additions/editions to the final Player’s Handbook / framework. The various scenes’ dialogue will be contextualized and then analyzed for subtext and meaning in relation to emergent, critical community building. The meaning discovered and interpreted here as a result of analysis has led to a greater understanding of how a shareable framework for building community within a multitude of contexts came to be, present and manifest as the Players Handbook. The initial, beta version of the Player’s Handbook, the one players had at their disposal during play, follows this chapter as the Prologue to the narrative analysis of our three sessions of play.

## CHAPTER 3

### PROLOGUE: NEW SCHOOL PLAYER'S HANDBOOK, 1ST EDITION

This intertextual box, and those like it that follow, aims to serve as a separate, supportive point of communication to the reader. They exist in order to ensure the reader obtains a more complete picture of game play, including but not limited to what knowledge may be privileged to the Game Master (GM), or contextual information preceding game play and analysis.

\*\*\*

The following section of text is what was shared with participants prior to the onset of each of the three sessions of play and was intended to serve as a brief user guide providing participants with a set of expectations for play. *Character sheets* (see Appendices A, B, C) were shared in their complete form via email upon the beginning of each session, as the options were new and different for each of the three sessions.

This is a table-top role-playing game (TRPG), designed to be played virtually with up to five total players. All but one participant will act as Player Characters (PCs); PCs will select, modify, and/or create their own in-game identities that will serve as the primary protagonist roles, around which the in-game stories revolve and shift. One of the players will be acting as the Game Master (GM), and is responsible for game, map, and non-player character (NPC) design, game facilitation, and resolving the declared actions of the other players.

#### **Who Was This Game Designed For?**

*New School* was created with educators in mind who regularly work in a variety of settings, whether virtually or multiple school sites (teaching artists, after school instructors, itinerant teachers, etc.); I have been referring to members of this grouping as *independent community educators*. Each of the three episodes of *New School* will take

place in a different kind of school setting than the last, a decision meant to reflect these educators' professional geographies.

### **Materials Needed**

- One 20-sided die, actual or virtual
- Computer and internet access, Zoom capabilities (camera + microphone)
- Character sheet

### **How to Play**

The core mechanics of gameplay are similar to the basic rules of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D): to resolve an action, a player rolls a 20-sided die and adds modifiers based on a variety of factors, the first being the natural aptitude of the character as defined by six attributes/abilities: Resiliency, Empathy, Adaptability, Intelligence, and Wisdom. For simplification purposes, instead of assigning the attributes numbers as is typical of D&D, each is represented on a scale of 1, 2, or 3 stars that correlate mathematically in terms of probability for resolving an action (e.g., 5, 10, 15). Additional factors influencing the success of a declared action include how skilled the character is in various fields, their impact points, as well as other situational modifiers. If the result is greater than or equal to a target number called an Upper Limit (UL), then the action succeeds; the GM will do the math for players so that they know what the UL target roll is beforehand. Each player's stats, skills, and background are indicated on their character sheet.

### **How to Read a Character Sheet**

Each character sheet has space for a player character's name, pronouns, and occupation. Below this are the character's star rating (1-3) for six characteristics:

Resiliency, Empathy, Charisma, Adaptability, Intelligence, and Wisdom. Additionally, background information and skills are described in more detail in the larger boxes. For reference, the six canonical characteristics in D&D include *intelligence*, *wisdom*, *charisma*, *constitution*, *dexterity*, and *strength*. In this game, *constitution* (also what influences impact point vulnerability) has been interpreted as *adaptability*, *dexterity* is now *empathy*, and *strength* has been reinterpreted as *resilience*. Impact points in this game are what one might imagine as “health” in a video game-like scenario.

**Figure 1**

*Sample character sheet*

Name: <i>he/him</i>					
Occupation: <i>Music Instructor</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
☆☆	☆☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> Age: 42 He is a professional flutist, but also plays a variety of other instruments, especially woodwinds and reeds. Teaching music after school is what allows him to carry on with his professional career. <u>Impact Points:</u> 15			<u>Skills + Actions</u> Curiosity ( <i>Empathy</i> ) +5 Reflex ( <i>Intelligence</i> ) +7 <u>Expertise</u> Precision Affectation <u>Motivation</u> Solos Harmony		

Player characters (PCs) are not limited to the listed skills on the character sheet - these are merely some of their special and specific abilities. Character expertise and motivation are, in addition to the entirety of the character sheet, simply more information for players in terms of what kind of choices your character might make, or what their predilections and tendencies might be. Remember, “In a role-playing game, players engage in the fantasy of portraying someone that they are not. Through consensual storytelling, players direct their characters to do and say things they would, could, or

should not do in real life” (Lafferty, 2004, p. 4), so, try to connect your PC’s abilities and perceived state of mind to their in-game actions and decisions.

This concludes the portion of the Player’s Handbook shared in writing with participants.

\*\*\*

The following text on pages 51-65, was for the “GM’s eyes only” - it was absolutely crucial for play but was not shared with participants in written form. Rather, the *Plot, About, and In-game items and happenings* sections influenced non-player characters, in-game descriptions, and action resolutions. The *Launch* sections were read aloud to the participants as the official start of each session. *Location* descriptions were not shared in writing with participants, rather they were given maps or other visual representations of the areas. Similarly, PC descriptions were read aloud by GM as an elaboration on the Character Sheets. It is provided here to bestow readers with a secondary, informed consciousness regarding game play, what was at play yet invisible to participants, the unknown cogs moving the story forward. In the Player’s Handbook, this section is provided in order for the game to be able to be led by other GMs.

## **For the Game Master**

### **New School, Episode I**

#### ***The Plot***

A disparaged science professor, Dr. Ed Algernope was not invited to return to the school this academic year, following a tragic science experiment gone awry that took the innocent lives of several guinea pigs and caused many thousands of dollars’ worth of fire damage to the school’s biology classroom. With few options left as a deranged yet mediocre scientist and teacher, Dr. Algernope exacted his misguided revenge on the school by installing an electromagnetic energy-emitting device somewhere within the school’s recesses before his official exodus, a weapon that has been silently and steadily wreaking accumulative havoc on the students and faculty. Symptoms include tinnitus, visual problems, vertigo, nausea, cognitive difficulties, hearing a sudden loud noise, pain

in one or both ears, feeling of pressure or vibrations in the head. When the emergency switch in the wings of the auditorium stage is thrown, this will be resolved.

**About the School.** Something weird is definitely going on at this high school. Maybe there's something going around but they've noticed lately that the faculty seem to be in a perpetual fog - their cognitive abilities have been dulled and slowed. Not to mention, the kids can't quite maintain their balance - lately they've noticed their walking momentarily disturbed, sloshing laterally like they were on a ship at rough seas.

**About the World.** We have to find a way to contact the outside world so we can get help! OR We have to find the source of that noise/whatever is emitting that frequency!

**Launch.** *You both arrive at a new school during the last period of the school day, check in with security, and have a seat in the lobby as usual. While you wait for someone to escort you to your classroom, you notice the others waiting as well. Fifteen minutes pass, and though your social media feed has been entertaining, when the final bell rings you look up and notice not only has no one else been retrieved from the lobby, but there is no longer any sign of the front office workers, the security guard or his coffee, or any students or teachers. It's as if everyone vanished without a trace. You return to your phones, only to discover they're all dead - not even 'no signal' but they've all been powered off and won't power on. What do you do?*

### ***Player Characters***

**Thom Jack Blackenger.** A district-wide substitute teacher, with a specialty in PE, Mr. Blackenger is a 57-year-old former attorney who was disbarred for illegal gambling activity. His sport of choice is football, and he can often be seen with a whistle



around his neck. He is motivated by winning, is able to recharge his energy quickly, and can become the center of attention at nearly any given moment.

**Yinka Camp.** A 38-year-old teaching artist in sculpture, specializing in metallurgy, Yinka is a trans person of color and are missing one hand lost in a tragic smelting accident; it has been replaced by a hook of Yinka's own design. They are motivated by the compulsion to create and have a nearly limitless imagination. They have an almost preternatural ability to both comfort and empower others.

### *Locations*

**Lobby.** Includes the security desk and front office, the central communications location and initial location of the PCs for game (and building) entry.

**Hallways and Walls.** You notice a row of faculty photos, each with an accompanying wall plaque including the teacher's name and subject area. You notice one of the frames is empty, and the plaque has been ripped from the wall, some minor cosmetic damage evident to the wall's paint. Otherwise, it's inscribed with student work, class photos, and photo ops from major milestones of the school, including a groundbreaking ceremony, a basketball team trophy, and a student posing behind a brooder box holding a new family of tan-colored guinea pigs.

**Auditorium.** On the stage is a lonely ghost light, one upright, bare bulb on a stand, with a pull-chain for on/off. On the ground next to it is a wired, hand-held microphone with a long cord, perhaps the source of some very loud feedback. The cord leads to a large, red handled switch that takes two arms to pull it down. It is labeled:

*Emergency! Do NOT shut off!*

**Science Classroom.** Contains lab tables, chemical closet, safety shower, office, supply closet, sinks, emergency eye wash, and biology textbooks.

**Cafeteria.** Encased in glass and its entry has two push doors. Inside are a couple of rectangular tables pushed to the end and a couple of circular lunch tables sort of pushed to one side of the far side farthest away from you of the cafeteria space. It appears there's some kitchen space, but you can't quite see through because it's a little bit to your direct side, out of your line of sight.

**Teachers' Lounge.** Features a supply closet, kitchenette, copy machine, bulletin board, sitting area, teacher workstations, and mailboxes. *\*see Appendix A for maps*

### ***Non-Player Characters***

**Clay Being.** This little clay piece of writhing matter has no sort of ambition, no desires. It's not really feeling any pain or remorse. It only exists to fulfill the orders and the instructions of its creator. But this particular clay golem is in anguish, and that is the reason for the burbles and the gurgling noises it makes. It's unfulfilled. It's unsure what to do. It is not humanoid per se but can be. It's an amorphous, amoebic sort, roughly the size of a small brick. This endearing, sentient lump of clay can shapeshift, if that is amenable to the fulfillment of its task, but its ability to stretch is finite. Because it is something that is devoted and blindly obedient to its master, it also has some amounts of omnipotent knowledge. So, it can find things that you want it to find. It can retrieve things if they are around, almost like a control F, but in a clay form.

**Zombie Horde.** These aren't exactly your typical zombies - they are a group of dormant teachers in a supply closet. They're burnt out, a little too pale for the season. Husks, really. Husks of once-bright-eyed, optimistic teachers. Yes, they're subdued for

now, but upon any disturbance whatsoever they will be awakened. They don't have a blood lust, but they do lust for office supplies: paperclips, sticky notes, highlighters, sharpies... They move at a slow pace, akin to a deliberate troglodyte. Stomping, they reach out, not to bite but to rifle through pockets and search for office supplies.

### ***In-Game Items and Happenings***

**News Clipping.** The startling article, *Tragic Fur Fry*, details a tragic science experiment gone awry that took the innocent lives of several guinea pigs and cost many thousands of dollars' worth of fire damage to the school's biology classroom. Dr. Algernope is assigned fault and his teaching career is likely over as criminal charges are pending. Later on in the article, it discusses the immediate plans for the restoration of that biology lab. The article is from six months ago.

**Brass Plaque Label.** It's a small rectangle shaped, brass-colored plaque label. It says Dr. Edwin K. Algernope, Life Sciences. Broken, on the floor.

**Sensitive Material.** Original copy left on the scanner glass, contents TBA/open

**Riddle.** Leads to the microphone and may come from either walkie, all-call, or auditorium's sound system: *I say everything I hear to others around. I'm not an animal, nor part of the human race. I will, immediately, repeat after you; But only if my tail is in place. What am I?* (a microphone).

## **New School, Episode II**

### ***The Plot***

The PCs are stuck in a place between space and time. What at first appears to be a school hallway slowly comes into focus as more of a contained capsule with three doors. Two of these doors lead to classrooms: a 1930s one-room schoolhouse in Kentucky, and an 1830s quaker school in Connecticut for young ladies of color. As players are allowed to discover through various details of the school room, children's dress and language, and more, players will begin to slowly realize they have traveled in time. The third door is the exit, around which is a border of lights in the classic stoplight configuration. Currently the lights are at the red level. As described in the launch, players are tasked with gaining sign-ups for their after-school program. As each player accrues more students on their list, the lights increase in level from yellow and finally to green.

*About this world:* Sign-ups are pooled among the PCs and have one solitary effect on its progress. As the final lights turn green, the door opens, the teachers are set free to go home at the end of this very strange workday, and the game ends! If a player loses all of their impact points, they're fired!

**Launch.** *Here's the thing - you are all specials teachers at a K-12 afterschool program fair taking place during the last block of the school day. Your task is to visit classrooms, meet with groups of students, and convince them to sign up for your individual afterschool program. You may chat with students or even conduct a demo lesson (rolling for action resolution, not necessary to actually deliver the entire lesson!). Of course, feel free to explore the classroom but you must all travel together. You may*

*not visit a classroom for longer than 30 in-game minutes, but you may revisit classrooms more than once. What do you do?*

### ***Player Characters***

**Player character A.** A 20-year old college student studying for the MCAT, working as an afterschool chess instructor, her chess background translates into her expertise in patience, perspective-taking, and pattern recognition.

**Player character B.** A 39-year-old drama teacher that is a member of a creative arts afterschool collective, she is a former child star, has pink and purple hair, and happily lives along with her cat, Xenu. She is particularly adept in mirroring others, despite her intentions, and she can schmooze her way past nearly any velvet rope.

**Player character C.** A 42-year-old professional flutist, teaching afterschool in order to make ends meet and sustain his artistic career, he pursues harmony in a group, follows his curiosities, and usually demonstrates precise, quick reflexes.

### ***Locations***

**One-Room Schoolhouse, Pikeville, Kentucky, 1930s.** Constructed of barn board, with an unfinished, dusty wooden floor, inside it is crowded with mostly barefoot boys and girls of a wide variety of ages. The room contains wooden desks and separate chairs, a blackboard, wood-burning stove, a globe, and a portrait of Christopher Columbus covered in mud. In one corner is a wasp's nest. Some of the children may have just been smoking a cigarette out the window. The teacher has left to retrieve a switch to discipline a student.

**Canterbury School for Girls, Canterbury, Connecticut, 1830s.** Made of dark wood and wrought iron, half of this classroom is organized in the style of a Quaker

meeting house, featuring four inward-facing pews in the shape of a square; the other half contains wood and iron chairs and desks (furniture is connected into single unit of chair/desk). Their society and model of education is all about reciprocity in exchange. This room is but one of many rooms in a brand-new Victorian home that serves as a boarding school for 12 young ladies of color, between 17 and 18 years of age. All wear long-sleeve dresses that are rather detailed and formal, each with several layers of petticoats underneath, buttons all the way up the front and at the cuff, complete with lace trim. The school was founded and is run by Prudence Crandall.

### ***Non-Player Characters***

**Sarah Harris.** A 17-year-old young lady and model student, she is African American, born to free parents as the second oldest of 12 children in the family. A sophisticated leader, she wears a frock sewn by her mother, Sally Prentice Harris.

**Herschel, Jr.** A nine-year-old child, wearing denim overalls and a collared shirt, he sports a buzzcut and dirty, bare feet. He has homesteading knowledge and has an incredibly high tolerance for physical pain (but not horse manure!). *\*see Appendix B for complete character sheets*

### ***In-Game Items and Happenings***

**Newspaper Article.** An upside down article in the Canterbury Gazette gives the year (1833) and connects Mark Twain as patron to the school's founder, Prudence Crandall

**Song.** The young ladies at the Canterbury school have a welcome song they sing to entering visitors *\*see Appendix B for lyrics*

### Reference Materials:

Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. (2023). *A Canterbury tale: A document package for Connecticut's Prudence Crandall affair*. <https://glc.yale.edu/canterbury-tale-document-package-connecticuts-prudence-crandall-affair-0>

Montell, W.L. & Montell, W.L.L. (2011). *Tales from Kentucky one-room school teachers*. University Press of Kentucky.

National Park Service. (2021, June 23). Article 5: (H)our history lesson: Prudence Crandall, Sarah Harris, and a struggle for Black women's education. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/-h-our-history-lesson-prudence-crandall-sarah-harris-and-a-struggle-for-black-women-s-education.htm>

## **New School, Episode III**

### ***The Plot***

The building the agents are about to raid is a Catholic Indian Residential School in British Columbia. The child they are looking for is a 10-year-old girl named Seepetza. She was taken from her home just like all the other children. The security at this “school” is very minimal and there are no armed guards; there is no reason to suspect that any of its inhabitants are necessarily armed and dangerous. However, agents may still carry a service weapon (assumed) as anyone who would do at a raid. Prior task force team knowledge is limited, they have not served as the investigatory team but instead are charged with extraction. Rumor has it her family members are the ones who reported the kidnapping. Unfortunately, there are no photographs of her for identification purposes. The time of this one-shot is up to the GM and was fluid in this iteration - Seepetza and her family existed on the plane of the 1950s, the PCs were in a contemporary timeframe, but the setting and the school were set in the very early 1990s.

**Launch.** *You are a taskforce of federal agents serving as an extraction team, all on the scene, hiding behind the brick wall by the entrance but ready to cross the threshold of a residence in order to rescue a young girl who's been the victim of a kidnapping., in your pockets, you find a schematic of the building. Your objective is to find and retrieve this young girl; you have reason to believe that she is inside this residence, and a warrant to enter the premises to search for her. What do you do?*



### *Player Characters*

**Player character A.** A 36-year-old hacker-turned-Federal Agent, they specialize in computers and technology, and are motivated by the precise pursuit of justice. He has specialized interrogation training that allows him to mirror others' body language and gestures in order to better understand them.

**Player character B.** A 42-year-old former social worker with a background in behavioral psychology, now a federal agent, he is an empath, which means he can comfort, empower, but also manipulate others into whatever he believes will serve the harmonious good.

**Player character C.** A 56-year-old agent that has been recently deputized, meaning their normal, day-to-day occupation is not a federal agent, they are a state or local member of law enforcement. They serve as the communication bridge between the state, federal, and local authorities, often the "eyes on the ground." They know the people from the area, they're from around these parts, and they can grease almost any wheel out there.

### *Locations*

**Girls' Dormitory.** The bedding is pretty drab - plain white sheets and a grey woolen blanket each. There's nothing decorative about the space, closer-looking to an army barracks than a sleeping-place for children. The room is kept so no identifying markers are able to be seen. In the trunks are all the same uniform: a maroon jumper with long white button-down sleeve shirt. All the socks, extra shoes, and undergarments are the same.

**Showers/Bathroom.** There are six shower heads, two toilets, some sinks and shelves for towels and extra toilet paper. There are no curtains in this bathroom. It is all open air. Indeed, there are no doors on the toilets, just the dividing wall from the rest.

**Classroom.** There are 16 desks, a blackboard, a teacher's desk, a class pet hedgehog, and a bookshelf including the titles *Bridge to Terabithia*, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, *Caddie Woodlawn*, and *Hatchet*.

### ***Non-Player Characters***

**Seepeetza.** A 10-year-old N'laka'pamux girl taken by the Canadian government, against her will, to the Kalamuk Indian Residential School for reacculturation and family separation, she was renamed Martha Stone by her captors and caretakers (nuns).

**Father McHenry (Priest).** Unaware of the investigation and context of the circumstances around him, Father McHenry is righteous in his correctness. It is true, he was sanctioned by the Canadian government to carry on the "school" as it was - a cultural genocide and cleansing at his discretion. He is the individual responsible for overseeing the loss of self, family, and identity of these children.

### ***In-Game Items and Happenings***

**Hedgehog.** A pet hedgehog that has mystical powers to communicate with the First Nations people.

**Secret Message.** A paper with a secret message written on it in Seepeetza's native language is ripped in two: she holds one half, the other is under a bunk bed in the dormitory.

**Dance Class.** An Irish step dancing class is taking place somewhere in the school.

**Say Her Name.** Seepeetza has been conditioned not to respond to her given name, but only to her new, Christian name - Martha. She will not acknowledge her name as “Seepeetza” unless it is someone known to her.

### Reference Materials

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- De Leeuw, S. (2007). Intimate colonialisms: the material and experienced places of British Columbia’s residential schools. *The Canadian Geographer*, 51(3), 339–359. doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.2007.00183.x
- Niezen, R. (2016). Templates and exclusions: victim centrism in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian residential schools. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 22(4), 920–938. doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12497
- Reynaud, A. (2014). Dealing with difficult emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Anthropologica*, 56(2), 369–382.
- Rose, H.A. (2018). “I didn’t get to say good-bye... didn’t get to pet my dogs or nothing”: Bioecological theory and the Indian residential school experience in Canada. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(2), 348–366. doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12261

This concludes the Game Master’s section of the Player’s Handbook.

### For the Reader:

The following chapters, Episode I-III, contain the narrative analysis of the results of the three corresponding sessions of game play. It is presented in this way both to reflect some order of operations, and to scaffold your contextual knowledge of the game's events. The identities of player characters are shared and reflected on, which will aid in understanding the summary of events located in our story. Finally, critical meaning-making and reflections are extrapolated and extended, subsequently and directly informing the community-building framework in development.

Each Episode of analysis follows the pattern of analysis in this order and as described below: *Character identity*, *Our story: A brief plot summary*, *Critical construction sites*, and *Action research cycle*. The sections of analysis are further described below:

*Character identity*: Each episode first contains the narrative descriptions surrounding character identity construction, as character selection and formation is traditionally the first segment of game play in TRPGs.

*Our story*: Following an episode's launch is its in-game story summary; each consisting of three chapters, the titles were constructed by and with participants during the mini-focus group.

