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Playing in Trelis Weyr: Investigating Collaborative Practices in a Dragons of Pern Role-Play-Game Forum

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Playing in *Trelis Weyr*:

Investigating Collaborative Practices in a *Dragons of Pern* Role-Play-Game Forum

by

Kathleen M. Alley

DEDICATION

To my husband, Doyle Alley, who has supported my dreams since the first day we met.

To my parents, Jim and Suzanne Carpenter, who have always believed in my ability to achieve anything I set my mind to accomplish. I know you are looking down from Heaven and smiling Mom.

To my sister and her husband, Karen and Bob Stout, who share my dedication as educators and talk with me about my research into the wee hours of the morning.

To my son, Robert Alley, who first introduced me to fandom and the world of fan fiction.

And to my daughter, Cassandra Alley, who led me on this extraordinary journey and allowed me to be a part of her online life in a way few parents are privileged to experience. Thank you, Cassandra, for sharing *Trelis Weyr* with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

This descriptive case study examined adolescents' and emerging adults' literate and social practices within the context of a role-play-game (RPG) forum, investigating the ways participants read and collaboratively composed within this space. As a researcher, I was interested in how this space functioned and how the interactions between members impacted their composing processes, with particular attention to the role of online spaces and popular culture in adolescents' motivation to engage in this forum. This study was guided by three research questions: (1) In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized as a virtual environment?; (2) In what ways, and for what purposes, do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose within *Trelis Weyr*?; (3) What are the factors that motivate participants to enter and persist at play in *Trelis Weyr*? Findings provide a nuanced understanding of how an RPG forum offers a range of multimodal, inter-textual, and hybrid reading and writing opportunities.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Literacy has been defined as a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of a particular group (Barton, 2007). Accordingly, as the social and cultural contexts of a society change, so do their literacies. For the past several decades, literacy studies have been concerned with youths' literacy practices across in- and out-of-school contexts (Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). In prior research, behaviorist and cognitive conceptions of literacy were focused on the individual, but a shift in thinking has turned researchers toward an understanding of how reading and writing are socially situated and develop via activities where people interact with each other (Gee, 2000b). This shift in thinking was brought about by studies of literacy demonstrating how reading and writing development cannot be explained by a narrow set of literacy skills associated with in-school activities. Instead, literacy is embedded in social processes and practices, and associated with various contexts including home, school, commerce, and community (Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

More recent research has provided literacy studies with several examples that acknowledge and validate the significance of adolescents' literacy practices not typically associated with school, including many involving digital tools (Mills, 2010). Youth are identified as agentive; individuals who actively construct literacy practices in relation to various contexts, including: new literacies (Hagood, 2009; Kist, 2005; Knobel &

Lankshear, 2007), popular culture and media production (Alvermann, 2002; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003b; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kinloch, 2009; Mahiri, 2004, 2011; Morrell, 2004; Ranker, 2007; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010), multimodality (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006), instant messaging (Jacobs, 2004; 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005), fan fiction (Black, 2008; Thomas, 2006), and video games (Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2007). This body of research is significant because it has redefined the literacy practices and agentive identities of adolescents (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006), providing contrasting examples to deficit perspectives of youth based on narrow, decontextualized sets of literacy skills (Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kinloch, 2009; Mahiri, 2004; O'Brien, 2001; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009).

In spite of society's expanding definition of literacy, in general education continues to delineate literacy primarily as engagement in print text; discounting adolescents' and emerging adults' alternative literacy practices, which often make educators and parents feel uncomfortable (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Therefore it is not surprising research has indicated a widening gulf between students' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, prompting a need for greater understanding of their new and rapidly evolving techno-literacies. Research has addressed the ways youth adopt and adapt technologies in the classroom; however, little research has focused on examples of youths' non-adult mediated or out-of-school literacy practices. Specifically, research has not directly addressed how youth think of themselves as literate individuals when they use these new technologies in their self-selected literate practices occurring outside of school. The New London Group (1996) recommended a broadened understanding of literacy needs to be adopted to address, "the culturally and linguistically diverse and

increasingly globalized societies" and to "account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (p. 61).

Purpose and Research Questions

Virtual game creation and play is a growing phenomenon, combining numerous complex literacy skills into one complex activity. This study examined adolescents' and emerging adults' literacy and social practices within the context of a role-play-game (RPG) forum situated in popular culture and fandom surrounding Anne McCaffrey's (1967-2011) *Dragonriders of Pern* fantasy literature series. This study located participants' thinking as it was revealed in the interstitial spaces amongst the participants as they engaged in the act of composing for this RPG.

The main objective of the proposed study was to explore adolescents' and emerging adults' literacy practices within this specific RPG forum by examining these practices relative to collaborative composition within the forum. As a second objective, I investigated the ways adolescent and emerging adult participants of this forum constructed and presented literate identities through role-play (e.g., text, multimodal creations, interactions with other participants) with particular attention to the role of online spaces and popular culture in their initial motivation and persistence at play. My dissertation study was guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized as a virtual environment?

2. In what ways and for what purposes do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively

compose within *Trelis Weyr*?

3.   What are the factors motivating participants to enter and persist at play in

Trelis Weyr?

Significance of the Study

New literacies (New London Group, 1996) embedded in RPG forum communities

are significant to anyone interested in the infusion of technology in daily life and its

effect on the principles and practices adolescents and emerging adults are learning online

during informal experiences, as well as how this nexus of factors may influence formal

instruction. This research explored the power of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006b)

within these spaces, as well as collaborative writing, and how online writing within fan

communities may support academic learning. This inquiry provided insight regarding the

ways participants read and created collective narratives within this space, and the factors

motivating them to initially enter and persist at play as members of this forum. Findings

extend research perspectives introduced through the examination of fan fiction to a

different, but related, arena, with a focus on adolescents' and emerging adults' literate

and social practices in *Trelis Weyr*, a text-based RPG forum.

Primary foci of this site were reader/writer interaction, collaborative writing, and

motivation elements. The site provided a context for in-depth inquiry into specific fan

activities aligned with school-based literacy practices (Black, 2005). By examining the

kinds of literacy practices embedded in this space, and the resources available to support

adolescents' and emerging adults' development of literate and social practices, this study

familiarizes educators and researchers with youth culture and the techno-literacies in

which individuals engage by choice. Information from this study provides nuanced understandings of how this type of online composition offers a range of multimodal, inter-textual, and hybrid reading and writing opportunities in which adolescents and emerging adults communicate ideas.

This research is relevant to education, as it provides insight regarding the literacies of adolescents and emerging adults, and the observed disconnect between their in- and out-of-school literacies. There is a need for greater understanding of new, rapidly evolving techno-literacies in order to educate students within the 21st century framework for education, which includes a shift in thinking towards informal learning across the lifespan, beyond traditional, formal learning occurring in schools (Black, 2009a; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). This research also adds to the knowledge of the Web 2.0 paradigm of collective and social knowledge construction, in which participants collectively construct and edit within online contexts as producers of information rather than as simple consumers of information.

Conceptual Framework

Literacy is a situated, social practice embedded in cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). I believe literacy practices both influence and are influenced by the context in which they occur. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning emphasizes "comprehensive understanding involving the whole person," where learning is seen as a social process of interaction in the world as the individual, their learning, and the environment jointly construct each other (p. 33). I believe learning is contextualized in

and develops from social interaction. This perspective of sociocultural and situated learning informs my research on this RPG forum. However, no one theory can adequately explain the complex interactions occurring within this space. Thus, I have braided multiple theoretical lenses to guide my inquiry, analysis, and interpretation: New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995), Affinity Space (Gee, 2004) and Communities of Practice and Play (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pearce, 2009), and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

New Literacy Studies (NLS)

New Literacy Studies (New London Group, 1996) situate literacy as socially and culturally situated practice (Street, 1995) that is embedded in cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). This approach to literacy views it as much more than a collection of decontextualized skills; rather, literacy is deeply connected to "embodied action in the material and social world" (Gee, 1991, p. 714). New literacies are highly collaborative, distributed, and participatory in nature, as expressions of what Jenkins (2006b) calls engagement in participatory culture, and Lankshear and Knobel (2006) describe as a distinctive *ethos*. According to Lankshear and Knobel, from this "social practice" perspective "new literacies" refers to "new socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses)" (2006, p. 65).

Affinity Space

Gee's (2004) "affinity space" theory guided my understanding of how this RPG forum was organized. Gee describes affinity spaces as sites of informal learning where

"newbies and masters and everyone else" interact around a shared effort (p. 85).

According to Gee, affinity spaces are online interactive spaces containing people who

help each other and work together through shared interactions, activities, and goals. The

notion of affinity spaces involves a place in which: (1) people from a variety of

backgrounds come together to pursue a common goal regardless of race, class or gender

identity; (2) there are various routes to participation; (3) informal leadership and status

occur as new participants and masters share the space; and, (4) different kinds of

knowledge are nurtured and valued by all participants (Gee, 2004). The members of this

forum were adolescents and emerging adults from varied backgrounds who came

together because of their common interest in *Pern*-related practices.

Communities of Practice

Theories addressing how communities interact assisted me in my analysis of this

RPG forum. A "community of practice" is defined as a group of individuals who engage

in a process of collective learning and maintain a common identity defined by a shared

interest or activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities that generally fall under this

definition tend to organize around forms of work or folk practice they have in common.

Viewing this RPG forum as a community of practice offered insight into how the forum

functioned collectively; how they utilized "knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases,

[and] documents, which members share and develop together" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.

3).

Communities of Play

The notion of "community of play" (Pearce, 2009) has emerged as a counterpoint

to "community of practice". Theories regarding community of practice and community

of play share much in common; in fact, some might view play as a type of practice. Nonetheless, Pearce suggests play practices may warrant their own understanding of "how communities form and are maintained, a subject that becomes particularly pertinent in the context of technologically mediated play" (Pearce, 2009, p. 5). Marshall McLuhan (1964) coined the term "global village" to describe television as a shared storytelling space. Pearce posits that in a similar way, networked games have created "a type of participatory 'global playground' where people are able to meet in real time and build new and increasingly complex play communities that traverse geographical and temporal boundaries" (Pearce, 2009, p. 6). Pearce's work extends both Gee's affinity space and Lave and Wenger's community of practice to encompass notions of play. Using this frame assisted me in explaining the ludic nature of this RPG forum, which afforded participants multiple opportunities for autonomous activity.

Self-Determination Theory (STD)

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. SDT addresses factors that either facilitate or undermine motivation, both intrinsically and extrinsically. I applied SDT when investigating the factors motivating forum participants as they entered and persisted at play in this virtual environment. As well, I investigated members' perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness through analysis of artifacts and transcripts of semi-structured interviews with participants.

Summary of Methodology

In this study, I focused on exploring the nature of a phenomenon (the literacies of reading and collaborative composition in the RPG forum) by studying members' behavior as evidenced through their postings and role-play. This descriptive case study was particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic in nature (Fetterman, 1998; Merriam, 2001). "Case" was bounded by the context of the forum group as a whole, focusing on the interactions and composition within this group, and the artifacts and knowledge co-constructed by its members collectively. I utilized descriptive case study as a non-participant observer (Merriam, 2001), analyzing artifacts created by adolescent and emerging adult participants (N=27; 25 females, 2 males; aged 14 to 24) who were engaged in a form of fan writing in this RPG forum.

I gathered data from multiple sources during three phases of collection: (1) artifacts from the forum, including moderator-created governing documents, character descriptions, and story threads; (2) field notes collected during more than 20 hours of non-participant observation of role-play; and, (3) transcripts of semi-structured interviews with three focal participants from the RPG forum. Additionally, I kept a researcher reflective journal throughout all three phases of data collection and analysis of data, as well as observation notes of the various processes involved in creating characters and stories while role-playing. Collecting data from multiple sources ensured I minimize my biases as a researcher, strengthening reliability and validity.

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive throughout the data collecting process as recommended in the qualitative research paradigm (Merriam, 2001). First, I used word frequency counts, a form of content analysis, to identify words of potential interest, and

then used a Key Word in Context (KWIC) search to test consistency of usage of words.

However, word count was used as an initial method to identify if certain types of words

were used more than others, allowing inferences to be made that could then be

corroborated using other methods of data collection (Krippendorff, 1980). I then used

Hatch's (2002) inductive approach to data analysis, identifying "patterns of meaning in

data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p.

161). Analysis was accomplished through repeated reading of texts, including artifacts,

field notes and research journal entries, and transcripts of semi-structured interviews.

Domains emerged from semantic relationships discovered within frames based on

relationships represented in the data.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions will assist in building background knowledge

regarding gaming, RPG forum play, and elements from "*Pern* life" in the *Dragonriders*

of Pern literature series by Anne McCaffrey (1967-2011) (see Table 1 and 2 below).

Table 1

Definition of Terms Related to Role-Play-Games

Term	Explanation
Adventure	A single challenge, often short enough to be completed in one session. Often makes up a smaller piece of a larger story with a beginning and an end, but may stand alone as well.
Anime	A Japanese style cartoon or animated movie used by some as inspiration for fan fiction creations.
Backstory	The history of a character prior to the player's actively portraying him or her in a role-playing environment.
BTB	By the book.

Table 1 (continued)

Term	Explanation
Campaign	A longer story told by chaining or linking a number of adventures together.
Canon	Original material or referring to "official source material", which is created or accepted by an RPG group. Canon is often used to ensure continuity within a RPG or fantasy setting.
Character	A persona being played by an RPG participant within the context of a game.
Character profile	A document containing a character's basic traits, skills, background, etc. Historically, a single sheet of paper, but this is now more commonly an electronic document or spreadsheet and/or may be made up of multiple sheets.
Chat	This is the chat feature on *Trelis Weyr*; a place where members can interact with each other out of character. It is a socializing space.
Class	The "main area of expertise", "role", or "job" for a player character. The chosen class typically affects what skills and abilities the player character can learn / use.
Cross Role Playing or Crossing	A type of blending, when a player uses Out of Character (OoC) information during In Character (IC) role play that their character would not otherwise know, such as from a profile, web page, or OoC conversation. When a player uses information gained from one character they play while playing a second, unrelated character.
Custom content	A commonly-used term within the gaming communities to refer to content created by players, as opposed to the off-the-shelf content produced by game designers, that is often made available for download into others' games. Custom content includes things like skins, avatars, adaption of avatars seen on sites, etc.
DeviantART	An online social networking site that connects artists and allows them to display their work (http://www.deviantart.com/). One of the participants displays her creations on DeviantART.
Game-story	The story-rich new gaming formats that are proliferating in digital formats (the hero-driven video game, the atmospheric first person shooter, the genre-focused role-playing game, the character-focused simulation).
Fan fiction	Fictional texts created by fans and derived from their fandom of a particular media such as a television show, movie, book, anime, manga series, or video game.

Table 1 (continued)

Term	Explanation
Flickr	A website for storing and sharing photos (http://www.flickr.com/). Many RPG forum members use Flickr to store and share digital images from Pern fandom. The site gives users the capability to connect with others through groups and contacts.
Free-form role-playing	Styles of role-playing which allows a player complete freedom to control his or her own character within the inherent restrictions of a setting.
Game Master (GM)	Term referring to the person who runs the adventure, tells the story, determines what action resolutions mean, etc., for their players.
Genre	A distinct category of role-playing, usually defined by setting elements (i.e., fantasy, spacer, historical fiction, cyberpunk, etc.).
In Character (IC)	An action or discussion which is meant to be performed by a character in the story of the game (behavior in line with the character's personality).
Karma	A method of deciding the outcome of the event where the GM chooses the result based on a static attribute of the acting character (your strength, dexterity, etc.). This originates with Ron Edward's design essay, System Matters.
Manga	A Japanese style of graphic novel or comics used by some as inspiration for fan fiction creations.
Mary Sue	A character that is over-the-top perfect and exists to fulfill the fanciful thinking of the player.
Modding	A commonly-used term within gaming communities for modifying the content or structure of a game.
Moderator	Members responsible for moderating assigned sub-forums on the site, with behind-the-scenes access to change the structure or appearance of the site as needed. Moderator is displayed on these members' profiles and forum posts. In some games, moderators would be similar to a Game Master.
Narrative	The IC information that appears within double colons during role play. Example – Nomad: :: taking a deep draught of his ale before replying:: Mind the offal in the lane as you depart, sir.
Out of Character (OoC)	An action or discussion made between players, not meant to be performed by characters in the game (an action that is not in line with the character's personality).
Player or participant	The physical person playing the game (i.e., not the character they play).

Table 1 (continued)

Term	Explanation
Powergame or Power-Play (PP)	To overstep the bounds of freeform roleplaying courtesy and make a decision for or attempt to control another player's character and/or storyline without his/her consent. Considered very poor form and often leading to disruptive player conflict.
Role-play	The act of taking on the role of a character. May be done in any of several modes, including 1st person dialog, 3rd person narration of action, or even 1st person improvisational acting.
Role-Play-Game (RPG)	Role-Playing Game. Includes a defined set of rules, and allows players to take on the role of a character. Also allows players a strong measure of free will to choose what the character does, which shapes or influences the story unfolding during game.
Scene	A single session of role-playing that takes place in the same room and/or setting. The portrayal of a single IC situation, which may span across multiple RP sessions, such as a story that takes several nights to play out.
Setting	The fictional universe in which a story takes place. A setting may be immediate, such as a room, or broad-based, such as a planet.
Screen Name (SN)	The abbreviation for screen name or user name.
Story Games	RPGs which focus more on the overall story than character building or rules enforcing. Most RPGs can be made to be more story-driven given the predisposition of the GM/Players, but some RPGs are more tailored to this style of play.
Thread	Spores from the Red Star, which descend on Pern and burrow into it, devour all organic material they encounter (a parasite).
Vaporgame	To advance or enhance a story by OoC agreement rather than through role play.

Table 2.

Definition of Terms Related to McCaffrey's Pern literature and RPGs

Term	Explanation
Apprentice	The lowest level in a Crafthall; basically a trainee.
Between	An area of nothingness and sensory deprivation between here and there. It is the space in between all spaces, and dragons and fire-lizards have the ability to go into this space. That is how they move around places and where dragons go when a dragon dies.
Craftmaster	The highest level of a crafthall; a fully trained craftsman.
Clutch	These are the dragon eggs that a clutching dragon lays.
Dragonet	Original name for fire-lizards. Also refers to young dragons.
Fire-lizard	AKA flits or flitters. A fire-lizard is a Pernese creature that the original settlers of Pern discovered where able to breath fire and burn thread. The geneticist used the last of their technology and resources brought with them to Pern to genetically engineer the dragons.
Firestone	A phosphine bearing rock found on Pern. Dragons and fire-lizards can chew it to produce phosphorous gases, which are ignited to burn Thread out of the sky.
Harper	Harpers are responsible for the education of children in the hold, hall and weyr. They are the entertainers of Pern and may also be called upon to arbitrate disputes.
Headwoman	Someone selected by the Weyrwoman to take charge of domestic duties in a weyr (e.g., cooking, cleaning, childcare, etc.).
Hold	A place where the common people live. Originally they were cut into mountains and hillsides, but now they are created wherever the people who are not *Weyr*folk live (rural villages).
Impression	The joining of minds of a dragon and its rider to be at the moment of the dragon's hatching.
Interval	The period of time between Passes of the Red Star (~ 200 Turns).
Pass	A period of time during which the Red Star is close enough to drop thread on Pern (usually 50 Turns).
Pern	Pern is a fictional planet created by Anne McCaffrey for the *Dragonriders of Pern* series of fantasy and science fiction books. It is the third of the Rukbat System's five planets.
Red Star	Pern's stepsister planet. It has an erratic orbit, which is why it moves close to Pern every so often.
Sevenday	Pernese word for week.

Table 2 (continued)

Term	Explanation
Thread	Spores from the Red Star, which descend on Pern and burrow into it, devour all organic material they encounter (a parasite).
Turn	This is a Pernese year.
Watchdragon	The dragon and rider who have pulled watch duty on the Weyr roster. A "watch" is four hours long.
Watchwher	A nocturnal, photosensitive relative of dragons used as a guard.
Weyr	A *Weyr* is a collection of dragons, their riders and support staff in Anne McCaffrey's fictional world of Pern. Also, a weyr with a lower-case w is a dragon's den.
Weyrfolk	Anyone who lives in the *Weyr*.
Weyrleader & Weyrwoman	A *Weyr*woman is the first queen who rises; the matriarch of the *Weyr*. A *Weyr*leader is the rider of the dragon who catches the *Weyr*Queen (the dragon of the *Weyr*woman).
Weyrling	The newly impressed rider to a dragonet. Members are *Weyr*lings from the time they impress to approximately 18 months in character time.
Weyrling Assistant	Members who assist the *Weyr*ling Master in his/her duties.
Weyrling Master	The member who is in charge of the *Weyr*lings (newly impressed dragons and riders). It is this member's job to oversee the training of *Weyr*lings, and they are in charge of the assistants who help them in the clutches.
Weyrsinger	A harper for the Weyr, usually a dragon rider with harper training.
Wherry	A large, turkey-like bird.

Outline of the Dissertation

In this chapter, I began by contextualizing the lives of adolescents and emerging adults who have grown up as members of the net generation, accustomed to a multimodal world and engaged in online literacy practices outside of school sharing little resemblance with the practices they experience in classrooms. This study is an attempt to

add to the literature exploring and describing the kinds of out-of-school, informal literacy

learning youth are involved with in online spaces, in an attempt to identify aspects of

their experiences that hold implications to make in-school literacy teaching and learning

more meaningful and relevant to the lives of students.

In Chapter Two, I review multiple theoretical lenses I braid: namely, New

Literacy Studies (New London Group, 1996), Affinity Space (Gee, 2004) and

Communities of Practice and Play (Lave & Wender, 1991; Pearce, 2009), and Self-

Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As well, I explore studies investigating

adolescents' literacy and motivation, including their literate and social practices using

multimodal technologies and popular culture in virtual environments. Further, I explore

the history of role-play games, and then turn my attention to studies focused on youth's

experiences with online gaming and play. Finally, I share studies focused on youth's

involvement in fandom and writing within fan communities. In so doing, I attempt to

illustrate how youth's out-of-school literacy practices mediated by multimodal

technology and popular culture are crucial in their literacy development and socialization.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the context of this study and how data were collected,

analyzed, coded, and reviewed. I describe the context of this virtual research, including

the selection of the *Trelis Weyr* RPG forum virtual community, virtual fieldwork to

collect and analyze data, and the virtual interview process. Moreover, I discuss the

validity of virtual research and the challenges of researching in a virtual environment.

In Chapter Four, I describe the *Trelis Weyr* RGP forum, and the ways participants

of *Trelis Weyr* collaborated to create collective narratives through role-play. I explore the

literate, social, performative, and play or ludic practices participants engaged in as they

interacted in this forum. I then describe three focal participants – Larkwing, Zi and Kit –
who engaged in sophisticated practices while roleplaying. Through this examination, I
explore the features of participation in text-based RPG forums and related activities,
focusing on how participants constructed characters to engage in collective narration as
they role-played and made social connections.

In Chapter Five, I present a dialogic conversation between my daughter and
myself as we discuss our interactions as researcher and participant, and as mother and
daughter, providing insight regarding how these roles influenced us both. This chapter
considers the notion that our own identities and those we attribute to others are relational
and constructed in conversation and interaction with others (Gergen, 2009). Thus,
narrating continually shapes and reshapes what we think and who we are as people.

In Chapter Six, I discuss the findings of this study and examine the implications
that are suggested by exploring the three participants' literate, social, performative, and
play or ludic practices in *Trelis Weyr*. I emphasize how knowledge learned from this
study on today's youth and their literate and social development in online spaces can help
us to design pedagogies better suited to their needs. In this regard, I discuss the ways to
promote literacy development of youth by bridging their out-of-school literacies and the
curriculum inside the classroom.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This dissertation examines youth's multimodal literate and social practices around text-based role-play-game forums and the collective narratives created via role play in a fan site named *Trelis Weyr*. In this chapter, I review the literature guiding the conceptualization and design of this study. The purpose of this chapter is to review theoretical perspectives and pertinent research that directly influenced the design and execution of this study. To connect my study with relevant discourses in the research, I examined related literature to inform my theoretical and practical understanding of adolescents' and emerging adults' everyday out-of-school literacies (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003a, 2003b; Gee, 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). During the course of this research study, I was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized as a virtual environment?

2. In what ways and for what purposes do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose within *Trelis Weyr*?

3. What are the factors motivating participants to enter and persist at play in *Trelis Weyr*?

This chapter opens with a discussion of the methods incorporated during this review of the literature. I follow this methodological review by sharing the braided theories informing my analysis of the literature: New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995), Affinity Space (Gee, 2004) and Communities of Practice and Play (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pearce, 2009), as well as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I then identify research on adolescence and literacy, motivation and literacy, gaming and play, and writing within fandom.

Methodological Review

Literature examined in this review explores what is already known about adolescents' literacy development, online gaming environments, fan communities, and adolescents' motivation to enter and persist at play in these virtual environments. Any study that met the following inclusion criteria was incorporated in this analysis: (a) empirical research published in English language, peer reviewed journals from 2000 to 2012; (b) either qualitative or quantitative design; (c) adolescents and/or emerging adults who were English language speakers (Level 1); (d) adolescents and/or emerging adults involved in online writing and/or gaming communities with writing as a focus; (e) online environments were provided in English; and, (f) research on adolescents' and emerging adults' motivation to participate in these online experiences.

In conducting this review of literature, I chose to focus on research conducted since 2000 because during the 1990s commercial use of the Internet was limited by National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET) acceptable use policies. Consequently, early online games relied on proprietary services such as CompuServe and America

Online for distribution, limiting opportunities for participation. As NSFNET restrictions were relaxed in the latter 1990s, commercial text-based role-play-games (RPGs) began to transition from a proprietary network to the Internet. Thus, more access was available to people who wished to participate.

