CRITICAL HITS AND CRITICAL SPACES: ROLEPLAYING GAMES AND THEIR POTENTIAL IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL LITERACY AND NEW LITERACY PRACTICES

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Literature curricula in schools are often dominated by a fascination with the “classics” of the Western Canon and limited definitions of literacy. Such a perspective endorses an ethnocentric view of culture and suggests that texts existing in popular culture fail to stimulate critical thinking or establish academic rigor. As a result, many pupils are often denied opportunities to examine the texts they find most engaging. Yet popular culture can offer rich perspectives from the margins — opportunities for the development of critical literacy practices and the fuel to imagine a different and better world.

Pupils’ lives include constant interaction with a multiplicity of texts. Film, novels, television and even various forms of gaming all provide opportunities for reflection, meaning-making and critique. Roleplaying games (RPGs) in particular promote a cooperative, creative process where forms of exploration, analysis and critique may take place within a collaborative and improvisational context. As a result, players can perform as critical agents within various narratives found in literature, film and other cultural media. Moreover, players can follow the established account of a particular story or branch out into new alternatives. It is the potential of these alternate narratives that provide pupils opportunities to develop their critical literacy as they can construct and investigate new possibilities derived from their own lived experiences. This, in turn, can help them to develop what Freire describes as conscientization, or the ability to “perceive the social, political and economic contradictions” at play in their daily lives.

As rules systems for RPGs have grown in sophistication, an emphasis on player collaboration rather than competition has emerged, allowing for experimental and performative spaces in which players, while in character, strive to understand and overcome problems within the game world — a process which can model action in the “real world” and promote critical investigations of pupils’ social landscapes. In this paper, I draw on my experiences as a secondary school teacher and mobilise a critical performative pedagogy in theorizing the potential of roleplaying games as creative and transformative practices of a critical pedagogy that accommodates and encourages the development of pupils’ political literacy.