*Critical construction sites* are narrative analyses of an episodes' dialogue. In order to develop upon the game as a framework, scenes will be prioritized in which a player characters invoke one or more of their six core characteristics (Empathy, Resiliency, Charisma, Adaptability, Intelligence, and Wisdom) or in which a player summons a skill, action, area of expertise, or particular motivation listed on their given character sheet. Additionally, dialogic contents reflecting the *questioning or challenging of authority or power*, *role-playing*, and *problem solving* will be investigated. Narrative analyses of selected, emblematic sections of dialogue will be conducted, each scene's dialogue *contextualized*, analyzed for *subtext*, and mined for *meaning*.

*Action research cycle*: The meaning made, both during the sessions of game play and by the action research cycle of *participant questionnaires* → *researcher reflection journal* → *crafting the next episode*, will be examined, and reflected upon here, including indications of how the framework for community-building, the Player's Handbook, will be updated or altered accordingly.

## CHAPTER 4

### EPISODE I: AN ELECTRICAL HAUNTING

Episode I is the result of gameplay on the evening of Wednesday, October 12, 2022. There were two player participants in this session of gameplay, in addition to me: Dusty and Reba.

#### **Character Identity**

##### **Character Creation**

The initial, independent construction of player character identities was a daunting task. At the very least, the application of a critical theoretical perspective made it necessary that I avoid perpetuating hegemonic hierarchies when constructing these identities. Furthermore, this initial round I wanted the game to be as ready-made as possible, and thus the identities provided to players were complete - race, gender, age, occupation, history, ability, etc. brown (2021) explicitly states that facilitators of emergent strategy are “not responsible for bringing diversity or a different culture into a group” (p. 75), but also warns facilitators of monocultural groups. In order to reckon with what I could not ignore, that all the players of the first session were cis-white folks, I felt compelled to move into my discomfort. Since the non-player characters (NPCs) that had already been created for the game were non-human, the care taken to ensure a diverse expression of humankind within the game itself was most evident in the player character options themselves.

Three player character (PC) identities were presented for selection: Vera, Yinka, and Thom. PCs Vera and Yinka both identify as people of color, Yinka also as a trans, disabled person. Vera’s identity was not selected and was saved and recycled for a later

round of game play. Thom's role as the straight, WASP man was similar to a buffoon, not a very 'nice' thing to do on my behalf as a GM and PC creator. However, the point of this choice was not to dehumanize one of the players, but rather to pretend to be a person with little empathy in the safe environment of the TRPG. This provided a new experience for players, one in which they can try on another identity that is *not* ideal, one in which they can sense the absence of empathy, thereby emphasizing its crucial place in schools and the hearts and minds of teachers.

*R: So how do we make our selections? Do we choose a character?*

### **Player Character (PC) Selection**

Players in this session included participants Dusty and Reba (pseudonyms). At the onset of our Zoom session, pre-populated character sheets were shared with participants via email. These PC identities were Thom Jack Blackenger, Vera Lopez, and Yinka Camp. PCs occupations were various kinds of independent community educators who began the game waiting in the lobby for their retrieval by program administrators. (see Appendix A for complete character sheets, Player's Handbook for character descriptions).

Upon initial inspection of the buffet of player characters, a conversation and discussion began during which I was able to answer player questions and more; this helped the players better understand how to play the game, how each of the components of their identity might translate into their actions and motivations, and their objective during the game. Two significant questions arose: *Where'd you get the names?* (from Dusty) and *Could you clarify 'person of color' a little more?* (from Reba). Name origins were shared, as included in the For the GM section of the Player's Handbook. As for

clarifying POC, the game miniatures, pieces meant to represent PCs and NPCs, were shared. These were various guitar picks made from wood, still retaining their natural color. In order to answer this question about race, I merely shared the particular guitar pick I had associated with the character under the document camera for the participants to see themselves; the answer for all was a personal construction of race in relation to the individual's perception of the pick's color.

Participant Dusty chose to play the character Thom, and Reba selected the character Yinka; in these analyses, only selected identities were shared and elaborated upon, as they were the only identities active in this session's in-game world. Before launching the session, I asked participants if there was anything else they would like to ask me about these characters, or if they felt like anything was missing from their chosen character's identity. This was done with the express intent of increasing understanding in order to make choices and actions from the perspective of the PC identity. Two significant questions arose: *Is there any information about how long they've been doing the job that they're in?* (Reba) and *Thom Jack, does he have a family? Is he a dad?* (Dusty). In short, the answers were "not long" and "no," respectively. With a final point of clarification, we readied ourselves to play the game.

### **Our Story: A Brief Plot Summary**

#### **Launch**

*You both arrive at a new school during the last period of the school day, check in with security, and have a seat in the lobby as usual. While you wait for someone to escort you to your classroom, you notice the others waiting as well. Fifteen minutes pass, and though your social media feed has been entertaining, when the final bell rings you look*

*up and notice not only has no one else been retrieved from the lobby, but there is no longer any sign of the front office workers, the security guard or his coffee, or any students or teachers. It's as if everyone vanished without a trace. You return to your phones, only to discover they're all dead - not even 'no signal' but they've all been powered off and won't power on. What do you do?*

### **Chapter 1: Darkness!**

In the premier episode of *New School*, player characters navigated their way through an oddly, and rather suddenly, abandoned school building, encountering inconsistencies and mysteries with the lighting and electrical systems. PCs Thom and Yinka searched for a sound booth, or any possible way to control the lights to no avail.

### **Chapter 2: Clay Creation and a Horde**

Thom and Yinka discovered themselves in a dark closet filled with zombified teachers, their presence awakening the dormant horde. Thankfully they were able to satisfy the bloodlust of the zombies - not typical brains, but this time they thirsted for *office supplies*. After this PCs were in and out of the auditorium, searching for the unknown source emitting electrified, buzzing, whirring noise, leaving the building's inhabitants feeling a little off kilter. In a closet of a classroom in the seemingly deserted building, they met a remarkable non-player character, the anguished and unfulfilled Clay being. A devoted golem, Clay being has the ability to shapeshift as well as access to omniscient knowledge, used to fulfill its new masters' tasks. PCs worked together to form a practical use for the clay being, while also working with it to question the nature of the in-game world.



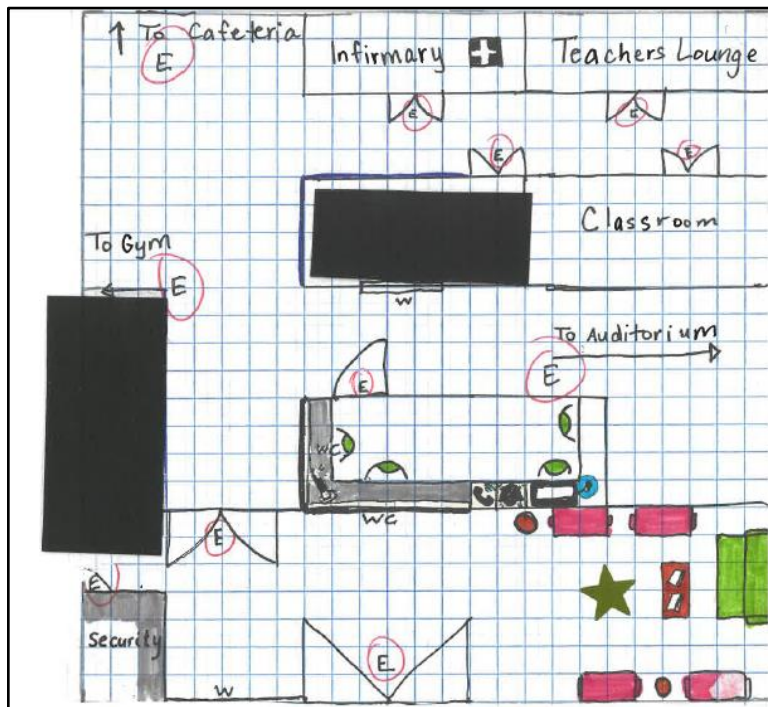
### Chapter 3: Mystery Solved?

Eventually, Yinka and Thom found a way to cease the disturbing pulse causing all the confusion, pulling a giant lever in the wings of the auditorium's stage. Sadly, the clearing of the disruption also led to the de-animation of the beloved Clay being. In the end, Thom and Yinka are able to finally exit this eerie school.

#### Critical Construction Sites

**Figure 2**

*Floor Map, Episode I*



#### First, and Then

##### *Scene I Context*

The GM has recently launched the game. Yinka and Thom have yet to leave their initial location in the school's lobby (the map was shared with participants via document camera). The PCs were, at first, seated in the colorful area, where a star sticker indicates

'you are here,' and are now exploring the area. The following dialogue is in reference to the bottom-most set of double doors that open inward into the lobby, with an 'E' for exit circled in red.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Dusty (as Thom)

***Dialogue***

D (Thom): I peek in through the window, if there is one, windows of the doors.

GM: Right. You go to those doors like anyone might would if they're feeling a little creeped out in a new place. You might try and leave but those magnetic doors are sealed. They do not open.

D (Thom): Oh, I didn't try to *open*. I tried to *look* through the window.

GM: Oh, oh. What? You look through the window and you see trees, gentle winds.

D (Thom): Oh. That's the outside.

GM: That's the outside.

***Subtext***

I was a novice GM, whereas Dusty is more experienced, as both a player and GM. He is being very gracious as he scaffolds *me* through the scene.

***Scene II Context***

Yinka and Thom have entered the school auditorium, unlit except for a ghost light on the proscenium. They walk up the side-steps to the stage to investigate this light, and a microphone on the floor next to it.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Reba (as Yinka), Dusty (as Thom)

## *Dialogue*

D (Thom): But the thing is, what are these things connected to? How come something's working *here*? I follow both cords.

GM: You follow both cords. As you follow both cords, they lead to a big, red handle. Like a lever. It takes two arms to pull it down, if that were the case, and it says-

D (Thom): Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. I didn't follow. What's big and red?

GM: The two cords lead back to an emergency shutoff, a big red handle, like a valve. And it says "emergency shutoff." Then there's also a secondary sign. It says, "Do not shut off."

D (Thom): I'm *not* going to shut it off. I describe what I'm seeing to Yinka, but my mission was to get the light, and I'm trying to see if I can perhaps use the light as a flashlight.

GM: Are you going to pick it up?

D (Thom): Well, I'm going to see. Yeah. Can I? What kind of play does it have? How far can I move it?

GM: Well, you pick it up. It is about shoulder height...it's a pretty tall stand, but you can wield it around fairly easily if you wanted to hold it out in front of you, it'd be very possible.

D (Thom): All right, but how far can I walk with it? The cord is my limiting factor.

GM: The cord is not that long. It will not let you leave the stage. It's very limited.

You can reach perhaps the diagonal edge here or the other way. *\*indicates on map\**

R (Yinka): Wield it!

D (Thom): Yeah, sure. I mean, I'll just wave it out as far as I can, but yeah, I'm going to try to illuminate more of the space.

GM: Okay. Successful! *\*removes black paper from the map that was previously covering a larger section of the room\** You can see the rest of this auditorium. It's a pretty powerful light just moving it that far. But then you realize that it's not just the ghost light that is ramping up. The overhead lights have turned on as well, and they're starting to both cycle between glowing brightly and dimming down at erratic speeds.

R (Yinka): No, thanks! So, something electrical is going on here. There's a power surge or a haunting.

GM: An electrical haunting.

### ***Subtext***

Thom is investigating the cords and the big red handle he found but is not interested in shutting it off. He wants to use the light to explore the space and fulfill his mission. Yinka is concerned about the sudden power surge and the possibility of a haunting. Here I am actively working to improve my own GM skills by repeating both myself and the PCs declared actions verbatim. The PCs experienced in-game success, both in manipulating objects and gaining greater visual access to the map. The dialogue

also highlights the characters' different attitudes towards the situation, with Thom more curious and Yinka more cautious.

**Meaning: A diversity of experience among players and GM can be successfully mitigated with patience, grace, and empathy.** A player was comfortable exercising and sharing their own authority of knowledge with me, the GM, in the first scene of the game. Even though I had indeed overstepped my boundaries as GM, narrating beyond the declared action of Dusty (as Thom), what is important here is not limited to what I *should* have done. What is illustrated here is that a diversity of experience among players and GM can be successfully mitigated with patience, grace, and empathy. The second exchange encapsulates the developing dynamic of ease in-between the moments of the game. The required tedium and extraordinary amount of attention paid by a GM is demonstratively valuable. Not only was the story evolving and emerging, but so was I in my role as GM, and so were players in their acceptance, use, and wielding of power and authority. We danced together, not always knowing exactly who was leading. The significance of this scene also lies in its evidentiary value, one that supports *New School* as a game that, at least in this instance, promotes both in-game and metacognitive empathy, marked by the above described “shift away from concern for one’s own personal interests and toward the interests of others, both in one’s reasoning about moral scenarios and in the expression of one’s values” (Wright et al., 2020, p. 118).

## **Mutual Adoration**

### ***Scene Context***

One of the non-player characters (NPCs) created for this session is named Clay being (see Appendix A for complete character sheets), whom the PCs have just released

from a jar in the chemical closet. Thom and Yinka are exploring the Clay being and its abilities for the very first time.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Dusty (as Thom), Reba (as Yinka), Clay being

*Dialogue*

D (Thom): I don't know what to do with the clay being. This is unlike anything I've ever thought about or seen or heard about. This is making me question many things about the world. What can it do?

R (Yinka): Well, the good news is that my expertise is imagination and I am a sculptor. So I would like to approach this clay and see if it's game to be molded.

GM: [Clay being] can shapeshift if that is amenable to the fulfillment of its task, but it doesn't really have a will of its own. And it will form itself into whatever you ask it to or whatever its master asks it to. One more thing to know also about this type of clay being is that because it is something that is devoted and blindly obedient to its master, it also has some amounts of omnipotent knowledge. So it can find things that you want it to find. It can retrieve things if they are around, almost like a 'control F,' but in a clay form.

D (Thom): Okay. Clay being, jump onto the floor.

GM: Clay being makes a little gurgle and it jumps on the floor.

D (Thom): Okay. Clay being, you get back on the chair.

GM: Clay being climbs the chair leg like a little monkey and burps and it gets back on the chair.

D (Thom): Okay. Climbs, it doesn't jump. Clay being, bring me an expo marker.

GM: Clay being looks around the room through the open [closet] door. It can see the whiteboard up front, skitters across the room. It grabs an Expo marker. It skitters up this little garbage can, jumps onto the countertop and then, onto the sort of resting place for the expo markers and it walks over. And it picks up the Expo marker and it tucks it under its arm. And then, with one hand, it jumps in, swings down and then, onto the floor and then it runs back over, hands you the Expo marker. But it's standing on the floor. It's handing it up like this. *\*extends arms and gaze up and outwards in a star-like reaching shape\**

D (Thom): This is amazing.

R (Yinka): This is like Gumby.

D (Thom): This is very Gumby-ish, it's true. All right, so Yinka, I think we should try your plan. I suggest that you, Yinka, tell it to go get the walkie.

R (Yinka): Cool, cool, because I agree. It seems like a very agile creature. It can just slurp around if it needs to. Clay being, go get that walkie-talkie from the auditorium, please, and bring it back to us.

GM: Clay being nods, runs to the auditorium.

*(Much later)*

GM: You yank down on this red lever and immediately, everything changes. The noise stops... Your clay being is no longer a being. It is just your lump of clay. Oh, no!

R (Yinka): That feels sad.

### *Subtext*

PCs are amazed by Clay being's shapeshifting abilities and its obedience to commands. Thom asks the clay being to perform different tasks to test its abilities, while Yinka suggests they use the clay being to retrieve the walkie-talkie from the auditorium. Thom and Yinka find the unique abilities of Clay being fascinating. Yinka suggests they use the clay being to retrieve the walkie-talkie, and they send it off to the auditorium to get it. They are both impressed by its agility and compliance. Later, at the game's climactic resolution, the achievement falls flat because it de-animates Clay being.

**Meaning: A 'pliant being' NPC can help players gain a greater understanding of the game, promotes inhabiting one's player character identity, and ignites empathy in players.** Clay being provided participants the opportunity to participate and exercise more control, in general. Players are preparing to problem solve, one by asking the GM a question, the other by capitalizing on their given character's background and expertise. Reba (as Yinka) realizes they have two essential assets that can be put into action at this moment. Player autonomy extended beyond themselves and their characters and was projected onto Clay being. In reality, the players brought this creature to life, and I simply narrated their desires come alive. All of us played together and had a great time.

Through the interactions with Clay being, players gained a greater understanding of the critical elements of the game, Players more fully inhabited their character identity, especially in terms of their characteristics and expertise. The animation of Clay being proved to be a deeply meaningful exercise in *humanizing*. Not only did participants exercise authority in their new world as Clay being, they also, as their new selves had to



then consider the in-game desires and wishes of their character, in order to give instructions to the being. Through the interactions with their new common ally, players learned more about the mysterious in-game world and were scaffolded into more complicated actions-resolutions and exciting game moments.

Perhaps having such an endearing being's feelings and essence to consider can be an exercise in empathy. There indeed was a bit of attachment to clay being revealed at the game's end. Truly, a marked sadness of the participants was both expressed and felt by the GM in the very moment they won the game - this was most certainly unintentional. In what I had imagined to be the lead up to this triumphant moment, the precipitating event of the game's end and players' "success," killed their new friend! Perhaps the most critical construction that occurred in this episode was really a mutual love and care for an imaginary thing, yet it seems quite apparent that this imaginary thing was real. We can trick our minds into doing incredible things when we aren't paying attention, even brilliant, open, whole-hearted things, when we have a proper, safe space to play. Furthermore, I am also reminded of the literature studied at the beginning of this research process, particularly that of Sidhu & Carter (2021); their study found that meaningful transformations can take place during game play when surrounding an in-game death event. It seems not only in theory but in practice does this resonate with sincerity.

## **Second Selfing**

### *Scene Context*

In the following excerpt, participants discuss a possible solution to the lack of light in the school auditorium.

**Characters.** Reba (as Yinka), Dusty (as Thom)

### *Dialogue*

R (Yinka): So, if we can use that [ghost light] as a flashlight, let's see if we can illuminate the rest of the auditorium with it. But Thom, you're going to have to take this one because one of my body parts is not going to help us out with this one.

D (Thom): Oh, okay. I see what you're saying...

### *Subtext*

Yinka and Thom are problem-solving together, and Yinka has come up with a potential solution that Thom will have to execute since Yinka is unable to physically help. It highlights the importance of communication, collaboration, and utilizing each other's strengths to achieve a common goal.

**Meaning: Players exercised embodiment as empathy as they gave consideration to and voiced a PC's in-game physical limitations.** It would have been obvious to us all if we were standing there together and one of us had a hook for a hand, that the folks with two hands would be doing the heavy lifting. This moment required a deeper, imaginative empathy, from both participants, dwelling inside of another physicality. However, at this point in the game it remains to be seen what potential there may be for illuminating concepts like Du Bois' "double consciousness," described as a second self, or inability to *not* see oneself as the other (2015) as experienced by People of Color through the eyes of Whiteness, or hooks' description of the inescapable terror of the White gaze (1997), not merely as an academic bulletin, but as an experiential awareness that elevates embodied empathy. Playing a TRPG inherently creates an alternate sense of self in a player, but the degree to which the participants were able to

engage in “some sort of suspension of one’s primary identity and immersion into an alternate mental framework” (Bowman, 2010, p. 180) is debatable and remains to fully concretize at this juncture.

### **Action Research Cycle**

#### **Character Identity**

Participant Reba reported that playing as a person with a different race, gender, and physical ability than their own was an enormous stretch for them, but one they chose with intention. As I prepared for the next round, the limitations of completely assigned identity influenced the flexibility or lack of initial provided context of various identity markers. However, I did and still believe it crucial to seize the opportunity for someone (a cis, white person) to feel uncomfortable, period.

The most crucial question I found myself asking while preparing for the next session was, “Whose story am I telling?” It matters to me that a diverse representation of human identity is infused into anything I create - a game, a dance, a curriculum; that is a key and central tenet of emergent strategy as well (brown, 2017). What this episode, as a first of three in a series, has to offer is its presentation into radical discomfort and disorientation to an audience of cis-white able-bodied individuals (descriptive of GM and all participants). The experience of dressing oneself in a proverbial cloak of otherness is and was uncomfortable and difficult. Players were clumsy and stumbled through, questioning themselves, the environment and its logic, and their imagined ways of acting from the perspective of a marginalized person. It was icky, yet it was done in a safe, controlled, low-stakes environment. What was the value in this? There is a difference between simply hearing or saying that you will never understand what it is like to be an

othered person / another person, and actually trying to make a decision while desperately trying to imagine life from their point of view and failing miserably. The experience of inauthenticity and humility is a badge now worn proudly, ignorant, but not blissfully, consciously incompetent.

The beauty of clay being is that its specialty is being moldable and malleable - both literally and figuratively. Designed as a golem, it immediately wants to fulfill the desires of its master, in this case the players. This was an extraordinarily helpful tool in hindsight, and resolved many sticky moments or unknowns, encouraged brainstorming among players, and gave players a neutral platform onto which to project their thoughts and feelings, all in the name of making informed, group decisions about how to best handle situations.

### **In-Game Logic and Structure**

As a result of me, a novice GM, leaning heavily onto the cleverness of my maps' incorporation of darkness (black overlaid paper) without fully considering the way that lights *actually* work in real life, I received some in-game and post-game feedback from participants regarding the inconsistencies between the conventions of the feature in-game as too sharp a contrast. In other words, my own "overseeing eye" perspective ended up being far too two-dimensional. Indeed, the discrepancies between expectations in reality and within the game later resulted in my abandoning a strictly sci-fi lens. There are lessons to be learned here for me, as GM and constructor of the final framework itself, in regard to pragmatic realities within the game.