I utilized a three-phase, systematic search. The first phase involved an electronic search of ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR Education, and WilsonWeb. A second phase involved the manual search of journals. In a third search phase, additional relevant studies were identified from bibliographies of previously identified literature. Additionally, chapters within books or entire books were identified and read to provide a deeper understanding of theories and concepts related to this research. Many of these books also shared research studies. I read all materials multiple times using inductive analysis, identifying "patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (Hatch, 2002, p. 161).

Braiding of Theoretical Frameworks

Literacy is a situated, social practice embedded in cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). I believe literacy practices both influence and are influenced by the context in which they occur. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning emphasizes "comprehensive understanding involving the whole person," where learning is seen as a social process of interacting within the world as the individual, their learning, and the environment jointly construct each other (p. 33). I believe learning is contextualized in and develops from social interaction. This perspective of sociocultural and situated

learning informed my research on *Trelis Weyr*. However, no one theory could adequately explain the complex interactions occurring within *Trelis Weyr*, an extremely unique space. Thus, I braided multiple theoretical lenses to guide my inquiry, analysis, and interpretation: New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995), Affinity Space (Gee, 2004) and Communities of Practice and Play (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pearce, 2009), as well as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

New Literacy Studies (NLS)

For many years, literacy has been understood as a set of encoding and decoding skills (Street, 1995); as an acquired set of discrete rules for reading and writing text. Literacy was understood as being autonomous, cognitive and individual in nature, but this view of literacy is shifting from literacy as a set of decontextualized skills to using language and literacy as a social practice. According to Scribner and Cole (1981):

> Instead of focusing exclusively on the technology of a writing system and its reputed consequences… we approach literacy as a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it. Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. The nature of these practices, including, of course, their technical aspects, will determine the kinds of skills ("consequences") associated with literacy. (p. 236)

The social view sees literacy as a socially situated and constructed practice (Street, 1995), embedded in cultural, historical and institutional contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000;

Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). This focus on a social context is influenced by

sociocultural theories, including New Literacy Studies (NLS).

NLS is influenced by several schools of thought, including sociolinguistics,

critical pedagogy and post structuralism, which focus on literacy practices as intricately

woven into the social, cultural, economic, political, and institutional practices of various

contexts. Gee (1991) affirms literacy is more than a collection of decontextualized skills.

Rather, literacy is socially and culturally situated, being deeply connected to "embodied

action in the material and social world" (p. 714). In other words, literacy should not be

viewed as a cognitive activity alone, but also as social and cultural practices fully

embedded in or situated within specific social and cultural contexts.

Street (2000) explains NLS as an ideological model, defined in opposition to

earlier studies of literacy that were based on a more autonomous model. This autonomous

model of literacy was based on the assumption that literacy affects other social and

cognitive processes "irrespective of the social conditions and cultural interpretations of

literacy associated with programs and educational sites for its dissemination" (Street,

2005, p. 417). This autonomous model was disrupted by research from psychology

(Scribner & Cole, 1981), literacy studies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984), and

ethnography of communication (Heath, 1983), where various forms of literacy were

situated in social arrangements, like families, schools, and workplaces. Thus, it is

understood that multiple forms of literacy shape and are shaped by the social practices

enacted in these social arrangements, and the shared understanding of the purpose and

meaning of particular uses of literacy practices.

These socially situated forms of literacy led Street (2005) to define the ideological

model of literacy as a social practice, instead of an autonomous technical or neutral set of skills. Street argued literacy is always "embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles", framed ideologically in social, cultural, and institutional practices (2005, p. 418). Researchers who work with the NLS ideological model of literacy observe literacy events in order to make inductions about what literacy practices are at work within those events. However, definitions of literacy events and practices vary in terms of how researchers make inductions from events to practices (Bloome, et al., 2005; Street, 2000). Thus, I provide a brief explanation of how I define these two concepts within New Literacy Studies.

  Literacy events. Within NLS, literacy events are usually defined as observable situations where reading, writing or related semiotic systems play a non-trivial role. Researchers investigate literacy events by observing actions, examining how participants endow those actions with meaning, and considering the ideological underpinnings that inform actions so they can make inductions about the literacy practices involved within and across related events. However, researchers conceptualize the relationships between individuals and the literacy practices they contribute or construct within a literacy event differently (Baynham, 1995; Bloome, et al., 2005; Bloome & Bailey, 1992; Jacobs, 2007; Street, 2000).

  In this study, I define literacy events to be social occasions (Heath, 1983), constructed by the actions and reactions individuals during an event. People react in relation to the materials and social conditions of an event. For example, participants in *Trelis Weyr* acted with and react to each other in relation to the arrangements of the role-play forum, available materials, and their negotiated understanding of the purpose and

expectations of social interactions occurring in the forum. However, these materials and social conditions are not determinants for action that takes place in a literacy event. Instead, people agentively co-construct the event in relation to these conditions. They "concertedly act on their circumstances and act on and with the literacy practices that are given and available" (Bloome, et al., 2005, p. 6). Literacy events may also involve multiple social situations occurring simultaneously, so researchers need to consider how individuals draw on different literacy practices to construct an event for multiple purposes. Literacy events are also not isolated occurrences. They are connected to related events occurring in the past, and are constructed in anticipation of events that may occur in the future.

New literacy studies and previous research. New Literacy Studies has been utilized in previous research as a theoretical framework to research youth's out-of-school literacy practices. Prior to NLS, "formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (New London Group, 1996, p. 61) were the only forms of literacy considered valuable. However, many researchers began to see youth's literate practices situated outside the scope of in-school activities, such as home, community, after-school programs, and more recently virtual environments, providing rich portraits of youth's everyday literacies (e.g., Alvermann, 2002; Barton, 1994; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2003; Hull & Schulz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Barton (1994) posits "everyday literacy gives a richer view of literacy which demands a new definition of literacy, a new way of thinking about what is involved in reading and writing" (p. 5).

With the introduction of these new frameworks regarding literacy development,

various literacy practices once thought to have very little to do with being literate are now

deemed important. Today's youth are engaged in critical thinking and sophisticated forms

of literacy and learning in out-of-school experiences, which often meet or exceed what is

occurring in traditional classroom spaces. For example, Lewis and Fabo (2005)

investigated the way seven young peoples' use of Instant Messaging (IM) in their daily

lives extended schooled literacy practices. According to these researchers, adolescents

"used language in complex ways in order to negotiate multiple messages and interweave

these conversations into larger, overarching story lines" (Lewis & Fabo, 2005, p. 482).

This study revealed youth engaged in literate and textual practices through IM – a central

component of their social worlds in both on- and offline spaces. Further, Lewis and Fabo

shared educators need to understand how different social spaces and literacies enable

students to enact various identities to make school relevant for today's net generation

youth.

Gee's (2003) examination of videogames identified learning principles that make

good videogames and contribute to students' literacy development. Rather than

providing verbal information out of context, Gee shared videogames provide "just in

time" or "on demand" information as players need to encounter it. Gee added good

videogames make a player feel challenged while still feeling they are able to complete a

task, creating a sense of pleasurable frustration. Additionally, Gee posited players

developed virtual identities when they took on a character's persona and played a game,

helping the player to think, learn and act in new ways and develop new values and

beliefs. Gee concluded by stating instruction based on these learning principles should be

adopted to replace classroom practices, which are often outdated and characterized by

transmission models including things like drills of decontextualized skills.

Gee's groundbreaking work on videogames has influenced other scholars. For example, Steinkuehler (2008) addressed forms of technology-mediated literacy activities constituting participation and successful play in *Lineage*, an online game. In her work, Steinkuehler focused on intellectual practices developing cognition, including scientific reasoning and collective intelligence. In addition, Steinkuehler detailed game players' in-game interactions, such as text-written talk and in-game letters, in addition to out-of-game activities including fan sites, clan sites, personal game blogs and fan fiction. This examination of players' literate and social practices revealed games were not replacing print-based media (e.g., books). Rather, the games themselves were literacy activities. She further suggested game-related literacy practices were more complex and exceeded standards for reading, writing and technology when compared with literacy activities at school.

Jenkins (2004) added to these claims, sharing youth were engaged in more complex literate activities in out-of-school online spaces than they were inside the classroom. Jenkins analyzed the experiences of a teen named Heather while she created and edited a fictional school newspaper titled "Hogwarts Academy," attempting to find out how Heather and other youth serving as staff for the newspaper were able to write in this venue. Each participant took on an identity as a writer, an editor, a reporter, or a columnist. Jenkins pointed out "through online discussion of fan writing, the teen writers develop[ed] a vocabulary for talking about writing and learn[ed] strategies for rewriting and improving their own work" (2004, n.p.). When discussing *Harry Potter*, these youth "make comparisons with other literary works or draw connections with philosophical and

theological traditions; they debate gender stereotyping of the female characters; they…
read critical analysis of the works" (Jenkins, 2004, n.p.). Thus, the participants' online
participation had several educational merits, including developing sophisticated literate
and social skills.

Theories of Community

    Affinity space. Gee's (2004) "affinity space" theory helped me to understand
how *Trelis Weyr* was organized. Gee describes affinity spaces as sites of informal
learning where "newbies and masters and everyone else" act together toward a shared
effort (p. 85). This communal effort creates the unity in an affinity space, instead of a
shared location, age, gender, or other social factors. According to Gee, affinity spaces are
online interactive spaces containing people who help each other and work together
through shared interactions, activities, and goals. The notion of affinity spaces involves a
place in which: (1) people from a variety of backgrounds come together to pursue a
common goal regardless of race, class or gender identity; (2) there are various routes to
participation; (3) informal leadership and status occur as new participants and masters
share the space; and, (4) different kinds of knowledge are nurtured and valued by all
participants (Gee, 2004).

    The participants in the *Trelis Weyr* community were adolescents and emerging
adults (ages 14-24), with the majority female. Interest in Anne McCaffrey's (1967-2011)
Dragons of Pern literature series, and more specifically interest in *Pern* fan-related
practices, brought participants to *Trelis Weyr*. Gee's (2004) notion of a "paradigmatic"
affinity space shares eleven distinct features visible within a gaming site like *Trelis Weyr*.
I explain how these features are relevant to my study in detail in Table 2 below.

Table 3

Affinity Space Features as Visible in *Trelis Weyr*

Feature Defining an Affinity Space	Feature as Visible in *Trelis Weyr*
"Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary"	*Trelis Weyr* fan-related practices served as the shared affinity attracting participants from all over the world.
"Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space"	The range of experience was visible in members' profiles, which recorded their "date registered." Additionally, newbies interacted with founding members of the site.
"Some portals are strong generators"	As a portal to the larger affinity space of *Pern* fandom, *Trelis Weyr* was a generator of content providing a space for RPG.
"Content organization is transformed by interactional organization"	The practice of creating fiction via role-playing provided continued interest in *Pern* literature and generated interest in the creation of a motion picture based on *Pern.*
"Both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged"	*Trelis Weyr* was organized around various specialized topics, encouraging the development and sharing of intensive knowledge about practices such as custom content and digital photo editing. Participants displayed broader, extensive knowledge of story writing practices through role-play and collaborative creation within the forum.
"Both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged"	*Trelis Weyr* provided lists of resources, links to custom content, tutorials, participant information sub-forums, and reviews of and links to other *Pern*-related sites, all of which created a network of distributed knowledge with which members could connect their individual knowledge to collaboratively compose via role-play.

Table 3 (continued)

Feature Defining an Affinity Space	Feature as Visible in *Trelis Weyr*
"Dispersed knowledge is encouraged"	*Trelis Weyr* members drew on knowledge dispersed across a range of *Pern*-related sites, and from other media and from knowledge of writers' craft, photography, image editing, etc.
"Tacit knowledge is encouraged and honored"	Collaboratively composing story through role-playing provided means for displaying tacit knowledge built up in practice as a creator and reader of *Pern* fiction.
"There are many different forms and routes to participation"	*Trelis Weyr* provided a place for members to participate in a variety of ways, including as moderators, lurkers, chatters, role-players, contest entrants, and request fillers.
"There are lots of different routes to status"	Routes to status in *Trelis Weyr* included creating a popular character, serving as a moderator, and engaging in regular role-play in the forum.
"Leadership is porous and leaders are resources"	While *Trelis Weyr* did have moderators, other informal leaders included those members who guided forum play with their posts and those who led by offering their expertise in various ways.

* Features are quoted from Gee (2004, p. 85-87).

Participants' opportunities to enact "different forms and routes to participation" (Gee, 2004, p. 87) is a central feature of an online fan community's definition as an affinity space. Consequently, affinity spaces offer participants potent learning opportunities because "people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests" (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 177). *Trelis Weyr* was supportive of community building, offering various routes to participation through the creation and sharing of story. Participants could take an active role, entering play as a character they created,

encouraging others as they created characters to entered play, and serving as resources for other participants who asked questions about involvement in the forum. They could extend this participation further by providing leadership to the community, becoming a moderator, assisting in the creation of plot development, or creating and conducting contests in the community. Conversely, participants could also choose to passively participate, viewing and reading content as 'lurkers' without entering role-play. Individuals were free to select their own path for participation, based on their abilities, skills and interest.

How an affinity space encourages "intensive and extensive knowledge" (Gee, 2004, p. 85) is also significant in this analysis of *Trelis Weyr*. The forum encouraged members to gain and share "intensive" (specialized) knowledge around various aspects of character creation for role-play, such as creating digital images of character avatars. Fan websites were devoted to sharing how to create digital artwork to support fan activities, and participants sometimes chose to develop their knowledge in this area of expertise. As well, participants utilized each other's knowledge by asking participants who were experts at various things to assist them (i.e., to create digital art). Additionally, participants displayed an "extensive" (broad) knowledge about *Pern* canon and life on *Trelis Weyr* as they role-played and collaboratively composed, creating stories with others in the forum threads. Such practices engaged forum participants in ways that encouraged them to display, develop, and utilize both "intensive and extensive" knowledge.

In an affinity space, "both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged" (Gee, 2004, p. 86). How participants in *Trelis Weyr* demonstrated knowledge through

their participation became part of the distributed and shared knowledge of the forum, and

shaped future role-play and interactions in this space (Black, 2005) also informed this

analysis. *Trelis Weyr* participants displayed "individual knowledge" in a variety of ways.

Their knowledge of Pern canon, as well as their digital writing and editing abilities, were

displayed via character creation and role-play. Participants also demonstrated individual

knowledge and skills by answering new members' questions, supporting each other's

creation and distribution of knowledge in the space. Participants were able to tap into this

"distributed knowledge" as they drew on resources, allowing "people to know and do

more than they could on their own" (Gee, 2004, p. 86).

Community of practice. Coined originally by anthropologist Jean Lave and

educationist Etienne Wenger, "communities of practice" offers a perspective of learning.

These communities are made up of groups of people sharing common concerns or

passions for something they do or are interested in. Members of a community of practice

become more skilled as they interact with each other on a regular basis. However, a

community of practice is more than a few people who meet because they share a similar

interest (e.g., playing tennis on Mondays). According to Wenger, members of a

community of practice are practitioners who develop a shared repertoire of resources:

experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems.

Structural characteristics of a community of practice are defined as a domain of

knowledge, a notion of community, and a practice. A domain of knowledge creates

common ground, inspiring members to participate and guiding their learning, giving

meaning to their actions. Community creates the social fabric for learning to occur,

fostering interactions and encouraging willingness for members to share ideas. Practice is

the specific focus around which the community develops; the shared interest and core of

knowledge a community maintains for its members. Wenger and colleagues further

differentiate a community of practice from a community of interest, in which members of

a community share a domain but they do not contribute to the scope of knowledge

beyond what has already been established. Table 2 below offers an overview of the

structure of communities of practice.

Table 4

Structure of Communities of Practice

Term	Definition
Domain	An area of interest that brings a group of people together. Creates common ground and a sense of common identity.
Community	The group united by the domain. Fosters interactions based on mutual respect and trust and encourages a willingness to share ideas.
Practice	The knowledge, methods, stories, documents, etc., developed by the community

A community of practice evolves naturally from members' interests. The process

of sharing knowledge, information and experiences with the group provides opportunities

for members to learn from each other and develop themselves personally and

professionally. Communities of practice can exist online, such as in newsgroups, forums,

and discussion boards, or face to face. This type of learning is not new; it has existed for

as long as people have shared experiences through storytelling and learned as apprentices

from one another.

Wenger describes the structure of a community of practice as consisting of three interrelated terms: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, p. 72). Mutual engagement is when member establish norms and build collaborative relationships through participation in the community. These relationships are the ties that bind members together as a social entity. Joint enterprise is when members create a shared understanding of what binds them together through their interactions with each other. This joint enterprise is renegotiated by members and is often referred to as the "domain" of the community. Shared repertoire is when the community produces a set of communal resources as part of its practice. This is used in pursuit of the community's joint enterprise and can include literal and symbolic meanings.

Lave and Wenger observed situated learning within a community of practice among Yucatan midwives, native tailors, Navy quartermasters, and meat cutters (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as well as insurance claims processors (Wenger, 1998). Wenger's more recent work focuses on how individuals become active participants in the practices of social communities, and the construction of identity through community involvement (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger identified seven actions that can be taken to cultivate communities of practice: (1) design the community to naturally evolve and support shifts in focus; (2) create opportunities for open dialog within and with outside perspectives; (3) welcome and allow different levels of participation; (4) develop both public and private community spaces; (5) focus on the value of the community; (6) combine familiarity and excitement; and (7) find and nurture a regular rhythm for the community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Community of play. Play was an important new literacy concept that was also considered when analyzing the organization and participant interaction of *Trelis Weyr*. Concepts such as affinity space (Gee, 2004) and community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) focus on information sharing and building knowledge; things considered productive in Western society. In fact, terms like "productive play" (Pearce, 2009) permeate the literature when researchers describe virtual spaces, including multiple types of online play and social networking environments.

Bernie DeKoven (1978) has defined "play community" as a group whose commitment to playing together surpasses the specifics of the game and its rules. DeKoven proposed looking at a social model of play based on Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," defining this concept as a complete involvement in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfillment. The components of a "flow" producing activity, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1991) include: feeling up to the activity, being able to concentrate, having clear goals, being given direct feedback, feeling that you were in control, having no worries or concerns, and experiencing an altered sense of time. However, not all of these components need to be present for "flow" to be experienced. Furthermore, this state of "flow" is maintained by keeping a balance between ability and challenge. A "flow" producing activity is supposed to provide some challenge to the participant without producing frustration; thus, the activity supports the persistence of interest and involvement.

Pearce (2009) extended these notions by sharing flow has a cumulative effect in play communities; the individual and the group mutually support each other. Pearce further combines the community of play concept with complexity theory to characterize

play spaces within virtual environments as "play ecosystems." She shares these spaces were designed to facilitate networked play, so they include features and affordances that differ significantly from spaces that are typically associated with other functions, like work, or even social networking. The "serious" functions tend to be privileged over play, probably because play is marginalized in Western culture (Schechner, 1988). Pearce (2009) shared, "The game bias is deeply embedded in the discourses of techno-culture and digital media, as characterized by the naming of the discipline 'game studies,' as opposed to its anthropologic antecedent, 'play studies'" (p. 28).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. SDT addresses factors that either facilitate or undermine motivation, both intrinsically and extrinsically. I applied SDT when investigating the factors motivating *Trelis Weyr* forum participants to enter and persist at play in this virtual environment. As well, I investigated members' perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness, key constructs in SDT, through analysis of artifacts collected on the site, as well as transcripts of semi-structured interviews with three focal participants.

According to SDT, individuals possess inner motivational resources that actual conditions can either support or frustrate. When these inner motivational resources are supported, individuals adopt an autonomy-supportive style. Thus, autonomy-supportive environments identify, nurture, and develop individuals' inner motivational resources. SDT also involves people's natural growth tendencies and innate psychological needs, focusing on the degree to which behavior is self-motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT

identifies three innate psychological needs that form the basis for self-motivation and personality integration, allowing optimal learning when fulfilled: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Competence refers to a person's effectiveness in dealing with their environment. This can manifest as a person's need to understand his or her work to complete tasks successfully. *Relatedness* is the universal desire people have to interact with, be connected to, and care for each other. A person's need for belonging, to receive personal support, or to feel secure in relationships all are examples of relatedness. *Autonomy* is the urge we have to be causal agents in our own lives and to act in harmony with our integrated selves; though autonomy does not assume that we are independent of others. Autonomy can manifest as a person's need for control over decisions, and his or her sense of choice within and between activities (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

Self-determination theory (SDT) stipulates motivation is not a single construct; it involves a variety of factors, including diverse experiences and consequences, making it appear different in a variety of contexts. SDT makes distinctions between types of motivation, including people who are amotivated, those who are extrinsically motivated, and those who are intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Amotivation* is not regulated, involving an impersonal perceived locus of causality. In contrast, *intrinsic motivation* is intrinsically regulated and has an internal perceived locus of causality. *Extrinsic motivation* resides somewhere between amotivation and intrinsic motivation, and according to SDT varies greatly in its relative autonomy and volition.

Ryan and Deci (2000) posit, "Motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence and equifinality – all aspects of activation and intention" (p. 69). However, motivation is

not a single construct; it appears different in a variety of contexts, due to multiple factors, diverse experiences, and consequences. A person's motivation is on a continuum, varying from fear of punishment to a desire for excellence. Ryan and Deci (2000) share whether people do something because they are personally interested or externally motivated is important in every culture, representing a basic dimension by which humans make sense of behavior. Research comparing levels of motivation revealed self-motivated people enjoy more interest, excitement, and creativity; and, self-motivation impacted vitality, self-esteem, and well-being, even when people had the same level of perceived competence or self-efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation exists within the individual and is driven by a person's interest or enjoyment of a task, rather than in response to an external condition like pressure or enticement. In contrast, extrinsic motivation originates from outside the individual, referring to an activity performed in order to attain some separate outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation involves four regulatory stages that vary by degree of autonomy: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. While external regulation and introjected regulation are motivational types that rely on external controls (i.e., locus of causality), identified regulation and integrated regulation are aligned with personal values, awareness, and synthesis with self. Thus, identified regulation and integrated regulation are more autonomous or self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Both *external regulation* and *introjected regulation* involve perceived locus of causality that are external. Behaviors that are externally regulated involve the least autonomous form of extrinsic motivation, which satisfy an external demand or reward

contingency, originating from outside the individual. Introjected regulation involves behaviors that are performed to avoid guilt or punishments, but they can also involve ego enhancements like pride in accomplishments (e.g., good grades, awards for accomplishments). Introjected regulation is more autonomous than external regulation because it is internally driven, though these behaviors still have a perceived external locus of causality, originating from outside the individual, and they are not experienced as part of the self (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Both identified and integrated regulations are more self-determined or autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). ***Identified regulation*** involves a "conscious valuing" of goals. The task is either personally important to the individual, or it is accepted or "owned" by that person. The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is ***integrated regulation***, which occurs when identified regulation is fully assimilated to the self. In other words, a person has evaluated the task and assimilated it with their other values or needs. However, though identified and integrated regulations share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, they are not intrinsic because they are not completed for their inherent enjoyment.

Review of Related Research

Adolescence and Literacy

What exactly constitutes literacy? This question has been argued for decades. Scribner and Cole (1981) posit literacy is a socially organized practice using a symbol system and a type of technology to disseminate those symbols. Further, they define literacy as not only knowing how to read and write, but being able to use those skills for

specific purposes in specific contexts as needed. The role of symbol systems is central to this perspective, but Scriber and Cole acknowledge these systems are affected by cultural factors. A more complex definition is formed, when the term adolescent is combined with that of literacy. Moje (2008) states, "We see the world of adolescent literacy as complex, not only because both 'adolescent' and 'literacy' are ill-defined constructs, but also because young people are so different from one another" (p. 108). Thus, cultural factors, including family, community and peers, have a tremendous influence on adolescent literacy development. Gee (2001) believes meaning is negotiated at the "intersection of the individual, culture and activity" in sociocultural theory. He espouses the view that reading is a process embedded in "a context of social interaction and culture," going beyond simple processing skills. This sociocultural perspective on literacy acknowledges the central role of print and other symbol systems, but also recognizes that how an individual learns and utilizes these symbols is mediated by and constituted in cultural practices (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984).

Power, identity and agency also influence the value groups place on social and cultural practices (Moje, 2008; Moje & Lewis, 2007), including literacy practices. Adolescents must access socially constructed codes, learned in the discourse communities to which they belong. Literacy requires group members to make sense of a variety of codes – symbolic, visual, oral and embodied (Kress, 2003). Having access to a group's "codes" affords adolescents some power to develop identity within that group. Members "enact" identities they feel are most appropriate in a discourse community, or those demanded through a specific relationship, space, or time (Moje, 2004).

Various scholars have defined proficient adolescent literacy skills as the ability to

read, interpret, critique, and produce the discourse of a disciplinary area (Bain, 2006; Lee, 2005; Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg & Martin, 2004). These scholars believe adolescents must be able to access the conventions of disciplinary knowledge production and communication, giving them the power to read and think critically across various texts and disciplines. This perspective assumes adolescents must participate in the discourses of the disciplines during the school day, as well as to integrate these discourses into other discourses they experience, exploring various identities within these discourses (Gee, 2001; Luke, 2001; Luke & Elkins, 1998). Thus, content area teachers should provide adolescents with opportunities to examine subject-area texts in relation to the discourses of everyday life; the ways individuals read, write and speak in their community and family (Moje, Collazo, Carriollo, & Marx, 2001).

Additionally, adolescents must be able to deal with differing forms of literacy in order to navigate texts from various discourse groups; even those not valued by institutions such as schools. Adolescent literacy skills for the twenty-first century must involve navigating multiliteracies (Luke & Elkins, 1998; New London Group, 1996), as well as being able to traverse various texts, permeated with the discourses of a particular community. The New London Group (1996) shares education should include learning to be metadiscursive; not just focused on teaching conventional codes and scripts. Metadiscursivity, according to Moje (2008), is "the ability to engage in many different discourse communities, to know how and why one is engaging, and to recognize what those engagements mean for oneself and others in terms of social positioning and larger power relations" (p. 112). New literacy scholars further contend the technologies to access, create, and produce codes and scripts should be a part of instruction, whether

traditional or alternative in nature (Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009; Moje, 2008). These scholars believe digital media themselves influence not only what is written, but also how digital media texts should be read. Additionally, they espouse adolescents must develop both the skills to use these technologies and the ability to navigate the technologies when their skills are not adequate to the task (Moje, 2008).