I appreciate the patience and the grace extended to me by the participants - they could have been very direct and laid way with criticism in-game. However, they were

kind enough to have their characters express confusion aloud and try something different. Indeed, there were multiple conventions of the game that I realized had been compromised, with the help of the participants' observations, such as when Dusty (as Thom) expressed his concern regarding the noise coming from the auditorium, saying, "Well... That's, in my experience, not exactly how sound works." I felt prepared in many ways to GM this session, but there I was, realizing something so normalized, so conventional, such an essential part of life - one of the five senses - was nontransferable.

*D (Thom): I throw my hands up in the air. Are the lights working or not? I don't get it. How come my phone won't work but the lights are on in this room?*

However, this particular lack of logic was a foil that first brought players together to attempt to solve an impossible problem, something that will always bring people together as it becomes clear very quickly what one cannot accomplish all on one's own. Although quite sticky, gritty, and on a personal level, cringey, this quandary of how the light/dark "worked" in-game did indeed bring all of us together. Here, a healthy portion of dysfunction is fairly harmless, but more importantly, pushes forward the weaving of the community. It is more than clearing an obstruction, the braiding together is what makes the meaning out of doing.

The following chapter, Episode II, contains the narrative analysis of the results of the second of three sessions of game play. As did the episode before, this analysis follows the pattern of analysis in this order and as described below: *Character identity, Our story: A brief plot summary, Critical construction sites, and Action research cycle*. Each ‘construction site’ is a scene or scenes, the analysis of which flows as *context→dialogue→subtext→meaning*.

Episode II is the result of gameplay on the evening of Wednesday, October 19, 2022. There were three player participants in this session of gameplay, in addition to me: Dusty, Reba, and Mila.

## CHAPTER 5

### EPISODE II: CLASS ROULETTE

#### **Character Identity**

##### **Character Creation**

Whereas in the previous episode, an expression of diversity was assigned to the player characters offered to participants, here the non-player characters (NPCs) were a greater focus, though not exclusively. With this knowledge, knowing that now *I* would also be speaking from the perspective of an othered person, putting on the discomfort of contortion when trying to inhabit that space, I chose to incorporate direct quotes, historical records and accounts, and factual elements from American history into the NPCs and the settings of the classrooms. Three classrooms were constructed for the game session, each with their own *time* setting: a school for young ladies of color in Connecticut in the early 1830s, a one-room schoolhouse in Kentucky circa 1930, and an alternative boarding school for teenage girls with reactive attachment disorder, around 2003; the participants did not enter the third door from the most recent time, and thus it is not subject to analysis.

Four player character identities were presented for selection, three were selected and named by participants (see Appendix B for initial and modified character sheets). Each PC has an after school specialty. PC identities provided included a music teacher (he/him), a drama teacher (she/they), and a chess instructor, (she/her). Only one of the PCs race was expressly mentioned; the chess instructor identifies as Latina but passes for White.

### **Player Character (PC) Selection**

Participants in this game session included both Dusty and Reba from the first episode, as well as new participant, Mila. Upon initial inspection of the character sheets Mila, a seasoned gamer, dove right in with critical questions:

I have a question about the character sheets as well. I heard that you said you want us to choose one based on what their specific job is. As a player I will say... Well, I'm definitely not going to choose the one that I don't identify with because that makes me feel uncomfortable. But is that the point of this game? I don't want to misrepresent a community and act out stereotypes. That's a very fine line. So my wondering is what are you trying to gain from me as a player giving me the option to play those types of people?

This line of questioning is both important and relevant to contemporary conversations surrounding TRPGs and role-playing and is a reminder to the structuring of this analysis that the opportunity for challenging the GM does not merely lie in the Exploration phase of play. During the clarifying conversation that followed, I explained that from a design perspective, the idea was to explore the space between empathy, representation, and understanding, that perhaps even though my understanding may be limited due to aspects of my own privileged reality, we could learn something from trying. Participant Mila expressed that role-playing as, for example, as someone of a different gender expression, can be successful if, “All the players are really good about

being cognizant of it,” but that she herself was afraid to cross a line. We all agreed that we would be moving forward with a great sense of care applied to this specific aspect of the game, and ultimately, Mila became the drama teacher, Miss D (for Delilah), Reba became Valentina Romero, chess instructor, and the music teacher, Simon Winwood, was played by Dusty.

Again, before launching the session I asked participants if there was anything else they would like to ask me about these characters, or if they felt like anything was missing from their chosen character’s identity:

GM: Nothing about these characters is written in stone. Indeed, it's just ink and maybe some pencil. If there is something about them that you would like to change or add or you have clarifications about before or after you select them, we can do that. This is also about you all's experience too.

In terms of identity, no major changes were made immediately, although some elaborations of PC personal histories were made in-game by players. Of particular note, the personal narrative of Miss D included past experiences and traumas from childhood; any and all alterations are reflected in the appendices alongside the original disseminated character sheets. PC and NPC miniatures were each pieces from a tiny wooden chess board, this session. Maps served as the game board (see Appendix B).

### **Our Story: A Brief Plot Summary**

#### **Launch**

*Here's the thing - you are all specials teachers at a K-12 afterschool program fair taking place during the last block of the school day. Your task is to visit classrooms, meet with groups of students, and convince them to sign up for your individual afterschool program. You may chat with students or even conduct a demo lesson (rolling for action*



*resolution, not necessary to actually deliver the entire lesson!'). Of course, feel free to explore the classroom but you must all travel together. You may not visit a classroom for longer than 30 in-game minutes, but you may revisit classrooms more than once. What do you do?*

### **Chapter 1: Two Doors, One Exit**

In this exposition, PCs Simon, Valentina, and Miss D navigated an odd tesseract-like space in which they encountered three different classroom doors. Upon looking through the doors' windows, the PCs noticed that one lead to a classroom of students who were rough-housing and fighting one another, one to a quaker-style room where a group of young ladies were singing; the third had no window, but this barn-board door had a crack through which they could see a mere portion of a strange rectangular iron metal object. They entered the room with the singing students.

### **Chapter 2: When Are We?**

Reality began to come into focus when the PCs interacted with the NPC in this classroom, Sarah Harris. Reading the clues contained in their song, dress, and manners of speech, one player realized that they were not in the current year (2022). Eventually, with the help of a newspaper article, they discovered the classroom is located in the 1830s. With this knowledge, they engaged these students and successfully managed to sign a significant amount of them up for their after-school classes.

### **Chapter 3: Passing Through Time**

After they exited the first room, one PC explicitly asked to be told more about the liminal space between the rooms, which led PCs to notice a stoplight configuration of lights over an exit, lights that gradually moved closer to all green as PCs gained students

on their rosters. PCs entered the barn-board door classroom, realizing the strange metal object they caught a glimpse of is a wood-burning stove at the center of a one-room schoolhouse. Here, they met another student NPC, Herschel. This round, PCs were more equipped in their understanding, and gained enough sign ups to make their final exit through the magical door.

## **Critical Construction Sites**

### **The Big Reveal**

#### *Scene Context*

After inspecting the three doors presented to them the PCs choose to enter the classroom outside of which they could hear a group of young girls singing. They've met the ambassador of students, Sarah Harris, who mentions she and her peers were just practicing the song of greeting for the visitors. From these initial interactions, players realize that they are not in a contemporary time.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Mila (as Miss D), Dusty (as Simon), Reba (as Valentina)

#### *Dialogue*

M (Miss D): What clique vibe are they giving?

GM: There are 12 young ladies in the room. They are all 17, 18 years of age.

Their dress is rather detailed and formal to you. All of their dresses have several layers of petticoats underneath and their dresses button up all the way up front and have sort of this lace situation with some frills here. And then, all of their sleeves are long with the little buttons at the end.

M (Miss D): Are they Amish?

GM: Oh, no, these ladies are not Amish.

M (Miss D): As a drama teacher, am I like... Are those costumes? Am I perceiving those as costumes or they're actual clothing?

GM: Would you like to ask them about their clothing? Would it be like a little...?

M (Miss D): I guess, yeah. Yeah. I guess none of your checks really felt like I have a perception I guess, but sure, sure, sure. As, I guess, what was the student's name that approached, did she tell us her name?

GM: Sarah Harris.

M (Miss D): Okay, so as they were speaking and offer the tune to us to hear it again, I also want to say, 'Oh, like Ms. Harris, I absolutely adore what you're wearing. It's such a beautiful outfit. Is there any special occasion that you guys are so dressed nicely for? I'd love to hear what you have to perform for us. I'm really interested as I am actually a performer myself....You look absolutely divine. You're really working that.'

GM: Sarah says, 'Thank-you, this frock was sewn by my mother. Her name is Sally Prentice Harris.'

D (Simon): Quick aside, can we have a... We're going to hear the song, but I need to speak very briefly with my friends. I think there's a chance that we're not in the year 2022.

M (Miss D): Wait, we time traveled?

D (Simon): I think we time traveled.

M (Miss D): Because my cat's name is Xenu. How would I have Xenu in the 1920s?

R (Valentina): I'm supposed to be taking the *MCAT*.

D (Simon): This is like-

R (Valentina): The future is messed up.

M (Miss D): Yeah, because when does a mother make clothes anymore?

R (Valentina): Wait a second. Is this something we should roll for? Because one of my... for determining when and where we are... because one of my skills is puzzles and pattern recognition. Maybe I can deduce the time and location that we find ourselves in at present. Or *is it* present?

D (Simon): It's like where are we? When are we?

M (Miss D): My guess right now, is that each room is a different time.

D (Simon): Time and place.

M (Miss D): Yeah, each room is a different setting. That's my assumption. So I'd like to go to the other room to try to deduce more, because there was a bookshelf in the other one.

D (Simon): Right.

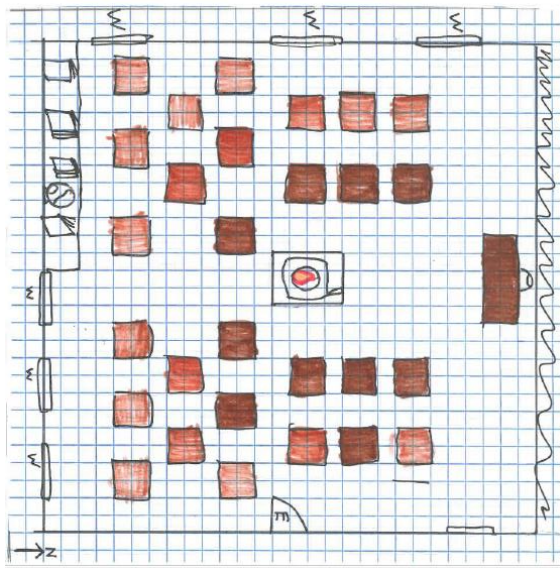
### ***Subtext***

PCs are confused and disoriented about their surroundings, and they are trying to figure out where and when they are. Miss D is initially curious about the clothing of the young ladies in the room, and she asks the game master about them. When she learns that the dresses are not costumes and are actually the clothing of the young ladies, Simon then interrupts to suggest that they may have time traveled, which further adds to their confusion. Valentina offers to use her skills to try and deduce their location and time. Miss D and Simon agree to investigate another room to gather more clues. The dialogue

also highlights the different personalities and skills of the players/characters, with Miss D's curiosity, Simon's intuition, and Valentina's analytical thinking.

### Figure 3

*One Room Schoolhouse Map, Episode II*



**Meaning: The give and take of constructive criticism can serve as a catalyst for player participants to construct their own understanding of the nature of reality in the game, and what their next move would be.** Mila briefly steps out of character to offer the GM (me) a bit of constructive criticism. She is essentially sharing a bit of frustration or lack of clarity surrounding her PC's perceptions of *cultural schemas* and collective knowledge. Players realize together that, given their peeks into the other two rooms, all the rooms are of a different time. Playing with language and words, a combination of their thoughts, ideas, questions, and facts of the game point to a logical, sensible, and agreed upon group action. The cognitive dissonance experienced by Mila was in part due to the chasm of time between her character and Sarah Harris, something unbeknownst to her at the time. This grit served as a catalyst for player participants to

construct their own understanding of the nature of reality in the game, and what their next move would be. From the perspective of a GM desiring to run a critical, resonant game, I welcome critical challenges and view them as opportunities for growth of all kinds. It is an unfortunate truth, and I am in agreement with Shapiro & Leopold (2012) in that, “role-play can indeed be used uncritically... This, we believe, should not be a cause for rejection, but for reformation” (p. 128). Riding the crest of the wave, straddling alignment and critique, learning and entertainment, lies the imaginative, empathic play *New School* game desires to cultivate, and this requires a humble and open GM.

### **Always Be Learning**

#### ***Scene Context***

Following the realization of each door being a classroom of a different time and space, PCs have decided to leave the classroom of young ladies but have yet to do so. Participant Reba (playing Valentina) inquires of her peers as to what the proper course of in-game action would be to get the most students to sign up, given the gender and racial make-up of each class.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Mila (as Miss D), Dusty (as Simon), Reba (as Valentina)

#### ***Dialogue***

R (Valentina): I wonder if there's a classroom of kids that best suits each of our club pursuits, since we have young ladies who are clearly already singers and probably wouldn't be doing what I'm offering in that day and age. We have a couple of male children in the other classroom. We don't know what they're looking at, but I could teach *those* kids to play chess, maybe.

D (Simon): I hear you. I'm wondering also if that's just an assumption? Maybe those girls are going to be chess masters? Yeah. We have no idea.

M (Miss D): Yeah. That's what I was thinking, too. I wonder if the idea of chess would be very intriguing to groups of people who have never experienced it before?

R (Valentina): But is there going to be some sort of negative outcome for them if they're doing an activity that's frowned upon for them?

M (Miss D): I don't know. Would chess be frowned upon?

R (Valentina): This game's coms, if you will, are very, very impacted by their reality. And I feel like I've been going into this as a teacher from our reality, but they are very conscious of what is a traditional way to learn and what are women traditionally going to do. They probably won't be on stage, or if they did, they would be seen as scandalous. I don't know. I guess I'm just thinking out loud that we should keep that in mind.

D (Simon): You know what? I think we should just run this almost like an experiment. Let's go back into the room that we've been in. We're comfortable. We know that they're nice. Let's try seeing how receptive they are to signing up for chess, just to see if that helps us get back to our own time as an experiment...[Reba], I'm going to go ahead and let you declare your own action here to our [Reba], our mischievous [GM].

R (Valentina): Okay. Before I declare an action though, I just want to share with you what I think my strategy is going to be in trying to connect with these people, and see what you think about that.

D (Simon): Great. Let's have this conversation in the hall.

R (Valentina): The people in this room are women of color. I am also a woman of color.

M (Miss D): White-passing though, right?

R (Valentina): So I'm thinking that could be a connecting point, where we have a shared experience in some way and maybe that could get them to open up to whatever I'm offering. Do you think that's likely to work?

M (Miss D): Maybe, but I will say that it sounds like they're in the timeframe where they're being heavily segregated and you being White-passing is not necessarily enough to connect with them. They're not going to understand that you are a person of color, because you don't get the issues that they have to deal with in times of segregation. You can go up to a water fountain. They can't.

D (Simon): Well, I think this is time of enslavement. I think we're in the North and there's enslaved people of color in the South still at this time.

M (Miss D): Oh, you think it's even that far back?

D (Simon): Oh yeah. We got Twain? Got to be slavery.

R (Valentina): If they're calling people Yankees- it could be. It's probably the 1860s or '70s.

M (Miss D): Yeah. My only thing is that I don't know if they would empathize with you, because you don't look like someone who would be enslaved...

D (Simon): So maybe the way in is to just see if it's fun?



M (Miss D): Yeah, like the joy factor of what you offer and if that's something that's exciting and fun.

D (Simon): And I know that that was not your original approach, but you asked us what we thought and that's...

R (Valentina): Yes. That's why I asked. That's why I asked. I'm going to go a different route.

### *Subtext*

The three characters are discussing how to approach teaching a group of women of color in a time of segregation and possibly enslavement. They are concerned about the societal expectations for women and the potential negative consequences for the women if they engage in activities that are traditionally seen as masculine. They are also discussing how to connect with the women and make the activity of chess appealing to them. Dusty (as Simon) gives us a refresher in American history's timeline of events, and the group decides together to pursue their next actions based on experimentation, fun, and joy rather than identity.

**Meaning: Identity may momentarily be wielded like a blunt instrument, but players can find an appropriate way to navigate intersectionality of gender, time, race, and color.** The characters are grappling with the challenges of teaching in a historical context that is vastly different from their own. Reba is earnestly trying to play the game while taking what she and the others see as a problematic strategy, and requests consultations regarding her choices and declared actions; she is trying to be sensitive to the societal norms and expectations of the time, particularly with regard to gender and race. They are also trying to find a way to make the activity of chess appealing to the

women, despite the potential societal backlash. Dusty and Mila, more experienced, are more apt to let things play out and perhaps remain incidental and pursue curiosity instead. Ultimately, they decide to approach the situation as an experiment and see if the joy factor of the game will be enough. Reba, not obstinate in the least towards others' opinions about how to be appropriately motivated by one's identity, listened. There was an intersection of gender, time, race, and color here, and an appropriate way was made. When Reba considers how her race could be to her advantage, her status as a POC here, identity is momentarily wielded like a blunt instrument, a bargaining chip. This, I would venture to say, is perhaps indicative of a real-life wielding of one's race (in this case, White) as a trump card, however subconscious the intent of *those* actions. This predilection is reminiscent of the core idea behind George Lipsitz' 2006 text, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*. Future lines of inquiry should consider how to *divest* from Whiteness with more thorough intent and understand more closely that this divestment is essential to anti-racist work.

## **A Swing and a Miss**

### ***Scene Context***

Chess expert, Ms. Valentina Romero, is going to try and convince the young ladies at the Canterbury School for Girls to sign up for her after school class. However, this roll initiative fails to meet or exceed the threshold for success as the skills, expertise, and traits of her character (as based on her character sheet) factor into the disadvantage of the outcome.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Reba (as Valentina), Dusty (as Simon)

## *Dialogue*

GM: Ms. Romero, you are going to ask them if they want to play a little game of chess?

R (Valentina): Yes, but live action chess where the desks are the squares, and I'm going to teach them how to play chess in a mindset that you have when you play the game and see if they're intrigued by the strategy of trying to move themselves as pieces around the desk arrangement here.

GM: Hm. Okay. One thing about these ladies, they are a very intriguing bunch and they have indeed three stars for Adaptability and Resilience, so they seem to be game to play initially at first. Now, for it to go successfully, I'm just noticing, Val, that although your Adaptability and Intelligence, your Wisdom has three stars, your Charisma is just a little bit lower - one star. So, I'm going to need a 15 or higher for this moving around conceptual lesson to work according to plan.

R (Valentina): Come on! This is engaging lesson planning here.

GM: If this goes well, if this succeeds and they play the game, then they will all agree to sign up for your afterschool.

R (Valentina): Oh gosh. Okay.

D (Simon): So perhaps a failure means not all, but some will sign up?

GM: Yes. A failure is going to get you these two young ones in the back.

R (Valentina): *\*rolls her 20-sided die\** Ooh. 13.

GM: Oh. Val, I give you props for going out there and trying to get some kinesthetic learning, but for the most part, these ladies have been practiced

in being prim and proper and are not accustomed to such odd practices of learning. Their only learning practices are really done either seated or standing at their desk unless they're playing some sort of sporting game or a field game. But the two ladies in the back, you can have their vote because they're young, silly, immature.

*Subtext*

Valentina is planning to teach a group of ladies how to play live-action chess using the desks as squares. The success of the lesson will determine if the ladies sign up for her after school program and is contingent upon Valentina rolling a 15 or higher on a 20-sided die. The GM notes that the group is adaptable and resilient, making them likely to be open to the new teaching style. However, Valentina's lower charisma score may make it more challenging to get the ladies interested. Ultimately, the game doesn't go according to plan, and only two of the younger ladies are interested.

**Meaning: Charisma is necessary for convincing folks to try something foreign and brand new, and character predilections and pre-populated identities become a factor in success on a roll, despite a player's real-life capabilities.** Although an innovative and engaging take on chess instruction, Reba (as Valentina) was not successful in gaining enough trust and rapport with the ladies for them to participate in their strange, modern ways. Charisma is a socially based competency, as distinct from other physically based characteristics present in traditional TRPGs (strength, dexterity, stamina, etc.) or mentally-based (intelligence, perception, etc.) (Bowman, 2010). Her competent lesson design was not substantial enough here, student buy-in was still necessary. Success on a roll is dependent on a few variables, including chance, just as in

any dice game. In this episode, character predilections and pre-populated identities also became a factor, depending on the rating of a given characteristic. Other strategies that were productive and proactive were appealing to the nature of the students *accompanied* with one's own strengths and expertise as an educator.

## **Action Research Cycle**

### **Character Identity**

Participants were very honest in their feedback about identity and how it showed up in the session. Reba took the biggest risks and was honest and open in conversations about identity and in feedback regarding so. She and her character Valentina learned the hard way that professional expertise and success do not directly correlate or translate in this game, meaning that just because you have access to knowledge that will succeed out-of-game, as in with the kinesthetic learning, it may not succeed in-game. As identity became something to be used to one's advantage, I am concerned with this aspect of the game; it feels like something that could become another version of privilege, co-opted bargaining chips. The next round, all player characters will be their own race and gender, however they identify out-of-game. If anything, this illumination again asks that I reconsider the centering of stories in my game worlds, especially in terms of primary resourced, directly quoted historical figures, and how this centeredness must continue to recur and be refined each cycle of this research and each development made upon the game's structure and manual.

One participant's reflections suggested that they value success and want to see their ideas and lessons be successful in the classroom. They felt frustrated when their ideas were not well-received or when students did not engage with the material in the

way they had hoped; they believe that their expertise as a teacher is important and wanted to apply it in more meaningful ways, not merely by chance. They may prefer games that are more focused on teaching strategies or that allow them to use their teaching skills in a more specific way. Overall, participants seemed to view role-playing as a way to explore and improve their teaching practices, and they want to feel successful in their role as a teacher, even in a game setting.