Many types of technology are used today by adolescents, including the Internet, email, instant message and chat, video conferencing, virtual gaming, social networks, and so forth. These resources are utilized on a daily basis by many adolescents to communicate with others, complete their homework, and interact with peers in multiple online spaces. Adolescents will need to become proficient with technologies their teachers cannot even imagine in order to be considered literate in the future. According to Alvermann (2004), there is a "perceived need to develop young people's critical awareness of how all authored texts (print, visual, and oral) situate them as readers, writers, and viewers within particular cultural and historical contexts" (p. 78). Educators should familiarize themselves with these out of school literacy practices of adolescents as well, so they can benefit from connections made between school literacies and these more unconventional literacy practice adolescents' value. Educators cannot "co-opt youth culture," but they can combine a variety of texts, both print and digital, to support curricular needs (Alvermann, 2004).

Moje's (2008) research challenged the myths that exist about adolescents and their literacy practices. She presented insightful findings about adolescent reading practices to identify what, how often, and why teens read. Moje shared adolescents often

read and write for various purposes outside the classroom, but the types of text with which they interact may not be valued by adults in their lives, particularly within classroom expectations for literacy. In her study, educators reported that reading novels outside of school on a regular basis was the only type of reading to have a positive effect on adolescents' academic achievement. Despite this, it was determined it is in the teacher's best interest to know the reasons adolescents choose to read outside the classroom, as well as the types of texts they value. Survey and interview data indicated adolescents read texts in school that were situated in social networks they identified with (e.g., conflict with peers, issues with parents). Moje's findings suggest that adolescents should be offered high-quality reading material that is appealing to them in support of literacy development; not just the canon of the traditional English curriculum.

The literature reviewed on adolescent literacy included several commentaries about the importance of in- and out-of-school literacy development, and how each can support the other. However, there were few empirical research studies that were conducted with middle and high schools students. These articles asked questions, identified problems, and offered tentative solutions, but many lacked supporting evidence from empirical research for their conclusions. However, the articles did add to important conversations taking place in the literacy community. They also provided direction for future areas of research to shed light on this important aspect of adolescent literacy development and its influence on classroom culture and practice.

Motivation and Literacy

In the past few decades, literacy researchers have increasingly considered motivation's influence on students' literacy development (Alexander & Fox, 2004;

Alexander, Kulikowich, & Jetton, 1994; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Across research, findings emphasize the importance of understanding motivation and engagement as an aspect of comprehension and general school achievement (Moje, 2008). Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998) focused on the necessity of understanding motivation within students' interaction in social contexts. Alexander et al. (1994) explored students' interest in subject knowledge and strategic processes used during reading. Moje, Dillon, and O'Brien (2000) also investigated the intersection between learner knowledge and interest; including the influence of textual factors, and social and disciplinary contexts as well. However, research including aspects of motivation is still maturing; thus, "Motivated literacy" (McCaslin, 1990) is a construct in need of more in-depth study. However, literature does point towards three identified variables relevant to understanding adolescents' motivation for literacy: self-efficacy and engagement, involving how students view themselves as readers; and, self-determination or autonomy, focusing on the effects of choice and control.

   Self-efficacy and engagement. Self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs about his or her ability to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels. It is grounded in social cognitive theory, which posits achievement depends on reciprocal interactions between a person's behavior, their personal beliefs, and the environmental conditions present (Bandura, 1986; Wigfield & Eccles, 2001). Task choice, effort, persistence, and achievement are all believed to be affected by self-efficacy. Students, who feel more effective as learners, participate more, work harder, persist longer, and achieve at high levels (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006; Wigfield & Eccles, 2001). It is this belief in ourselves, or lack thereof, which determines how competent we feel (Bandura,

1989).

Reciprocal interactions between personal factors, environmental factors, and behaviors help inform our understanding of literacy development (Alvermann, 2002; Bandura, 1989; Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006; Wigfield & Eccles, 2001). For example, a student's personal self-efficacy beliefs about their ability to write an essay influence their writing behaviors, such as choice of topic, effort and persistence. Self-efficacy beliefs can also affect a person's environment. Efficacious students who try to write in a noisy environment may redouble their personal concentration to avoid being distracted. In contrast, students' social environment can affect personal variables and behaviors. If a student receives encouraging feedback from his or her teacher, the student may feel more personally efficacious and work harder to succeed. Teachers can inspire their students academically by creating a supportive classroom environment.

Behavior can also influence personal variables. For example, behaviors effect a person's environment; students can choose to eliminate distractions, like turning the television off so they are able to focus and read better. Additionally, a student who decides to read a difficult book and experiences success feels higher self-efficacy and motivation to try reading another difficult book in the future. This student's self-efficacy is shaped by her successful completion of an authentic, challenging task. As she successfully navigates the difficult book and is able to make meaning, the student's belief that she is capable of meeting her goal to read the book in entirety builds her feeling of competence. Furthermore, as a person builds her feeling of competence in a task, she is more likely to make a greater effort and persist longer with a difficult task than someone who has low efficacy. The stronger the self-efficacy or mastery expectations an

individual possesses, the more active his or her efforts (Bandura, 1977).

The perception of self-efficacy is central to theories of motivation, and adolescents' perception of their competence as literacy learners generally affects their motivation to learn (Bandura, 1977). Thus, effective literacy instruction should address issues of self-efficacy and engagement. In an extensive review of literature on instructional influences, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) concluded various practices, though important, did not directly impact student outcomes (e.g., time spent reading independently, achievement on standardized tests, performance assessments, and beliefs about reading). Rather, students' level of engagement was the mediating factor influencing students' reading engagement and academic performance. Hence, instructional practices supporting student engagement were most effective. For example, providing clear goals for a comprehension task, then giving feedback on progress, led to increased self-efficacy and greater use of comprehension strategies for struggling students (Schunk & Rice, 1993). As well, integrating technology that heightened students' motivation to become independent readers and writers also increased students' sense of competence (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000).

Pajares, Johnson, and Usher (2007) investigated the influence of four hypothesized sources of self-efficacy (e.g., mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and anxiety/stress) on the writing self-efficacy beliefs of students, exploring how these four sources differed by gender and academic level with students grades four through twelve. Results indicated each of the four sources significantly correlated with writing self-efficacy and with each other. Perceived mastery experience showed the greatest variance in writing efficacy for boys and girls, at all academic levels.

Girls reported greater mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and lower anxiety than boys. They also reported stronger writing self-efficacy, and their teachers rated them as better writers. Differences between grade levels were evident as well. Students' writing self-efficacy beliefs diminished as they moved from elementary to middle school; anxiety and stress about writing were related to this diminished sense of self-efficacy.

Research also investigated how teachers define reading and what kinds of reading motivate adolescents, as well as how educators can use this information in secondary curriculum (Pitcher et al., 2007). Results indicated adolescents used multiliteracies extensively; however, they did not consider their out of school literacy activities as "reading". Devaluing these important literacy skills correlated with students' lack of belief in their ability as readers. In spite of their feelings, students' attitudes and interests in reading were positively influenced by family, friends, teachers' enthusiastic talk and modeling of books. Students valued choice of books, as well as choice of topics and formats of assigned projects, but their reading interests seldom included anything academic. In general, students' self-efficacy as readers and their value of reading coincided with their reading choices and overall enjoyment of reading.

Research also indicates teachers who are able to convince students they care about them as individuals and want them to learn contribute to adolescents' sense of competence and self-worth (Dillon, 1989; Walker & Greene, 2009). Findings from multiple research studies indicate the classroom culture and the relationship teachers' form with their students inspires student participation and pride in learning (Fecho, 1998; Finders, 1997; Heron, 2003; Moje, 2000). Walker & Greene (2009) focused on

identifying motivation variables related to students' sense of belonging; whether this sense of belonging helped to predict mastery goals; if self-efficacy, perceived instrumentality, and sense of belonging helped predict whether students would be more cognitively engaged; and, if classroom goals helped predict students' sense of belonging. Results suggested when adolescents believed they were valued members of their classroom community, felt supported by their teachers and peers, felt a sense of competence in their abilities, and believed their work in class was important to their future; they were more willing to use cognitive strategies to develop an understanding of the material (Walker & Greene, 2009).

Self-determination or autonomy. Self-determination is the degree to which a person feels autonomous and has a choice about their actions, in contrast with lack of control and feeling pressured (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). It is expressed most clearly through intrinsically motivated behavior, which occurs when a person feels motivated to participate in an activity for its own sake and not because of a reward or recognition they might receive separate from the task. Intrinsically motivated people choose to engage in activities that provide opportunities for mastery and enjoyment. When people are self-determined, they feel like they are in control of their own actions, that they have a choice about engaging in an activity or not, and they are responsible for the decision-making behind their actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). Additionally, how much students develop their sense of self-determination impacts their achievement, ability to cope, preference for challenges, moral reasoning, and several other outcomes.

The provision of choice has been an archetypal procedure for manipulating intrinsic motivation, and much research has demonstrates that individuals who are offered choice will show more enjoyment of, better performance on, and greater persistence at a variety of activities (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Langer, 1989; Legault et al., 2006; Perlmuter & Monty, 1977; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978). Moreover, these motivational effects remain, even when the choices afforded an individual seem trivial or "illusory" (Langer, 1989). However, adolescents' classrooms tend to be teacher-directed instead of being student-centered (Guthrie & Davis, 2003), providing few opportunities to support of autonomy through choice and decision making; part of an increasingly controlling school climate.

Research involving choice often investigated students' perceptions of what makes them want to read in their school classrooms (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Ivey and Broaddus (2001) took the position that tensions between middle school students and school reading can be attributed to a mismatch between what students need and the instruction they receive. Findings from the survey and interview data indicated students valued independent reading the most, as well as teacher read-alouds during instructional time. Students focused on the act of reading, and personal reasons for reading (e.g., intrinsic motivational factors) versus social aspects or activities related to reading in their responses. Research was closely aligned with positive experiences reading, and middle school students' worst experiences reading directly related to teacher-assigned reading in the classroom (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999).

Providing choices of reading materials and activities increased students' interest

and time spent reading, which are aspects of intrinsic motivation and build students'

sense of autonomy. In addition to greater choice of materials, students' responses

indicated diversity of material and the access to that material were key implications for

classroom teachers and school librarians. Students reported they often did not find books

they wanted to read in their classroom and school libraries. Overall, these middle school

students wanted time to read during instructional blocks, and to be allowed autonomy in

the choice of subject matter they read.

　　　　Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) further examined students' reading

preferences, choice of reading material, and their access to reading materials. Research

focused on middle school students' preferences in reading material; how these

preferences related to gender, socioeconomic status, reading attitudes, and reading

achievement; where students get materials; and, how students' preferences match what is

available in their schools. Ethnically and economically diverse sixth graders from three

middle schools in the Southwestern U.S and twelve classroom teachers participated.

Findings stated most students' preferred materials were scary books and stories, comics

and cartoons, magazines about popular culture, and books or magazines about sports.

　　　　Comparisons by gender, income, reading attitude, and reading achievement found

more similarities than differences in readers' preferences (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner,

1999). Providing choice and access to a diverse collection of reading materials increased

these middle school students' motivation for reading and enhanced their comprehension

of self-selected texts. Additionally, students valued teachers' opinions and their help in

locating materials, even if they didn't feel classroom and school libraries had the most

popular items. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) leave us with an interesting

question to ponder. Is the answer to how educators motivate students to read as simple as encouraging them to follow their interests? If interest, choice, and control play critical roles in motivating students to read, what do educators need to do to ensure these findings influence curricular development?

A Brief History of Role-Play-Games

Role-playing games are rooted in the earlier tradition of role-playing, which can be traced back to 16th century Europe and traveling players who performed improvisational theatre known as the Commedia dell'arte, as well as 19th and 20th century board and parlor games (Rilstone, 1994). However, role-playing games are commonly believed to have developed from miniature war gaming, or people enacting military-style battles using maps and miniatures. Through role-play, rather than a player controlling an army, they were taking control of a single character and playing through that character's thoughts, actions and motivations in an unfolding narrative (Rilstone, 1994).

The inspiration for early role-playing games is said to have been the *Lord of the Rings* literature series by J. R. R. Tolkien and the *Conan* novels by Robert Howard. At this same time, developers began to create board war games. Likewise, Gary Gygax of the University of Minnesota's war gaming society developed a set of rules for a late medieval setting, publishing this guide in 1971 as *Chainmail*. Initially a historical game, *Chainmail* later included an appendix to add fantasy elements like dragons and wizards. Many scholars share *Chainmail* was the basis for what later became *Dungeons and Dragons* (Rilstone, 1994). *Dungeons and Dragons*, published in 1974, was the first commercially available role-playing game. The game developed a cult following and this success spawned cottage industries and a variety of peripheral products. Other fantasy

games appeared over the next several years, including *Chivalry & Sorcery*, *Traveller*, and *RuneQuest* (Rilstone, 1994). Live-action role-playing groups formed and organized gaming conventions, and publications began to cater to this growing fan base.

During the 1980s literary and mythological references drew new fans to these games. New publishers entered the scene as well, and the games spread across the world as translations became available. Games began to be produced outside the United States, as gaming industry emerged in Germany, the United Kingdom, Finland, France, and Japan. During the late 1980s, role-playing games influenced other media, including video games and animated television series (Harrigan & Wardrip-Gruin, 2010).

By the 1990s, role-playing was a global phenomenon. Advances in home computing increased role-playing video games popularity. However, this increase in role-playing video games and the development of competitive card-collecting games like *Magic: The Gathering* split gamers' time and money, resulting in a decline in the role-playing game industry (Harrigan & Wardrip-Gruin, 2010). Meanwhile, critical and theoretical reflection on role-playing game theory was evolving. During the 2000s, the open gaming movement developed, and self-defined "Indie role-playing" communities arose on the internet, studying role-playing and developing multiple theories on role-playing games. Print on demand and PDF publishing options also made it possible for individuals to produce games and provide them to the masses (Harrigan & Wardrip-Gruin, 2010).

Role-playing's core qualities. Most role-playing shares three core qualities: narration, improvisation, and collaboration. In role-play, participants describe creating a shared fiction by describing events and sharing dialogue (Bal, 1997). However, at its

heart role-playing is an improvisational activity. Actions are not planned in advanced by participants. Instead, narrative events play out in the game while action unfolds between participants during role-play. Generally, participants do not know when they start play how the actions will unfold and what will ultimately happen during the game (Bal, 1997). Collaboration is a hallmark of role-playing. Participants have an equal opportunity to contribute to the narrative through their interactions during role-play. Every person is able to share their character's actions, or to influence the outcome of the play in the fictional world of the game through their interactions with other players. Though participants may not have an equal role during play, they are afforded an equal opportunity to participate and contribute to the development of story (Bal, 1997).

Overview of research. Researchers have approached role-playing games from different perspectives. Koster (2002) and Mackay (2001) examined them from a performance point of view, Copier (2005) considered their place in fantasy subculture and ritual, and Fine (1983) used participant observation to examine the interactions between players. As well, Tychsen, Newman, Brolund, and Hitchens (2007) looked at players' enjoyment and engagement in the game. Research on role-playing also included a focus on game play style (Edwards, 2001), and the examination of narrative and storytelling as aspects of role play (Henry, 2003; Kim, 2003; Padol, 1996).

Interestingly, many researchers shied away from defining a role-play game specifically. Rather, they discussed RPG history and the demographics of players, without defining exactly what role-play was exactly. If researchers did attempt to provide a definition, it was broad and defined the act of role-playing instead of explaining what a role-play game was per se. Though these definitions are useful, they focus on the player's

experience rather than the activity itself. There may not be a definition of role playing games that is commonly accepted across the variety of styles available to fans, but it is agreed that certain games are examples of RPGs: pen-and-paper or table top, systemless, live-action role-playing, single-player digital, massively multi-player online, freeform, and pervasive. This is not an exhaustive list; however, it covers a variety of examples to help develop a workable understanding of what constitutes a role-playing game.

Pen-and-paper RPGs. Pen-and-paper or table top games refer to the original form of RPG from the 1970's, where a small number of players sit around a table and interact with a game world. Players generally play one character, and a game master is responsible for the game world beyond these players' characters and their interactions. Play usually involves verbal descriptions by the players sharing their character's actions, or by the game master describing the results of actions. Written materials, including rules, play aids and character descriptions, are used, and players interact within the game world in ways their characters would naturally be capable of.

Systemless. This type of RPG, coming from Australia primarily, is related to the pen-and-paper form and to psychodrama. The number of participants and what they do is similar, but systemless RPGS use multiple game masters who have greater authorial control. These games are considered more qualitative in nature, with descriptions of characters' history and personality rather than their attributes and skills, and the levels typical of other forms of RPG. Systemless play emphasizes enacting more than description, with players moving around space and speaking as their characters might, acting out their character's actions and reactions. Play is the interaction between participants, including the development of characters and story. Game masters make the

decisions based on their own assessment of the situation, rather than referring to quantitative character, world descriptions, or other resolution mechanisms. This type of RPG is a cross between live-action role-playing and tabletop (Lynch, 2000).

Live-action role-playing. Live-action RPG involves more participants than those just described, ranging from a few dozen to thousands. This style of RPing is focused on enacting character's movements within a setting. Settings are often real-world locations, such as castles and parks, and players generally play one character, while game masters control the parts of the game world beyond players' characters. There are usually many game masters, and some players may be enlisted to assist the game masters by carrying out pre-planned actions.

Single player digital. This type of RPG is much like the original pen-and-paper version, but software has taken on the functions of the game master and the game world is created using visual, digital representations (Tychsen et al., 2007). As well, the software enacts a strict enforcement of rules, in contrast with a human game master who may choose to enforce some rules and bend others to meet the needs of desired outcomes. A digital form of RPG also limits interaction with the game world, only allowing interaction forms that have been created by the game designer.

Massively multi-player online. The biggest difference between this type of RPG and the single player digital form is the number of simultaneous participants, which typically can be in the thousands (e.g., *World of Warcraft*). The basic form of the game is the same, with a graphical interface, but the sheer number of players gives rise to varying patterns of play based on the interactions possible. These games generally include more geographical areas to explore as well, since they are typically larger than single player

digital games. There is a much richer possibility of interactions with other characters created and controlled by participants, in comparison to single player varieties with limited dialogue and interaction primarily offered by software controlled characters. Participants can also have multiple characters they play, and play itself lasts much longer than single player digital games, ranging from 20 to 40 hours (Taylor, 2006).

Freeform. The freeform style of RPG is best known in the US, United Kingdom and Australia. This is a form of live-action RPG, with an emphasis on character interaction in a more controlled environment than large scale live-action games might allow. There is little emphasis on combat, setting, costumes, or props. Instead, this form of RPG relies heavily on inter-player communication and negotiation, and less on rules-based action resolution. Multiple game masters handle large numbers of players, but play is normally in a single physical location. Of the types described herein, freeform is the closest description for text-based role-play game forums.

Pervasive. Pervasive and ubiquitous games are generally digital games extending the game play beyond a computer screen. Players' movement in the real world equates to an avatar's movement in the game world. This type of RPG does not necessarily include a digital component as well. Anything in the real world, including people not playing the game, can take on significance for play. Since any part of the real world can potentially be part of the game, ways to interact within the game are extensive. This form of RPG resembles live-action role-play most closely.

As previously mentioned, there is no commonly accepted definition of what a role-playing game is, and it is somewhat understandable as there is a great variety of types of RPGs. Most research on RPGs focuses on game design and theory, as well as on

anthropological and sociological interests related to culture and ritual in these game spaces. Few research studies focus on enjoyment and engagement during game play or the examination of narrative and storytelling as aspects of role-play. More recent research on role-playing tends to focus on massively multi-player online RPGs with graphical interface like *World of Warcraft*, considering the cultural practices and the development of multiple identities. In a few cases, literacy and social development of players has been explored as well. However, there is currently no research I could identify on text-based role-play-game forums, or the literate and social development of players who are engaged in this form of role-play.

Online Gaming and Play

The increasing sophistication of technology over the past few decades has stimulated interest in virtual environments to deliver entertainment, education, and socializing experiences for users. The evolution of the Internet combined with increases in memory and computer operating capabilities have fostered complex virtual and gaming environments that users find immersive and engaging (Ryan et al., 2006). Video gaming is the fastest growing form of human recreation today, and participation in gaming is common across most demographic groups, taking up greater amounts of people's leisure time. Barton (2007) states, "everyday literacy gives a richer view of literacy, which demands a new definition of literacy, a new way of thinking about what is involved in reading and writing" (p. 5). As what counts as literacy expands each day, various literate practices ignored by researchers and educators in the past are now being recognized and examined (Alverman, 2007; Alverman & Heron, 2001; Black, 2008; Gee, 2008; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b).

An overarching theme across research regarding online literacy practices within gaming environments is that youth are engaged in critical thinking and complex forms of literacy and learning while involved in these online activities, which often match or even exceed the types of literacy activities occurring in school (Gee, 2000b, 2004, 2008; McGinnis, 2007; Williams, 2005, 2009). However, this increase in gaming involvement is also of concern to many people, who worry that participation in gaming may have negative side effects for adolescents, including increased tendencies toward violence, lower academic achievement, and lower feelings of well-being (Ryan et al., 2006). Conversely, other findings indicate gaming can have positive psychological benefits, including increased self-efficacy and empowerment regarding your environment, and increases in ability to learn. Regardless of which belief scholars may hold, it is apparent gaming environments have a tremendous appeal, are motivating, and have the potential to benefit or harm individuals. The review of literature on gaming unveiled three common themes I will use to summarize research findings: motivation and engagement, a balance between cognition and perceived playfulness, and gaming and literacy.

Gaming, motivation, and engagement. Multiple studies identified variables associated with motivation and gaming or involvement in virtual environments, including positive affect, competence, enhanced self-esteem, vitality, and participants' valuing of game tasks (Gee, 2003; Ryan et al., 2006; Wang & Wang, 2008; Warren, Dondlinger, & Barab, 2008). Rich, media-based presentations supported students' motivation and acquisition of knowledge in self-directed ways as students collaborated with others to problem-solve and identify solutions to real-world problems in a multisensory environment (Liu, Horton, Olmanson, & Toprac, 2011). Game play also permitted an

emotional release for many adolescents (Eglesz, Fekete, Kiss, & Izso, 2011).

Additionally, adolescents' preferred action games required strategic thinking and more

sophisticated rule-sets, in which sensation-seeking requirements were satisfied without

actual risk (Eglesz, Fekete, Kiss, & Izso, 2011). In general, game playing was socially

captivating, providing an eclectic mix of challenge and fun, and precipitating a positive

affect and cognition even when participants were unsuccessful during game play

(Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010). Further, findings suggested intrinsic motivation could be

enhanced by challenge, curiosity, autonomy, and relatedness (Liu et al., 2011; Ryan et al.,

2006).

Motivational engagement in video gaming and virtual environments was a second

identified theme in gaming literature. In a study by Barab, Sadler, Heiselt, Hickey, and

Zuiker (2007), students were engaged in rich discussions in multi-user environments,

developing a conceptual and ethical understanding of science while engaged in scientific

discourse. They were involved not only in a scientific process, but also in social

negotiations requiring perceptual, conceptual, and ethical understanding. These types of

interactions, utilizing motivational aspects of gaming and virtual environments

supporting learning, were engaging because adolescents interacted in simulated activities

that were socially and academically meaningful and immersive.

Sustained engagement was related to relationships between individual skills and

game complexity, the ability to control the environment, and a pursuit of pleasure

(Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010). Engaged participants had specific entertainment and

gaming objectives, but they also demonstrated a need for recognition and self-evaluation.

Additionally, there was a high positive correlation between task and ego goals, as well as

mastery and performance orientations (Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010). Interestingly, several studies cautioned regarding gaming's ability to fulfill instructional expectations (Hoffman & Nadelson, 2010; Huang, 2011). Researchers stated direct relationships between game and learning context must be present to ensure successful game interaction and persistence in play. Socialization, not learning, was the motivational factor for most participants to game play, and if game design and demands during play overloaded participants' cognitive capacity, frustration and task failure were the result.

In four studies by Ryan et al. (2006) the researchers specifically investigated how well SDT applied to and accounted for player motivation in gaming contexts. They also investigated the impact of game play on psychological wellbeing as a function of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The researchers posited it is the satisfaction of these immediate psychological needs that provides the proximal psychological determinants of game play, and this may point to a more finely differentiated understanding of what makes playing these games fun. They focused on what motivates game play, how that motivation varies from game to game, and how in-game satisfaction can impact positively or negatively participants' short-term wellbeing. They believed the most practical motivational models would be those addressing fundamental psychological and motivational dynamics instead of deconstructing specific instances of games or genres. They applied SDT by assessing player need satisfaction, specifically focusing on psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which they assumed might in part account for the psychological attractiveness of games, regardless of specific genre or individual preferences.

Results of these four studies mostly supported Ryan et al. (2006) hypotheses

concerning the relations between autonomy and competence satisfactions in solitary game play, and all three needs in multi-player environments. Researchers also found both game enjoyment and preferences for future play significantly accounted for by psychological need satisfactions. Moreover, intuitive controls appeared to enhance game enjoyment and preferences by facilitating players' experiences of in-game competence, and in some game context, in-game autonomy. Study four focused on multi-player (MMO) environments and examined motives of regular game players. Game enjoyment and intentions for future play were both significantly related to the SDT, derived measures of autonomy, competence, and relatedness need satisfactions, suggesting the unique relevance of each within an MMO gaming context. Autonomy and competence satisfactions also were positively related to post-play mood.

These studies also investigated the impact of computer game play on people's wellbeing in short-term effects, particularly pre- to post-game changes in vitality, state self-esteem and mood. In the first three studies, short-term effects on wellbeing were mixed. There were few or no positive or negative mood changes due to exposure, but mixed effects for state self-esteem were identified. Game exposure also appears to be somewhat draining and fatiguing (negative effect on vitality). However, this was qualified by need satisfaction. People who experienced autonomy and competence in game playing showed more positive outcomes, helping explain why games may be restorative for some people.

Balancing cognitive processes and perceived playfulness. Several studies focused on how design aspects of online game and virtual environments affected participants' cognitive processes by reducing their cognitive load (Ang, Zaphiris, &

Mahmood, 2007). Researchers discussed how participants' cognitive capacity could be overtaxed due to common factors in game and virtual environments, including multiple interactions in the game, user interface activities, and identity construction. Findings indicated learners' limited cognitive processing capacity must be considered to ensure efficient learning processes (Kalyuga, 2007).

When participants use this capacity to apply, synthesize, and think critically about what they are learning through active, social participation, cognition is supported (Gee, 2003). When gaming environments offer participants challenges that do not exceed their playing skills, playfulness is considered higher (Wang & Wang, 2008). However, when the gaming challenge is greater than a player's skill, frustration and task failure may occur. To offset this negative outcome, designers incorporate design aspects that act as catalyst for "play," like socialization. The creation of this "playful space" allows exploration of challenging assignments within the virtual environment, while pursuing personal discoveries. In some instances, the voluntary pursuit of enjoyment can become so intense for individuals that they become fully immersed within the environment. Ultimately, maintaining a balance between cognition and play is important because perceived playfulness and enjoyment will impact participants' intentional use of games (Wang and Wang, 2008), impacting whether participants will persist at play.

Gaming and literacy. Gee (2008) examined videogames, identifying learning principles within gaming that promote meaningful learning for students. Instead of providing verbal information ahead of time out of context, Gee said "good" videogames give verbal information "on demand" as players need to utilize it. Gee added these games make players feel requirements are challenging but doable, creating a sense of

"pleasurable frustration." Gee also suggested taking on and playing with a game character allows a player to develop virtual identities, helping them to think, learn and act in new ways with new values and beliefs.

Since the time of Gee's work on videogames, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) have also received attention from researchers due to an assortment of related literacy practices. Drawing from ethnographic data collected while playing *Lineage* over two years, Steinkuehler (2008) addressed the forms of technology-mediated literacy activities constituting participation and successful play in the game. In her work, Steinkuehler focused on the intellectual practices that develop cognition, including scientific reasoning and collective intelligence. Additionally, she detailed the game players' in-game interactions (e.g., text-written talk and in-game letters; out-of-game activities on fan sites, blogs, and fan fiction). After the intellectual, literate, and social practices that game players use, Steinkuehler suggested games are not replacing print-based media; they are additional literacy activities themselves. She further argued game-related literacy practices are much more complex and exceed standards for reading, writing, and technology in comparison to in-school literacy activities and national literacy standards.

Among the many genres of role-play games, massively multiplayer online role-play games (MMORPG) may have the greatest impact on future instructional design for interactive learning environments. They are flexible, providing support for scaffolding of problem-solving, as well as fostering intrinsic motivation (Dickey, 2005). MMORPGs are "persistent, networked, interactive, narrative environments in which players collaborate, strategize, plan, and interact with objects, resources, and other players within

a multimodal environment" (Dickey, 2007, p. 254). According to Dickey (2007),

collaboration and critical thinking are both crucial to the MMORPG experience.

Additionally, research indicates learning environments should provide opportunities for

exploration and manipulation to foster knowledge construction (Jonassen, 1999).

MMORPGs allow players to move and interact in simulated realistic or fantasy

environments (Dickey, 2007). Discourse and communication are important aspects of a

learning environment as well, supporting social negotiation in learning (Lave & Wenger,

1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Most MMORPGs are extremely social environments, supporting

participants as they brainstorm, collaborate, plan, and socialize with each other. There is

a great need for additional research about this and other varieties of role-play to share

further insight and provide information that may be useful when developing future

curriculum.

Fandom and Writing

   Fan communities foster friendship. Online fan communities can support the

opportunity for people to develop meaningful friendships with others, though participants

may never meet face-to-face. Baym (2000) described how strangers became friends while

participating in a newsgroup as they exchanged messages analyzing and commenting on

episodes and characters in a favorite daytime soap opera. Participants exhibited an "ethic

of friendliness" (p. 121) constructed through various social norms developed by

participants when posting their messages in the Usenet newsgroup. However, this

friendship extended beyond the newsgroup, evident by the personal messages exchanged

between participants in times of celebration and tragedy. Tobin (1999) also addressed this

notion of friendship in his exploration of what constitutes a "real" friend while studying

his son's interaction in the online game community, *Warhammer 40,000*. Tobin expressed concern about his son's belief these online interactions were meaningful friendships, questioning his definition of friendship because these relationships were solely online. In fact, Tobin's son saw no need to know personal information about his online friends or meet them face-to-face to consider them true friends. Tobin's son Isaac stated, "Those things have nothing to do with our conversations. I know the people I write to from what they write to me and the list. That's all that matters to me" (Tobin, 1999, p. 122).

Fan communities as collaborative learning environments. In addition to facilitating friendship, these online communities can function as collaborative learning environments. Similar to Gee and Steinkuehler's work on gaming environments shared previously, Jenkins (2004) claims adolescents are engaged in more complex literate activities in online spaces in comparison to what is occurring within the classroom. Analyzing a student's experiences creating and editing a fictional school newspaper for Hogwarts Academy in *Harry Potter*, Jenkins stated, "Through online discussion of fan writing, the teen writers developed a vocabulary for talking about writing and learned strategies for rewriting and improving their own work" (Jenkins, 2004, n.p.). Jenkins further shared when students discussed *Harry Potter* they made comparisons with other literary works, making connections with philosophical and theological traditions, debating gender stereotypes, citing interviews with the writer, and reading critical analysis of the original work. In other words, the students' popular culture and online participation in these fan fiction sites had educational merit; improving language skills, and developing sophisticated, literate and social skills.

Black's (2009a) research on adolescent English Language Learners' (ELL) fan fiction writing describes how online involvement fostered learning. Digital literacy skills identified by various 21st-century consortiums include proficiencies such as basic print literacy, scientific, economic, technological, visual, information and multicultural literacies as well as global awareness (NCREL, 2003). However, developing these proficiencies can pose challenges for certain populations, like English language learning students (ELLs), when they are relegated to classroom contexts where the focus is mastery of traditional forms of print-based literacy (Black, 2009a). Thus, though it is crucial ELLs receive instruction in and access to standard, academic forms of language, they should also be involved in activities based on popular culture, new technologies, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to provide opportunities for the development of digital literacy and 21st-century skills. Additionally, building on activities and literacy practices many youth are engaged with during their leisure time can help ELL students draw from prior knowledge to contextualize and develop understandings of new language forms and content (Black, 2009a). Furthermore, Black points out that school is interested in what students have inside their head instead of focusing on what students are able to do with distributed forms of knowledge and available resources, like those on fan fiction sites, because knowledge is distributed and what counts as knowledge is not just what is in the heads of native English speakers.

Fan communities support multimodality. Multimodality, or the integration of multiple modes such as visual, linguistic, and audio within one text, is a key concept in multiliteracies. The New London Group (1996) posits all texts are multimodal to some degree – even the ones that appear to be produced in a single mode. Several research

studies looked at the multimodality of fan communities to add to their research, which

centered on single, bounded online spaces where fans gathered. Multiple studies looked

at the engagement of participants in collaborative, hybrid forms of role-playing and fan

fiction, shedding light on how participants in these communities consider that "writing

crosses a range of online and offline spaces, and extends into the production of

multimodal texts" (Thomas, 2007, p. 160; Stein, 2006). For example, the creation of fan

art and fan-based songs extended participants' posts in a mode Thomas described as

mono-polymorphic, suggestive of a single description traversing "a range of media,

styles, genres, and time to become a single rich and complex narrative" (Thomas, 2007,

p. 160).

Additionally, studies noted that fan spaces can consist of numerous

interconnected websites, discussion boards, and listservs. Baym (2007) offered an

analysis of Swedish Indie music fandom describing fan participation as occurring through

a distributed, "quasi-coherent" network of sites, instead of a centralized online group.

Similarly, Tobin (1999) described his son's participation in *Warhammer 40,000* fandom

as occurring through a variety of email lists, as well as through creating and engaging on

other related websites.

Tension and conflict in fan communities. Finally, much of the available

research shares ways in which well-functioning online sites support participants by

providing engaging sites for friendly interaction, learning, and collaboration. However, a

few studies do share moments of tension and conflict in online fan groups. One example

is in an analysis of Phish.net, an online discussion group of fans of the band Phish.

Watson (1997) discussed strategies participants employed to deal with the loss of

intimacy that occurred when the group's population increased. As the group grew larger, participants developed "tools for the maintenance of intimacy, behavioral norms, and values" (p. 116). Other references to conflict centered on the practice of 'flaming,' or yelling at someone in a post. Watson explained participants were often made aware of shared norms for the group through an "inevitable first 'flame' or personal message from a more experienced member who attempts to inform the user of where they crossed the line of acceptability for that group" (p. 111). For the most part, references to flaming in the literature offered illustrations of how online fan groups created a culture discouraging this behavior (Baym, 2000; Black, 2005; Bury, 2005).

Conclusion: Finding Missing Pieces

In closing, adolescents and emerging adults are complex, possessing a variety of literacy practices, interests, and background knowledge (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Lam, 2009; Moje, 2004). In this chapter, I examined theoretical frameworks and related literature to my study on youth's literate and social practices in the online *Trelis Weyr* text-based role-play-game forum. Additionally, literature examined in this review explored what is already known about adolescents' literacy development, online gaming environments including role-play-games, fan communities, and adolescents' motivation to enter and persist at play over time in these virtual environments.

This review of literature implies we have a research-based understanding of adolescents' literate practices inside of schools. However, we are lacking a large body of research addressing adolescents' and emerging adults' everyday out-of-school literacies to connect my study with relevant discourse (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Barton &

Hamilton, 2000; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003a, 2003b; Gee, 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Though these literacy practices may be mediated through fans' interpretations of media and popular culture, this small body of scholarly work clearly indicates interaction in fan literate practices appears to lend itself to literate and social development, and calls for further exploration.

A lack of focus on this area may be due in part to a tendency in educational research to dismiss popular culture, scorning it and the media as frivolous uses of time that distract youth from more worthy pursuits, like reading literature, studying, and learning about "high culture" (Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2002). Popular culture is not considered socially legitimate capital, or associated with academic success. In fact, many schools ban popular culture artifacts because they are considered "lowbrow" forms of entertainment, often including violence and explicit content that can be distracting or considered a waste of time. The result of this marginalization of what youth might consider authentic content is to further alienate struggling students who rely on this type of unofficial cultural capital in social exchanges (Black, 2008).

Dyson (1997) argues, to disregard popular culture risks "reinforcing societal divisions in children's orientation to each other, to cultural art forms, and, to school itself" (p. 181). Ultimately, this type of dismissal prevents educators and researchers from recognizing potential opportunities within popular culture and affinity spaces for the sort of learning and abilities becoming increasingly more valuable for students in the future (Black, 2008). Additionally, if students are to primarily avail themselves of these opportunities outside of school, meaningful forms of participation and meaning-making in these leisure-time, out-of-school activities will be limited to those students who have

access to technology, networks, and online learning and affinity spaces. This is a significant issue of access and equity for students without the means to be involved in this type of interaction outside of school. Students who do not have access to these resources will fall behind in these skills, while those with unlimited access with learn and master procedural knowledge and digital literacy skills that will enable them to excel in higher education and the world of work (Black, 2008).

In Chapter Three, I describe the methods I used to conduct a research study to investigate the ways *Trelis Weyr* was organized as a collaborative environment, how participants engaged in literate and social practices while they read and collaboratively composed within the environment, and what factors motivated participants' initial and continued involvement.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This descriptive case study was particularistic, in that it focused on a particular phenomenon; it was descriptive, in that it produced a rich, detailed account; and it was heuristic in nature, in that it illuminated and extended our understanding of the phenomenon under study (Fetterman, 1998; Merriam, 2001). Case was bounded by the context of the *Trelis Weyr* forum as a whole, focusing on the interactions and composition within the group, and the artifacts and knowledge co-constructed by participants collectively. I designed this study to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized as a virtual environment?

2. In what ways and for what purposes do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose within *Trelis Weyr*?

3. What are the factors motivating participants to enter and persist at play in *Trelis Weyr*?

In this chapter, I first provide a description of the context under consideration. Next, I outline the details of the study, including an explanation of my relationship with the participants in the research through the data collection and ongoing analysis of data. Lastly, I detail the inductive analysis process to explain how I rendered my findings, which I detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Research Context: Pern and Trelis Weyr

My purpose in this study was to learn about the relationships between literacy and social development and use, popular culture, and new literacy technologies. To unpack this, I investigated adolescent and emerging adults' reading and writing practices in an online site called *Trelis Weyr*. *Trelis Weyr* is a text-based role-play-game forum embedded in fandom related to Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* young adult fantasy literature series. For adolescents and emerging adults using *Trelis Weyr*, this is an opportunity to share their interest in McCaffrey's literature and *Pern* through web creations (e.g., collective narratives created by role play, original or remixed artwork) with others who share this passion, making friends all over the world. In this section, I describe who the users of *Trelis Weyr* were and the content organization of the site.

Anne McCaffrey's *Pern*

***Pern* fandom.** Many works have been developed related to *Pern* in response to interest generated by a large fan population. Gamebooks and companion books explore descriptions of Weyrs, Hold, and Halls; as well as *Pern* geography, society, flora, and fauna. Graphic novels and music have also been published, and the entire *Dragonriders of Pern* series was optioned by Copperheart Entertainment in 2006 to bring Pern to the big screen. Several games have also been released over time based on *Pern*, including board, card, computer, and role-play games. In particular, a number of online Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) style games have been created by fans to explore the *Pern* universe, centering on role-playing instead of combat.

Pern fandom consists of a large variety of fan communities, the largest part being made up of groups allowing their members to "play" *Pern* by creating original characters

within a *Pern* environment. To avoid duplicating *Pern* canon and trademarks, each group

typically creates a particular location and timeline different from McCaffrey's established

history of *Pern*. Often these groups are named for the main Weyr they create as a playing

location; in fact, this is the way *Trelis Weyr* was named. The first fan communities

started out publishing printed fan-zines containing fan fiction and artwork. However, via

the Internet groups, the communities were able to make use of online technology, such as

role-play through chat and email. These text-based online virtual reality games have

been around since the early 1990s. For a time, stringent rules were placed on the creation

of new fan communities and the governance of existing groups, involving legal action

taken against fans at times. However, McCaffrey relaxed her fandom rules significantly

in 2004, allowing Pernese fan fiction to be posted freely throughout the Internet once

more. *Trelis Weyr* is a fan-organized discussion forum, providing an outlet for fan

activity.

Life on *Pern*. Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* science fiction book

series includes 22 novels and several short stories. Life on *Pern* resembles a pre-

industrial society with lords, holds, musicians, entertainers, teachers, and dragons, as well

as the occasional technology interwoven throughout the story (e.g., flamethrowers,

microscopes). *Pernese* people are described as belonging to four basic groups: Weyrfolk,

including Dragonriders who live in Weyrs; the Holders, who live in the Holds (e.g.,

cities, towns, farms); the crafters who live in Crafthalls; and, the Holdless who have no

permanent home (e.g., displaced people).

One of the main threats to *Pernese* life is the *Thread*, which is described as a

mycorrhizoid spore that periodically rains down on the planet due to the orbit of a Red

Star. This Red Star has a 250 *Turn* elliptic orbit around its sun, creating the *Pernese* year.

Pern is threatened by *Thread* for about 50 *Turns* each year while the Red Star is at

perihelion. *Thread* consumes organic material during this time at a ravenous rate,

including crops, animals, and people unlucky enough to be in its path. To fight the

Thread, the *Pernese* use intelligent firebreathing dragons and their riders. A rider and his

or her dragon are telepathically bonded through *Impression* at the time of the dragon's

hatching. Later books in McCaffrey's series, written by both she and her son, deal with

the initial colonization of *Pern* and the creation of dragons through genetic manipulation.

Over two millennia are covered by this series, allowing room for new stories and

characters to emerge across time, as well as beyond the book series due to the influence

of *Pern* fandom. *Pern* fandom utilizes these elements of *Pern* life to create new Weyr

settings and characters, extending McCaffrey's vision of *Pern* in new and interesting

ways.

Trelis Weyr RPG Forum

Trelis Weyr is a semi-canon *Dragonriders of Pern* RPG forum, based on the

science fiction literature series created by Anne McCaffrey. Semi-canon, or partial canon,

describes RPG forums that utilize information in their role-playing from sources other

than McCaffrey's fiction, but within the constraints of what could exist in the *Pern* world

she created. *Trelis Weyr* has existed on two websites hosted on ProBoards, the largest

host of free forums on the Internet. The original *Trelis Weyr* site was in operation

between May 1, 2011 and January 15, 2012 (See Figure 1 for original site banner).
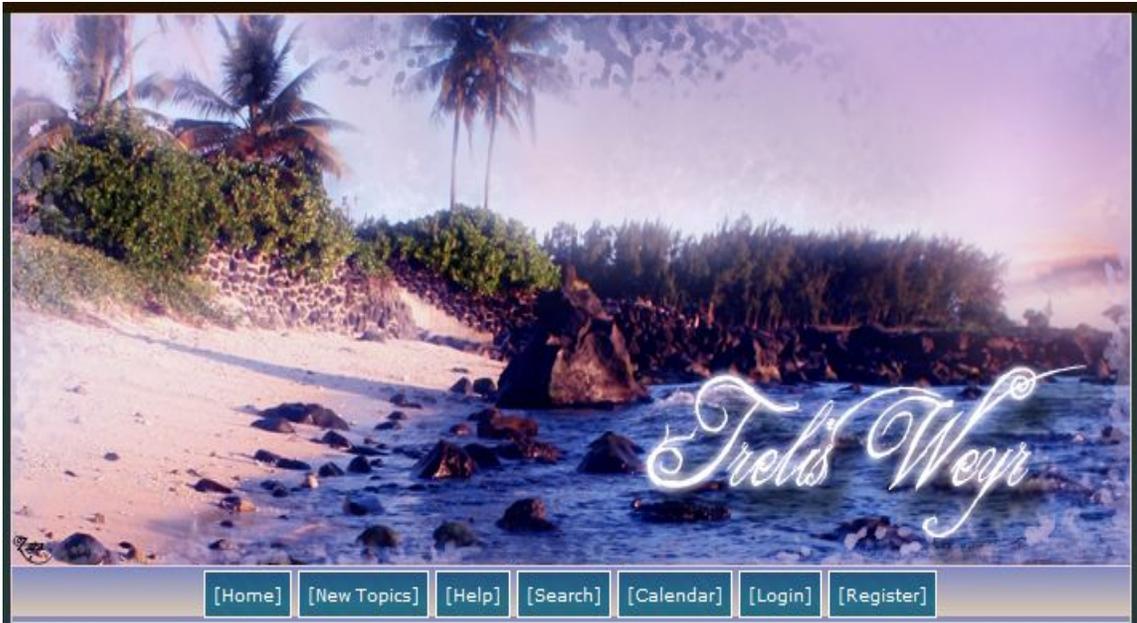
Figure 1. Banner head for original *Trelis Weyr* RPG forum.

The RPG forum then migrated to a new website within ProBoards when members chose to complete a "time skip" to provide opportunities for plot development, propelling *Trelis Weyr* approximately two years into the future. This second space is titled *Trelis Weyr: The Obsidian Rebellion* (See Figure 2 for current site banner), and was in operation between January 15, 2012 and September 15, 2012. This migration allowed forum moderators to change the physical organization and visual format of the forum more easily than overhauling the original site; a fairly common practice within fan communities. I collected data from the first *Trelis Weyr* forum website for this study.

Figure 2. Banner head for *Trelis Weyr: The Obsidian Rebellion* RPG forum.

Selecting Trelis Weyr as a research site. Selection of *Trelis Weyr* as an

example of a text-based role-play-game forum and a research site for my study was made

due to convenience, since I was knowledgeable regarding this public forum due to my

relationship with my daughter who served as an administrator for the site. Since the

forum was public, I was able to obtain documents and other artifacts posted to the forum

and served as a passive, non-participant observer when later collecting observation notes

regarding methods of play. I was also able to share a request for participation through my

daughter, who assisted me by contacting forum members regarding my research interest

and their possible involvement via email and forum posts. Thus, my focal participants

were also selected in a purposive, convenience sampling, since this group was involved

in behaviors relevant to my particular research questions and those who contacting me in

response to my request for volunteers were selected for participation.

I first became familiar with Trelis Weyr when my daughter, Larkwing, shared

information about the site. We had been discussing various types of online virtual environments teens were involved in, and Larkwing mentioned text-based role-play-games to me, explaining what they were and showing me an example of one she'd been a member of for approximately six months. I quickly realized this type of online experience was rife with opportunities to develop literacy skills, and I wanted to consider researching this phenomenon, particularly after realizing how important her play in this site appeared to be to my daughter and how much she was benefitting from the involvement.

Unbeknownst to me at the time of this discussion, my daughter had decided to try her hand at developing a site and becoming an administrator of a Pern related text-based RPG forum. Larkwing developed *Trelis Weyr* on ProBoards forums, and after recruiting participants and running the forum for approximately 3 months, she showed me the space and offered me the opportunity to examine this virtual community as a part of my research. After discussing my interest and ideas for research with Larkwing, she next spoke with the leadership of the forum and ask if they would be agreeable to me using their forum as a site for research. The moderators unanimously agreed to allow me this access to resources on the site. However, I did not collect data or interview focal participants until after they had completed the 8 months of role play on *Trelis Weyr*, so data collection and analysis was completed retrospectively and I had no interaction with forum members except for the 3 focal participants who volunteered to be interviewed.

Trelis Weyr members. Approximately 27 individuals made up the original *Trelis Weyr* membership, though only 10 to 15 members were normally online at any given time. Specific demographic data regarding members is unavailable, but I had a sense of who spent time in the space by reviewing their self-reported member profiles. The

majority of members (*n*=25) self-identified as females, with only two members self-identifying as males; and of these two males, only one actively posted on the forum boards. The majority of members (*n*=25) also indicated they were residents of the United States, though two members reported living in Canada. All *Trelis Weyr* forum members' self-reported being between 14 and 24 years of age. Beyond this information, I do not know specifcis regarding their demographics as this information was not shared in member profiles or readily available without surveying all members of the site, which was not possible retrospectively. Additionally, I am not able to verify the information that was self-reported by members of Trelis Weyr due to the virtual nature of their participation.

  Moderators. The four original moderators of the first *Trelis Weyr* site were female, in keeping with the general self-reported demographics of the space. Additionally, these moderators ranged in age between 16 and 24 years. *Trelis Weyr* promoted its moderators from within, periodically soliciting applications from members interested in serving in a leadership capacity. Moderators' role-play posts displayed their titles as Senior Staff, thus making their leadership role visible on transactions within the community. Moderators served in this space as idea-generators, contest managers, order-keepers, and teachers. As idea-generators, *Trelis Weyr* moderators created and communicated new story ideas and activities for the group and played a central role in redesigning the forum periodically. Moderators also managed site contests, developing rules, collecting submissions, and tallying votes to announce winners. Additionally, moderators were responsible for monitoring the forum to ensure members posted in the correct areas, following governing rules established by the community when founded. As

well, moderators served as teachers within the community, offering advice and how-to instructions for those participating in the *Weyr*.

Overview of the Study

I was specifically interested in exploring adolescents' and emerging adults' online literacy practices by examining their social practices and collaborative composition as communication practices within *Trelis Weyr,* an online text-based role-play-game (RPG) forum. I examined texts, multimodal creations, and participant interactions, paying particular attention to the role of online spaces and popular culture in participants' motivation to participate in this forum. Using qualitative research methods, I sought "answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4). I wanted to understand how participants of *Trelis Weyr* socially constructed this community, and explored what it meant to them drawing on the new literacy studies notion of play (Jenkins, 2006a). I approached my research from an interpretivist stance in a quest to understand the complexities of this community from the participants' perspective (Schwandt, 1994). To this end, I followed a descriptive case study design (Merriam, 2001), documenting the literate and social experiences of *Trelis Weyr* participants.

Case study features, according to Merriam (2001), include a "particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon" (p. 29) and "rich thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study" (p. 30). In this study, "case" was bounded by the context of the *Trelis Weyr* forum group as a whole, focusing on the interactions and composition within this group, and the artifacts and knowledge co-constructed by its participants collectively. Additionally, three focal participants were selected, sharing a unique perspective of

varying experiences within the group as forum users, authors, and literacy learners. As well, each individual's participation in the forum was potentially different in terms of writing style and collaboration with others, as well as the ways in which they socialized within the community. By concentrating on the forum, I aimed to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2001).

All *Trelis Weyr* Participants

Overall, the participants in the *Trelis Weyr* text-based role-play-game forum were 27 adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24); 25 were female and 2 were male. Most were citizens of the United States, though two self-reported they were from Canada. Interest in Anne McCaffrey's (1967-2011) *Dragons of Pern* literature series, and more specifically interest in *Pern* fan-related practices, brought participants to *Trelis Weyr*. These 27 members made up the body of role-players throughout most of the eight months of play, though approximately 10-15 individuals could be found playing online at any given time during this period.

To recruit three focal participants to interview during phase three of this study, I used purposeful snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As I viewed story threads created by role players, I was able to see the usernames of the members who created the characters being role-played and look at their member profiles. Through these channels, I was able to identify 17 potential forum members who had consistently participated in role-play during the eight months the site was active. I contacted the site administrator and asked her to send an invitation letter with attached consent, assent and parental permission forms to these members' email addresses so interested individuals could contact me directly.