### **In-Game Logic and Structure**

The interactions between NPCs and PCs, in accompaniment with the descriptions by GM of the environment led to some more confusion (this time intentional!), through which the participants eventually saw through talking it out as a group *and* by utilizing their given character's strengths and skills. The players loved the time travel aspect yet made it very clear they were looking forward to the final session's surprise - something that I interpreted as pressure to be clever, perhaps. The push to continue to be innovative was appreciated and fruitful. The competition among the players that was unintentionally present, even if not in the foreground of the game, was part of the 'problem' in terms of the way identity was imagined. For this reason, the final episode organized PCs into one, unified "team." More and more, PC identity, game structure, and logic become more and more closely knit.

*GM: The year is 1833.*

*Dusty (as Simon): We're 30 years until the Civil War.*

*Mila (as Miss D): Wow. Okay.*

*Dusty (as Simon): We've got Andrew Jackson. He just signed the Indian Removal Act.*

*Reba (as Valentina): Oh.*

*Dusty (as Simon): We're doing Trail of Tears. It's happening right now.*

\*\*\*

*Dusty (as Simon): Oh, oh. Let's kidnap kids from across time!*

The following chapter, Episode III, contains the narrative analysis of the results of the third and final session of game play. As did the prior two episodes, this analysis follows the pattern of analysis in this order and as described below: *Character identity*, *Our story: A brief plot summary*, *Critical construction sites*, and *Action research cycle*. Each ‘construction site’ is a scene or scenes, the analysis of which flows as *context→dialogue→subtext→meaning*.

Episode III is the result of gameplay on the evening of Wednesday, October 26, 2022. There were three player participants in this session of gameplay, in addition to me: Dusty, Reba, and Bob.

## CHAPTER 6

### EPISODE III: SERIOUS GAMES

#### **Character Identity**

##### **Character Creation**

After careful consideration of the gameplay, feedback, and reflections, I realized that a sharper attention could be paid to the united, collaborative motivation set forth by a particular set of circumstances. In the last episode, players actually reported feeling in competition with one another, initially, and that it felt unnatural to a TRPG to compete in this way. For this reason, for the final episode, the player character occupations were federal agents with a rescue mission as their immediate objective. This adjustment, in relation to the locale of an Indian Residential School in Canada, the final session felt ripe for a finer attunement to the opportunities inherent within roleplaying for the pursuit of justice and mitigation of oppression. The primary resources that were available to me through the Arizona State Library played an integral role in determining the accounts and narratives re-presented in this context as NPC speech.



## **Player Character Selection**

Five player character identities were presented to participants for selection, four were chosen (see Appendix C for initial and modified character sheets). Each PC agent has a particular specialty (i.e. telecommunications, the local law enforcement community, and behavioral psychology). Otherwise, all components of identity presented were left undone, with players determining their own race, gender, and name. Miniatures this round were various small objects: a miniature thimble, miniature dice, and penny. Participants in this session again included participants Reba and Dusty, as well as new participant, Bob. Bob became Boris, adding the status of ‘defected Russian,’ the tech and computer expert; Dusty became Ed Steinbeck, former social worker, and Reba became Janine, the local sheriff recently deputized by the federal law enforcement agency to work with the team.

*Reba (as Janine): I'm Janine Franklin, a white woman. She/her/hers, please and thank you. I'm the person with the real information.*

## **Our Story: A Brief Plot Summary**

### **Launch**

*You are a taskforce of federal agents serving as an extraction team, all on the scene, hiding behind the brick wall by the entrance but ready to cross the threshold of a residence in order to rescue a young girl who's been the victim of a kidnapping., in your pockets, you find a schematic of the building. Your objective is to find and retrieve this young girl; you have reason to believe that she is inside this residence, and a warrant to enter the premises to search for her. What do you do?*

## **Chapter 1: Approaching Paradox**

In this narrative, the players are part of a team of agents tasked with finding a 10-year-old missing child. This ‘special force’ has been dropped onto the scene by helicopter and have reason to believe the child is in the building ahead of them. This building is both a residence *and* a school, but it remains unclear to the PCs how the child was taken and separated from their family, why this is happening at *school*, or the context of her *taking*. This information is not available to them, and they pose different theories on the situation, like a random/hostage scenario, and speculate about a possible kidnapper. Everyone expresses their general discomfort at how the school appears to be operating as usual (2 PM on a Wednesday), since the administration of the school is aware of the child’s presence!

## **Chapter 2: Fragments**

The players split up to investigate different areas of the building, with some going to the dormitories and others to the bottom floor of classrooms. Bob finds a ripped page, speculated as a piece of a journal, and the PCs discuss other disturbing findings with each other, including the identical contents of each of the trunks, uniformity of the barracks-like dorm, and the prison-style showers. As he tries to leave to reunite with the others, his passage is blocked by one tough nun! The two engage in lengthy physical combat, Boris ultimately proving the victor.

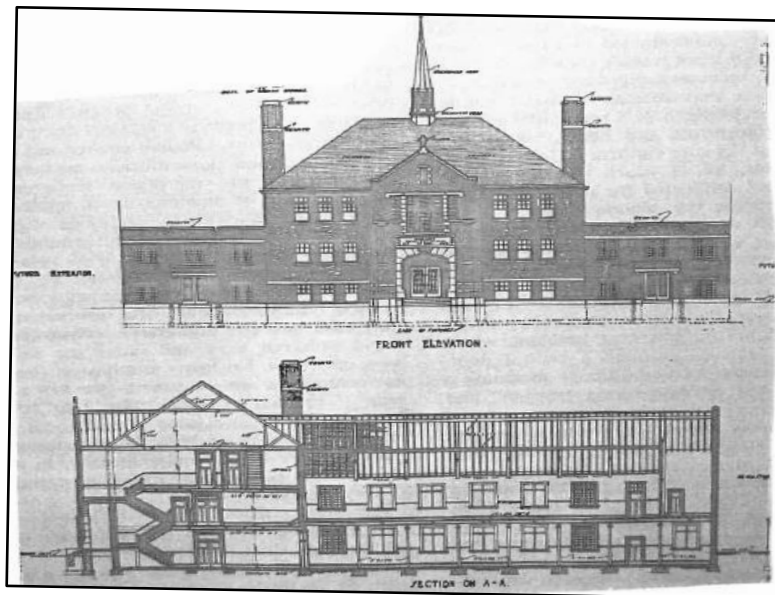
## **Chapter 3: History is Rewritten?**

The team of agents now all together, they confront the priest, Father McHenry, demanding to know where Seepeetza is so she can be returned to her parents and family. With a rosary that transforms into a morning star, Father McHenry swings and scrapes

the tip of Boris' nose, which sends him into a fury. His "Moscow Drop Kick" fails, as do multiple attempts to cuff the priest once tackled (he moisturizes well, and often). When they finally subdue Father McHenry, he apologizes as they perp walk him into the only room left to inspect. This classroom not only contains over a dozen students, but also a pet hedgehog. When they ask for Seepetza, one girl steps forward, beckoning toward the caged hedgehog. When Ed retrieves it for her, the physical connection between the hedgehog and the agent ignites a magical moment in which the spirits of the hedgehog, Ed, and Seepetza are united as one consciousness, wherein Seepetza can share a part of her people's painful collective conscious with him. The team of agents decide to take the entire room of children with them but have to get through one last juggernaut-nun before they can make the exit. When they do, the children never stop and keep running into the nearby forest until they disappear from sight.

**Figure 4**

*Residential School Building Plans, Episode III*



## Critical Construction Sites

*Bob (as Boris): This is residential? It's just like... a mansion?*

### Sense-Making and Consensus

#### *Scene Context*

Soon after the game's launch and during the exploratory phase, PCs try to make sense of the details regarding the scene, their purpose, location, and intent. They are discussing a possible hostage situation at a school, where a 10-year-old girl named Seepeetza is missing.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Dusty (as Ed), Bob (as Boris), Reba (as Janine)

#### *Dialogue*

GM: The security at this school is very minimal and there are no armed guards.

You have no reason to suspect that any of its inhabitants are necessarily armed and dangerous. However, you are still carrying your service weapon as anyone would do at a raid as it is.

D (Ed): I'm just trying to figure out to what extent the 10-year-old is missing if we know where they are. It's a bit of a conundrum. Almost paradoxical.

B (Boris): Sounds like a hostage situation to me where maybe they haven't announced anything, but they're keeping her somewhere for future plans.

D (Ed): That's true. Also, is there any indication... Did we get any briefing on who is thought to have done this?

GM: You aren't exactly sure who, but I can tell you that in this building, you expect to find many other children not too different from Seepeetza. Perhaps a few priests and several nuns.

D (Ed): That would explain the chapel-looking and the cross that I now see on the front of the building.

B (Boris): Maybe they're hiding in plain sight....All right, I think we go in. Do we trust the front desk? I think we can just go in and say we're here to see Sepeetza and we can flash our badge.

R (Janine): I think maybe I shall approach a person since I am 'of these parts' person and see if they will allow us to just go about our work calmly checking some areas, checking some things out.

***Subtext***

The players note the presence of other children and religious figures at the school, which may complicate their search with safety concerns in mind. The PCs are cautious but determined to find the missing child. As they begin to co-construct their new school's reality, the GM is intentionally limited in their replies as to not to give anything away too early.

**Meaning: When players engage in active listening, critical thinking, and build upon one another's ideas while respecting each other's perspectives, they can navigate the complexities of the situation and develop a strategy while keeping all characters safe.** In order to construct their reality and make sense of the information provided by the GM PCs engage in a dialogue to build a shared understanding of the situation and develop a consensus on the best course of action. This involved active listening, critical thinking, and the ability to build upon one another's ideas while respecting each other's perspectives. As they warmed up to the session, they engaged in the alchemy of their constructed reality. Because of this, it can be said that this session of

play surely integrated the “Principle of Designing Systems for Exploration” (Klopfer et al., 2018, p. 105) present in resonant games. This principle is typified by a game with “interesting relationships” (Klopfer et al., 2018, p. 105) in systems that promote discovery and captivating experiences. They relied on one another for stability, co-regulating, and grounding in their amalgamate world shaped by both the players and the GM, one which continued to shift and morph as the game progressed. Through this process of collaborative sense-making and consensus-building, the players develop a sense of community and cohesiveness that is essential for effective teamwork and problem-solving.

*Dusty (as Ed): I said I was only going to say it once, so I'll say it differently:*

*Bring us to Seepeetza!*

*GM: Father McHenry stutters. He says, "No... It's mac and cheese day."*

## **Finally, Some Combat**

### ***Scene Context***

Boris encounters an angry nun in the dining hall of a school they are investigating. The nun attacks Boris with a ruler and a leather strap, forcing him to fight her. the school is Catholic, run by nuns and a priest. The following consists of two scenes of combat between Boris and the nun.

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Bob (as Boris), Reba (as Janine), Dusty (as Ed)

### ***Dialogue***

GM: (*To Boris*) You went to the dining hall. And indeed, you are met by an angry nun. She's so mad! She's so mad in fact, in one hand she has a ruler, and in the other hand she has this leather strap. She's grimacing and coming

towards you *so* fast, faster than you really think a nun should be able to travel.

D (Ed): Nuns run.

B (Boris): That rhymes. All right. Well, I'm going to start saying, 'Sister, I'm here to investigate a crime that might be committed here on campus. I'm looking to help.'

GM: She is very unimpressed with your sort of information that you've offered her and to her, you are just a stranger in the school that does not belong. She's not going to stop. She's going to keep coming at you. I think she's going to swing.

B (Boris): Holy shit!

GM: She's swinging!

B (Boris): All right. I'm not afraid of hitting nuns. Let's go!

GM: Boris, everybody comes to a path in their life sometime where they have to make a choice between-

B (Boris): Sucker punching a nun and getting whipped by a nun?!

*(Later)*

GM: You're going to have to fight her again to get out this door with all these kids. Boris, you and Sister reunite. Round two.

B (Boris): All right, I'm ready.

GM: You are. It's going to be a 10 this time, because you have experience.

B (Boris): All right. This time, are we still in the classroom or are we in the hallway now?

GM: She's come into the classroom.

B (Boris): All right, I'm going to break a chair over her head.

GM: All right. You're going to need a 10 for success.

B (Boris): All right. All right, you old bat! \*Rolls\* 16!

D (Ed) and R (Janine):(*simultaneously*) Yes!

GM: Oh she's down!

B (Boris): Hell yeah!

GM: I think, you guys, I think the writing is on the wall pretty much what needs  
to happen next...

B (Boris): We get another chair!

R (Janine): We run away...

### ***Subtext***

The characters are facing a dangerous situation as they investigate a potential crime at a school. Boris's encounter with the angry nun underscores the potential hostility of the school's inhabitants and the physical danger they may face. The PCs' decision to fight back against the nun reflects their determination to complete their mission despite the risks involved. However, the scene also highlights the absurdity of the situation, as the characters use unconventional methods such as breaking a chair over the nun's head to defend themselves. Overall, this portion of their narrative serves to build tension and suspense while also injecting humor into the story.

**Meaning: Recognizing, understanding, and navigating power dynamics within communities are crucial norms for building a critical community.** With regards to *critical* community building, this exchange suggests the importance of



acknowledging and navigating power dynamics within communities. The school in question is Catholic, run by nuns and a priest, which establishes a clear power structure. The angry nun, as a representative of this power structure, uses physical violence to assert her authority over Boris, who is an outsider in the community. The fact that the PCs fight back against the nun reflects a challenge to this power dynamic and a desire to assert their own agency in the situation. Perhaps another unfortunate truth is that human beings love to rally around seemingly innocuous violence, but violence in TRPGs can be purposeful in cultivating social justice when “encountered and used with potentially prosocial motives (fighting against evil forces), or even within the context of genuine moral dilemmas (using torture on an enemy to gain important information)” (Wright et al., 2020, p. 118).

Emergent TRPGs can involve encountering unexpected obstacles and hostility, but they also require determination and creative problem-solving to overcome these challenges. The scene highlights the importance of remaining focused on the mission while adapting and improvising in the face of unforeseen circumstances and emphasizes the importance of building strong relationships and a sense of shared purpose within a community. Even in the face of unexpected challenges like difficulty navigating power dynamics in a community where the rules and expectations may be unclear or unconventional, here *New School* demonstrates that “games can be used to codify and examine important themes [and/or] simulate new consciousness-raising experiences” (Crocco, 2011, p. 36). Ultimately, it underscores the importance of understanding power dynamics and community norms in order to effectively build and maintain a critical and inclusive community.

## Re-Presentations

### *Scene Context*

The priest in charge, Father McHenry, has been physically overpowered and defeated by the agents and is now handcuffed. PCs have an “aha” moment after the priest ‘confesses.’

**Characters.** Game Master (GM), Reba (as Janine), Bob (as Boris), Dusty (as Ed)

### *Dialogue*

GM: [Father McHenry] realizes that his hands are literally tied and accepting his defeat he says, "I'm sorry, more than I can say that I was part of the system that took children from their home and family. I'm sorry, more than I can say that we tried to remake them in our image-"

R (Janine): Oh, no...

GM: "...taking from them the language and the signs of their identity. I am sorry, more than I can say, that in our school so many were abused culturally and emotionally on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada. I present my apology."

B (Boris): Take it to the judge!

D (Ed): Okay, hang on a sec.

R (Janine): *All* the students are kidnapping victims!

D (Ed): I have a question. Are the students here First Nations people?

GM: This is a residential school. Yes.

R (Janine): Oh, my gosh. Are they indigenous people?!

D (Ed): Yes.

R (Janine): No!

D (Ed): Yeah, the First Nations People of Canada.

R (Janine): They're all the kidnapping victims! They were all kidnapped! Does that mean we won? We solved the case. We saved them all. How do we save them? We have to beat that...

D (Ed): I don't really know how to proceed.

GM: Well, are you asking me?

D (Ed): You know what? Maybe we talk to the children. Yeah.

B (Boris): We are the children.

D (Ed): Let's go in and see what we can do here.

### *Subtext*

The dialogue sheds light on the dark history of residential schools and their impact on First Nations people in Canada. Father McHenry's apology, directly quoted from historical documents, indicates that the entire system refused to recognize the children's cultural identity and abused them emotionally and culturally. The players' reaction to this information suggests shock and horror at the extent of the injustice done to the First Nations people. They discuss how to proceed, highlighting the need to address the situation and help the children. The dialogue highlights the importance of acknowledging past wrongs and taking steps to rectify them.

**Meaning: When addressing historical injustices while role-playing, it is essential not only to recognize the systemic forces at work that condoned and facilitated the injustice, but we must ensure that our narrative does *not* rewrite the dominant group into history as innocent in the matter.** This scene emphasizes the

importance of recognizing and addressing historical injustices done to marginalized communities, particularly First Nations people in Canada. The players' reaction to Father McHenry's confession suggests a realization of the severity of the situation and a desire to take action to help the children who were affected by the residential school system. The dialogue emphasizes the need to acknowledge past wrongs and take steps towards rectifying them, which is a crucial aspect of building a strong and inclusive community. By addressing historical injustices and working towards reconciliation, communities can move towards a more just and equitable future.

However, I also believe it important to note that it did take an old White guy apologizing for them to fully “get” the scope of where we were, and the full-circle context of what a capital-R Residential school *is* and *was* to the First Nations people of Canada. Nevertheless, the shock expressed upon this revelation was also interesting to *watch* from the perspective of seeing this group of players as *agents* of the *federal government*, and interpreting governmental forces as *the* systemic forces at work that condoned and facilitated the cultural genocide of multiple tribes and nations. Therefore, I want to make it explicit that I do not wish to rewrite this group into our history as innocent in the matter. As Weigman (2002) said of *Forrest Gump* and the way in which the film somehow deems Forrest not culpable in his Whiteness, somehow post-White, great equalizer just the sheer number of scenes that take place on a bus - two refusals that lead him to Jenny and Bubba, between segregation, busing, and social exclusion:

These scenes perform two functions: they rewrite segregation as a discourse of injury no longer specific to black bodies, which installs whiteness as injury, and they define that injury as private, motivated not by a social system but by the prejudices and moral lack of individuals who seem simply not to know better. In these narrative moves, national memory is both privatized and disturbingly de-

essentialized, by which I mean that the relationship between identity and politics that underwrote so much sixties dissent is disavowed in order to recast the social meaning of Gump's body—his white masculine heterosexuality—as having no historically contextual meaning at all. (p. 277).

In reality, the probability leans toward Seepeetza being so mortally terrified of a clique of armed, White, agents of the law looking for her. She would likely not step forward without more reassurance, but historically *coercion* was more typically applied on indigenous bodies by members of law enforcement. The casual glossing over of this cognitive dissonance emphasizes certain boundaries that need fortifying, particularly so that the narrative of our story does not reify the government as a group of heroes and “good” White people. For better or for worse, it appears indeed that, “There are no limits - inside the circle” (Fanon, 1963, p. 57), and this scene demonstrates that this permission must be monitored closely and carefully by the GM when a group of players are monocultural.

### **Action Research Cycle**

#### **Character Identity**

As the player participants and I continued to inhabit and tent the structure of our in-game identities, we continued to confront walls of discomfort and unsure footing. The distance between our fictional school investigation in the game and the real-life outcome for Seepeetza and all the children taken from their families was uncomfortable. This could highlight the dissonance between the sense of justice achieved in the game and the reality of ongoing injustices in the world. Additionally, the game could delve deeper into the issue of the white savior complex, examining how it may be subverted by the realization that justice can not always be fully achieved. Ultimately, the arc of identity

culminating in this third episode could aim to promote critical reflection and self-awareness among players, encouraging them to consider the limitations of their actions and the complexity of the issues at hand.

*GM: You know what? You are motivated by the 'precise pursuit of justice' and what's more precise and just than an eye for an eye, so a 10 will be successful for you!*

### **In-Game Logic and Structure**

The feedback suggests that participants enjoyed the game because the GM listened to their feedback and implemented it in subsequent games. They appreciated the attention to detail, such as the maps and newspaper clippings, which made the game feel more immersive. The fact that the game was based on a real story added to the intrigue and overall enjoyment. The greater meaning of this line of complimenting may be that actively listening to feedback and incorporating it into future actions can improve the overall experience for everyone involved. The feedback regarding the combat was less positive, with more constructive feedback including one participant's description of it being “clunky” in general. Not becoming too excited, anticipatory, or overwhelmed with the involvement of combat and violence is a must for a successful GM for *New School*.

## CHAPTER 7

### EPILOGUE: DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

#### **Summary of Study Findings**

This qualitative action research dissertation explored the use of an original table-top role-playing game, *New School*, as a virtual means of community-building among independent community educators. Implementing an emergent strategy-informed approach, the game was collaboratively co-created and developed over the sessions and analyzed in order to better understand if and how it could build community, and what kinds of frameworks to do so could be developed from such gameplay. Qualitative data was collected in the form of transcribed observations, game artifacts, participant questionnaires responses, researcher reflection journal entries, transcribed participant interviews, and one transcribed mini-focus group, all of which were analyzed through narrative data analysis.

The narrative analysis was organized in three episodes, each following the pattern of analysis of *Character identity*, *Our story: A brief plot summary*, *Critical construction sites*, and *Action research cycle*. At these critical construction sites narrative analyses of selected, emblematic sections of dialogue were conducted, and each scene's dialogue was contextualized, analyzed for subtext, and mined for meaning. The action research cycle examined the meaning made during the sessions of game play and by the action research cycle of participant questionnaires → researcher reflection journal → crafting the next episode. This included indications of how the framework for community-building, the Player's Handbook (see Chapter 8), was updated or altered accordingly.

Within the narrative analysis, nine scenes of dialogue were examined, three from each episode. Their extrapolated meanings are restated here following their construction site's title:

1. *First, and then:* A diversity of experience among players and GM can be successfully mitigated with patience, grace, and empathy.
2. *Mutual adoration:* A 'pliant being' NPC can help players gain a greater understanding of the game, promotes inhabiting one's player character identity, and ignites empathy in players.
3. *Second selfing:* Players can exercise embodiment as empathy while giving consideration to and voicing a PC's in-game physical limitations.
4. *The big reveal:* The give and take of constructive criticism can serve as a catalyst for player participants to co-construct their shared understanding of the nature of reality in the game, and what their next move would be.
5. *Always be learning:* Identity may momentarily be wielded like a blunt instrument, but players *can* find an appropriate way to navigate intersectionality of gender, time, race, and color.
6. *A swing and a miss:* Charisma is necessary for convincing folks to try something foreign and brand new, and character predilections and pre-populated identities become a factor in success on a roll, despite a player's real-life capabilities.
7. *Sense-making and consensus:* When players engage in active listening, critical thinking, and build upon one another's ideas while respecting each other's perspectives, they can navigate the complexities of the situation and develop a strategy while keeping all characters safe.



8. *Finally, some combat:* Recognizing, understanding, and navigating power dynamics within communities are crucial norms for building a critical community.
9. *Re-presentations:* When addressing historical injustices while role-playing, it is essential not only to recognize the systemic forces at work that condoned and facilitated the injustice, but we must ensure that our narrative does *not* rewrite the dominant group into history as innocent in the matter.

Additionally, each action research cycle reflection proffered other insights and recommendations for the GM with regards to character identity and in-game logic and structure, specifically. These insights were not specifically listed or limited to one particular session reflection, but are here collected and presented as “for the GM” recommendations that will be added to the Player’s Handbook, the framework and product of this innovation:

- When player character identity markers mismatch those of the participants’ actual identity in some way(s), it can move participants into the crucible of discomfort.
- Purposefully misinterpreting and misrepresenting one aspect of reality in-game can serve to unite players and to encourage them to challenge the GM.
- A mystery implies a solution, point of actualization, or ultimate success.
- Tacit competition can sometimes have unintended consequences and therefore it is crucial that a motivation for teamwork is identified.
- Challenging authority moves everyone forward in some capacity, so lean into the story as it develops and emerges.

- Questioning your own authority moves you forward into *becoming* and transformation.
- Choosing fun, joy, to experiment, or to play will never disappoint.
- Be flexible in PCs' interpretations of themselves, just as you would with any other person in the world.
- A game can be fun and serious at the same time.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

#### **Research Questions**

*(RQ1): How can a table-top role-playing game establish and build community among independent community educators?*

*(RQ2): By engaging in an emergent design-informed table-top role-playing game, what kinds of community-building frameworks can be produced by independent community educators playing the game?*

The study's findings - though preliminary - support the notion that table-top role-playing games are a medium that encourages critical thinking, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing among player participants. TRPGs offer a space for players to engage in shared experiences and collaborative storytelling. By working together to navigate the complexities of the game world and the dynamics of their own interpersonal relationships, players built empathy, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging among one another. The summarized findings demonstrate how players can work together to understand and inhabit the game world, sharpen their perspective of their character, and develop action strategies for in-game success. When public, personal revelations

surrounding player identity occur, players can build critical community norms and foster a sense of social responsibility within the group.

In particular, the findings might suggest that games involve complex encounters with others and oneself, of the varying distances between and connections among participant, player character, and non-player character identity appear to facilitate a shift away from uncritical role-playing and toward more than mere concern for folks who have been marginalized, but toward the cultivation of a loving, critical *inward eye*, and a perspective critical of systems that perpetuate inequality and oppression. This complication of perspective is refracted in the notions of multiple ideations of self, mentioned by scholars Du Bois (2015) and hooks (1997). Furthermore, the findings suggest the game may be of particular use to independent community educators, those who enter a multitude of educational environments, as the game requires that players engage with shifting power relationships in and among communities where rules, expectations, and interpretations of multiple realities may be unclear or unconventional.

This emergent design-informed table-top role-playing game has potential as a framework for community-building. The typology of the framework requires the intentional incorporation of several mechanisms at work in this study that come alive in the cyclical narrative structure of our three episodes of play. However, it does not translate that the three episodes should be replicated, in any way shape or form. Rather, the GM must keep several principles in mind when casting their first rod, so to speak. The success of the framework's functioning is also enhanced by players' and the GM's relative experience with table-top role-playing games or role-playing in general.

It is also recommended, for the game's purpose and function of community-building to be maintained, that several principles are kept in mind, namely the cultivation of the sacred space needed to expand one's awareness and consciousness surrounding identity, on where "players have the chance to imagine their best (and sometimes worst) selves in a safe space" (Klopfer et al., 2018, p. 41). This brave, safe, sacred place is the crucible for the imaginative, critical constructions the game exists to produce, providing players with "opportunities to project their identity into new roles and consider new ideas with a flexibility that may not be available in more straightforward instructional settings" (Klopfer et al., 2018, p. 81).

### **Emergent Design and Strategy Within Findings**

Emergent design has been conceived in agile contexts as "large-scale growth comes from the basis of many little contributions" (Cavallo, 2004, p. 100). Rather than bits of code, in this game context the contributions from each participant consist of their emerging understanding and truth within the co-constructed reality before them. Within a contemporary imagination of emergent *strategy*, one that is rooted in critical studies, brown (2017, 2021) has developed foundational principles and protocols for facilitation committed to radical liberation from fear and oppression and conceive of change as a state of becoming that can be aligned and directed with intention (ESII, 2022). The collaborative nature of this inductive approach to building community, embracing and empowering community voices in the development of a possible framework, has deeply informed the formation and mode of this study's innovation, but in retrospect also wholly shaped the setting, location, and intention behind each emergent episodes' creation and enactment.

There was one component that went fairly unmentioned during the data analysis phase of this study, and that was the unstructured commentary that came immediately after gameplay, but before recording stopped. During these discussions, as well as individual interviews, such transformations occurred when players were looking back on and narrating their immediate past actions and choices from multiple perspectives, from their in-game character identity, their personal identity, and the assumed or implied identities of the non-player characters. This largely liminal space birthed much of what constitutes, I believe, a ripe space for WOE (Working on Excellence) (brown, 2017). The purpose of a group such as this is to pursue and celebrate alongside one another the challenges involved in the development of self-awareness, including accountability through mutual transparency, self-transformation, curiosity, vulnerable reflection, pattern disrupting, and being present and intentional (brown, 2017). The reflections, discussions, and revelations surrounding identity, race, gender, and ability contained within this study's narratives suggest that it certainly could serve to build this specific kind of emergent, critical community.

With an eye on “visionary fiction [that] disrupts the hero narrative concept” (brown, 2017, p. 152), it was first crucial to “create open, non-judgmental space...[and] avoid shaming folks for having conflict, harm, abuse, or violence within their [group]. This is common and unfortunately normal” (Dixon, 2021, p. 67). However, this permissive space must also not be completely insular and safe from discomfort or acknowledging one's own mistakes and missteps. Rather, in this *brave space* (Jones, 2021), we lifted “voices that fight to be heard elsewhere” (p. 65) yet simultaneously and without exception we dove into our “responsibility to examine what we think we know”

(p. 65). The complexity of the narrative, its realities, and identities made these questions and supports necessary and logical. Additionally, the parameters and emergent nature of the game made it nearly impossible *not* to recognize the critical critiques of self and world that made this game transformative and hopefully transferable.

*I relinquished (with much relief) the possession and totality of authority over the game. - Researcher Reflection Journal, October 26, 2022*

### **Limitations**

This study had its limitations, all important to acknowledge. While exploring the table-top role-playing game's ability to build community, the context was limited to three sessions of game play. Therefore, it cannot yet be said whether or not the same outcome could be achieved when the Player's Handbook is put into play by another Game Master and player participants. However, prior research on the potential capacity and effects of TRPGS (Abbott et al., 2022; Bowman, 2010; Daniau, 2016) suggests that it is absolutely possible, given that at least the GM has experience in other TRPG contexts or campaigns (Lasley, 2021). In other words, "Resonant games cannot be built on narrow expertise" (Klopfer et al., 2018, p. 168). While it was indeed an enormous contributing factor to the game's success to have two constant participants, present for all three sessions (Dusty and Reba), the small sample size of four participants should be noted. While the success of the framework is yet to be determined, as it is dependent on its dissemination and use by others, the initial results suggest that *New School* built a critical community among its independent community educator participants. For this reason, I would venture to say that *New School* is a resonant game that defies the "Principle of Working Within an Educational System" (Klopfer et al., 2018, p. 121). In fact, this entire study operated

*outside* an educational system, something that became a necessity indeed when coordinating folks from all over the world yet made its own miniature systems for exploration and discovery.

## **Implications**

### **Literature and Body of Research**

The critical orientation of the guiding theories undergirded the responsibility of this community framework. Critical gaming, and role-playing pedagogies are at the core of the game's purpose, next to which lies empathy, hoping to impart some to all participants. This is reflected most obviously in the player characters' six key characteristics, one of which is Empathy. This may suggest that TRPGs can function as a medium for social-justice-oriented development, a moral practice similarly attempted by Wright et al. (2020). Extending on Sidhu & Carter's 2021 study, wherein they propose *pivotal play*, a transformational moment for players surrounding a death event, this study confirms this notion and also proposes that transgressions in general, and ones specific to racism, may also present themselves as pivotal moments in TRPGs. More refined and intentional research would shed more light on this, especially if future iterations exhibit more diversity in the makeup of participants. Notably, the status of the participants as independent community educators did make connecting them together difficult, both logistically and in fictional spaces. However, TRPGs continue to present themselves as a framework for reaching "difficult to engage populations" (Abbot et al., 2022, p. 29) of varying degrees, and the virtual nature of our communion ameliorated much of this difficulty in gathering players. The findings of this study suggest that online communities of educators, or perhaps *this* online community, were able to "co-construct new forms of

meaning and understanding in ways that are individually and collectively valuable” (Booth & Kellogg, 2015, p. 695), and though quite different from a traditional learning management system, the game functioned as a critical mode of “producing and disseminating tacit knowledge” (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018, p. 31).

Moreover, this study points to an unnamed sector of the education workforce. This unique group is not limited to the ‘itinerant’ label many education districts or departments place on traveling teachers. Beyond my imagining after school as still a part of the school day, and the inclusion of teaching artists who may hold temporary appointments at various educational institutions, the recruitment piece of this study opened up many other possibilities and groups of educators who also fall under this umbrella. District substitute teachers, adjunct college and university faculty members, and other special education service providers all ‘fit the bill’ and were invited to play. There remains an enormity of untapped potential within and among these educators, and they also deserve to be named and acknowledged for their unique existence in so many of our schools.

### **Future Professional Practice**

Independent community educators enter and exit communities and buildings each with its own norms, invisible curricula, and power dynamics. These forces are felt, indeed much more intensely, by folks who are not acculturated to the space like students and teachers. The navigation of these unclear or unstated ways of being may involve independent community educators committing unintentional transgressions due to a lack of incorporation and therefore familiarity with the internal subtexts of an educational community. The misinterpretations of these transgressions can cause members of the



community to reduce the educator's autonomy or even value. Therefore, I believe it imperative to develop intentional community for and among independent community educators. Table-top role-playing games are an opportune locus for developing this connection, as it "lends to a heightened sense of community among players, encouraging interaction between people who might not normally socialize with one another" (Bowman, 2010, p. 179), something certainly applicable to independent community educators and their unique orbits of work.

### **Participants**

Reba's experience in the game sheds more light on a potential pitfall in identity and role-playing, as well as the limitations of assuming that shared identity automatically leads to shared experience and understanding. In the second session of the game, Reba initially believed that her identity as a person of color would allow her to connect more easily with the other students of color, but she found that their experiences were too different to bridge simply through identity. The game master acknowledged the complexity of identity and underscored the importance of empathy and understanding when embodying a character from a different background.

*Reba: I really tried to leverage my identity there... [but] just because I'm a person of color does not necessarily mean that I can empathize with what's going on in their life and use that as a teaching tool.*

This experience has implications for future participants in the game, as well as in real-life situations. It reminds us that shared identity does not always equate to shared experiences or understanding, and that assumptions based solely on *perceived* identity can lead to misunderstandings and harmful actions. It also highlights the importance of

taking the time to listen and understand others' experiences, even when we share some aspects of identity. In the game, Reba's lesson can be applied to future characters she embodies, while in real life, it can serve as a reminder to approach others with empathy and understanding, rather than relying solely on assumptions based on identity.

### **Reflections**

*Dusty: Most importantly, you created a safe space to play and try out ideas.*

\*\*\*

*Reba: It felt like a really safe way to make that error.*

### **Virtual Game Design and Facilitation**

The feedback above is confirmation of its importance within the framework. My priority as GM was to create a safe and welcoming environment where players could make mistakes without fear of judgment. However, during the final session, I realized that I had unintentionally made a decision for the players, a social error that I had to reckon with. This experience taught me that we often uncover real-life biases through gaming, and it's important to be mindful of this. Despite my mistake, I appreciated the safety of the game, which allowed me to use the experience as a learning opportunity. The safe space was not only constructed by the GM, but all of the player participants present. I believe that if we all practiced admitting when we've made a mistake, we could create a better world for ourselves and those around us. Ultimately, practice makes progress, and I could not have done any of this without the contributions, questions, and challenges from the player participants.

## Conducting and Writing on Action Research

I did not know it at the time, but I was primed and ready for this whole process, long before it occurred. In the early summer of 2019, I embarked on a two-week Fellowship, held at the Lawrenceville School near Princeton, New Jersey. The program was designed for early career teachers in private independent schools around the globe, and run by the Klingenstein Institute at Teachers College, Columbia University. The few dozen of us did many brave and bold, difficult things during our time together, being vulnerable, making mistakes, and most of all growing. Our final project was to create an anti-racist action plan that would be implemented under our realm of control or ‘in our wheelhouse,’ when we returned to our teaching positions in the fall of 2020. This experience not only familiarized me with making intentional action plans, but as a reference point it helped me understand the scope and sequence of a true *study*, what *research* requires. That is to say, the installation, cultivation, and dedication that was required for the execution of the plan I learned all the while during the making and playing of *New School*.

What I have learned about myself, as a researcher and writer, is namely that I prefer to work with others. If it were not for the pages upon pages of dialogue transcripts, the interactions and conversations with my playmates fodder and food for the soul of this work, the process would have stopped with its proposal. I have learned that I take imagination and play very seriously, from its infusion in the game to the way in which I structured and wrote its analysis, the flexibility and nature of improvisation is geared toward ‘yes, and’ - something that not only moves me forward in my own development

as a researcher and writer but that moves us all forward. Don't ever underestimate the value of or stop playing pretend with your friends.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have conducted my dissertation study, and I am proud of what I have accomplished. Although I did not completely achieve my original goal of large-scale community building for independent community educators through the game, I realized that addressing the Whiteness in the play space became more urgent for a purpose. Looking back, I recognize the importance of staying open-minded and flexible in research, as unexpected findings can sometimes lead to even more valuable insights. I am happy that I was able to identify and name a critical, overlooked sector of the education workforce, in addition to creating a mechanism for communities to interact. This is a significant contribution to the field, and I hope it will pave the way for further exploration in this area.

### **For the Next Times**

In my own future imagination of my implementation of *New School*, I am not yet convinced that it is the most appropriate avenue to creating and *establishing* community. However, it has the potential to be tremendously successful in fortifying, focusing, and strengthening existing communities that share the desire to grow with intention. Additionally, this could promote a longer campaign-style series of game play which I imagine would be much more effective in supporting risk and reward from participants.

While such a game like *New School* has the potential value in highlighting the experiences and perspectives of people of color throughout history, there is also a risk of reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Role-playing games can indeed be a powerful tool for exploring issues related to race and identity, but they also have the potential to perpetuate

essentialist views of race. If games are designed to promote inclusivity and diversity, an all-white player group presents a conundrum. As this was not necessarily a component of my original design planning process, my review of literature specifically surrounding the racial identity component of role-playing was lacking. Since approaching this threshold, many theorists and researchers have informed my considerations and reflections surrounding this version of the game, and what its next iteration might look like.

With regard to the community-building framework, Richard & Gray (2018) might appreciate the efforts made to create a community-supported collaborative learning environment with *New School*. They might also encourage an increased awareness of the power dynamics at play within gaming spaces, and to work to create an inclusive and equitable environment that empowers marginalized players to set their own agenda and create their own rules and practices. Richard & Gray (2018) might see the game as an opportunity to create a community-supported collaborative learning environment that challenges dominant narratives of history and empowers marginalized players to set their own agenda and create their own rules and practices.

Shaw (2015) argues that it is important to ensure that a TRPG includes representation that is not just player-created or chosen, but that is intentionally designed and integrated into the game. However, even if an intention of *New School* was to indeed move beyond mere pluralism and towards true diversity and inclusivity by including non-fictional NPCs of color from American history, it is of equal importance to be mindful of how the presentation of these characters may reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes or power dynamics related to race, gender, and ethnicity. Additionally, a GM must ensure

that players are not just passive observers of history, but that they have agency to shape the narrative and create their own stories.

Eddy (2020) might appreciate a critical reinvestigation of the frontier imaginary present in the final episode of *New School*, especially since the “investigation” grappled with the problematic history and ongoing legacies of colonialism and oppression. Eddy (2020) might see the use of direct quotations from historical documents as a way to critically engage and to disrupt dominant narratives of history. However, she might also encourage the GM to consider how this approach may limit the portrayal of non-fictional characters of color and to explore ways to humanize and complicate their experiences beyond what is presented in historical documents.

In light of this literature, it is important to approach a role-playing game in which people of color are given voices based on historical accounts with care and sensitivity. Game designers should be aware of the potential for cultural appropriation and harmful stereotypes and should design the game with a view to promoting inclusivity and diversity. Players should be willing to challenge their own biases and be sensitive to issues of representation and cultural appropriation and should approach the game with an open mind and a willingness to learn from the experiences of others.

### **Closing Thoughts**

*Racism is a White problem. (Dreasher, 2021)*

\*\*\*

*Anti-racism is a White person's problem. (Thompson, 2021)*

Some discussion questions that have come up as a result of this process(ing):

- What are the limits of empathy as a practice?

- Is this game “for white people”?
- Can something be “for white people” and anti-racist?

A "game for white people" that aims to be anti-racist *could* be designed to educate and challenge players on issues of privilege, power, and systemic racism. The game could encourage players to confront their own biases and engage in critical self-reflection through gameplay mechanics that simulate the experiences of marginalized groups. It could also promote empathy and understanding through storytelling and role-playing, allowing players to see the world through the eyes of others. The game could be designed to facilitate difficult conversations and provide a safe space for players to learn and grow together. In this way, a "game for white people" could be a powerful tool for promoting anti-racism, promoting awareness, education, and action towards dismantling systems of oppression.

In this way, yes - the game created here was indeed exclusionary, even if unintentional. However, I also absolutely do not believe that White people working on anti-racism need to *expose our hindquarters* to People of Color, as we look over our shoulders at Them, desperate for a look of approval, all the while bumbling, stumbling, and embarrassing ourselves. That is not to say embarrassment is to be avoided - quite the opposite, embarrassment is my greatest teacher. That is to say, under no circumstances was I about to tokenize a Person of Color by inviting them to play after noticing the pale complexions of the participants and GM. The monocultural group also avoided magnified shame (*and* any over-magnified victory) through the eyes of Persons of Color - we were forced to reckon with *ourselves* (the point). We were learning the hard way that we could never imagine that experience, even if it is simulated, that the space and distance between

our White bodies and systemic violence are nowhere near comparable. Perhaps the intentional creation of a space in which White people felt brave enough to be accidentally racist isn't a bad idea.

While it might be an easier task to assign outcomes to cards drawn from a stack, the 'get out of jail free' cards are *not* randomized in American life. A person's identity cannot be trivialized in this way. Games that purport to educate us about the plight of marginalized individuals with lists of facts, fail to capitalize on the power of empathy, perspective, and role-playing with identity. Building the plane while flying it is preferably done in a lower stake environment than 30,000 feet. Similarly, if we are going to get to a point where White people *divest* from their Whiteness, we need a place to practice that does not cause more harm to People of Color - the real-world is not our playpen for trying out new solutions to a seemingly timeless problem. To pretend to be an *othered* person, to make believe and act from their point of view, is a Sisyphean task, one that renders any White person who tries impotent, or at least that is what I learned and observed during the sessions of *New School*. I do not share in their trans-race identity, but for these confident (formerly?) White women, the Raquel Saraswati's (fka Rachel Seidel) and Nkechi Diallo's (fka Rachel Dolezal) of the world, I reserve judgment but do wonder in what ways and what spaces their transgressional desires could be contained and fulfilled in ways that do not injure or retraumatize marginalized communities and individuals of color.



What follows is the Second Edition of the *New School* Player's Handbook. It is now complete with the indications and additions gained from insights during the initial playtesting sessions, and is presented here as a possible framework for community building among independent community educators.

## CHAPTER 8

### NEW SCHOOL PLAYER'S HANDBOOK, 2ND EDITION

This is a table-top role-playing game (TRPG), designed to be played virtually with up to five total players. All but one participant will act as Player Characters (PCs); PCs will select, modify, and/or create their own in-game identities that will serve as the primary protagonist roles, around which the in-game stories revolve and shift. One of the players will be acting as the Game Master (GM), and is responsible for game, map, and non-player character (NPC) design, game facilitation, and resolving the declared actions of the other players.

#### **Who Was This Game Designed For?**

*New School* was created with educators in mind who regularly work in a variety of settings, whether virtually or multiple school sites (teaching artists, after school instructors, itinerant teachers, etc.); I have been referring to members of this grouping as *independent community educators*. Each of the three episodes of *New School* will take place in a different kind of school setting than the last, a decision meant to reflect these educators' professional geographies.