Among these potential volunteers, six individuals contacted me as potential interview subjects. Four of these individuals were 18 years or older at the time of interview and two were less than 18 years of age. After multiple emails between myself and these interested members, I was able to obtain consent forms for three participants who were 18 years or older; however, I was unable to secure parental permission for the two members under 18 years of age, so they were not included in this study. The primary data for this dissertation were drawn from these interviews with Larkwing, Zi and Kit. The main reasons for choosing these young women as focal participants for this study involved their different forms of participation on *Trelis Weyr*, their different ages, and their willingness to engage in my research project.

Researcher-Participant Positioning

In my relationship with Larkwing, the administrator of *Trelis Weyr,* and focal participant who served as my expert, I positioned myself as a fellow researcher looking at the collaborative writing phenomenon occurring in the forum. I intentionally shared my lack of knowledge about role-play-game activity in text-based role-play game forums in order to minimize the perception that I had a privileged position as a graduate student researcher. I explained to Larkwing that I had many questions about my own understanding of adolescents' literacy and social practices in online spaces, which led to my interest in exploring related questions with her. I also considered how my work with Larkwing might be mutually beneficial within the limits of our involvement with one another. In this regard, I tried to create opportunities wherein we could discuss ideas together about her involvement in role-playing and her leadership in the *Trelis Weyr* forum. This led to the co-authoring of chapter 6 of this dissertation, and I hope future

conference presentations together. Although these activities have ultimately benefitted me more than Larkwing professionally, she remarked that our time working on this study together has given her an opportunity to reflect on her involvement in *Trelis Weyr* and other online, virtual environments, and to consider how this interest is more than a hobby; it has become a vocation she is now pursuing in college and additional creation of online content.

In my relationship with the other two focal participants in the study, I deliberately positioned myself as an enthusiastic reader of their writing and a fellow fan of fantasy and Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* fiction. Even though I shared with the two participants that I had taught previously in public schools, I tried not to position myself as a teacher. I encouraged them to refer to me by my first name, which is not customary in school since teachers are referred to and addressed by using their last name generally. These two participants seemed to accept this positioning by referring to me by my first name, and as a researcher interested in their work in *Trelis Weyr*.

For all three focal participants, I encouraged them to disagree with me or contest my understanding of events because they were helping me to paint a more representative picture of their experiences on *Trelis Weyr*. I deliberately positioned them as partners in the research process, explaining what we were unable to confirm together was just as important as what we could confirm. I also made every attempt to accommodate their schedule and respect their time, as well as to provide interactive opportunities that were most comfortable for them (e.g., email, private message, Skype, phone call, etc.). I let them know if I approached them with questions during a time that was not convenient, they were more than welcome to let me know it wasn't a good time for them. My

participants often didn't respond for a week or more at a time to my questions, showing they were comfortable with responding to me when it best suited their situation and was most convenient. If I ever sensed resistance, I always offered participants an opportunity to talk with me at a later time or not to talk with me, as they chose to do moving forward. I reminded participants often that they were under no obligation to continue to talk with me as well, and that they could drop out of the research study at any time if they chose to.

Other than my involvement with these three focal participants, I was a non-participant observer during active play on the *Trelis Weyr* site, which I analyzed retrospectively after play on the forum concluded. During my lurking on the active *Trelis Weyr*: *The Obsidian Rebellion* site, I was also a non-participant observer, choosing not to interact with participants in the forum in any way during my hours observing their activity. I sat "virtually" off to the side and was unnoticed by participants in the forum, since I was online as a guest viewing their interaction and was not visible as a user during game play.

Putting these conditions in place was very important, particularly with Larkwing because she is my daughter. Throughout this research process, I endeavored to be cognizant of my role as both a researcher and her mother, making every attempt not to presume on our mother-daughter relationship when I was interviewing her or asking her questions to confirm my understanding through member-checking. Below I detail information about how I proactively chose to approach my relationship with Larkwing, as an expert, a research participant, and as my daughter, including methodologies I incorporated during the research process to process this complex relationship and be cognizant of how it might influence data collection, analysis, and my research findings.

Intimacy in Research

  Intimate relationships. In this study, one of the focal participants interviewed was my daughter. She served throughout my initial exploration and later during data collection and analysis as an expert other, providing me with unique insight I would not have been privy to otherwise. My conversations with my daughter guided my thinking during my initial exploration of this phenomenon, as I designed this study, and ultimately during data collection and analysis. Our conversations over a two year period of time influenced my understanding of the phenomenon, as well as the ways I chose to explore it during research and my interpretations of data. For this and other reasons, I sought methods to come to an awareness of my own preexisting beliefs and our relationship, bringing a "critical self-awareness of [my] own subjectivity, vested interests, predilections, and assumptions and to be conscious of how these might impact on the research process and findings" (Finlay, 2008, p. 17). I endeavored to separate out what belonged to me, versus what I was researching.

  According to Busier et al. (1997), intimate relationships are those that "include qualities of mutual care and friendship as well as revelation of, and respect for, personal vulnerabilities" (p. 165). Human development and feminist development theorists have shared we are not isolated, but instead we are "relational beings" who grow through our connections with others (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surray, 1991). Intimate relationships can thus serve as a catalyst causing us to interact with others, consequently helping us to develop a greater understanding of ourselves, those we come into contact with, and the wider world. This was the case for me as I interacted with my daughter, endeavoring to better understand the text-based role-play-game phenomenon.

In the past, researchers have shared intimate relationships which resulted from fieldwork experiences (Cesara, 1982; Cole, 1995), bringing conversations about the texture and nature of these connections into mainstream discourse (Rabinow, 1986). However, these accounts caused concern regarding researcher/researched relationships. Underlying this concern was "an implicit assumption of celibacy in the field … [as] a fundamental condition for preserving the desired objectivity of the [researcher] from the subjectivity of the [researched]" (Cole, 1995, p. 178). More recently, intimacy in fieldwork has been supported by three paradigms: the interpretive, feminist, and postmodern. Though these paradigms have unmasked researchers, exposing them as human beings, there remains a certain level of discomfort regarding using data obtained through intimate relationships. Nonetheless, in some research context intimate relationships have been shown to be useful and appropriate. Maguire (1987) posits "without close, empathic, interpersonal interchange and relationships, researchers will find it impossible to gain meaningful insights into human interaction or to understand the meaning people give to their own behavior" (p. 20). However, intimacy in research does carry with it responsibilities and considerations for the researcher.

Relational ethics. Ellis (2007) shares relational ethics "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (p. 4). As well, Slattery and Rapp (2003) describe relational ethics as doing what is necessary to be "true to one's character and responsible for one's actions and their consequences on others" (p. 55). Relational ethics requires that we, as researchers, act from our hearts and minds, acknowledging the interpersonal bonds we have with others (Slattery & Rapp, 2003).

Researchers must consider the relationships they have or create over time with their participants, asking what their ethical responsibilities are towards those involved in their research. We must consider how to act in a humane, non-exploitative ways, particularly when intimate others are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves and our research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 264).

      Relational reflexivity. According to Welch (1994), "We create our own stories, but only as coauthors" (p. 41). Relational reflexivity is a way to think about ourselves as researchers and as individuals involved in relationships with our research participants, providing the means to include the voices of all participants, including a dialogue about these relationship. Revealing the interplay between researcher and researched is necessary to our understanding of how an intimate relationship might influence fieldwork and interpretation. Busier et al. (1997) call for a co-story, defined as "a collaborative construction of a historical event, episode, or personal story created by dialogue among the participants" (p. 167).

      Consistent interrogation of my own thoughts was a focus in the researcher reflective journal I kept throughout this research process, since I did have an intimate relationship with one of my focal participants. I acknowledged relationality within the research process, recognizing the connectedness between myself and this participant. In addition to this thoughtful consideration of my role during data collection and analysis, I also included two pertinent areas in my research design to address researcher reflexivity: the need for reciprocity and the question of validity. To attain reciprocity, I followed several procedures including: conducting interviews in an interactive, dialogic manner, requiring self-disclosure on the part of me as a researcher; conducting sequential

interviews of individuals to facilitate collaboration and a deeper probing of research issues; and, negotiating meaning with my focal participants by recycling descriptions, emerging analysis, and conclusions. I also followed several procedures to check the credibility of data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence (Kamarovsky, 1981), including triangulation, reflexivity, and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). One method I utilized was "face validity," through the recycling of description, emerging analysis and conclusions with my daughter during multiple member checks (Reason & Rowan, 1981).

Research Design

Descriptive Case Study

I utilized descriptive case study as a non-participant observer (Merriam, 2001), analyzing artifacts created by adolescent and emerging adult participants (*N*=27; 25 females, 2 males; aged 14 to 24) who were engaged in a form of fan writing in *Trelis Weyr*. I gathered data from multiple sources during three phases of collection: (1) artifacts from the *Trelis Weyr* forum, including moderator-created governing documents, character descriptions, and story threads created during role-play; (2) field notes collected during 20 or more hours of observation while participants played on *Trelis Weyr: The Obsidian Rebellion*; and, (3) transcripts of semi-structured interviews with three focal participants from the original *Trelis Weyr* RPG. Additionally, observation notes and researcher reflective journal entries, noting the various processes involved in creating characters and stories through collaborative composition while role playing, informed my understanding during data analysis.

This research was conducted thoroughly in the online context to understand what literate and social practices these youth were participating in on *Trelis Weyr*. I spent one month as a "lurker" non-participant observer (Spradley, 1980, p. 60) in this study to "engage in activities appropriate to the situation and to observe the activities, people and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54). As a non-participant observer, I read participants' collective narratives and other multimodal productions. These data helped me to gain detailed understanding about my participants and their literacy and social practices related to *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum. Such exploration enabled me to create a "thick description" (Merriam, 2001) of this online community, as well as to gain a rich sense of what it meant to participate in this type of community. Data analysis helped me gain a situated understanding of the aspects of this community promoting the development of collaborative composition, and to understand how such communities enable and motivate adolescents and emerging adults to engage as successful, critical writers. Collecting data from multiple sources ensured I minimize my biases as a researcher, strengthening reliability and validity. Each method will be discussed more fully in the following section. Table 4 offers an overview of how each method addresses the research questions.

Table 5

Research Methods

Research Question	Method(s) Used to Address Question
1. In what ways was Trelis Weyr, an RPG forum, organized as an environment?	Artifacts Observation notes Research reflection journal Interviews
2. In what ways and for what purposes did adolescents and emerging adults engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively composed within Trelis Weyr?	Artifacts Observation notes Research reflection journal Interviews
3. What were the factors motivating participants to enter and persist at play in Trelis Weyr?	Observation notes Researcher reflective journal Interviews

Data Sources

Governing documents. During the course of this study, I collected 24 moderator-created governing documents to better understand how members interacted and were regulated within this community. Moderators set the norms for participation in *Trelis Weyr* in part by creating these governing documents containing rules for what should and should not be posted in the forum (see Figure 3 below). These unique forum posts were pinned (i.e, permanently attached to the top of the page, even when other posts were added) to most areas throughout the site, prominently displayed at the top of boards to provide members with guidance. Titles included such things as "RULES & TIPS – Read before posting" and "Important Announcement!" These titles were intended to draw members' attention to the directions before they posted in a forum area.

Figure 3. Screenshot of general rules posting, captured May 2, 2012.

Character descriptions. When members joined *Trelis Weyr* they could adopt an existing character or create one to use in role-play (see Figure 4 below for example character description). This character had to be approved by the moderators of the *Weyr*, based on the quality of description and writing provided for the character, as well as how closely the participant followed *Dragons of Pern* canon when creating the character. Once a character description was approved, a member could enter play as that character in a section of the forum of his or her choice. However, there were rules established regarding how a member might role-play a character when interacting with others in the forum.

Lark
Weyrwoman
★★★★★
Inali of Gold Loraketh

member is offline

Glitch-"I have a proper name... and when I remember it I will tell you"

Joined: May 2011
Gender: Female ♀
Posts: 592
Location: United States
Karma: 2
Marks: £192

Inali of Gold Loraketh
« Thread Started on May 14, 2011, 12:51am »

Name Inali
Pronunciation (in-all-E)

Age 20 turns (Fall)
Gender female
Sexuality Heterosexual.

Location Trelis Weyr
Rank Senior Weyrwoman
Wing/Pack Sunrise Wing

Appearance
Inali has an hourglass figure that tops around 5 ft 4 in and is covered in creamy alabaster skin. With a petite frame she's not the strongest rider in the weyr. Inali's figure is composed of long legs, a shorter torso, small shoulders, a slender neck, and a heart shaped face.

From what her mother always told her though, it's Inali's eyes that show her personality. Almond shaped and light green, they are hidden behind thick, dark brown lashes and will often flicker around not wanting to settle on one thing for too long. A nervous habit of hers is to brush a hand through her wavy hair. It settles about mid-back in dark, loose waves. Almost being black, the color is a rich brown. Inali also has a soprano voice that matches her temperament, and she enjoys singing while she works.

Figure 4. Screenshot of character description posting, captured May 2, 2012.

Role-play forum posts. Participation in *Trelis Weyr* took the form of role-play-game postings in the forum. As noted earlier, *Trelis Weyr* contained a variety of posts in various boards and sub-boards. Conducting my research in *Trelis Weyr* meant I would need to read and download hundreds of pages of these posts, saving them as word processing documents. I read posts in various threads on these boards, noting interaction between role-players. I read posts in the chat section of the forum as well (archived), which helped me to understand the importance of this community to its members. I located my interview participants' posts in *Trelis Weyr*, reading a majority of their forum contributions. While reading these data I took field notes and regularly completed entries in my researcher's reflective journal, recording my perceptions.

Table 6

Researcher Reflective Journal Entry, January 16, 2013

Reflective Journal Entry: Trelis Weyr – A Community of Practice?
January 16, 2013

Is Trelis Weyr really a community of practice? Lave and Wenger share CoPs are groups of people who share a common concern or a passion for something they do, becoming more skilled as they interact with each other on a regular basis. Trelis Weyr participants are coming together on the site so they can share their passion for Pern literature and enter the world they love so much. They are so devoted to McCaffrey's creation; they don't want it to end with the books she has written. They want to use her work and stay true to it, but they want to go farther and add some of their own content.

Question: When they use McCaffrey's literature in this way and add their own content, are they "remixing" material in the way normally considered remix of multiple media?

Trelis Weyr participants are also becoming more skilled over time I think. They do quite a bit to scaffold each other's ability to role-play on the forum, and leaders provide support in the form of documents and tips, as well as guided practice during early interaction by role-playing with new members to show them the ropes. They also teach new members the etiquette (netiquette?) they need to follow to be acceptable within the community.

Question: Are there written guidelines related to netiquette on the site? How do the members learn this, other than from interaction with the leadership of the forum and being told in messaging about it?

Lave and Wenger also talk about CoPs being made up of practitioners, and that members develop shared resources (experiences, stories, tools, and ways of dealing with problems) as a "shared practice". I see this happening on the site as well. The members have created shared resources. I see them sharing their experiences with each other – both about role-play on the site, but also in chat for both their in-character and out-of-character lives. They create stories together through their role-play.

These threads are developed as they interact in what I am calling a virtual improvisation. The outcome of their role-play is the story thread, which I am calling a collective narrative produced by all the individuals who role-play on that thread in collaboration with each other. They have also created multiple tools, and they share tools with each other they find on the internet and other fan resource sites, to support their creation of character profiles, how they learn to RP, what they can do to get others interested in RPing with them, etc. Talking to the participants recently, they all shared multiple tools for character creation in particular (go back and look at transcripts to identify tools for this).

Table 6 (continued)

The participants I interviewed also shared with me what happened when problems cropped up between players, or other issues that might come along. They talked about god-moding and power playing – things people will do to get the upper hand and power in RP. This is not allowed on Trelis, and there are means in place to safeguard against it.

Member profiles. I reviewed members' *Trelis Weyr* profiles and captured screenshots of my interview participants' profiles to include in the data. These profiles served as a source of information about each participant and their participation in the forum. When they joined, *Trelis Weyr* members created a profile including a username, an avatar image, their location, birth data, and contact information including email address, website, and instant messenger information. To indicate the member's activity level in the community, the profile displayed the number of posts, stars, and membership rank earned for that level of posting. For those members who served as moderators, the membership rank was replaced by their staff title. Members could also include a signature, which would then appear at the bottom of their posts. Signatures could be multimodal and contain hyperlinks to the user's story threads in *Trelis Weyr* and/or outside websites hosting *Pern* creations. Figure 5 is a sample profile for one of the participants, a moderator on *Trelis Weyr* named Lark.
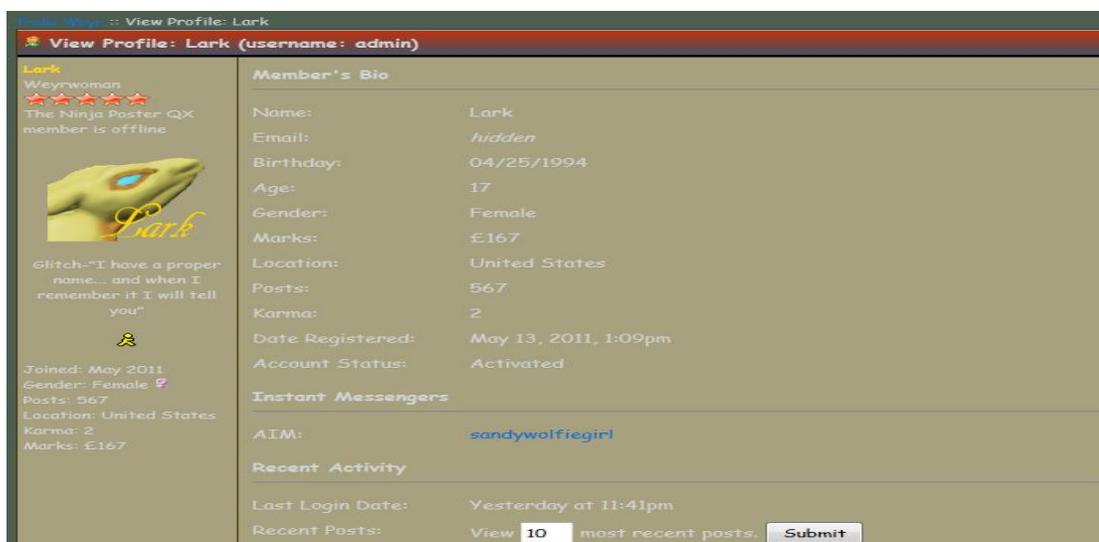
Figure 5. Screenshot of a moderator's profile, captured May 2, 2012.

Virtual interviews. Interview participants' responses were vital in helping me to gain insiders' perspectives into what I observed in *Trelis Weyr*. As noted earlier, I conducted interviews virtually using email or *Trelis Weyr*'s PM system, based on the participants' preferences. The interview protocol (appendix A) contained questions, which I personalized for each participant for the two separate interviews. Participants' virtual interview responses were stored using word processing documents. As I collected and analyzed data, I became more familiar with the practices in *Trelis Weyr*. This elicited additional questions I sent as follow-up email messages, asking for participants' perspectives about various identified information and comments. The iterative nature of my virtual interviews allowed me to continue to make sense of *Trelis Weyr* from an insiders' vantage point by requesting additional information from my focal participants.

Observation field notes. To document my observations, I created multimodal field notes using word processing software. I captured screenshots, text from posts, hyperlinks to other artifacts and related sites, and record my own interpretations and

wonderings in these documents using Microsoft Word and audio recording software on my laptop computer. I also included notes about areas of *Trelis Weyr* I wanted to explore next. These field notes helped me track both my observations and thoughts about what I saw in the community. I also entered reflective notes in my researcher journal.

Additional artifacts. In addition to the data sources previously described, I collected other artifacts during my study of *Trelis Weyr*, such as custom content created by members of the forum (e.g., digital art posted by members). These artifacts were hosted within *Trelis Weyr*, and on a variety of websites linked to the forum through members' posts. To collect these data, I captured screenshots and noted URL addresses so I could return to the artifacts later. See figure 6 and figure 7 below for example artwork created by *Trelis Weyr* participants as avatars for participants' characters.

Figure 6. Screenshot of artwork created for character avatars, captured May 2, 2012.

Figure 7. Screenshot of artwork created for character avatars, captured May 2, 2012.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected in three phases. During phase one, I collected artifacts from the original *Trelis Weyr* role-play-game forum, operational between May 2011 and January 2012. Artifacts were copied and pasted to Word documents or screen captured as photo images. During phase two, I kept field notes and a researcher reflective journal while observing participants during role-play for 20 hours. In phase three, I interviewed three focal participants multiple times over three months. During phase one and phase two, I followed discourse-centered online ethnography (DCOE) procedures (Androutsopoulos, 2008) as I examined the relationships among participants of *Trelis Weyr*, taking note of the various processes involved in creating characters and stories through collaborative composition while role-playing in this community. I have described Androutsopoulos' "practice-derived guidelines" (p. 6) in Table 3 below. These guidelines provided a framework to support my systematic observation of the community and eventual contact with participants during phase three.

Table 7

Practice-Derived Guidelines for Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography

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Practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation:

1. Examine relationships and processes rather than isolated artifacts
2. Move from core to periphery of a field
3. Repeat observation
4. Maintain openness
5. Use all available technology
6. Use observation insights as guidance for further sampling

Practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors:

1. Contacts should be limited, non-random, and include various participation formats
2. Pay attention to the initial contact
3. Formulate and customize interview guidelines
4. Confront participants with (their own) material
5. See repeated and prolonged contacts
6. Make use of alternative techniques whenever possible

---

* Table from Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6

Systematic observation. To give me an understanding of the norms of participant interaction in the site, I began by analyzing artifacts from the original *Trelis Weyr* forum. I went into every section of the forum, reading the governing documents, rules posted by moderators, and a few of the posts within each board and sub-board on the forum created while members role-played when the forum was open for play. I then engaged in repeated observation of the most active boards, noting the threads members role-played within. Additionally, I identified the areas with little or no activity in the forum. I read RPG forum posts by the most prolific members and the moderators, as well as by some of the newer and less active members of *Trelis Weyr*, systematically moving myself and

observations from the "core to the periphery" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6).

I read and download forum posts and followed the hyperlinks to related forum areas and artifacts to which they pointed. I collected virtual artifacts by capturing them through screenshots and by copying the URL addresses for future reference. I navigated *Trelis Weyr* by following the internal links, looking at posting statistics to assess member activity, and employed the site's search features to find all the posts by individuals, thus using "all available technology" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6) to gather data. I recorded my observations, interpretations, wonderings, and proposed next steps in field notes. My systematic observation was more than simply gazing at the artifacts on the site. I attempted to get a feel for *Trelis Weyr* as a culture while I focused on the "relationships and processes" (p. 6) involved in creating characters and stories collectively.

I identified potential focal participants for semi-structured interviews using the insights gained from my repeated observations of this community. I selected members to request as volunteers whose interactions spanned different types of participation in *Trelis Weyr*, including moderators, seasoned members, authors of popular characters, prolific posters, and new members. I followed Androutsopoulos' "practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors" (2008, p. 6) and contact these members through the administrator of *Trelis Weyr,* who sent an email to members provided email addresses with information about my study. I wrote my initial contact message in a way that positioned me as a researcher, explaining my project, and "indicating my familiarity with the field" (p. 8). As Androutsopoulos did in his research, I attempted to strike a balance between informality and professional distance in this initial contact.

If a *Trelis Weyr* participant agreed to be interviewed, the *Trelis Weyr* site

administrator sent the individual my study's informational letter and the required

consent/assent and permission forms. No volunteers were under 18 years of age; thus, it

was not necessary to receive parental consent for their involvement. These procedures

were submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved as a

means of adequately protecting the rights of my study participants (See Appendix C for

the letters and forms I used to secure consent, assent, and parental permission if

required).

Three forum participants were recruited to participate and share their thoughts

with me during multiple semi-structured interviews. To get these insiders' perspectives, I

conducted semi-structured interviews through private message on *Trelis Weyr*, email, or

Skype, depending on each person's preference. All three focal participants shared they

preferred interacting with me via email. To create my interview protocol, I began with

one developed for another study of fan fiction (Hayes & King, 2009) and adapted it to

correspond to my understanding of *Trelis Weyr* (See Appendix A for the interview

protocol). In preparing to virtually interview each of these participants, I customized the

interview questions to reflect my observations of participants' interactions within *Trelis

Weyr*. I maintained "repeated and prolonged" (p. 8) contact with my participants

throughout my data collection and analysis, as they continued to confirm and inform my

understanding of practices in *Trelis Weyr*.

Data Analysis

Word frequency counts. I used word frequency counts, a form of content

analysis, to identify words of potential interest, and then used a Key Word in Context

(KWIC) search to test the consistency of usage of words. This procedure helped to

strengthen the validity of the inferences I made regarding overarching frames of analysis

from the data set. For the purpose of this study, word count was used solely as a way to

initially explore the data primarily by looking for the frequency of and more importantly

the type of words used in the governing documents. Atlas.ti can quickly and efficiently

calculate word counts using a component of the program called "Word Cruncher". Word

count is an effective initial way to analyze data by exploring the occurrence of words in a

data set. The assumption with word counts, according to Leech and Onwuegbuzie

(2007), "is that more important and significant words for the person will be used more

often" (p. 568). However, it is important to acknowledge that word count has some

limitations (e.g., it can decontextualize a word and its meaning). Therefore, word count

was not the only method to analyze data. For this study, it was used solely as an initial

method to identify if certain types of words were used more than others, allowing

inferences to be made that could then be corroborated using other methods of data

collection (Krippendorff, 1980).

Hatch's inductive analysis. Data analysis was ongoing and recursive throughout

the data collecting process as recommended in the qualitative research paradigm

(Merriam, 2001). I used Hatch's (2002) inductive approach to data analysis, identifying

"patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under

investigation can be made" (p. 161). Data analysis unfolded in several stages as outlined

in Table 4 below.