#### **Materials Needed**

- One 20-sided die, actual or virtual
- Computer and internet access, Zoom capabilities (camera + microphone)
- Character sheet

## How to Play

The core mechanics of gameplay are similar to the basic rules of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D): to resolve an action, a player rolls a 20-sided die and adds modifiers based on a variety of factors, the first being the natural aptitude of the character as defined by six attributes/abilities: Resiliency, Empathy, Adaptability, Intelligence, and Wisdom. For simplification purposes, instead of assigning the attributes numbers as is typical of D&D, each is represented on a scale of 1, 2, or 3 stars that correlate mathematically in terms of probability for resolving an action (e.g., 5, 10, 15). Additional factors influencing the success of a declared action include how skilled the character is in various fields, their impact points, as well as other situational modifiers. If the result is greater than or equal to a target number called an Upper Limit (UL), then the action succeeds; the GM will do the math for players so that they know what the UL target roll is beforehand. Each player's stats, skills, and background are indicated on their character sheet.

### Example of a roll initiative in *New School*:

GM: Your walkie-talkie is starting to make some noise.

PC1: Oh, weird. What sort of noise?

GM: Well, you can kind of maybe hear someone talking, but you're not quite sure.

I don't know. Maybe you should roll to see if you can get your walkie talkie tuned to the correct channel...

PC1: Please, game master manager, what core ability is such a skill tied to?

GM: Indeed. Your intelligence. Your ability to investigate and retrieve this information.

PC1: I toss the walkie to PC2. 'I don't know. Maybe you can find the channel.'

PC2: I shall roll to make sense of this as yet unintelligible garble.

GM: Okay. I'm looking for a 13.

PC2: *\*Rolls\** A 10.

GM: Ah, 10. You can hear some sort of words, maybe almost every other one but I think you can hear, almost sounds like a man's voice speaking, but you can't quite hear what he says.

## **How to Read a Character Sheet**

Each character sheet has space for a player character's name, pronouns, and occupation. Below this are the character's star rating (1-3) for six characteristics: Resiliency, Empathy, Charisma, Adaptability, Intelligence, and Wisdom. Additionally, background information and skills are described in more detail in the larger boxes. For reference, the six canonical characteristics in D&D include *intelligence*, *wisdom*, *charisma*, *constitution*, *dexterity*, and *strength*. In this game, *constitution* (also what influences impact point vulnerability) has been interpreted as *adaptability*, *dexterity* is now *empathy*, and *strength* has been reinterpreted as *resilience*. Impact points in this game are what one might imagine as "health" in a video game-like scenario.

Player characters (PCs) are not limited to the listed skills on the character sheet - these are merely some of their special and specific abilities. Character expertise and motivation are, in addition to the entirety of the character sheet, simply more information for players in terms of what kind of choices your character might make, or what their predilections and tendencies might be. Remember, "In a role-playing game, players engage in the fantasy of portraying someone that they are not. Through consensual storytelling, players direct their characters to do and say things they would, could, or should not do in real life" (Lafferty, 2004, p. 4), so, try to connect your PC's abilities and perceived state of mind to their in-game actions and decisions.

### **For the Game Master**

Upon initial playtesting and during this game's construction, several insights and recommendations floated to the surface, reflected in feedback from participants both during and after sessions of play. These recommendations fit mostly into two categories,

when concerned with the GM: Character identity and In-game logic and structure. The status and continuation of this game as a potential framework for community-building may or may not be contingent upon the degree to which one heeds this advice. However, it remains a core component of the products of this innovation and is shared as such. This researcher welcomes any and all other insights as a result of further game play and will be including them in further additions.

### **Community Care**

A diversity of experience among players and GM can be successfully mitigated with patience, grace, and empathy. Players can also exercise embodiment as empathy while considering and voicing a PC's in-game physical limitations. When players engage in active listening, critical thinking, and build upon one another's ideas while respecting each other's perspectives, they can navigate the complexities of the situation and develop a strategy while keeping all characters safe. Additionally, A 'pliant being' NPC can help players gain a greater understanding of the game, promotes inhabiting one's player character identity, and ignites empathy in players.

### **Identity**

When player character identity markers mismatch those of the participants' actual identity in some way(s), it can move participants into the crucible of discomfort. Identity may momentarily be wielded like a blunt instrument, but players *can* find an appropriate way to navigate intersectionality of gender, time, race, and color. Be flexible in PCs' interpretations of themselves, just as you would with any other person in the world.

*PC: I don't know too much about walkie-talkies. Yeah, you just leave it on and then, if somebody tries to reach us, it'll go boop. I guess I just clip it to my belt loop.*

*GM: You definitely have one...?*

*PC: I'm a 57-year-old substitute teacher for PE so, yeah, you best believe I got belt loops!*

## **Motivation**

Tacit competition can sometimes have unintended consequences and therefore it is crucial that a clear reason for teamwork is identified. Genre also contributes to this; for example, a mystery implies a solution, point of actualization, or ultimate success.

Charisma is necessary for convincing folks to try something foreign and brand new, and character predilections and pre-populated identities become a factor in success on a roll, despite a player's real-life capabilities.

## **Power dynamics**

Recognizing, understanding, and navigating power dynamics within communities are crucial norms for building a critical community. Challenging authority moves everyone forward in some capacity, so lean into the story as it develops and emerges.

Questioning your own authority moves you forward into *becoming* and transformation.

The give and take of constructive criticism can serve as a catalyst for player participants to co-construct their shared understanding of the nature of reality in the game, and what their next move would be. Purposefully misinterpreting and misrepresenting one aspect of reality in-game can also serve to unite players and it encourages challenging the GM.

## **Purpose**

Make sure you are familiar with the features and purpose of all described or mentioned objects in a room!

*PC: I'm going to try to figure out, based on my natural geography. For example, if there's no Czechoslovakia, then I'll know that we're maybe in the middle of the 1940s or something like that. If, for example, there is a big old Austria Hungary, I'll know that we're... Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm looking at Europe.*

*GM: Yep. Okay.*

*PC: I'm trying to figure out the decade.*

*GM: You're walking over there and you're taking a look and you peer and then you can see that it says Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary.*

*PC: Hungary. All right. So post World War I. That's good.*

*GM: Yugoslavia. What else can you see? The USSR.*

*PC: I think we're in the thirties. I did it. We're in the thirties.*

## **Tone**

Choosing fun, joy, to experiment, or to play will never disappoint. Deepen into sensation and imagination when narrating.

*GM: Oh my God. You opened this jar and it is the most vile smell you've ever smelled in your life before. It's like old pizza and other people's ketchup farted. You try and screw it back on, but it's just no use. The stench is out and it's not going back in!!*

## **Storytelling**

A game can be fun and serious at the same time. However, when addressing historical injustices while role-playing, it is essential not only to recognize the systemic forces at work that condoned and facilitated the injustice, but we must ensure that our narrative does *not* rewrite the dominant group into history as innocent in the matter.

### **New School, Episodes I-III**

#### **New School, Episode I**

##### ***The Plot***

A disparaged science professor, Dr. Ed Algernope was not invited to return to the school this academic year, following a tragic science experiment gone awry that took the innocent lives of several guinea pigs and caused many thousands of dollars' worth of fire damage to the school's biology classroom. With few options left as a deranged yet mediocre scientist and teacher, Dr. Algernope exacted his misguided revenge on the school by installing an electromagnetic energy-emitting device somewhere within the school's recesses before his official exodus, a weapon that has been silently and steadily wreaking accumulative havoc on the students and faculty. Symptoms include tinnitus, visual problems, vertigo, nausea, cognitive difficulties, hearing a sudden loud noise, pain in one or both ears, feeling of pressure or vibrations in the head. When the emergency switch in the wings of the auditorium stage is thrown, this will be resolved.

**About the School.** Something weird is definitely going on at this high school. Maybe there's something going around but they've noticed lately that the faculty seem to be in a perpetual fog - their cognitive abilities have been dulled and slowed. Not to

mention, the kids can't quite maintain their balance - lately they've noticed their walking momentarily disturbed, sloshing laterally like they were on a ship at rough seas.

**About the World.** We have to find a way to contact the outside world so we can get help! OR We have to find the source of that noise/whatever is emitting that frequency!

**Launch.** *You both arrive at a new school during the last period of the school day, check in with security, and have a seat in the lobby as usual. While you wait for someone to escort you to your classroom, you notice the others waiting as well. Fifteen minutes pass, and though your social media feed has been entertaining, when the final bell rings you look up and notice not only has no one else been retrieved from the lobby, but there is no longer any sign of the front office workers, the security guard or his coffee, or any students or teachers. It's as if everyone vanished without a trace. You return to your phones, only to discover they're all dead - not even 'no signal' but they've all been powered off and won't power on. What do you do?*

### ***Player Characters***

**Thom Jack Blackenger.** A district-wide substitute teacher, with a specialty in PE, Mr. Blackenger is a 57-year-old former attorney who was disbarred for illegal gambling activity. His sport of choice is football, and he can often be seen with a whistle around his neck. He is motivated by winning, is able to recharge his energy quickly, and can become the center of attention at nearly any given moment.

**Yinka Camp.** A 38-year-old teaching artist in sculpture, specializing in metallurgy, Yinka is a trans person of color and are missing one hand lost in a tragic smelting accident; it has been replaced by a hook of Yinka's own design. They are



motivated by the compulsion to create and have a nearly limitless imagination. They have an almost preternatural ability to both comfort and empower others.

### ***Locations***

**Lobby.** Includes the security desk and front office, the central communications location and initial location of the PCs for game (and building) entry.

**Hallways and Walls.** You notice a row of faculty photos, each with an accompanying wall plaque including the teacher's name and subject area. You notice one of the frames is empty, and the plaque has been ripped from the wall, some minor cosmetic damage evident to the wall's paint. Otherwise, it's inscribed with student work, class photos, and photo ops from major milestones of the school, including a groundbreaking ceremony, a basketball team trophy, and a student posing behind a brooder box holding a new family of tan-colored guinea pigs.

**Auditorium.** On the stage is a lonely ghost light, one upright, bare bulb on a stand, with a pull-chain for on/off. On the ground next to it is a wired, hand-held microphone with a long cord, perhaps the source of some very loud feedback. The cord leads to a large, red handled switch that takes two arms to pull it down. It is labeled:

*Emergency! Do NOT shut off!*

**Science Classroom.** Contains lab tables, chemical closet, safety shower, office, supply closet, sinks, emergency eye wash, and biology textbooks.

**Cafeteria.** Encased in glass and its entry has two push doors. Inside are a couple of rectangular tables pushed to the end and a couple of circular lunch tables sort of pushed to one side of the far side farthest away from you of the cafeteria space. It appears

there's some kitchen space, but you can't quite see through because it's a little bit to your direct side, out of your line of sight.

**Teachers' Lounge.** Features a supply closet, kitchenette, copy machine, bulletin board, sitting area, teacher workstations, and mailboxes. *\*see Appendix A for maps*

### ***Non-Player Characters***

**Clay Being.** This little clay piece of writhing matter has no sort of ambition, no desires. It's not really feeling any pain or remorse. It only exists to fulfill the orders and the instructions of its creator. But this particular clay golem is in anguish, and that is the reason for the burbles and the gurgling noises it makes. It's unfulfilled. It's unsure what to do. It is not humanoid per se but can be. It's an amorphous, amoebic sort, roughly the size of a small brick. This endearing, sentient lump of clay can shapeshift, if that is amenable to the fulfillment of its task, but its ability to stretch is finite. Because it is something that is devoted and blindly obedient to its master, it also has some amounts of omnipotent knowledge. So, it can find things that you want it to find. It can retrieve things if they are around, almost like a control F, but in a clay form.

**Zombie Horde.** These aren't exactly your typical zombies - they are a group of dormant teachers in a supply closet. They're burnt out, a little too pale for the season. Husks, really. Husks of once-bright-eyed, optimistic teachers. Yes, they're subdued for now, but upon any disturbance whatsoever they will be awakened. They don't have a blood lust, but they do lust for office supplies: paperclips, sticky notes, highlighters, sharpies... They move at a slow pace, akin to a deliberate troglodyte. Stomping, they reach out, not to bite but to rifle through pockets and search for office supplies.

### ***In-Game Items and Happenings***

**News Clipping.** The startling article, *Tragic Fur Fry*, details a tragic science experiment gone awry that took the innocent lives of several guinea pigs and cost many thousands of dollars' worth of fire damage to the school's biology classroom. Dr. Algernope is assigned fault and his teaching career is likely over as criminal charges are pending. Later on in the article, it discusses the immediate plans for the restoration of that biology lab. The article is from six months ago.

**Brass Plaque Label.** It's a small rectangle shaped, brass-colored plaque label. It says Dr. Edwin K. Algernope, Life Sciences. Broken, on the floor.

**Sensitive Material.** Original copy left on the scanner glass, contents TBA/open

**Riddle.** Leads to the microphone and may come from either walkie, all-call, or auditorium's sound system: *I say everything I hear to others around. I'm not an animal, nor part of the human race. I will, immediately, repeat after you; But only if my tail is in place. What am I?* (a microphone).

### **New School, Episode II**

#### ***The Plot***

The PCs are stuck in a place between space and time. What at first appears to be a school hallway slowly comes into focus as more of a contained capsule with three doors. Two of these doors lead to classrooms: a 1930s one-room schoolhouse in Kentucky, and an 1830s quaker school in Connecticut for young ladies of color. As players are allowed to discover through various details of the school room, children's dress and language, and more, players will begin to slowly realize they have traveled in time. The third door is the exit, around which is a border of lights in the classic stoplight configuration. Currently

the lights are at the red level. As described in the launch, players are tasked with gaining sign-ups for their after-school program. As each player accrues more students on their list, the lights increase in level from yellow and finally to green.

*About this world:* Sign-ups are pooled among the PCs and have one solitary effect on its progress. As the final lights turn green, the door opens, the teachers are set free to go home at the end of this very strange workday, and the game ends! If a player loses all of their impact points, they're fired!

**Launch.** *Here's the thing - you are all specials teachers at a K-12 afterschool program fair taking place during the last block of the school day. Your task is to visit classrooms, meet with groups of students, and convince them to sign up for your individual afterschool program. You may chat with students or even conduct a demo lesson (rolling for action resolution, not necessary to actually deliver the entire lesson!). Of course, feel free to explore the classroom but you must all travel together. You may not visit a classroom for longer than 30 in-game minutes, but you may revisit classrooms more than once. What do you do?*

### ***Player Characters***

**Player character A.** A 20-year old college student studying for the MCAT, working as an afterschool chess instructor, her chess background translates into her expertise in patience, perspective-taking, and pattern recognition.

**Player character B.** A 39-year-old drama teacher that is a member of a creative arts afterschool collective, she is a former child star, has pink and purple hair, and happily lives along with her cat, Xenu. She is particularly adept in mirroring others, despite her intentions, and she can schmooze her way past nearly any velvet rope.

**Player character C.** A 42-year-old professional flutist, teaching afterschool in order to make ends meet and sustain his artistic career, he pursues harmony in a group, follows his curiosities, and usually demonstrates precise, quick reflexes.

### *Locations*

**One-Room Schoolhouse, Pikeville, Kentucky, 1930s.** Constructed of barn board, with an unfinished, dusty wooden floor, inside it is crowded with mostly barefoot boys and girls of a wide variety of ages. The room contains wooden desks and separate chairs, a blackboard, wood-burning stove, a globe, and a portrait of Christopher Columbus covered in mud. In one corner is a wasp's nest. Some of the children may have just been smoking a cigarette out the window. The teacher has left to retrieve a switch to discipline a student.

**Canterbury School for Girls, Canterbury, Connecticut, 1830s.** Made of dark wood and wrought iron, half of this classroom is organized in the style of a Quaker meeting house, featuring four inward-facing pews in the shape of a square; the other half contains wood and iron chairs and desks (furniture is connected into single unit of chair/desk). Their society and model of education is all about reciprocity in exchange. This room is but one of many rooms in a brand-new Victorian home that serves as a boarding school for 12 young ladies of color, between 17 and 18 years of age. All wear long-sleeve dresses that are rather detailed and formal, each with several layers of petticoats underneath, buttons all the way up the front and at the cuff, complete with lace trim. The school was founded and is run by Prudence Crandall.

### *Non-Player Characters*

**Sarah Harris.** A 17-year-old young lady and model student, she is African American, born to free parents as the second oldest of 12 children in the family. A sophisticated leader, she wears a frock sewn by her mother, Sally Prentice Harris.

**Herschel, Jr.** A nine-year-old child, wearing denim overalls and a collared shirt, he sports a buzzcut and dirty, bare feet. He has homesteading knowledge and has an incredibly high tolerance for physical pain (but not horse manure!). *\*see Appendix B for complete character sheets*

### ***In-Game Items and Happenings***

**Newspaper Article.** An upside down article in the Canterbury Gazette gives the year (1833) and connects Mark Twain as patron to the school's founder, Prudence Crandall

**Song.** The young ladies at the Canterbury school have a welcome song they sing to entering visitors *\*see Appendix B for lyrics*

### **Reference Materials:**

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## **New School, Episode III**

### ***The Plot***

The building the agents are about to raid is a Catholic Indian Residential School in British Columbia. The child they are looking for is a 10-year-old girl named Seepetza. She was taken from her home just like all the other children. The security at this “school” is very minimal and there are no armed guards; there is no reason to suspect that any of its inhabitants are necessarily armed and dangerous. However, agents may still carry a service weapon (assumed) as anyone who would do at a raid. Prior task force team knowledge is limited, they have not served as the investigatory team but instead are charged with extraction. Rumor has it her family members are the ones who reported the kidnapping. Unfortunately, there are no photographs of her for identification purposes. The time of this one-shot is up to the GM and was fluid in this iteration - Seepetza and her family existed on the plane of the 1950s, the PCs were in a contemporary timeframe, but the setting and the school were set in the very early 1990s.

**Launch.** *You are a taskforce of federal agents serving as an extraction team, all on the scene, hiding behind the brick wall by the entrance but ready to cross the threshold of a residence in order to rescue a young girl who's been the victim of a kidnapping., in your pockets, you find a schematic of the building. Your objective is to find and retrieve this young girl; you have reason to believe that she is inside this residence, and a warrant to enter the premises to search for her. What do you do?*

### ***Player Characters***

**Player character A.** A 36-year-old hacker-turned-Federal Agent, they specialize in computers and technology, and are motivated by the precise pursuit of justice. He has

specialized interrogation training that allows him to mirror others' body language and gestures in order to better understand them.

**Player character B.** A 42-year-old former social worker with a background in behavioral psychology, now a federal agent, he is an empath, which means he can comfort, empower, but also manipulate others into whatever he believes will serve the harmonious good.

**Player character C.** A 56-year-old agent that has been recently deputized, meaning their normal, day-to-day occupation is not a federal agent, they are a state or local member of law enforcement. They serve as the communication bridge between the state, federal, and local authorities, often the "eyes on the ground." They know the people from the area, they're from around these parts, and they can grease almost any wheel out there.

### *Locations*

**Girls' Dormitory.** The bedding is pretty drab - plain white sheets and a grey woolen blanket each. There's nothing decorative about the space, closer-looking to an army barracks than a sleeping-place for children. The room is kept so no identifying markers are able to be seen. In the trunks are all the same uniform: a maroon jumper with long white button-down sleeve shirt. All the socks, extra shoes, and undergarments are the same.

**Showers/Bathroom.** There are six shower heads, two toilets, some sinks and shelves for towels and extra toilet paper. There are no curtains in this bathroom. It is all open air. Indeed, there are no doors on the toilets, just the dividing wall from the rest.



**Classroom.** There are 16 desks, a blackboard, a teacher's desk, a class pet hedgehog, and a bookshelf including the titles *Bridge to Terabithia*, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, *Caddie Woodlawn*, and *Hatchet*.

### ***Non-Player Characters***

**Seepeetza.** A 10-year-old N'laka'pamux girl taken by the Canadian government, against her will, to the Kalamuk Indian Residential School for reacculturation and family separation, she was renamed Martha Stone by her captors and caretakers (nuns).

**Father McHenry (Priest).** Unaware of the investigation and context of the circumstances around him, Father McHenry is righteous in his correctness. It is true, he was sanctioned by the Canadian government to carry on the “school” as it was - a cultural genocide and cleansing at his discretion. He is the individual responsible for overseeing the loss of self, family, and identity of these children.

### ***In-Game Items and Happenings***

**Hedgehog.** A pet hedgehog that has mystical powers to communicate with the First Nations people.

**Secret Message.** A paper with a secret message written on it in Seepeetza's native language is ripped in two: she holds one half, the other is under a bunk bed in the dormitory.

**Dance Class.** An Irish step dancing class is taking place somewhere in the school.

**Say Her Name.** Seepeetza has been conditioned not to respond to her given name, but only to her new, Christian name - Martha. She will not acknowledge her name as “Seepeetza” unless it is someone known to her.

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Thus concludes the 2nd edition of the Player’s Handbook, a product of this innovation.