Analysis was accomplished through repeated reading of texts and multimodal

products including artifacts (e.g., role-play story threads, moderator-created governing

documents, & character descriptions), field notes and researcher journal entries, and

transcripts of semi-structured interviews. To create domains based on semantic

relationships discovered within frames, I developed a set of categories of meaning or

domains that reflected relationships represented in the data.

Table 8.

Steps in Inductive Analysis (Hatch, 2002)

1) Read the data and identify frames of analysis
2) Create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis
3) Identify salient domains, assign them a code, and put others aside
4) Reread data, refining salient domains and keeping a record of where relationships are found
5) Decide if your domains are supported by the data and search data for examples that do not fit with or run counter to the relationships in your domains
6) Complete an analysis within domains
7) Search for themes across domains
8) Create a master outline expressing relationships within and among domains
9) Select data excerpts to support the elements of your outline

* Table from Hatch, 2002, p. 162

Hatch (2002) states, "Creating domains is the key inductive element in this model" (p.

164), and discovering domains "gives researchers a way to get at how participants

organize their understandings and operate in their worlds" (p. 165). Hatch shares that

domains are represented by identifying "included terms" and "cover terms" linked by

semantic relationships (p. 165). Included terms identify the members of the category and

cover terms name the category into which all included terms fit. Appendix B is the

domain sheet created during the analysis of data.

Role-Play as a Literacy Event

In order to make these inductions, I looked closely at how *Trelis Weyr*

participants accomplished collaborative writing using the online digital tools and related

resources available to them in this RPG forum. This approach is consistent with New

Literacy Studies, in which researchers investigate literacy events (Heath, 1983) in order

to make inductions about the literacy practices occurring within those events (Street,

2000). Additionally, consistent with sociocultural views of writing, I conceptualized

writing as mediated social action comprising an

> array of socio-historically provided resources (languages, genres, knowledge,
>
> motives, technologies of inscription and distribution) that extend beyond the
>
> moment of transcription and that cross modes and media (reading, writing, talk,
>
> visual representation, material objectification). (Prior, 2006, p. 58).

In an effort to position my research within sociocultural studies of writing

(Leander & Prior, 2004; Prior, 2006), I endeavored to understand how youth in *Trelis*

Weyr coordinated online, social interactions and took up mediational means, such as

online digital tools and popular culture resources, to collaboratively plan and write

through role-play, creating collective narratives. I considered how participants in the

forum negotiated the coordination of their collaborative writing as a product of their role-

playing. Rather than attempt to determine the type of collaborative writing they engaged

in, or the extent to which their final story thread met a collaborative idea of co-authorship

(Haring-Smith, 1994), I considered their collaborative writing as social action that

unfolded over time, mediated by a range of provided resources in relation to the literacy

practices participants brought to bear or constructed while role playing. These resources

included "technologies of inscription and distribution" (Prior, 2006, p. 58), which

included the ProBoards forum they used to post their writing through role-play, read each

other's posts, and communicate via site-specific boards and sub-boards, as well as private

messaging (a type of email built into ProBoards forums).

Protection of Human Subjects

The risks for participants in this study were limited to social factors; however, these risks were highly mitigated by several features of the study design. As part of the interview request and again during the informed consent process (oral at the time of the interview), participants received a description of the study purpose along with benefits, risks and participant rights (see Appendix C). Also, their identity was held confidential, other than being identified by gender and as part of the *Trelis Weyr* RPG forum. The nature of the interview questions also did not tend toward information that could be used in a manner considered a risk to confidentiality or a means of discomfort.

Dependability and Credibility

This study was strengthened by a design including several processes to bolster quality and dependability. First, I used both data and methodological triangulation to ensure dependability and credibility (Merriam, 2001). I achieved data triangulation by gathering data from multiple data sources, as well as from different people, observing literate and social practices over time. I achieved methodological triangulation by adopting multiple data collection methods, such as field notes, interviews, conversations, and the collection of artifacts. The procedures for this study included a highly systematic process for data collection and analysis. All procedures were carefully followed and documented during the course of the study through the use of data analysis tools and plans discussed in this chapter.

As for interview data, I asked participants to engage in the process of member-checking, whereby they reviewed the transcripts to revise and confirm for

representativeness (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). This member-checking feature of the study

design adds to the trustworthiness of the findings (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Also, by

allowing time to elapse between interviews and member-checking tasks, each participant

was able to engage in reflexive thinking; a feature of dependability in qualitative inquiry

(Patton, 2002). The data analysis processes were strengthened by ongoing attempts to

cross-check for report, and explain negative cases which did not fit emerging patterns

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, while I was the sole analyst, I engaged in

discussions with two mentors in order to check for transparency and confirmability of the

data analysis and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, I sought to bolster researcher credibility through various means (Patton,

2002). In this inquiry, the understanding of knowledge as a socially constructed

phenomenon prompts an open acknowledgement of my own perspective along with an

appreciation of the perspectives of others (Patton, 2002). To assist in managing my

biases, I expanded my collection of field notes to include analytic memo writing.

Additionally, I conducted this study with a stated awareness of the critical perspective I

brought as an advanced graduate scholar, literacy researcher, experienced educator, and

mother of a youth engaged in this activity. Yet, I also appreciated the probable difference

in perspectives held by members of the *Trelis Weyr* community.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the research methods I adopted to understand

adolescents' and emerging adults' literate and social practices in online spaces. I

introduced the primary context for research, *Trelis Weyr*, and explained the rationale for

using a descriptive case study approach. Then, I described the multiple data types I

gathered during the study and the three focal participants of the study. I also explicated

the procedure and the foci to analyze data. Next, I addressed the issues of dependability

and credibility for my investigation in this virtual context.

In the following chapter, I begin by describing the three focal participants through

multiple vignettes. Next, I describe three domains that emerged during data analysis,

connecting these categories and their included sub-categories of information to my

research questions. I delineate how the forum was organized, how forum participants

constructed characters and took on new personas, as well as how they made social

connections in the fan community as they composed collective narrative through role-

play. I also share elements of the fan community that supported participants' motivation

to enter play, and to persist at play over time.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In this chapter, I address the three research questions with an inductive analysis of artifacts collected from *Trelis Weyr*, with observation notes, entries in my researcher reflexive journal, and within transcripts from multiple interviews conducted with three focal participants. In so doing, I sought to gain deeper understanding of youth's involvement in *Trelis Weyr*, a text-based role-play-game forum by laying out the structure of this type of text-based RPG forum and describing this phenomenon from a structural perspective. In future research, it is my intention to delve more deeply into this phenomenon to explore in greater detail the nuances of collaborative practices and the development of literacy and social skills within this virtual space. I restate my research questions here for reference purposes:

1. In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized as a virtual environment?

2. In what ways and for what purposes do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose within *Trelis Weyr*?

3. What are the factors motivating participants to enter and persist at play in *Trelis Weyr*?

Three Focal Participants

The following vignettes explore demographic information from the three focal participants, the features of each player's participation in role-play related activities, as well as information they shared about how they constructed stories collaboratively and made social connections in the community as they role-played. This information comes from multiple interviews, which were conducted primarily online using email; the format chosen by the majority of participants in order to communicate with me.

Getting to Know Larkwing

Larkwing is an 18-year-old Caucasian female who has been role-playing, including her involvement in *Trelis Weyr*, for approximately four years. Lark, as she is known by the members of *Trelis Weyr*, was raised "out in the country in a rural area", but she now lives in an urban area while she is attending college. Lark is a freshman in college this year at a large urban, southern university. However, she was a junior and senior in high school while she was a member of both *Trelis Weyr* forums. Lark stated she is pursuing a dual major in Studio Art with a specialization in Graphic Design and Emerging Media, and a second major in Advertising. Lark indicated part of her interest in this career path is directly related to her creation of material for multiple online contexts, including *Trelis Weyr*.

When Lark was in high school her favorite subject was English, but she also liked social studies and science classes. However, Lark mentioned she did not like math, sharing, "Math is not my friend!" Lark has one brother who is 25 years old and in the United States Air Force. She lives with both her parents when she is at home, and her brother lived at home with her until she was 15 years of age, when he enlisted in the Air

Force. Lark's brother is seven years older than her, but she shared they have always been close and he is part of the reason she began to like role-play games when she was younger. She mentioned her brother was a gamer who liked playing many different types of video games, and she used to watch him and later played with him, as she grew older. Lark said in their home her family speaks English, and that both her parents graduated from high school and college.

Lark was the creator and administrator of *Trelis Weyr* and *Trelis Weyr: The Obsidian Rebellion*, and she has been involved with various forms of role-play since she was in sixth grade. Lark shared she has also been involved in *Deviant Art*, which is an Internet community where people post anything from drawing and art media to writing of either original characters or fan-based characters. The first types of role-play games Lark played were videogames on normal gaming consoles like Gameboy and PlayStation. Lark shared she grew up with different kinds of gaming equipment and played all types of games, from *Pokemon*, to *Dot.hac*, to *Digimon*. She stated in these games a player usually starts out by building a character and then has to follow a plot line taking on the persona of that character, so they are considered role-play.

Lark later became interested in websites known as "one-liners", where individuals create and post short descriptions and comments during role-play. In Lark's case, the one liner she participated in was a part of fandom related to the *Warrior Cats* literature series by Erin Hunter. Lark shared that in order to participate she would create a cat character to role-play, and then post anywhere from one sentence to a paragraph about her cat. She stated this type of role-play is considered a "lower" form of role-playing, as grammar and sentence structure are not important and play is fast-paced between players on the site.

The play on this type of site is also mostly synchronous, with players needing to be on the site in real-time to interact with each other and stay in the game. Though different from more advanced forms of text-based role-play, like the *Trelis Weyr* forum, Lark shared one-liners were a good introduction for her to creating characters. However, the nature of this type of role-play left much to be desired, as Lark wanted to write longer pieces and improve the quality of her posts. Nonetheless, Lark shared she didn't start to role-play on Internet forums until one of her friends told her about a site and encouraged her to become involved. Lark stated:

> We had an art class together, and I would draw characters for her sometimes, and eventually she got my interest because it [the site] was based on a common book series we had read. So, I decided to check it out and I started playing. It was a lot of fun to be honest, both to be able to write with my friend and to talk to other people with similar interests. To be able to have friends that I made on a wider scale than just in my own high school, that were different ages. (Larkwing, personal communication, November 26, 2012)

Lark's involvement in role-play games was initially prompted by a friend who shared her interest in RPG forums with Lark. However, as she explored the sites Lark met others who shared her interest in *Pern* literature, artwork, and writing, and she enjoyed sharing this common interest, talking and writing with others in these virtual communities. According to Lark, developing friendships beyond the boundaries of her local off-line network, as well as interacting with others of different ages, were two appeals to enter and persist at play in text-based RPG *Pern* forums. Lark also provided some insight regarding her exploration of *Pern* related RPG forums and why participants

sometimes become involved in multiple sites:

> A lot of people will start up sites, but they often die quickly, and unfortunately I have a habit of picking sites that are like that. So, I have tried quite a few – more than I could probably name. Sometimes you like them and sometimes you don't. It is very common for people to jump around. You have people who stick to one or two and they absolutely love them, and then you have people that like to try out different ones because its fun seeing what other people are coming up with. It is all based on one book series, but it is also someone's interpretation – someone's thoughts about what if this happened or that happened. One that I first started on that I am still involved with is *Dalibor*. There's also *Rainbow Mists*. That one has been around a very long time, back when it was started for *NeoPets* on the forums there. I've been on *Red River* for a little while too. (Larkwing, personal communication, November 26, 2012)

Lark shared she felt her involvement in role-play-game forums like these helped her to make friends, to develop her reading and writing skills, and provided an opportunity for her to share her artwork and writing with others who possessed the same interests and passion for fantasy fiction.

Getting to Know Zi

Zi is a 22-year-old Caucasian female, who was 20-21 years of age when she was actively participating as a member of the *Trelis Weyr* RPG forums. Zi shared, "I was born female. However, in role-play and games in general, I tend to prefer to play male characters; though I have been known to play both genders and I intend to extend myself beyond the binary constraints in the future" (Zi, personal communication, December 20,

2012). Zi has one brother who is now 20 years of age. When she was younger, Zi lived

at home with her parents and her brother, and English was the language spoken in her

home. Zi's mother completed college but she stated her father did not go to college. Zi's

favorite classes in high school were any courses related to computer programming;

however, Zi shared she enjoyed math and English classes as well. She stated, "High

school courses on geography and history were more or less hated, and college's

networking classes were not my favorites either" (Zi, personal communication, December

20, 2012). When Zi was playing in *Trelis Weyr*, she was a college student living in an

urban area. Today Zi has graduated from college and entered the world of work, and she

shared this transition has affected her opportunities for role-playing since she has less

time to be online than she did while in college.

Zi stated she has not been involved in role-play forums like *Trelis Weyr* for very

long; it's been approximately 2-3 years since she began. Zi said, "I tend to stick to *Pern*

related role-plays when I am involved in fan-based sites, but in the early days of role-

playing I dabbled for a very short while, roughly two or three months, in *Digimon*

fandom" (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012). Her first role-play-games

were played within a group of high school friends and consisted of *Digimon* crossovers

(i.e., a game containing a mixture of two or more fandoms in the same game universe),

supernatural worlds, and some original games played via email for the most part. When

asked what got her started role-playing, Zi replied:

> It was a spur of the moment decision originally. A friend was looking for a fourth
>
> person to take part in a [role-play] game he had come up with and I was asked if
>
> I'd be interested. I had never tried role-playing before then, but it sounded fun so I

agreed. This game, however, was not a forum game. It was roughly seven or eight months later that I joined my first forum-based game. Starting out on the small site I found was a bit nerve-wracking, to say the least. For all that I enjoyed writing, I was nervous about whether I was good enough to have a place in the game, or if I would make a fool out of myself. Becoming part of the community, even a short-lived one like this first site, was a very rewarding experience. (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Zi shared she first started to role-play in *Digimon* crossover games that were not forum-based RPGs. Rather, they were played via email and not on forum sites, which are more complex and involve multiple boards and sub boards, as well as more participants. Zi also shared being involved in a small community was nerve wrecking because she didn't know if she was good enough to participate in the game; however, her experience was rewarding. Zi's initial lack of confidence in her ability appeared to be a common refrain during all three of my focal participants' interviews; they were not sure of their abilities initially, but they shared they all felt supported by the communities where they played and became confident over time. These phenomena will be explored in greater depth later in chapter four. Zi further stated she felt more pressure playing with only a few people in an email context that seemed more immediate in comparison to the text-based RPG forums where there were more outlets for play and involvement (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012).

Zi stated she became involved in *Pern* forums about a year and a half ago on a forum named *Plagued Pern*, which is also where she first met Lark. Zi participated in both *Trelis Weyr* sites (*Trelis Weyr* and *Obsidian Rebellion*), as well as attempting to join

two other *Pern* sites, which she shared sadly never got off the ground. Online text-based

role-playing game forums like *Trelis Weyr* are play-by-post RPGs where players post

messages to media such as bulletin boards and online forums, and then fellow players

post role-played responses. This type of forum uses a story format requiring character's

actions be mentioned, including the surroundings and a general description of what is

going on. Additionally, forum play normally involves more people and is more

asynchronous in nature, in comparison to email and one-liner types of RPing.

Zi was a member of the original *Trelis Weyr* community, and later became a

moderator for the second *Trelis Weyr* forum, *The Obsidian Rebellion*. Overall, Zi felt her

experiences in role-play-game forums like *Trelis Weyr* were very rewarding. She stated,

"To be part of a group like that is a pretty wonderful feeling." Zi also shared:

> The neat thing about forum role-play is that you get to meet people from all over
>
> the world, so it's very easy to find others with similar likes and dislikes, and thus
>
> creating bonds can be very easy, fulfilling and fun. It's pretty amazing how tight-
>
> knit a group of people can be even if they've never met outside the Internet. (Zi,
>
> personal communication, December 20, 2012)

All three of my focal participants mentioned this "tight knit" metaphor in some fashion,

sharing *Trelis Weyr* was a social network providing a means for participants with similar

likes and dislikes to create bonds of friendship. The Internet makes it easier for people to

meet and play together, and this freedom to interact online with others from all over the

world provided these participants with opportunities to interact with people they would

have normally been able to get to know. All three participants interviewed shared they

felt fulfilled through these relationships socially, which will be explored in depth later in

chapter four.

Getting to Know Kit

Kitsuneko shared she was 25 years old at the time of the interview, and 23-24 years of age during play on the *Trelis Weyr* RPG forums. Kit, short for her screen name Kitsuneko, identified as a Caucasian female but shared she enjoys role-playing both male and female characters. Kit stated, "In fact, I think the majority of my characters are male, but I don't really identify as male, even if I am currently playing a male character" (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012). Kit described where she lived as suburban, and said she was in her senior year attending a university.

When Kit was in high school, she said her favorite subjects were generally art classes, though she also had some interest in history, and her least favorite class was math. Kit stated, "My major in college is accounting, so obviously I have some interest in it. My least favorite subject in high school was math, ironically, though the business-oriented math classes I am taking now don't bother me" (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012).

Kit shared she has two brothers and a sister; all of them older than herself. Kit's brothers are 28 and 31 years of age, and her sister is 33 years old. She lives with her Dad, as well as her sister and one of her brothers. Kit also shared English is the language spoken in her home, and both of her parents graduated from college; thus, all three of my focal participants had at least one parent who had completed college.

Kit stated she has participated in text-based role-play forums for about three years and that she also reads and occasionally writes fan fiction on fanfiction.net. She originally got into *Pern* fan-sites through *Pern*-inspired cyber-pet adoption sites, which

are a sort of role-play forum but with less interactivity. Kit tried out forum-based role-plays a few times based on the book *Eragon* and on original worlds created by role-players; however, it didn't really stick until she began to play *Pern* RPGs on forums. Kit said:

> I first tried to role-play because it was something a lot of people I knew through the cyber-pet adoption [web] sites were into, so it was a different way to run hatchings and give out dragons. As the activity on that forum started to die down, I found myself with more free time and I decided to try out a *Pern* RPG forum. I joined my first *Pern* RPG three years ago. The first one was a place called *Copse Weyr*, and since then I've joined about nine different forums, most of which ended up being closed down. Aside from *Trelis*, *Changing Pern* is the only other forum I joined that is still somewhat active. (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012)

Many role-players begin their RP experiences on less complex websites, like the cyber-pet adoption site mentioned by Kit above. These online communities (e.g., NeoPets) provide a chance for members to adopt a virtual pet to nurture. Members of these sites look after the health and welfare of their pets, explore the community, and often earn points to "buy" things for their pets as part of their interaction. Gameplay on these sites tends to be real-time, so plotlines and characters develop continuously as members create the storyline. Text shared on discussion boards is shorter and often referred to as "one-liners" where participants share one or two lines of text in rapid-fire succession with others who are also online at that time. Crafting of story through longer posts, as mentioned previously in relation to RPG forum posts, is not an emphasis of this

type of role-play.

Kit shared she has really enjoyed role-playing with most people in the forums, and she feels she is patient and supportive, particularly with newer players who may not be as good at writing or know how to interact. Kit feels this is actually her strength as an RPG forum member and moderator – she is good at mentoring new members and encouraging them to improve their character profiles, and their role-play contributions on the forum (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012). Kit shared:

> I think I am pretty patient with newer players who maybe aren't as good at writing. I've found something to enjoy role-playing with everyone I've played against. If I didn't, I'd just try not to start or join thread with that person, but that hasn't really been an issue for me. (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012)

Kit mentions she is patient with newer players who may not be as good at writing, and she feels there is something she can enjoy when role-playing with everyone on the site, regardless of their ability. Many forum groups form tight knit cliques of players who have interacted for several years across multiple sites, which can be difficult for new players to join. Some sites have also labeled their boards and sub-boards for three levels of role-playing: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Other sites have a type of application process to ascertain new member's ability to role-play, or they may choose to allow users to indicate their level as they create their characters. Still other sites like *Trelis Weyr* are more "newbie-friendly", where more advanced players are available to answer questions and teach "newbies" things they should and should not do during game play. They also help "newbies" to learn RP vocabulary and the etiquette of play, and they

transition them into site-wide game play by first interacting with them in role-play to provide practice and guidance. Eventually, the new member feels confident and wants to role-play with other members of the forum community, so the mentor is no longer needed. This type of scaffolding and gradual release of new members will be discussed later in this chapter to explore how this interaction supported players' motivation to enter play in the *Trelis Weyr* community, as well as their continued persistence at play over time.

Three Domains Emerged

Three domains emerged from the data that may help to explain the ways *Trelis Weyr* was organized, and how this text-based role-play-game (RPG) forum supported youths' construction of collective narratives during role-play: (1) creation of community; (2) development of collaborative processes; and, (3) the relationship between play, performance and literacy events. Factors motivating participants to role-play in *Trelis Weyr* were interwoven within all three of these domains, so that motivation as a theme will be shared where applicable during the discussion of each domain. Additionally, motivation within this RPG forum will be examined as a separate construct by looking through the lens of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) at how motivation may drive the development of literacy and social practices within this community.

The phrase "creation of community" is used in this study to explain how *Trelis Weyr* was organized as a virtual environment. This community was made up of a group of people who shared a common passion or interest – Anne McCaffrey's *Dragons of Pern* literature series. Multiple themes emerged within the "creation of community"

domain: enactment of a shared interest through play, freedom from geographical and time constraints, development of discursive skills and collective competence, and engagement in joint activities culminating in opportunities for collaborative authorship.

The phrase "collaborative processes" is used in this study to consider the ways participants of *Trelis Weyr* interacted with one another, and how various elements supported the creation of collective narratives during role-play. Multiple themes emerged within the "collaborative processes" domain: members' engagement in active, social participation; development of a virtual participatory culture; creation of interactive modalities to support ongoing interaction and collaboration; and, production of collective narratives as a by-product of role-play.

The phrase "literacy events, performance, and play" is used in this study to consider the cultural ways participants used language, performance, and play to enact literacy events as they developed collective narratives through role-play. Multiple themes emerged within the "literacy events, performance and play" domain: participants developed literacy skills, were both producers and consumers as readers and writers, performed during role-play, and engaged in experimentation and problem-solving through play.

Domain 1: Becoming a Community

Members of *Trelis Weyr* considered themselves to be a part of a community, which my three focal participants indicated was foundational to their interaction with other forum members. They built relationships that enabled learning from each other, as well as friendships that supported them emotionally and socially. However, though my focal participants shared they did feel in control when making decisions about their

characters and how they would interact with others, they also indicated they were closely

tied to the hierarchy and structure of this virtual society.

Kit, one of three focal participants, shared she felt obligated as a member of the

Trelis Weyr community to interact on a consistent basis so other community members

would be able to role-play (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013). Kit's

commitment to *Trelis Weyr* and its members is not unusual, and aligns with Wenger's

(1998) theory on communities of practice. According to Wenger (1998), a website like

Trelis Weyr in and of itself is not a community, unless the members of the website

consistently interact with and learn from each other. However, members of a community

do not need to work together on a daily practice or in traditional ways. As an example,

Wenger shared the Impressionists met in cafes and studios to discuss their style of

painting, inventing this style collectively, but they often painted alone. Nonetheless, their

interaction during these meetings was essential to making them a community of practice

and developing their style of painting.

In a similar manner, *Trelis Weyr* members met collectively to invent their own

style of role-play, though they made contributions in role-play both synchronously

(interacting collectively, online simultaneously) and asynchronously (contributing

content individually, online at separate times). In this section, I provide an explanation of

how *Trelis Weyr* was organized and identify themes related to the creation of forum

members' sense of community: enactment of a shared interest, freedom from

geographical and time constraints, development of discursive skills and collective

competence, and engagement in joint activities culminating in opportunities for

collaborative authorship. Below I describe these themes and the ways they represent how

members created a community to support role-play and the creation of collective

narratives.

Enactment of a Shared Interest

Members of *Trelis Weyr* shared an interest in Anne McCaffrey's fantasy

literature. However, *Trelis Weyr* was more than just a group of people with a common

interest. They went beyond simply talking about their love of McCaffrey's literature to

develop a shared repertoire of resources supporting interaction with each other in order to

support their desire to enter the world McCaffrey created. This desire to become a part of

Pern required members to create a representation of this environment, since it did not

exist in actuality. The boards and sub-boards of *Trelis Weyr* and the supporting governing

documents were examples of resources created by the administrator and moderators of

the forum to support their own and other's desires to play in *Pern*. Members of *Trelis*

Weyr then created character profiles to represent various personae they could enact

through role-play in order to enter this virtual world. Kit explained:

> It's basically like collaboratively writing a story. You have one or more characters
>
> that you create, and you can decide just about everything about them, what they
>
> look like, where they come from, what they act like, and what happens to them in
>
> the future. Then you make a post on the forum as though you're writing a story
>
> with your character as a main character, or you can join a post someone else has
>
> started, and the writers decide how the characters interact with each other. (Kit,
>
> personal communication, January 3, 2013)

Kit pointed out in this excerpt from our first interview that characters were

created by forum members with a great deal of autonomy, since participants decided what

they wanted their character to be like and how they wanted them to interact with others in the Weyr. During our discussion, Kit further clarified this freedom of choice and how it influenced her during role-play. She stated:

> I can make and play any sort of character I want, which is nice. I like a wide variety of characters, so I'll create guys, girls, outgoing people, introverts, nice guys and jerks, all at the same time. It also allows me to play around with unusual situations, like a character I created who is blind. This freedom makes playing fun. (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013)

> Kit's enthusiasm about being able to create a variety of characters and explore "unusual situations" was indicative of the support of individual autonomy voiced by all

three focal participants during our interviews. All three shared their desire to explore multiple identities they constructed, and how this freedom to explore nuances in personalities made their role-playing experience fun. Zi queried:

> Have you ever had a time where you thought, "I wonder what it would be like to be a pessimist", or something along those lines? Trying out new roles or personalities is just putting those curiosities into written form. It's an interesting way to find the answer to "what if" questions. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

Lark also voiced her keenness to explore various aspects of characters she created for role-play. "If you've ever played a character in a theatre class, you know how thrilling it can be. Suddenly you're not you. If you want to be suave or cunning, you can be – or I guess you can try to be!" (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2013). Enacting these shared passions through the creation and role-play of characters to

experience *Pern* united members of *Trelis Weyr* as a community, with a shared interest in performing multiple identities.