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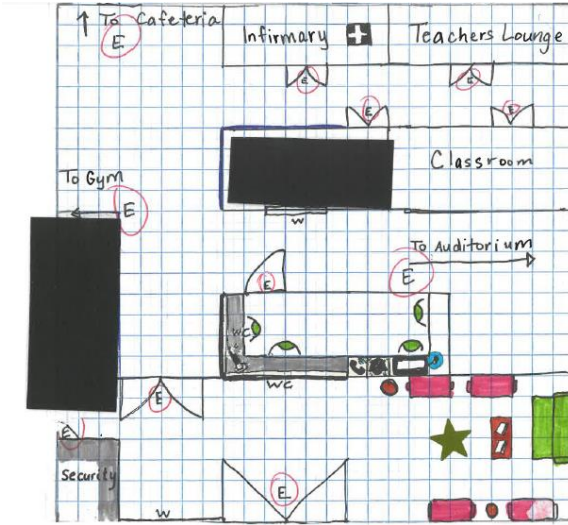
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APPENDIX A

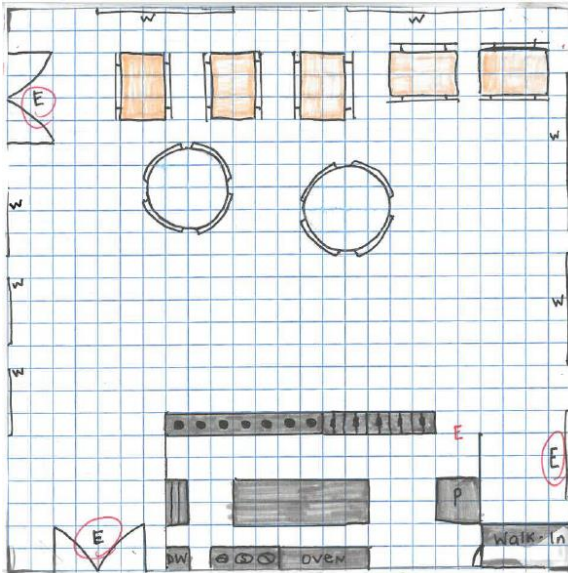
GAME EPHEMERA FROM SESSION 1, OCTOBER 12, 2022

# Episode 1: Maps

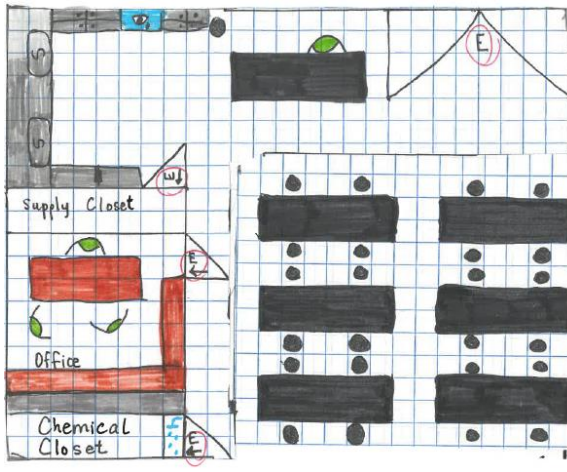
## Lobby



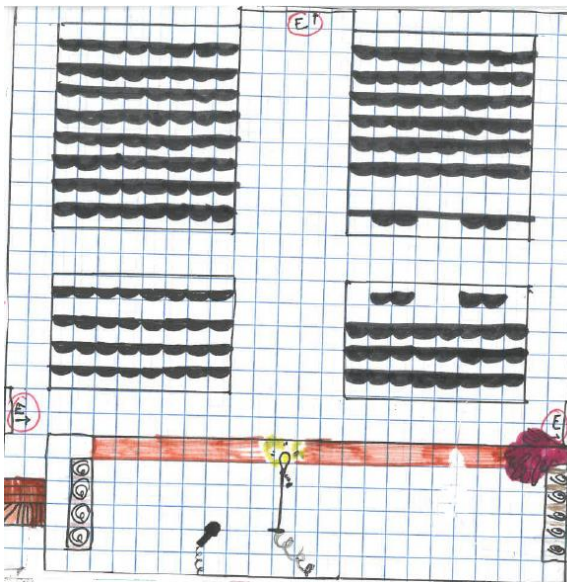
## Cafeteria



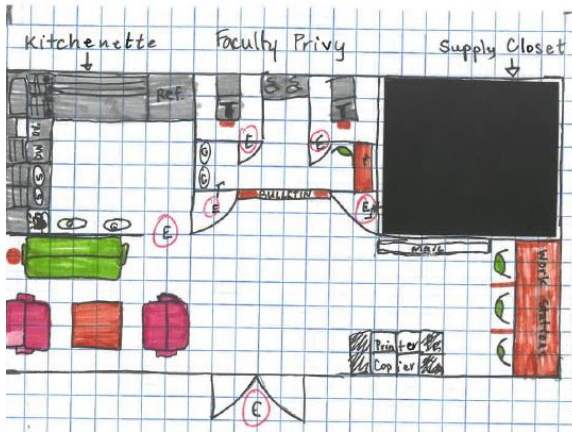
## Science Classroom



## Auditorium



## Teachers' Lounge



## Episode 1: Non-Player Characters

Clay being					
<i>An unstoppable, adorable golem juggernaut that exists to follow its creators orders.</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★ ★	★	★ ★ ★	★	★ ★	★
<b>Background</b>			<b>Impact Points: 18</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blind obedience to master                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When left without instructions, it agonizes in the anguish of being unfulfilled.</li> <li>If not remedied quickly, this can turn into impotent rage.</li> </ul> </li> <li>No ambition, no desire</li> <li>Needs no sustenance, feels no pain or remorse</li> <li>Amorphous, amoebic clay, roughly the size of a brick</li> </ul>			<b>Skills + Abilities</b> Can also perform Control F finding function for in-game items left behind or lost.  Stretch and shapeshift		

<b>Zombie horde</b>					
<i>A dormant cluster of teachers, husks of what were once faculty members</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★ ★	★	★ ★ ★	★	★	★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands language but cannot speak</li> <li>• Immune to poison</li> <li>• Slow-moving, lethargic</li> <li>• Unquenchable thirst for office supplies (rather than brains)</li> </ul>			<u>Impact Points: 7</u>  <u>Skills + Abilities</u> Biting, Scratching Fortitude		

### Episode 1: Player Characters

<b>Thom Jack Blackenger</b> <i>he/him</i>					
<i>Occupation: District-Wide Substitute Teacher, P.E. specialty</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★ ★	★	★ ★	★	★ ★	★ ★ ★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> Age: 57  Thom is a former attorney, who was disbarred for illegal gambling activity.  His favorite sport is football.  Thom Jack prefers students call him "coach," and is always wearing a whistle.  <u>Impact Points: 15</u>			<u>Skills + Actions</u>  Center of Attention ( <i>Charisma</i> ) +5 Re-charge ( <i>Resilience</i> ) + 7  <u>Expertise</u>  Tort reform Brand identity  <u>Motivation</u>  Winning		

# Yinka Camp *he/they*

*Occupation: Teaching artist, sculpture*

RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★ ★	★ ★ ★	★	★ ★	★ ★	★

## Background + Vulnerabilities

Age: 38

Yinka is a sculptor and metallurgist.

They are a trans person of color.

They are missing one hand - lost to a tragic melding accident - that has been replaced by a hook.

## Skills + Actions

Comfort (*Empathy*) +7

Empower (*Resilience*) +6

## Expertise

Imagination

Welding and casting

Alloys

## Motivation

Compulsion to create

Bending and shaping things

Impact Points: 10

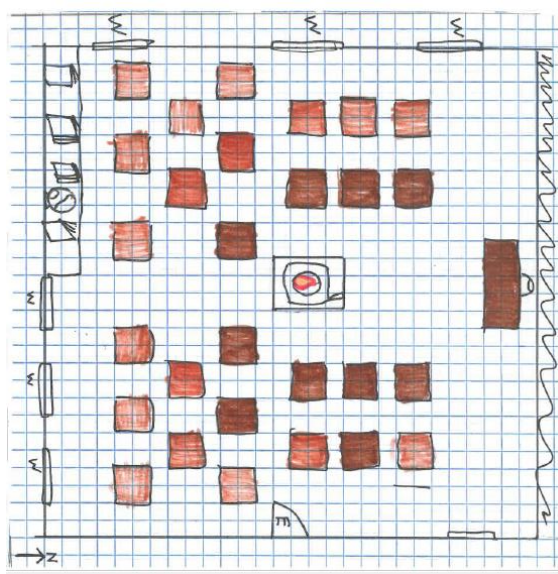


APPENDIX B

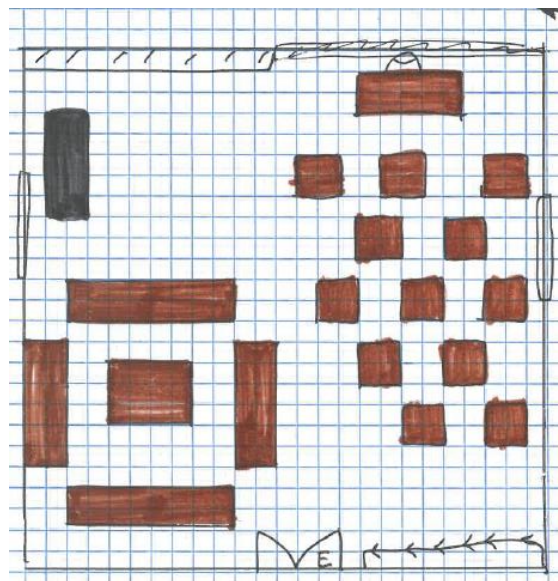
GAME EPHEMERA FROM SESSION 2, OCTOBER 19, 2022

## Episode 2: Maps

One-Room Schoolhouse, Pikeville, Kentucky (1930s)



Canterbury School for Girls, Connecticut (1830s)



## Episode 2: Artifact

### *Visitors' Song*

Four little children here you see  
 In modest dress appear.  
 Come listen to our song so sweet  
 And our complaints you'll hear.

'Tis here we came to learn to read  
 And write and cipher too.  
 But some in this enlightened land  
 Declare 'twill never do.

The morals of this favored town  
 Will be corrupted soon.  
 Therefore they strive with all their might  
 To drive us from our home.

Sometimes when we have walked the  
 streets  
 Saluted we have been  
 By guns and drums and cow bells, too  
 And horns of polished tin.

With warnings, threats, and words severe  
 They visit us at times  
 And gladly would they send us off  
 To Africa's burning climes.

Our teacher too they put in jail  
 Fast held by bars and locks!  
 Did ere such persecution reign  
 Since Paul was in the stocks?

But we forgive, forgive the men  
 That persecute us so  
 May God in mercy save their souls  
 From everlasting woe.

-Prudence Crandall

## Episode 2: Non-Player Characters

<b>Sarah Harris</b>					
<i>A model student at Canterbury School for Girls</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
☆☆☆	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆	☆☆☆
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u>			<u>Impact Points: 12</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17 years old</li> <li>• Young lady of color</li> <li>• Born to free parents, farmers</li> <li>• Second oldest of 12 children</li> </ul>			<u>Skills + Abilities</u> Leadership, sophistication		

Herschel Jr., age 9					
One-room schoolhouse in Pikeville, Kentucky					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★ ★	★	★ ★	★	★	★ ★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White, protestant</li> <li>• Barefoot, dirty</li> <li>• Wearing denim overalls, collared shirts</li> <li>• Hair is buzz-cut</li> </ul>			<u>Impact Points: 16</u>  <u>Skills + Abilities</u> Homesteading knowledge Lack of impulse control, but also nearly immune to physical pain		

**Episode 2: Player Character Scaffolds and Participant PC mods**

Name: <i>she/her</i>					
Occupation: <i>Afterschool chess instructor</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★	★	★ ★ ★	★ ★	★ ★ ★	★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u>  Age: 20  She is a first generation American citizen; her parents immigrated from Argentina. She is Latina but passes for white.  She attends a nearby college; her major is biochemistry and molecular biology (BCMB) and she is studying for the MCAT.			<u>Skills + Actions</u> Re-think ( <i>Wisdom</i> ) +5  <u>Expertise</u> Patience Perspective-taking Pattern recognition  <u>Motivation</u> Puzzles Winning  <u>Impact Points: 19</u>  		

<b>(Val) Ms. Valentina Romero</b> <span style="float: right;"><i>she/her</i></span>					
<i>Occupation: Afterschool chess instructor</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
☆☆	★	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆	★

<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u></p> <p>Age: 20</p> <p>She is a first generation American citizen; her parents immigrated from Argentina. She is Latina but passes for white.</p> <p>She attends a nearby college; her major is biochemistry and molecular biology (BCMB) and she is studying for the MCAT.</p>	<p><u>Skills + Actions</u></p> <p>Re-think (<i>Wisdom</i>) +5</p> <p><u>Expertise</u></p> <p>Patience Perspective-taking Pattern recognition</p> <p><u>Motivation</u></p> <p>Puzzles Winning</p> <p><u>Impact Points</u>: 19</p>
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<b>Name:</b> <span style="float: right;"><i>he/him</i></span>					
<i>Occupation: Music Instructor</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
☆☆	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆

<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u></p> <p>Age: 42</p> <p>He is a professional flutist, but also plays a variety of other instruments, especially woodwinds and reeds.</p> <p>Teaching music after school is what allows him to carry on with his professional career.</p> <p><u>Impact Points</u>: 15</p>	<p><u>Skills + Actions</u></p> <p>Curiosity (<i>Empathy</i>) +5 Reflex (<i>Intelligence</i>) + 7</p> <p><u>Expertise</u></p> <p>Precision Affectation</p> <p><u>Motivation</u></p> <p>Solos Harmony</p>
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<b>Mr. Simon Winwood</b>		<i>he/him</i>			
<i>Occupation: Music Instructor</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★	★ ★ ★	★ ★	★ ★ ★	★ ★	★ ★

<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u></p> <p>Age: 42</p> <p>He is a professional flutist, but also plays a variety of other instruments, especially woodwinds and reeds.</p> <p>Teaching music after school is what allows him to carry on with his professional career.</p> <p><u>Impact Points:</u> 15</p>	<p><u>Skills + Actions</u></p> <p>Curiosity (<i>Empathy</i>) +5 Reflex (<i>Intelligence</i>) + 7</p> <p><u>Expertise</u></p> <p>Precision Affectation</p> <p><u>Motivation</u></p> <p>Solos Harmony</p>
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<b>Name</b>		<i>she/they</i>			
<i>Occupation: Drama Teacher</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★	★ ★ ★	★ ★	★ ★	★ ★	★ ★ ★

<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u></p> <p>Age: 39</p> <p>She was a child actress that spent her years of education with a tutor in a trailer, most often.</p> <p>She lives alone with her cat, Xenu.</p>	<p><u>Skills + Actions</u></p> <p>Mirror (<i>Empathy</i>) +9 Schmooz (<i>Charisma</i>) +8</p> <p><u>Expertise</u></p> <p>Butoh Mime</p> <p><u>Motivation</u></p> <p>The Stage</p> <p><u>Impact Points:</u> 14</p>
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# Miss D for Delilah

*she/they*

Occupation: **Drama Teacher** for a well-funded creative arts afterschool group

RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★	★★★★

## Background + Vulnerabilities

Age: 39

She was a child actress that spent her years of education with a tutor in a trailer, most often.

She was traumatized from her time at church during childhood, and pursued her acting as an act of rebellion against the constraints of the church.

She has pink and purple hair, and lives alone with her cat, Xenu.

## Skills + Actions

Mirror (*Empathy*) +9

Schmooz (*Charisma*) +8

## Expertise

Butoh

Mime

## Motivation

The Stage

Impact Points: 14

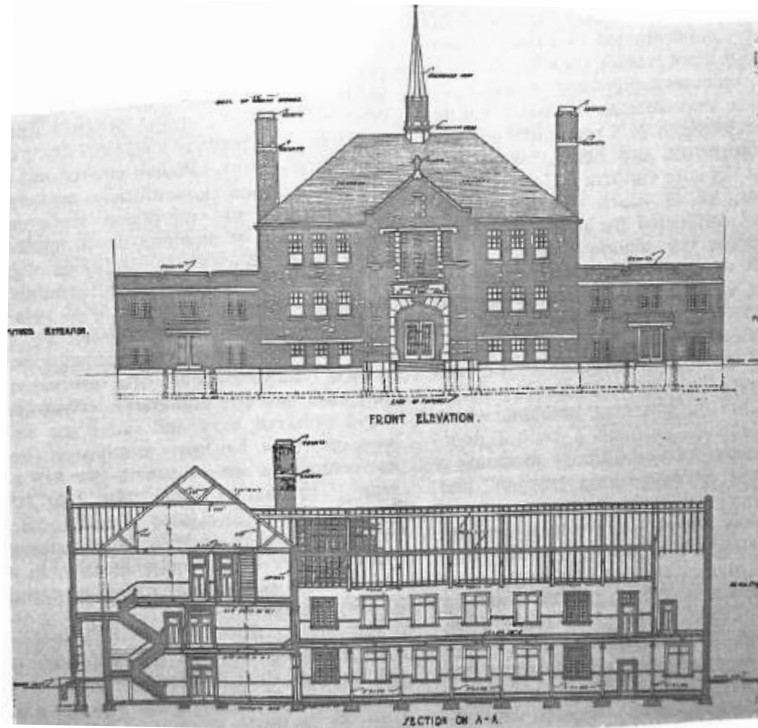
APPENDIX C

GAME EPHEMERA FROM SESSION 1, OCTOBER 26, 2022

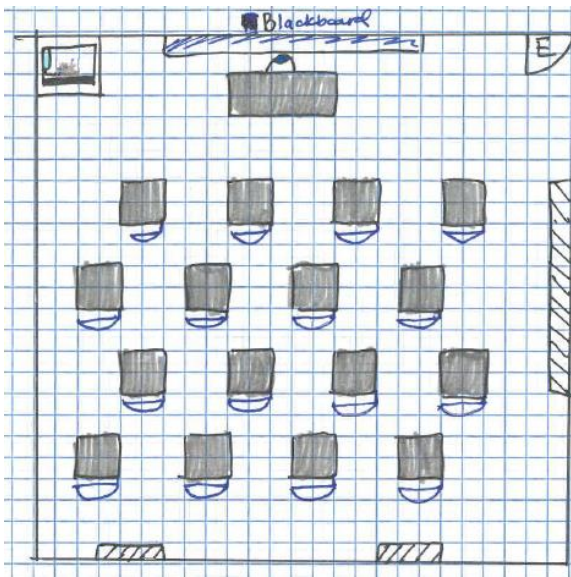


## Episode 3: Maps

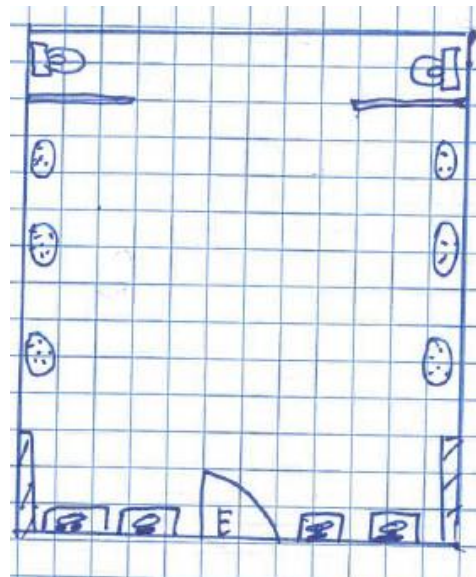
### Residential School Building Plans



Classroom



Shower / Bathroom



### Episode 3: Artifact

Note Pieces

Handwritten text: "NEUVE"

### Episode 3: Non-Player Characters

<p><b>Seepeetza, age 10</b></p> <p><i>Member of the N'laka'pamux first nations people</i></p>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
☆☆☆	☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆	☆
<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has suffered physical abuse at the hands of strict nuns</li> <li>A child of the 1950s</li> </ul>			<p><u>Impact Points: 20</u></p> <p><u>Skills + Abilities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Zoolinguism</li> </ul>		

<p><b>Father McHenry</b></p> <p><i>Irish Catholic priest</i></p>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆
<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Believes in strict confidentiality and forgiveness</li> <li>Conceal-carries a morningstar disguised as a rosary</li> </ul>			<p><u>Impact Points: 20</u></p> <p><u>Skills + Abilities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Irish step dancing</li> <li>English only</li> <li>Discipleship</li> </ul>		

### Episode 3: Player Character Scaffolds and Participant PC mods

Name/pronouns/race					
<i>Occupation: Federal Agent</i>					
RESILIENCE ★	EMPATHY ★★★★	ADAPTABILITY ★★	INTELLIGENCE ★★	WISDOM ★★	CHARISMA ★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <span style="float: right;">▼</span> Age: 36  This person grew up playing many long hours of online computer games.			<u>Skills + Actions</u> Mirror ( <i>Empathy</i> ) +9  <u>Expertise</u> Telecommunications  <u>Motivation</u> The precise pursuit of justice Data mining		

Boris Stelevich - white guy					
<i>Occupation: Federal Agent</i>					
RESILIENCE ★	EMPATHY ★★★★	ADAPTABILITY ★★	INTELLIGENCE ★★	WISDOM ★★	CHARISMA ★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <span style="float: right;">▼</span> Age: 36  This person grew up playing many long hours of online computer games.  Defected Russian			<u>Skills + Actions</u> Mirror ( <i>Empathy</i> ) +9  <u>Expertise</u> Telecommunications  <u>Motivation</u> The precise pursuit of justice Data mining		

<b>Name/pronouns/race</b>					
<i>Occupation: Federal Agent (Deputized)</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★	★★★	★	★★	★★	★★★★

<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <span style="float: right;">▼</span></p> <p>Age: 56</p> <p>This person is a local law enforcement officer, and bridges communication between local and federal forces.</p>	<p><u>Skills + Actions</u> Schmooz (<i>Charisma</i>) +8</p> <p><u>Expertise</u> “These parts”</p> <p><u>Motivation</u> Possibly having their picture in the paper</p>
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<b>Janine Franklin - white woman</b>					
<i>Occupation: Federal Agent (Deputized)</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★	★★★	★	★★	★★	★★★★