Freedom from Geographical and Time Constraints

The virtual context of *Trelis Weyr* supported participants' interactions and role-play, providing freedom from both geographical and time constraints, which also supported members' sense of community within the group. Players were able to log in and interact when it was convenient for them to do so, since role-play in the forum was often asynchronous and did not require members to be online at the same time to participate. An individual might post in a thread and then wait anywhere from a few minutes to several hours, and at times a few days, before another forum participant would post in turn and continue the thread.

Since participants of *Trelis Weyr* did not have to be online at the same time, individuals who lived in different geographic locations and got online at different times were still afforded the opportunity to interact with others they might never have had the opportunity to meet and role-play with in a traditional sense. Thus, a sense of community in *Trelis Weyr* was not dependent on being close to others geographically or actively online simultaneously. The virtual nature of this environment supported participants' ability to join together with others to create a community revolving around their shared interest solely, and participants did not need to consider distance from others in the group or similar availability to play. Additionally, this type of community may not have been able to exist locally for several individuals if they were the only ones with an interest in *Pern* literature in their off-line community. For example, Lark shared:

I can interact with people I normally would not, meeting and playing with people

from all over the world who are interested in *Pern*. In my high school, I only knew two other people who liked to read McCaffrey's books, and only one of them was interested in online fandom related to *Pern*. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

According to Kit, the ability to play when it was convenient was also supportive of her motivation to role-play, and to persist at play within threads over time. Kit stated, "I like that I can participate in the role-play plots as much or as little as I like, at least as long as I don't keep other players waiting for posts from me" (personal communication, December 23, 2012). In this quote, Kit was talking about time and persistence, which she indicated were motivational factors. Lark also said she was motivated to interact in the forum because it allowed her to get to know people she would not normally meet from all over the world, providing her with insight about how many things were the same despite differences in cultures as revealed by geographic markers in written dialect. Lark stated:

> The dialect may differ slightly, but the words you use talking with one another are very similar, and unless someone mentions they are not from the US you really don't know. In this way, I appreciate the value of learning we are not entirely alone and spectacularly different from others in this world. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Beyond Lark's initial comment about how meeting people from all over the world was motivating as a player, the quote above also referenced geographic distance as normally being a limiting factor, but this deficiency was overcome through interaction in an online, virtual community.

Lark also talked about how the forum supported members' ability to participate at

times and in ways that worked best for their schedules. According to Lark, many

participants posted to threads asynchronously, so they were not actively online at the

same time of the day with each other. However, there were guidelines set up in the forum

about the appropriate sequence of posts participants should follow, which guided play

and helped members know how to interact with little conflict. Lark shared if she had a lot

of other things in her life keeping her busy, she did not spend much time on the site. Yet,

periodically during the week she would have more time to be online and could catch up

on threads she was a part of (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Lark provided a detailed description of what it was like to post to threads,

including information about rules and netiquette members followed.

On weekends, when you have nothing to do but kick back and watch TV at home,

you might be multitasking so you are watching TV, talking to friends via text and

AIM, drawing, and sometimes writing things in the forum. I do a lot of things at

the same time normally, especially since it will often take you anywhere from ten

to thirty minutes to write a response on the forum, depending on how long and

how involved you want your post to be. There is a posting order, so you will post

something and then you will have to wait your turn to post in that thread again. It

could take a few minutes or up to a week, depending on the number of people in

the thread and how often they get online to interact in the threads.

Lark also discussed what occurred when members were able to be online together

synchronously, and how rate of response changed interaction in the community.

If everyone is online together, the threads might go really, really fast, because you

are posting right after each other, especially when there are only one or two other

people in a thread. Most of the time it is more asynchronous though, and one

person will be on, post something, and the next person may get on several hours

or days later to continue the thread. That is also why people will post in multiple

threads and begin new threads for role-play; so they always have something

going. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Lark's explanation about why members post to multiple threads and begin new threads at

the end of her comment is particularly interesting. It suggests there may in fact be some

connection between synchronous and asynchronous experiences, rate of response, and

sense of community. While asynchronous interaction appears to work and affords

extended participation duration for a particular role-play sequence, it is also true that

synchronicity supports increased speed of interaction in the community. Both forms of

play support a sense of community in different ways, and both appear to be needed to

support members' motivation to enter and persist at play over time within the forum.

Asynchronous interaction provided affordances for forum members to role-play

with each other even when they could not be online at the same time due to time or

geographic constraints. Thus, threads were replied to in a posting sequence over time as

members were able to get online and respond to each other, so interactions took

anywhere from a few hours to a few weeks to complete. Though members were not

necessarily online and able to interact in real time, they were still able to get to know one

another and form relationships within the community of play because of the affordances

provided by multiple communication resources enabling interaction when it was

convenient (e.g., email, private message, and board interaction).

Synchronous interaction, in contrast, provided forum members with a chance to

role-play in real-time, so play was at an accelerated pace. Lark also shared she felt

synchronous play supported social interaction more, as people chatted using various

means out-of-character frequently, in addition to their role-play interactions. Thus,

participants shared their lives with each other and build online friendships, in addition to

sharing a common interest in *Pern* fandom and role-play. These interactions built a sense

of community, as members become involved with one another and developed

relationships that were both in- and out-of-character. Affordances provided by

synchronous interaction will be discussed further in the next domain, when I share

emerging themes related to collaborative processes.

Development of Discursive Skills

Participants of *Trelis Weyr* engaged in joint discussions as they pursued their

individual and shared interests in a common domain, helping each other and sharing

information in support of their desire to role-play and enter the *Pern* world. Their

involvement in role-play necessitated they communicate with one another to make

decisions about their interactions, supporting the development of members' discursive

skills and use of insider language. Various formats of communication were used by

forum members to support their interactions and discussions. These formats included the

use of a chat-box and private messaging (PM) within the forum itself, as well as AIM

chat, Skype, regular email, and texting with cell phones outside the forum website.

Trelis Weyr's chat-box feature allowed members to talk with each other both in-

and out-of-character. The chat-box was a scrolling window on the left side of the website,

with posts sequenced from the bottom to top of the window as indicated by the date and

time stamp for each post (see figure 8 below). This in-site feature was informal and

included comments from various members about things that related to play on the site, as well as things that did not relate to role-play. The entire forum could see items shared in this chat-box area, so presumably aware of this wider audience, members tended to make general statements that were intended for whole group consumption. Figure 8 includes two screenshots of typical chat-box interactions from the *Trelis Weyr* website. The example on the left is an older version of the chat-box in *Trelis Weyr*, which was affectionately called "Squishy" by members. In later renditions of the site, the chat-box appeared like the one featured on the right, with a label "chat-box".
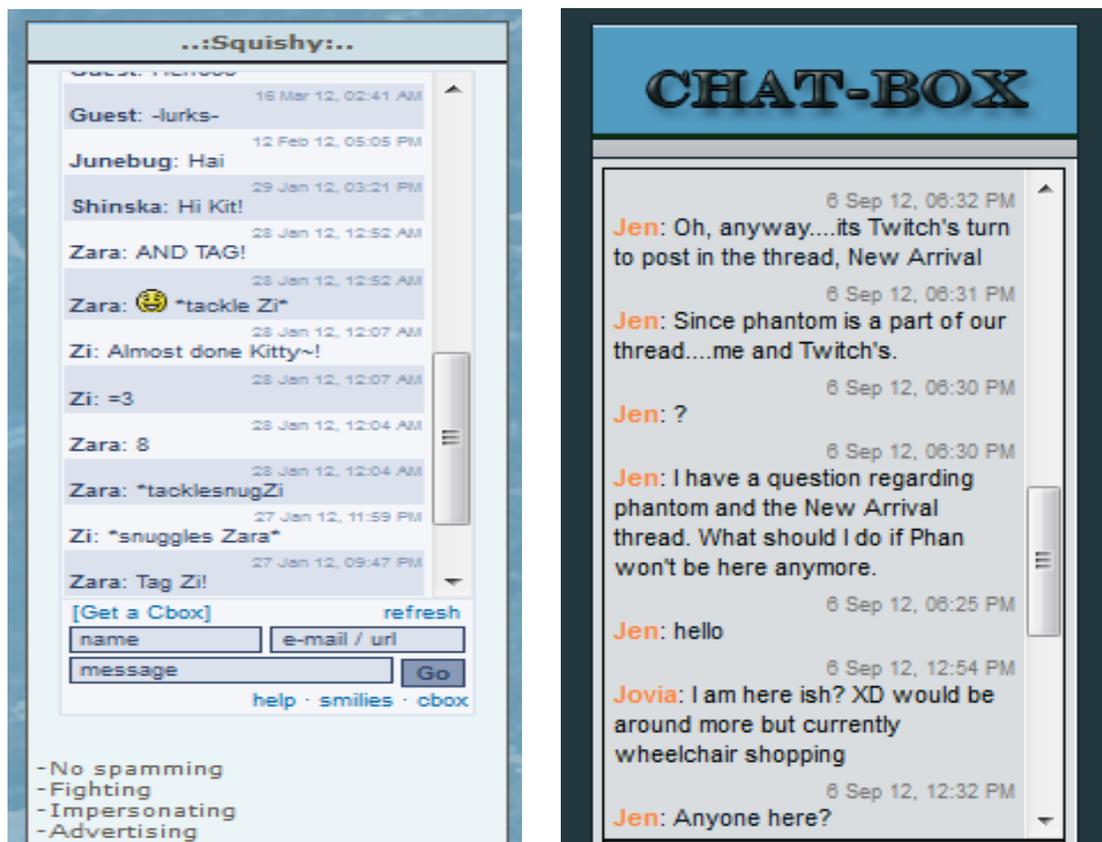
Figure 8. Sample chat boxes from Trelis Weyr

As displayed in the sample chat-box on the left, much of the dialogue posted in chat-box by members did not involve discussion about role-play nor site development. In the example on the left, members tagged each other to say hello and showed each other they were currently online. This type of interaction often led to longer posts with more dialogue, which could either be site-related like dialogue in the example on the right, or conversational and not related to forum play. According to Lark, most of the discussion in the chat-box was much like conversations people have when they first meet face-to-face, including asking others how their day was going and making small talk with others (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Another option members used to communication with each other were boards created for in- and out-of-character discussion. When the administrator, moderators, and members wanted to post information related to play that would be accessible for a longer period of time to members, they had the option to post in- or out-of-character on these boards. Below is an example of an out-of-character (OC) post on the OC board on *Trelis Weyr* by Lark, bringing members up to date about recent events and play (figure 9 below). These OC board comments were self-monitored for their potential usefulness as ad hoc governing documents and therefore posted in a more enduring way.

In contrast, private messages were generally sent directly to individuals or to a small group when information being shared was not meant for the entire forum community and involved short term conversations. Private messages were most often out-of-character, but were generally about both game-related topics and personal conversations based on off-world subjects. Forum members also used AIM and email on the Internet, and texting on cell phones, to interact with a selected group or with

individuals if they wanted to keep conversations more confidential and private. Skype

was used as well, but primarily by the moderators and the administrator to plan site-wide

events and brainstorm new ideas for plot development, and to discuss issues that came up

regarding site participation.

Figure 9. OC Board on Trelis Weyr

Participants of *Trelis Weyr* used all these communication options to share

information with one another as they interacted and role-played, which assisted in

creating a sense of community. This form of communication freedom contributed to

community building because members were able to share information freely in formats of

their choice and at times that worked best for them. Multiple forms of communication

also supported the development of relationships within the community by providing

multiple means to effectively communicate with group members, which in turn allowed

them to get to know each other socially as well as to deal with the business needed to

role-play and enter *Pern* life.

Lark also shared during our second interview how she provided selected and

targeted information as an administrator to support members' needs to ensure their

success on the forum (i.e., how to create a character profile). For example, she prepared

threads to post on the information board providing directions for members about how to

create a character profile, how to enter role-play with a newly created character, how to

get involved with other forum members in role-play, and often gave advice on what to do

to more fully develop a character's history or personality. Lark also stated she often

provided members with advice about how to improve their writing so content would flow

more easily, discussed how more details could support a richer description, and shared

the ways these descriptions would help readers of a thread to visualize the story being

developed. Lark said, "To be honest, this is part of my job and something I did on a daily

basis, but even in other communities it has become a habit for me to offer help."

(Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

This information shared by Lark provides insight regarding how she envisioned

her role in the forum in support of members' needs. As the administrator of this site, Lark

felt responsible for ensuring members success as role-players on the site, and she wanted

the experience to be enjoyable for everyone. Lark saw herself as a teacher of composition, providing writing help as a type of information that built community. Through support for participants' development of character profiles and their understanding of rules and netiquette expectations in the forum, Lark hoped to scaffold new members' success as they entered active role-play with other forum members.

To some degree, Lark felt like she owned the success of her participants; their success was her success. She provided instruction in posts on the information board, and interacted with new members using the forms of communication previously described to teach new members what they needed to know to be successful. As a self-described "good writer of character profiles", Lark felt competent to assist others in developing their characters' histories and personalities by suggesting things they might change and elaborations they might include to make content in members' writing flow better; to add details for a richer description; and to use description to visualize story development possibilities. These elements collectively express the foundations of a composing model Lark believes supported new writers in text-based RPG forums. Lark's approach to teaching composition may have parallels that could be useful in supporting struggling writers in the classroom. These connections will be explored later in the dissertation.

Development of a Shared Competence

Trelis Weyr participants also developed a shared competence during their interactions in support of role-play. In our second interview, Lark shared:

> I feel fairly competent in my own abilities to participate in role-playing. For one, at least in my opinion, role-play is not something that should be pulled apart and analyzed too much. Role-playing is something fun, creative, and a way of stating

a part of who I am and what I believe. That said, I think anyone who can write can role-play, though the amount and quality differs from person to person. Many times I will tell people who are starting out that quality is much better than quantity, and even a two paragraph quality response is more useful than a ten paragraph response that is nothing.

Lark's statement above was prefaced by a concern she voiced multiple times during our conversations; that role-play not be overly analyzed or considered more than a fun, creative way of exploring self. However, Lark also shared she felt anyone who could write was capable of successful role-play; they might write less than a more experienced RPG participant, but Lark indicated she felt it was important players understand quality was more important than quantity. When asked to clarify what quality looked like later, Lark shared she meant a well-developed character and a detailed description of that character's interaction in the space (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Lark further shared forum members learned how to improve their writing by interacting in role-play with others they believed were good writers; people who were able to provide a model of what good role-play entailed.

Forum participants gain insight into how to make their writing better by role-playing with other members they believe are good writers. They learn how to lengthen responses, how to put in more detail and how to make their narratives something they can be proud of.

Lark shared additionally her thoughts regarding competence:

Competency comes from others commenting on your work, saying they enjoyed

reading it. It comes from the inner pride in saying, "Hey look. I'm improving." I

believe that role players tend to look at it also from something other than a

perspective considering how well a person writes only. Instead, they consider how

well a person gets into their character. People are more interested in character and

plot development for role-play, and when you can get lost in a post as if reading a

page from a book, then you know you are doing well. So, we build competence

together in the forum as we role-play with each other.

Lark's message is important for educators to consider. Forum members derive their

feelings of competence, according to Lark, from experiencing inner pride in their own

improvement as players and writers. However, they look beyond the conventions of

writing toward development of story elements, including character, plot development,

and so forth rather than focusing on convention, grammar, and length of writing. If a

story is enthralling and demands attention, bringing the role-players into the virtual world

and supporting their transformation, then members feel they are successful. Thus, Lark

stated competence is built in the forum during role-play, as forum participants enact new

identities in the virtual world they create together.

Continuing in this vein, Zi stated:

I believe that a competent role-player is someone who is willing to admit there is

room for improvement and is always trying to grow as both a player and as a

person; someone who is friendly and approachable out-of-character, and who tries

to be active and take part in the community, in addition to being willing to help

newer, less experienced players become a part of the group. I like to think that not

only myself, but almost all members of *Trelis* were competent role players in that

respect. (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Both Lark's and Zi's focus on a person being willing to learn and to share their expertise with others was something else that emerged from my conversations with the three participants I interviewed. Lark stated:

> I know my writing is good, partially because of what others have told me, but also you end up trying to mold yourself, taking things from better role players. You try to learn. You try to figure out what works and doesn't work, having to write more or to write better. Sometimes you are learning how to put more description in your writing, or you are learning how to do in-character thoughts and dialogue for role-play, which is kind of like if you are just doing writing exercises in creative writing class I guess. The more you do it, the better you get, which I feel is very true because I have seen multiple people get better by doing it more and more over time. (Larkwing, personal communication, November 26, 2012)

Information from Lark, Zi, and Kit helped me develop an understanding of how collective competence within the forum was achieved. At least partially, members understood their own competence through opinions voiced by other members about their writing and involvement in role-play. Additionally, members endeavored to learn from each other, molding their own understandings about what worked and what did not on the successes of members the community perceived to be the best role-players. Participants of the forum tried to learn what their best players did by analyzing the way they developed character profiles, and by lurking on the site to watch the way they created posts during role-play.

Members discussed competence with each other so they could improve their

writing by providing more description, inserting character's thoughts, and using dialogue.

Lark ended her discussion of this development of collective competence by sharing with

me that she had seen many members improve their writing by practicing more over time.

She shared these types of suggestions were useful to new members in particular, but they

could be used as a model to develop competence for any group of writers; those writing

in online, out-of-school contexts, and those who were writing for classrooms in more

traditional face-to-face contexts (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15,

2012). This support of members' development of competence was also evident in the

governing documents provided on the "Rules" and "Library" boards on *Trelis Weyr*. The

table below depicts the number and type of governing documents found on these two

boards.

Table 9

Type and number of informational documents found on Trelis Weyr

Document Type	Number	Description
Informational	8	• Descriptions and color information for animals in the Weyr, including dragons, fire lizards, huntyres, and whers
Informational	1	• Descriptions of Pernese (human) characters who reside on Trelis Weyr, including candidates, weyrlings, and wherlings, as well as what occurs during hatchings
Informational	2	• History of the beginning of Trelis Weyr and of the current plots being enacted in the forum
Informational	1	• Description of the life of a rider
Informational	6	• Descriptions of various geographical locations on Trelis Weyr • Descriptions of Leadership (Weyrwoman/Weyrmen) • Descriptions of wildlife and plants on Trelis Weyr • Descriptions of Weyrs and Holds of Pern

Table 9 (continued)

Document Type	Number	Description
Rules	1	• Description of rules that apply to character development and interaction in the forum
Rules	1	• Description of fight versus run rules for participation in the forum
Rules	1	• General netiquette and rules for the forum
How-to guides	2	• Description of how to write a character profile; how to develop a character's history and personality • Description of how to enter role-play with others in the forum

Several of these 23 governing documents were informational in nature, sharing details about McCaffrey's fiction, life on *Pern*, and other background information a person would need to know to effectively RP on *Trelis Weyr*, particularly if they had not read McCaffrey's literature. An example of an informational document from the "Our History" sub-board on the "Library" board is pictured below, sharing the story of *Trelis Weyr* (see Figure 10 below). The development of community was fostered and delimited by this document, which gave a thorough description of how *Trelis Weyr* was created; connecting the creation of *Trelis* to the canon established by Anne McCaffrey in the *Pern* literature series. Since *Trelis Weyr* was a semi-canon forum, it was necessary to share with members on the forum how this connection was established through the story of this new Weyr's creation. Information about the creation of *Trelis Weyr* also provided valuable facts members could use in creating characters to populate the Weyr. Reading all of McCaffrey's novels was not necessary to be able to role-play on *Trelis Weyr*, but having an understanding of the storyline of this Weyr and its placement in that larger

story arc created by McCaffrey was important for successful role-play. New members who were not properly informed of this history would enter play without the background knowledge needed to understand many of the elements others might share during their interactions. Informational threads like this one provided the facts needed to ensure all members had base information and could participate successfully in the forum.

Author	Topic: The Start of It All (Read 225 times)
Lark Weyrwoman ★★★★★ Inali Alyara Panille Sh'ay Akilu Therru Tikrin Dalia Natayura Leotie Inoria member is offline Glitch-"I have a proper name... and when I remember it I will tell you" Joined: May 2011 Gender: Female Posts: 685 Location: United States Karma: 3 Marks: £685	**The Start of It All** « Thread Started on May 14, 2011, 2:17pm » After the Last Fall, the Weyrs ushered in an era of peace. In response to not needing the dragons and whers as much as in previous turns, their numbers declined. Eventually, there were only a few handfuls of the colors left. Holds stopped tithing as much as before as well, and in consequence disagreements ensued. However, the relative peace stayed. At least until the Red Star was knocked back into orbit by a meteorite. Many of the holdfolk died in the turns that followed because there weren't enough dragons to protect everyone. In response to this, the five remaining Weyrs of Benden, Ista, Fort, Southern and High Reaches came together and formulated a plan. They'd each send ten dragons back in time, fifty turns before the New Fall started. This would later become known as The Great Fall Back. Two Queens, Urinth and Zetrith were sent with the dragons in the hopes that they'd be able to raise more numbers. Four whers from each Weyr were also sent. Now back in time, the fifty-two dragons and twenty whers had to search out a place to live. The group had brought plenty of weyrfolk as well to start out, but the question was where would they all go? The answer came in the form of a search wing finding a fairly large island between the North and South Continents. Forming a Weyr in the mountains that arched across the landmass, the two Gold Riders named it Trelis Weyr. Soon, Sollace Hold was also created and populated with the people that were brought over. Though the going was rough at first, the Weyr and Hold soon had its first clutch on the sands. A good sized one of about 23 eggs, with a gold egg as well. This wasn't the only good news though, not only had more firelizard clutches been found on the warm shores, but a new species of avian was also discovered. Bird-like and incredibly beautiful, the firelizard sized creatures were named Huntyres, and they too could bond with their owners. Within the passing decades, more and more dragons and whers were hatched, and more children were born to the Hold and Weyr. When it got to the same date that the New Fall would start, a portion of the dragons and

Figure 10. Screenshot of "The Start of It All", an informational document

In addition to these types of informational documents, there were 4 documents the focal participants called "how to" guides. This set of documents shared tips regarding creation of characters, how to enter a thread to role-play with other members of the site, and netiquette focused on the ways leadership of the site collectively determined how members would appropriately respond to each other in the forum, including both in- and out-of-character interactions (See Figure 11 below for a portion of the netiquette guide).
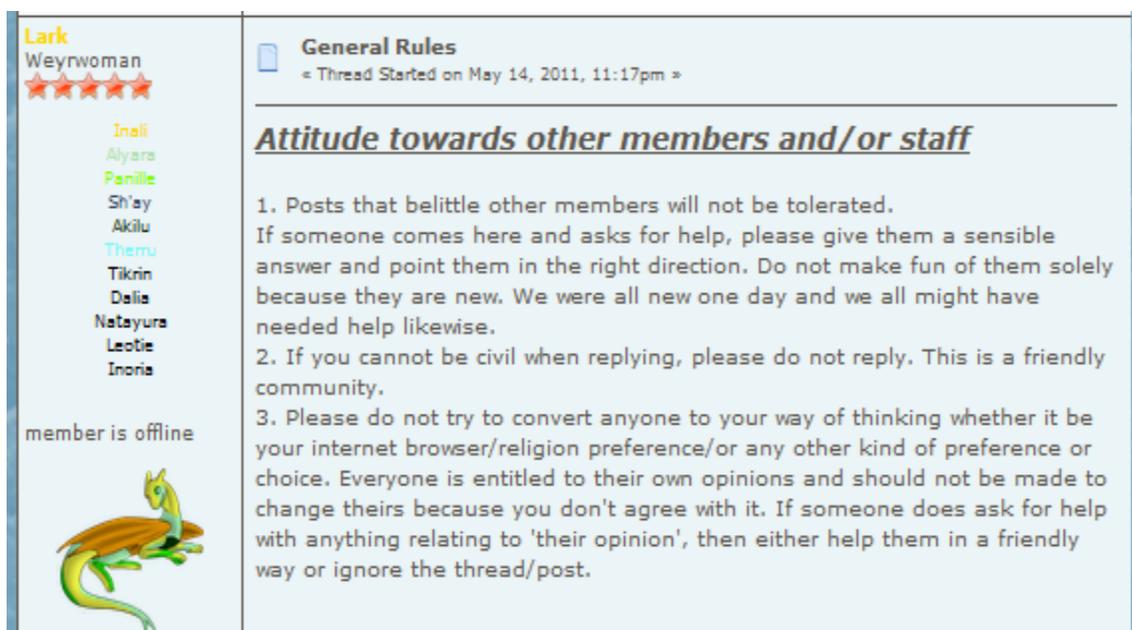
Figure 11. Screenshot of a section of the netiquette guide

To develop their own netiquette guide, leadership of the forum looked at netiquette rules produced by other *Pern* fan RPG forums and discussed what they felt would be useful in providing guidance in their forum. They remixed multiple guides, selecting items they liked from each and discarding things they didn't like, as well as rewriting portions of text to make it more user-friendly. They next presented these

netiquette guidelines to the original members of the forum, who voted to accept them as a governing document addressing appropriate interactions (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Members of *Trelis Weyr* observed netiquette dictating no participant could "god mod" or "power play". In essence, this rule in netiquette stipulated members were not to force another participant's character to do something they did not want to do, or to give their own character the upper hand during role-play by manipulating a situation so they were all powerful. Lark, the site administrator, explained the terms "god mod" and "power play", as well as how the netiquette guidelines protected a player's autonomy:

Your character cannot be all-powerful, like a God. This is called "god modding" in role-play and is frowned upon. You cannot control another character's actions unless given the permission to, but also you cannot say what happens to the other character; you can only suggest it. Also, you cannot be the one who never gets injured, which would be a form of "power play". Something has to happen to you – you are not allowed to be completely fine if you are involved in a serious fight for example, because it wouldn't happen that way in real life. It is partially courteous, but it is also because we are trying to be as realistic as possible. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

No *Trelis Weyr* player was allowed to intentionally give themselves god-like powers and control other characters in the game without other players' permission. If a participant posted something during role-play that didn't provide an opportunity for another player to respond to an action, then there was no freedom of choice for the other forum member in that interaction. By stating the end result of an action, a participant

removed the ability of other characters in the role-play to contribute to the scene and the mood of the thread. Additionally, Lark shared a need to be realistic in posts, sharing guidelines that specified a demand for the plausibility of what was written. If a participant would be injured by doing something like jumping off a ten-story building in a real-life situation, then the character role-playing this action inevitably also needed to be injured. Thus, it was necessary if following these guidelines for players to write a plausible outcome for their character, based on the actions that character played out.