<p><u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <span style="float: right;">▼</span></p> <p>Age: 56</p> <p>This person is a local law enforcement officer, and bridges communication between local and federal forces.</p>	<p><u>Skills + Actions</u> <u>Schmooz</u> (<i>Charisma</i>) +8</p> <p><u>Expertise</u> “These parts”</p> <p><u>Motivation</u> Possibly having their picture in the paper</p>
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Name/pronouns/race <span style="float: right;">▼</span>					
<i>Occupation: <b>Federal Agent</b></i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★	★ ★ ★	★ ★	★ ★	★ ★	★ ★ ★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u>  Age: 42  This person is a former social worker, and has a strong background in behavioral psychology.			<u>Skills + Actions</u> Comfort ( <i>Empathy</i> ) +7 Empower ( <i>Resilience</i> ) +6  <u>Expertise</u> Manipulation  <u>Motivation</u> Harmony		

Ed Steinbeck - white guy					
<i>Occupation: <b>Federal Agent</b></i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
★ ★	★ ★ ★	★ ★	★ ★	★ ★	★ ★ ★
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u> <span style="float: right;">▼</span>  Age: 42  This person is a former social worker, and has a strong background in behavioral psychology.			<u>Skills + Actions</u> Comfort ( <i>Empathy</i> ) +7 Empower ( <i>Resilience</i> ) +6  <u>Expertise</u> Manipulation  <u>Motivation</u> Harmony		

APPENDIX D

CHARACTER TEMPLATES

Player Character Sheet

Name/pronouns/race					
<i>Occupation:</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u>			<u>Skills + Actions</u>		
			<u>Expertise</u>		
			<u>Motivation</u>		

Non-Player Character Sheet

Name, age					
<i>Origin, group membership</i>					
RESILIENCE	EMPATHY	ADAPTABILITY	INTELLIGENCE	WISDOM	CHARISMA
<u>Background + Vulnerabilities</u>			<u>Impact Points:</u>		
			<u>Skills + Abilities</u>		

APPENDIX E

IRB PROTOCOL AND RECRUITMENT MATERIALS





		Page: 1 of 7
	<b>PREPARED BY:</b> IRB Staff	<b>APPROVED BY:</b> Heather Clark
<b>DOCUMENT TITLE:</b> HRP 503 A Social Behavioral Protocol	<b>DEPARTMENT:</b> Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (ORIA)	<b>EFFECTIVE DATE:</b> [9/8/2021]

<p><b>INSTRUCTIONS</b></p> <p>Complete each section of the application. Based on the nature of the research being proposed some sections may not apply. Those sections can be marked as N/A. Remember that the IRB is concerned with risks and benefits to the research participant and your responses should clearly reflect these issues. You (the PI) need to retain the most recent protocol document for future revisions. Questions can be addressed to <a href="mailto:research.integrity@asu.edu">research.integrity@asu.edu</a>. <b>PIs are strongly encouraged to complete this application with words and terms used to describe the protocol is geared towards someone not specialized in the PI's area of expertise.</b></p>
<p>IRB: 1. Protocol Title: Toward a Community-Building Framework for Independent Community Educators</p>
<p><b>IRB: 2. Background and Objectives</b></p> <p>2.1 List the specific aims or research questions in 300 words or less.</p> <p>2.2 Refer to findings relevant to the risks and benefits to participants in the proposed research.</p> <p>2.3 Identify any past studies by ID number that are related to this study. If the work was done elsewhere, indicate the location.</p> <p><b>TIPS for streamlining the review time:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Two paragraphs or less is recommended.</li> <li>✓ Do not submit sections of funded grants or similar. The IRB will request additional information, if needed.</li> </ul>

**Response:**

2.1 This study will be focused on building community among independent and itinerant community educators that lack a centrally identified locus to connect with one another. The purpose of this study is to fortify the educational community by working toward a community-building framework that could potentially be applied in a multitude of educational or organizational contexts. This will be achieved specifically through the critical co-constructions of knowledge and community during participation in a table-top role-playing game of the Co-PI's original design. There is no previous data and no previous for this study and no earlier studies related to this project were conducted.

RQ1: How can a Table-top Role-playing Game establish and build community among independent community educators?

RQ2: By engaging in an emergent design-informed Table-top Role-playing Game, what kinds of community-building frameworks can be produced by independent community educators playing the game?

2.2 This study is low risk, action research based, and is intended to support the local context.

2.3 N/A

**IRB: 3. Data Use - What are the intended uses of the data generated from this project?**

Examples include: Dissertation, thesis, undergraduate project, publication/journal article, conferences/presentations, results released to agency, organization, employer, or school. If other, then describe.

**Response:**

The data will be used in a dissertation and may be used in presentations or publications.

**IRB: 4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

4.1 List criteria that define who will be included or excluded in your final sample. Indicate if each of the following special (vulnerable/protected) populations is included or excluded:

- Minors (under 18)
- Adults who are unable to consent (impaired decision-making capacity)
- Prisoners
- Economically or educationally disadvantaged individuals

4.2 If not obvious, what is the rationale for the exclusion of special populations?

4.3 What procedures will be used to determine inclusion/exclusion of special populations?

**TIPS for streamlining the review time.**

- ✓ Research involving only data analyses should only describe variables included in the dataset that will be used.
- ✓ For any research which includes or may likely include children/minors or adults unable to consent, review content [\[here\]](#)
- ✓ For research targeting Native Americans or populations with a high Native American demographic, or on or near tribal lands, review content [\[here\]](#)  
For research involving minors on campus, review content [\[here\]](#)

**Response:**

Participants will include independent and itinerant teachers, those who provide instruction at more than one school or educational institution. Minors, adults who cannot consent, prisoners, undocumented individuals, and non-English speakers will not participate in the study. Native Americans may participate, but they are not being specifically recruited.

**IRB: 5. Number of Participants**

Indicate the total number of individuals you expect to recruit and enroll. For secondary data analyses, the response should reflect the number of cases in the dataset.

**Response:**

The total number of participants expected to be recruited and enrolled is 18.

**IRB: 6. Recruitment Methods**

6.1 Identify who will be doing the recruitment and consenting of participants.

6.2 Identify when, where, and how potential participants will be identified, recruited, and consented.

6.3 Name materials that will be used (e.g., recruitment materials such as emails, flyers, advertisements, etc.) Please upload each recruitment material as a separate document, Name the document:

recruitment\_methods\_email/flyer/advertisement\_dd-mm-yyyy

6.4 Describe the procedures relevant to using materials (e.g., consent form).

**Response:**

The Co-PI will conduct the recruitment process. She will recruit participants online by using a Recruitment Consent letter, which is attached. Additionally, she will advertise the study on various cooperating organizations' opportunity bulletins (see attached flyer). One such organization, CUNY Hunter College's Career, Professional and Partnership Development (CPPD), helps School of Education students and alumni (such as the Co-PI) become professionally and pedagogically prepared to enter fields in education, youth development, and relevant industries. Other organizations may include but are not limited to the Teaching Artist Guild (TAG), ASU's Next Educator Workforce, Partner for After School Education (PASE), and Team Esteem (a Special Education Itinerant Teacher agency). The sample is the United States of America, potential participants being selected from multiple, various organizations associated with itinerant teachers, teaching artists, and after-school instruction providers.

**IRB: 7. Study Procedures**

- 7.1 List research procedure step by step (e.g., interventions, surveys, focus groups, observations, lab procedures, secondary data collection, accessing student or other records for research purposes, and follow-ups). Upload one attachment, dated, with all the materials relevant to this section. Name the document: supporting documents dd-mm-yyyy
- 7.2 For each procedure listed, describe **who** will be conducting it, **where** it will be performed, **how long** is participation in each procedure, and **how/what data** will be collected in each procedure.
- 7.3 Report the total period and span of time for the procedures (if applicable the timeline for follow ups).
- 7.4 For secondary data analyses, identify if it is a public dataset (please include a weblink where the data will be accessed from, if applicable). If not, describe the contents of the dataset, how it will be accessed, and attach data use agreement(s) if relevant.

**TIPS for streamlining the review time.**

- ✓ Ensure that research materials and procedures are explicitly connected to the articulated aims or research questions (from section 2 above).
- ✓ In some cases, a table enumerating the name of the measures, corresponding citation (if any), number of items, sources of data, time/wave if a repeated measures design can help the IRB streamline the review time.

**Response:**

**Innovation.** The intervention consists of six 90-minute, virtual game play sessions. These sessions are intended to serve as crucibles for community-building among teacher-players, and as a venue for discussing and establishing best practices in teaching. The emergent nature of the sessions' contents are the results of the social constructivist and collaborative knowledge-building theories underpinning the study. A description of the innovation is attached.

**Questionnaires.** One online questionnaire will be administered to the session participants after each of the six sessions (15 min. each). The same questionnaire will be used at each time. The questionnaire items are attached.

**Individual Interviews.** At the conclusion of the study, a random sample of six participants will be selected to participate in the interviews (15-20 min.). Interviews will be conducted by Zoom and will be videorecorded after consent of the participant. The interview questions are attached.

**Mini Focus-Group.** After individual interviews, the six participant-interviewees will engage in a mini focus group (30-45 min.). This group discussion / interview will be conducted via Zoom and will be videorecorded after the consent of all participants. The focus-group questions are attached.

**IRB: 8. Compensation**

**8.1 Report the amount and timing of any compensation or credit to participants.**

**8.2 Identify the source of the funds to compensate participants.**

**8.3 Justify that the compensation to participants to indicate it is reasonable and/or how the compensation amount was determined.**

**8.4 Describe the procedures for distributing the compensation or assigning the credit to participants.**

**TIPS for streamlining the review time.**

- ✓ If partial compensation or credit will be given or if completion of all elements is required, explain the rationale or a plan to avoid coercion
- ✓ For extra or course credit guidance, see "Research on educational programs or in classrooms" on the following page: <https://researchintegrity.asu.edu/human-subjects/special-considerations>.
- ✓ For compensation over \$100.00 and other institutional financial policies, review "Research Subject Compensation" at: <https://researchintegrity.asu.edu/human-subjects/special-considerations> for more information.

**Response:**

No compensation or credit will be provided to participants.

**IRB: 9. Risk to Participants**

List the reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences related to participation in the research.

**TIPS for streamlining the review time.**

- ✓ Consider the broad definition of “minimal risk” as the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research that are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.
- ✓ Consider physical, psychological, social, legal, and economic risks.
- ✓ If there are risks, clearly describe the plan for mitigating the identified risks.

**Response:**

There are no risks for participating in the research.

**IRB: 10. Potential Direct Benefits to Participants**

List the potential direct benefits to research participants. If there are risks noted in 9 (above), articulated benefits should outweigh such risks. These benefits are not to society or others not considered participants in the proposed research. Indicate if there is no direct benefit. A direct benefit comes as a direct result of the subject’s participation in the research. An indirect benefit may be incidental to the subject’s participation. Do not include compensation as a benefit.

**Response:**

In addition to the knowledge produced during gatherings, participating educators may synthesize the effects of the process into their own teaching practices, thereby enhancing the field with their renewed expertise as well as the quality of educational experience provided to their students.

**IRB: 11. Privacy and Confidentiality**

Indicate the steps that will be taken to protect the participant's privacy.

- 11.1 Identify who will have **access to the data**.
- 11.2 Identify where, how, and how long data will be **stored** (e.g. ASU secure server, ASU cloud storage, filing cabinets).
- 11.3 Describe the procedures for **sharing, managing and destroying data**.
- 11.4 Describe any special measures to **protect** any extremely sensitive data (e.g. password protection, encryption, certificates of confidentiality, separation of identifiers and data, secured storage, etc.).
- 11.5 Describe how any **audio or video recordings** will be managed, secured, and/or de-identified.
- 11.6 Describe how will any signed consent, assent, and/or parental permission forms be secured and how long they will be maintained. These forms should separate from the rest of the study data.
- 11.7 Describe how any data will be **de-identified**, linked or tracked (e.g. master-list, contact list, reproducible participant ID, randomized ID, etc.). Outline the specific procedures and processes that will be followed.
- 11.8 Describe any and all identifying or contact information that will be collected for any reason during the course of the study and how it will be secured or protected. This includes contact information collected for follow-up, compensation, linking data, or recruitment.
- 11.9 For studies accessing existing data sets, clearly describe whether or not the data requires a Data Use Agreement or any other contracts/agreements to access it for research purposes.
- 11.10 For any data that may be covered under FERPA (student grades, etc.) additional information and requirements is available at <https://researchintegrity.asu.edu/human-subjects/special-considerations>.

**Response:**

Only the PI and Co-PI will have access to the data. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer for a period of four years and then deleted or destroyed. Video recordings will be deleted from the recording device after they have been transferred to the password-protected computer. Transcripts will be made of the recordings. As noted in the interview protocol, respondents will be informed they are not to use any names in their responses to interview questions. Questionnaires will ask participants to provide a unique identifier so any other questionnaires can be compared for data analysis. Details about the unique identifier are provided in the Recruitment Consent Letter and on the Questionnaire. Specifically, "In the survey, to protect your confidentiality, I will ask you to create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, use the first three letter of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your pre- and post-intervention survey when we analyze the data." Questionnaires will be created using Google Forms and will not collect or track IP addresses.

**IRB: 12. Consent**

Describe the procedures that will be used to obtain consent or assent (and/or parental permission).

12.1 Who will be responsible for consenting participants?

12.2 Where will the consent process take place?

12.3 How will the consent be obtained (e.g., verbal, digital signature)?

**TIPS for streamlining the review time.**

- ✓ If participants who do not speak English will be enrolled, describe the process to ensure that the oral and/or written information provided to those participants will be in their preferred language. Indicate the language that will be used by those obtaining consent. For translation requirements, see Translating documents and materials under <https://researchintegrity.asu.edu/human-subjects/protocol-submission>
- ✓ Translated consent forms should be submitted after the English is version of all relevant materials are approved. Alternatively, submit translation certification letter.
- ✓ **If a waiver for the informed consent process is requested, justify the waiver in terms of each of the following: (a) The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects; (b) The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects; (c) The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration; and (d) Whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.** Studies involving confidential, one time, or anonymous data need not justify a waiver. A verbal consent or implied consent after reading a cover letter is sufficient.
- ✓ ASU consent templates are [\[here\]](#).
- ✓ Consents and related materials need to be congruent with the content of the application.

**Response:**

The Co-PI will conduct the consent process. Completion of the questionnaire will indicate consent for the questionnaire. Verbal consent for the interviews will be obtained prior to conducting them, both individual and focus-group.



**IRB: 13. Site(s) or locations where research will be conducted.**

List the sites or locations where interactions with participants will occur-

- Identify where research procedures will be performed.
- For research conducted outside of the ASU describe:
  - Site-specific regulations or customs affecting the research.
  - Local scientific and ethical review structures in place.
- For research conducted outside of the United States/United States Territories describe:
  - Safeguards to ensure participants are protected.
- For information on international research, review the content [\[here\]](#).

For research conducted with secondary data (archived data):

- List what data will be collected and from where.
- Describe whether or not the data requires a Data Use Agreement or any other contracts/agreements to access it for research purposes.
- For any data that may be covered under FERPA (student grades, etc.) additional information and requirements is available [\[here\]](#).
- For any data that may be covered under FERPA (student grades, homework assignments, student ID numbers etc.), additional information and requirements is available [\[here\]](#).

**Response:**

**This study will not have a specific “site” or “location” other than online via Zoom.**

**IRB: 14. Human Subjects Certification from Training.**

Provide the names of the members of the research team.

ASU affiliated individuals do not need attach Certificates. Non-ASU investigators and research team members anticipated to manage data and/or interact with participants, need to provide the most recent CITI training for human participants available at [www.citiprogram.org](http://www.citiprogram.org). Certificates are valid for 4 years.

**TIPS for streamlining the review time.**

- ✓ If any of the study team members have not completed training through ASU’s CITI training (i.e. they completed training at another university), copies of their completion reports will need to be uploaded when you submit.
- ✓ For any team members who are affiliated with another institution, please see “Collaborating with other institutions” [\[here\]](#)
- ✓ The IRB will verify that team members have completed IRB training. Details on how to complete IRB CITI training through ASU are [\[here\]](#)

**Response:**

Zoe Bennett, CITI Training completed on April 12, 2020

**General Tips:**

- Have all members of the research team complete IRB training before submitting.
- Ensure that all your instruments, recruitment materials, study instruments, and consent forms are submitted via ERA when you submit your protocol document. Templates are [\[here\]](#)
- Submit a complete protocol. Don't ask questions in the protocol – submit with your best option and, if not appropriate, revisions will be requested.
- If your study has undeveloped phases, clearly indicate in the protocol document that the details and materials for those phases will be submitted via a modification when ready.
- Review all materials for consistency. Ensure that the procedures, lengths of participation, dates, etc., are consistent across all the materials you submit for review.
- Only ASU faculty, full time staff may serve as the PI. Students may prepare the submission by listing the faculty member as the PI. The submit button will only be visible to the PI.
- Information on how and what to submit with your study in ERA is [\[here\]](#). Note that if you are a student, you will need to have your Principal Investigator submit.
- For details on how to submit this document as part of a study for review and approval by the ASU IRB, visit <https://researchintegrity.asu.edu/human-subjects/protocol-submission>.

Recruitment Flyer

**Toward a Community-Building Framework for Independent Community Educators**

**REQUEST FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

**Who is conducting the study and what is the study about?**  
Researchers from Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University are recruiting participants for a study about building community through game play.

**Who can join this study?**  
You can participate in this study if you are an adult (aged 18+) and you are currently providing instruction of any kind at **more than one** school or educational institution.

**Why should I join this study?**  
You will meet and build community with other educators, develop new knowledge, and bring positive learning experiences into your own teaching practice and educational communities.

**How do I join the study?**  
Go to this link to get started: [Interest Form](#)  
**OR**  
If you want to join this study, contact the Study Coordinator/Co-PI listed below.

<b>PLEASE CONTACT US FOR MORE INFORMATION</b>	
Zoe Bennett (Study Coordinator/Co-PI) (865) 387-4592 ZLBENNE1@asu.edu	Leigh Graves Wolf (Principal Investigator) Clinical Associate Professor, MLFTC leigh.wolf@asu.edu

## Recruitment Letter

Dear Fellow Educator:

My name is Zoe Bennett and I am a doctoral candidate in Leadership and Innovation at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University (ASU). I am working under the direction of Dr. Leigh Graves Wolf, a faculty member in MLFTC. We are conducting a research study on community-building with and among independent and itinerant community educators. The purpose of this study is to fortify the profession by working toward a community-building framework that could potentially be applied in a multitude of educational or organizational contexts. This will be achieved specifically through participation in a table-top role-playing game.

We are asking for your help, which will involve your participation in up to six **virtual** sessions of game play (90 minutes, each), completion of an **online** questionnaire up to six times (15 minutes, each), and a potential **virtual** interview (about 15 to 20 minutes) concerning your experience during game play along with one **online** mini-focus group with other participants (about 30-45 minutes) concerning your collective experience(s) during game play.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study, and you must be currently providing instruction at more than one school or educational institution.

In addition to the knowledge and community produced during gatherings, you may benefit from synthesizing the effects of the process into your own teaching practices, enhancing the field with renewed expertise as well as the quality of educational experience provided to your students. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

In the questionnaire, to protect your confidentiality, I will ask you to create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, use the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your responses when we analyze the data.

For those randomly selected for the interviews and focus group, I will request to video-record your responses. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

Your responses will be confidential. Results from this study, including your responses and other 'de-identified' data collected, may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. No data from this study will be shared with other researchers to be used for future research purposes or other uses. For those who

agree to participate in the focus group, your identity will be known to other focus group participants and the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will respect the confidentiality of the group.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team – Zoe Bennett at [zbenne1@asu.edu](mailto:zbenne1@asu.edu) or (865) 387-4592, or Leigh Graves Wolf at [Leigh.Wolf@asu.edu](mailto:Leigh.Wolf@asu.edu) or (602) 543-7564.

Thank you,

Zoe Bennett, Doctoral Candidate

Leigh Graves Wolf, ASU Professor

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can also contact Dr. Wolf at (602) 543-7564 or the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX F  
PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW, MINI-FOCUS GROUP, AND QUESTIONNAIRE  
QUESTIONS

## Questionnaire

To protect your confidentiality, please create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, please record the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your responses when we analyze the data.

My unique identifier is: \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., Sar 6789, see paragraph above)

Date (MM/DD/YY): \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** In your own words, describe your experience during your most recent session of game play.

1. What worked for you? What made it so?
2. What did not work for you? Why not?
3. Did anything bring you closer to others?
4. Did anything bring you closer to your player character?
5. Did anything create distance between you and others?
6. Did anything create distance between you and your player character?
7. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

## Individual Interview Questions

### **Briefing Statement**

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. In the interview, I will be asking you to tell the story of game play from your character's perspective and from your own memory and experiences that occurred during our session(s). Please respond with your own thinking.*

### **Request**

*May I video record this interview? If so, at any time you may ask me to stop. As you respond to the questions, please do not mention actual names of individuals in your responses. Instead, please refer to their character alias.*

1. Tell me about what happened to [player character name].
2. What happened then/before/after?
3. What did you/they do then/before/after?

### **Debriefing Statement**

*Thank you for your responses and your time today. I appreciate it very much. I will be using your responses to inform my future efforts and research.*

## **Focus Group Questions**

### **Briefing Statement**

*Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group. During our time together, I will be asking you to listen to, review, and comment on the story of game play from your character's perspective and from your memories and experiences of our session(s). Please respond with your own thinking.*

### **Request**

*May I video record this interview? If so, at any time you may ask me to stop. As you respond to the questions, please do not mention actual names of individuals in your responses. Instead, please refer to their character alias.*

4. Imagine you are going to write a book about your characters' experiences during the game. What would the table of contents of the book look like?
5. Who was involved?
6. What were the consequences?
7. What happened then/before/after?
8. What did you/they do then/before/after?

### **Debriefing Statement**

*Thank you for your responses and your time today. I appreciate it very much. I will be using your responses to inform my future efforts and research.*