The administrator and moderators of *Trelis Weyr* guarded against "god mod" behavior so all forum members were provided equal opportunities during role-play. If someone began to "power play" in a thread by controlling other's behaviors, moderators were quick to remove the post and send a copied version of the post raising concern as an attachment in a private message to the individual. They would ask the member to amend the post to bring it into alignment with guidelines, as well as offer assistance to edit the post if needed (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). According to Lark, this happened one time on *Trelis Weyr* and was done inadvertently by a new member who had not yet mastered the writing style for role-play. No member of *Trelis Weyr* needed to be asked to leave the group by leadership due to online behavior (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Considering this analysis collectively, a definition of what my focal participants meant by members' development of collective competence can be shared based on the instances that emerged from discussion during interviews and analysis of site artifacts. Emerging factors in collective competence include: development of strong characters, ability to write quality posts and contribute to story threads, player response as a learner

and leader, observation of netiquette, and self-determined behavior. Additionally,

leadership provided support for members to develop these competencies, and in general

all members of Trelis Weyr were very happy to assist each other whenever asked

(Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Engagement in Joint Activities

Many joint activities in *Trelis Weyr* encouraged a sense of community. The act of

role-play itself was extremely collaborative, requiring interaction and joint construction

of threads that generated stories. Zi shared:

> Role-playing is always a collaborative effort. After all, if it is just you doing
>
> everything then it's writing a novel, not a role-play. The most common form of
>
> collaboration is the creation and planning of plots, both large and small. One of
>
> my personal favorites was when my character and another member's character
>
> made passing comments about the leadership of the then inactive leader of the
>
> rebellion. The passing comments got us thinking, and we decided to have those
>
> two characters attempt to stage a rebellion within the rebellion. It worked! It was
>
> a lot of fun to plan, and though it didn't work out quite like we had hoped, seeing
>
> our passing idea turn into a full on site plot was exciting. (Zi, personal
>
> communication, December 20, 2012)

Zi stated role-playing was collaborative in nature because it required members to work

with others to construct text, in contrast with what she understood authors to undertake

when creating more traditional texts, such as a novel. Zi also shared members often

collaborated initially by creating and planning plots. To be able to interact with each

other in role-play, participants first identified where geographically they were going to

meet on the forum, which characters they wanted to role-play, and developed a general concept of what they might do during their interaction together (Zi, ,personal communication, December 20, 2012).

Next, Zi detailed an example of how this occurred by sharing a favorite memory of her own role-playing experience on *Trelis Weyr*. She stated she made a passing in-character comment to another member during role-play in a thread for the story arc about the rebellion, and this comment got both she and the other member thinking about possible plot developments. Zi and this member ended up pursuing further discussions during an out-of-character chats and decided they'd like to investigate the possibility of enacting what had been suggested; a rebellion against the leadership of the rebellion they were currently engaged in. Several out-of-character discussions ensued, and these two developed ideas they carried out within the thread to stage this "rebellion within a rebellion". Thus, Zi saw her passing comment during play turn into a site-wide plot many others became involved with, which she shared was "thrilling" (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012).

Zi's retelling of plot development within *Trelis Weyr* is indicative of how empowered members felt within the forum, and the style of role-play they engaged in. Unlike graphic interface RPGs like *World of Warcraft,* where all plot development is determined by a game master and members must adhere closely to rules of engagement, text-based RPG forum play involves more choice and control by members who collectively make many decisions about activities and site development through voting and other means of collaborative decision-making. In this way, the collective activity of forums like *Trelis Weyr* is what builds a sense of community and supports development

of the collective narratives created during role-play. This distinction between graphical-based and text-based RPG play will be further discussed later in this dissertation, when I look at motivational factors that encouraged members to become involved with and persist at play in the forum.

Members of *Trelis Weyr* were also involved in joint, site-wide events like hatchings, which were initially planned by the leadership for everyone on the forum to enjoy. During our interviews, the focal participants expressed how excited they and other members of *Trelis* became as hatchings were planned and presented to the forum as a site-wide event, likening them to Christmas because of the element of surprise involved and the new gifts given to various members. As detailed in Chapter 3, hatchings were events where eggs within a clutch laid by the dragon queen were hatched and young candidates telepathically bonded through impression with the young dragonets as they emerged from their shells. This bonding took place on the hatching sands of the Weyr as the rest of the community observed this action.

In my current use, a hatching event is an example of an activity structure that developed community in the forum. All members had the opportunity to attend and participate in role-play related to a hatching, and as a dragon hatched members who were role-playing candidates didn't know if they would be impressed with a new born dragon, which type of dragon they might receive, or the interaction they might have with the dragonet who was being role-played by another member of the forum.

The leadership of the forum and the dragon queen laying the clutch, as well as a few key members who were given the opportunity to role-play a new dragon being born, developed the initial storyline for this thread in out-of-character discussions over several

weeks leading up to the hatching event. The hatching date and time were selected for optimal involvement of the entire forum, based on geographical location of users, since this was one of the few types of events on the forum to predominantly occur synchronously. Guests from other *Pern* text-based RPG forums would often cross over to view planned hatchings, playing visitors from other Weyrs located on the *Pern* world, so there was also potential to build membership and make connections with other *Pern* fan communities.

Though large, site-wide plots were very popular in the *Trelis* community, most of the role-play occurred between small groups of members. To develop these opportunities for role-play between forum members, sub-boards were created so members could post information about characters they wanted to role-play and possible scenarios to begin discussion with others who might be interested in joining them. As detailed in chapter 3, a sub-board is an area of the forum site designated for a specific purpose (i.e., advertising role-play ideas on a sub-board, located under a board housing character profiles and member generated posts related to characters and role-play). In this instance, I am sharing how sub-boards functioned to provide participants with community building opportunities by offering options for players to engage each other in conversations about role-play opportunities.

When a participant was looking for new role-play opportunities, he or she would read posts made by other forum members, suggesting ideas for role-play on sub-boards like those described above. Next, out-of-character interactions via email or private message were usually involved to discuss the role-play idea presented in the sub-board, and then a thread was created by one of the interested parties to begin role-play. During

the course of role-play in this created thread, participants might continue out-of-character chat if they needed to interact with each other to make decisions. Some role-play within the thread and conversations via private messages might happen synchronously, in real-time, while members were actively on the site with each other. However, once role-play began in a thread, Zi indicated most players allowed their characters to "take over" and drive action in posts on the thread, so they were not as likely to continue out-of-character chat to make decisions about what would happen during role-play. Once play began, members were more likely to allow the action in a thread to unwind through in-character posts, and only responded to each other in-character unless absolutely necessary. They preferred to take on the persona of their character, allowing that character to make decisions for him or herself during play (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012).

In domain 1, which is focused on community building, I shared the ways the focal participants' shared members considered themselves a community, as well as how this understanding was foundational to the forum interactions for role-play. Members built relationships with other participants of the forum, which supported them both emotionally and socially, in addition to providing support for the act of role-playing. Nevertheless, participants understood they were tied to a hierarchy and structure for this virtual space, in spite of feeling very free and in control of the characters they created and their interactions with others in the forum. *Trelis Weyr* members met and collectively invented ways to role-play with each other, the organization and structure required to support their role-play in the forum, how the forum supported their enactment of a shared interest and helped them develop discursive skills and collective competence, and

provided opportunities to engage in activities which culminated in collaborative authorship of collective narratives. Next, I extend this understanding of community to encompass the collaborative process specifically, which emerges from successful community building to shape members participation and role-play.

<h3 style="text-align:center">**Domain 2: Role-Play is a Collaborative Process**</h3>

In this section, I provide an explanation of how collaboration plays a key role in supporting interactions between participants engaged in role-play. Through inductive analysis, I identified three themes supporting collaboration in *Trelis Weyr*: (1) members' engagement in active, social participation; (2) development of a virtual participatory culture to support collaboration; and, (3) production of collective narratives as a by-product of role-play. Below I describe each one of these themes and how they jointly shaped members' participation and collaboration in *Trelis Weyr*.

Engagement in Active, Social Participation

Recalling the definition of a community of practice (CoP), Lave and Wenger (1991) described CoPs as activity systems in which individuals were united in action and in the meaning that action had for them, as well as for the larger community they were engaged with. Individuals in CoPs are engaged in active, social participation; they are glued together by the connections they share with one another. Further, Lave and Wenger (1991) shared that generation of knowledge in a CoP occurs when individuals participate in problem solving and share knowledge with each other. However, the successful functioning of this type of knowledge-sharing CoP is only possible through the active participation of members of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Members of *Trelis Weyr* were involved in many interactions indicative of active, social participation. They went beyond simply being passive members of an organization, to taking an active role in the RPG forum community. As an active, participating member of the forum, each participant occupied a position in the community. Everyone had a role to play, and there were opportunities for new roles as members continued their involvement with the RPG forum. During my analysis of data, four elements emerged supporting the development of active, social participation in *Trelis Weyr*, including: (1) tools for communication; (2) teamwork and shared goals; (3) virtual relationships and social networking; and, (4) and multiple forms of mentorship. These four elements are discussed now, sharing how forum members' engagement in active, social participation supported collaboration during play.

Tools for communication. Various forms of communication were used to support discussion between *Trelis Weyr* forum members. According to Kit, the most common method of communication on the forum was through the chat-box, which she described as "pretty casual and fast-paced, but useful for asking and answering questions and just chatting, really" (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012). Kit further explained:

> Anything important got its own post in the forum. The other two methods of communicating were through private messages, a system that was built into the forum, if there was something we wanted to keep secret or just talk with one person about. Another way to talk privately was through AIM, instant messenger. I got AIM pretty much solely for talking to people from *Trelis*, because I'm not really a big fan of chatting otherwise. I actually preferred the PM [private

message] system for most things, as I tend to forget to open AIM when I am

RPing [role-playing]. (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012)

Kit's comments verified members of *Trelis Weyr* used various types of communication,

largely depending on their need for privacy. If a person wanted to keep their discussion

between themselves and only a few people, then the chat-box feature would not be their

choice. Instead, they might use the forum's private message (PM) system (a type of

built-in email within the forum) to talk with each other. Kit also mentioned members

often chose to use AIM, which is a private messaging system that exists outside the

forum site. Kit shared many of the forum members were comfortable using AIM to talk

to each other outside of forum play in other online contexts, and they accessed this

resource simultaneously while online in the forum as a secondary means of

communication (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012). Additionally, Kit

stated she did not use private messaging services like AIM normally to chat outside of

Trelis Weyr play, but she did get an AIM account to support her interactions with other

members of the forum because it was a system they preferred to use. Thus, members

were often encouraged by one another to try various forms of communication beyond the

tools provided within the forum based on usage both inside and outside of forum play.

Zi also mentioned the ways members communicated, providing additional

information that helped me to envision the tools forum members selected to support their

interactions within and outside the RPG forum:

The most common way to communicate was through the chat-box, in which we

had to make sure any content was guest friendly (keeping swearing down to a

minimum and making sure not to accidentally say anything that could be taken as

offensive). Conversations in the chat-box were generally lighthearted and focused

on "how are you's" and the ideas we had directly related to the role-play. Private

messages, AIM, and occasionally Skype were used for more private

conversations, and plotting. (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Both Kit and Zi shared the chat-box was a popular form of communication on the forum

if they wanted to share general information with everyone. However, Zi's comments

provided additional insight regarding restrictions on the types of messages appropriate for

chat-box posts; content was to be kept "guest friendly" and members were not to post

anything others might find offensive. Thus, the chat-box appeared to be a place for small

talk, or for ideas about role-play if focused on *Pern*-related topics; in general, things that

would not be controversial for system-wide consumption.

Governing documents about netiquette related to postings substantiated the

expectations Zi shared about the content of messages deemed appropriate by forum

leadership. The *General Rules* thread posted by the site administrator stated:

Posts that belittle others will not be tolerated. If you cannot be civil when you post

and/or reply, please do not post or reply. This is a friendly community. Please do

not try to convert anyone to your way of thinking whether it be your internet

browser, religious, or any other kind of preference or choice. Everyone is entitled

to his or her own opinion and should not be made to change theirs because you

don't agree with it. If someone does ask for help with anything that would be

related to an opinion, then either help them in a friendly way or ignore the

thread/post. (Larkwing, General Rules thread, posted May 14, 2011)

The *General Rules* document also included information about what would occur if these

guidelines were not followed. "Staff may lock a thread at any time for any reason. If the reason is not obvious, a justification post will be made to explain the action" (Larkwing, General Rules thread, posted May 14, 2011). Both Zi's comments and the *General Rules* thread allude to acceptable forms of communication defined by leadership of the forum. This is in keeping with policies dictated by ProBoards (the host service for *Trelis Weyr*), and other fan-based forums existing on the Internet. Most forums have rules related to members' behavior, including stipulating that rudeness, insulting others, personal attacks, threats, or inflammatory posts are not tolerated; and, that illegal activities, as well as lewd comments, language or photos are prohibited (Forum Moderating Tips, ProBoards).

Lark shared these posting restrictions were not put in place to hinder communication, but rather to support fair, unbiased communication and protect members from individuals who are not interested in role-play, but rather in disrupting play within communities (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). Lark contended communication in the forum should support role-play interaction, and members' out-of-character social interactions, but should not serve to cause harm to others or to divide the community. She felt confident the rules governing inappropriate content in posts were fair, and stated moderators created the guidelines together. Additionally, the original participants in the forum voted to accept the rules posts, and all new members of the forum agreed to uphold these rules when they became members (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Teamwork and shared goals. Shared goals or interests and teamwork were key elements that defined *Trelis Weyr* as a community of practice and play. Beyond a sense of community as previously explained in domain one, these same elements (teamwork

and shared goals) also supported the development of active, social participation and social relationships between members in the forum. Having a common interest and developing shared goals supported members' interactions with one another and provided opportunities for increased collaboration as they developed storylines for role-play.

Interestingly, though the three focal participants had all ascended to leadership roles by the time of our interviews, each of them indicated they had not always been confident about their interactions in RPG forums – particularly when they first began to play. However, each stated in her own way that a sense of shared passions and interests made them feel they belonged to the community, even when they were not always confident about being able to role-play competently with other forum members within the community. As an example, Zi shared:

> I've learned many things through role-play; how to be more confident in myself and my ideas, the importance of time management, and how to prioritize tasks to suit my available time and energy, as well as how to react to situations both in and out of role-plays. Mostly it has helped me feel a bit less self-conscious about myself and to become more comfortable about interacting in these types of forums. Over time, I gained confidence, but I always felt I belonged because the members were so friendly and welcoming, and there was so much support. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

Being a part of a community with others who shared their interest in *Pern* fandom, and developing shared goals to support role-play provided the three focal participants with opportunities to develop their abilities to achieve individual and collective goals within the forum structure. Over time, they became more comfortable

with their role-play skills, but all three talked about the importance of feeling welcomed and made a part of the group from the start as a foundation for their later development and success.

Additionally, increased teamwork appeared to be a by-product of members' interactions to achieve shared goals within the forum. One example of forum teamwork was the way more seasoned members of the community often performed social duties and conducted forum business in support of the entire site, though they were not in forum leadership roles per se (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). These more advanced members were committed to ensuring the good health of the community by making themselves available to offer support, to coordinate with other expert players, to perform maintenance tasks on the forum's infrastructure, and to provide models of successful role-play. Lark explained:

> As a member who has been around longer, you have to keep event threads going
> and help others who have not been involved in role-play on the site as long. Many
> times older members will create characters just because we need them for a
> certain type of event or to role-play with other, newer member; to help them learn
> the basics, and to keep things active. Part of what our older, more experienced
> members do on the site is to just keep everything going. Some things are solely
> run by staff, but I like it whenever more experienced members are involved too,
> so you can give the chance to other people to try to be in charge a bit. And it is
> fun for them to be involved more and provide that leadership in the forum.
> (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Allowing experienced members of the forum to take a more active role in supporting play and the overall health of the site produced a greater sense of affiliation with the site and supported persistence at play over time, as well as providing a means to train potential future leaders for the forum community.

Taking on new roles in Trelis Weyr. As alluded to in the last section, the three focal participants also spoke of taking on new roles in forum role-play as a portion of how they grew personally through their involvement in *Trelis Weyr*. Kit talked about becoming a moderator on the original *Trelis Weyr* site, and how it gave her the opportunity to work with new members in particular; something she shared she enjoyed very much (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012). Though Kit felt she might have been a more demanding proofreader and editor than some of the other moderators on the site, during our interviews she shared many things she did to help members improve their character development and writing of posts, including: pointing out major mistakes with grammar and spelling, correcting misalignment in the histories, helping members add description, and making better word choices to help players create character profiles that would support members' visualizing character traits for future role-play interaction (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012).

Kit indicated she had several opportunities to take on various roles during her involvement in both *Trelis* forums as well. In fact, she shared these affordances on the site were the primary reason she became so involved in role-play on *Trelis Weyr*, and why she stayed involved as long as she did (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012). Kit stated:

What originally led me to join *Trelis* was the opening for a junior queen rider. As well, the specific history of the *Weyr* surrounding the queen riders interested me, so I decided to try out. I was surprised when my queen rider won, though I felt I had a decent amount of role-play experience by that time and a little bit of experience playing a high-ranking character, so I thought I was ready to take on a bit of a challenge. (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012)

In this excerpt, Kit discussed the opportunity to "try out" for a junior queen rider position on the forum. This character, once developed, would be second in command in a Weyr community behind the original queen rider, or Weyrwoman. In essence, Kit was saying she developed a character to try to obtain this new leadership position and was surprised when she won and was offered this opportunity. Though this was the first major leadership position she'd taken on an RPG forum site, Kit felt ready to take on the challenge because she'd played a high-ranking character previously and had a decent amount of experience role-playing. Kit had been mentored on the site through these early opportunities and was now ready to step forward for something more.

Zi added to this notion of exploring new roles when she mentioned the sense of freedom she felt to explore different aspects of her personality. She shared:

Have you ever had a time where you thought, "Wow! I wish I could do that," or "I wonder what it would be like to be a pessimist," or something along those lines? Trying out new personalities is just putting those curiosities into written form. It's an interesting way to answer "what if" questions. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 202)

Zi voiced in this interview excerpt she felt the freedom to explore various personas and

explore aspects of her own personality in the characters she created and role-played. Zi further shared, being provided opportunities through RPG interaction to take on new roles allowed her to investigate parts of herself she might not have been as comfortable exploring in a face-to-face context (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012).

Likewise, Larkwing mentioned the excitement of exploring possible identities by creating a variety of characters and becoming them during role-play. Additionally, she explained the types of characters members generally created as they explored new roles and relationships on the site, detailing their differences and a greater sense of worth for various types of characters within play:

There are four different kinds of characters that people make: GaryStues or VerySues, characters based on yourself and people you know, characters based on those you've seen in books or movies, and truly original characters. GaryStues and VerySues are cookie cutter characters who are always good and nice. They have no flaws and are pretty much perfect. Those you created based on yourself and people you know are the next step, because you have a model to pattern your character after. These characters may come out of something that happened in your life. Characters created based on book or movie characters are also fairly easy, because you try to embody the character traits of that person in your new character description. Sometimes you combine the interesting parts of multiple characters into a new composite in your own character. For me personally, I base many characters I create on artwork I produce first. I have an image of what that character looks like in my head, and it is another kind of expression of who that person is. Sometimes this character reflects things you like about yourself or

others, or things you wish you could do yourself. (Larkwing, personal

communication, December 15, 2012)

Character development as described by my focal participants was a powerful opportunity

for forum members to explore aspects of themselves and others through identity creation

and subsequent role-play.

    Forms of mentorship. Mentorship was a key element that emerged when

considering active, social participation in *Trelis Weyr*. Collaboration on the site provided

opportunities for informal mentoring and scaffolding, which was particularly significant

for new members who were often a bit lost until they learned the netiquette and nuances

of forum play. This form of mentorship is common for today's youth, who develop a

variety of knowledge through informal mentoring and apprenticeship via online spaces

(Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003a; 2003b). Additionally, these types of interactions in

online discussions help "teen writers develop a vocabulary for talking about writing and

learn strategies for rewriting and improving their own work " (Jenkins, 2004, n.p.).

Moreover, collaboration, informal mentoring, and scaffolding occur at the point of need,

so forum participants receive assistance in a timely fashion and learning is not

interrupted.

    All three focal participants shared they felt the best way to learn how to role-play

was to "lurk" on an RPG forum site and watch more experienced players as they

interacted, as well as to ask questions when a "newbie" didn't understand something.

There were governing documents devoted to providing support and assistance for new

members, but it became evident quickly when I lurked on the second *Trelis Weyr: The

Obsidian Rebellion* forum that members learned the most from mentorships they forged

with more experienced members who took them under wing and gave them advice,

helping them learn how to create characters and enter play. As an example, Zi shared:

> Other players are by far the most valuable resource there are when it comes to
> roleplaying. Even without consciously doing it, members help each other grow
> and learn through the act of roleplaying itself. Having a place to write where you
> won't be judged, and to see and experience how others role-play in a variety of
> situations, is the greatest way to learn and grow. (Zi, personal communication,
> December 20, 2012)

Lurking on the site and making connections to informal mentors on the forum supported

members' opportunities to learn how to develop characters and enter role-play, as well as

to learn the netiquette specific to *Pern*-related RPG forum communities, members'

interactions and collaboration. These forms of mentorship proved necessary, according

to the focal participants, in supporting members' ease within the community and

continued development as new players of the RPG forum.

Virtual relationships and social mentoring. Unique to online communities, the

virtual nature of active, social participation within a forum like *Trelis Weyr* supports the

development of virtual relationships with other forum participants as they interacted and

role-played. Zi shared in her first interview how much she enjoyed meeting and building

social relationships with people across the world that shared an interest in *Pern* literature

and were a part of *Pern* fandom (Zi, personal communication, December 23, 2012).

Aside from role-play on *Trelis Weyr*, Lark also shared she interacted with others

who were part of a wider *Pern* fan community. She spent many hours each week

producing artwork, writing, and sharing information about her *Pern* interests on Deviant

Art and other virtual spaces to introduce her work to others around the globe. Lark

indicated her involvement in a wide, online friend group supported her development of

greater self-confidence about her artwork and a sense of acceptance in the larger *Pern*

fandom community (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Further, Zi stated she enjoyed interacting with members about their personal

issues, and developing virtual relationships provided her with support during times she

experienced difficulties in her personal life.

> There were times when just having someone to rant to and get more support from
>
> was needed. When breaking up with my mate didn't go down as easily as I had
>
> hoped, one of the newer members of *Trelis*, who is now a close friend, was there
>
> to offer the support and shoulder I needed to keep calm. When others talked to me
>
> about personal issues, I always tried to be that support for them as well. (Zi,
>
> personal communication, December 29, 2012)

Zi's mention of having someone's support at the time of need was a typical refrain during

my interviews with both she and Lark. These two young women shared examples of

times they helped others during personal crisis, as well as times they were supported and

strengthened by virtual friends they'd developed relationships with through the forum.

These relationships went past in-character interactions to encompass out-of-character

discussions that often made these relationships feel even more intimate than friendships

they'd developed in face-to-face contexts (Larkwing, personal conversation, December

15, 2012).

Interestingly, though Lark and Zi shared they were comfortable with developing

virtual relationships in the forum; this was not the case for my third focal participant, Kit.

She shared social relationships had been difficult for her to develop in the past, whether virtual or face-to-face. Kit's participation on the forum can be best described as "interest-driven practices" (Ito et al., 2010, p. 10), because she explored her interests and enjoyed sharing her writing with others more than extending social relationships with peers. Kit clarified:

> Role-playing has helped me improve my writing over time, and I think it's also helped with social interactions. I've never been a very outgoing person, but it's impossible to RP without interacting with others, so it's hard not to figure out when you're upsetting someone or doing something wrong. It forces me to think about my interactions with others and how I am perceived by them, how I make them feel. Admittedly, it's something I've felt I've never been good at to begin with. (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013)

Kit indicated in her interviews she seldom talked to other members in chat or private messaging, and she did not enjoy sharing personal information about herself. Though she felt she spent a lot of time collaborating with other members in role-play to create collective narration in the story threads, she was not interested in developing more intimate relationships with other *Trelis Weyr* members. However, this did not preclude her from offering support when asked, if a member did share issues that were personal with her. Kit just preferred not to share her own personal life and issues on the forum with others she encountered, unless she had established extremely close bonds that extended beyond the forum play; and according to Kit, that was rare for her to do.

Creation of a Virtual Participatory Culture

Participatory culture provides a network supporting artistic creation and

community engagement, as well as a place where more experienced members pass along their knowledge to novices (Lenhardt & Madden, 2005). Additionally, members believe what they contribute to the culture matters, and thus feel some degree of social connection with other members of the culture. Forms of participatory culture include affiliations around various forms of media, expressions of new creative forms, collaborative problem solving, and circulation or flow of media (Jenkins, 2006a). *Trelis Weyr* appeared to meet all four forms of participatory culture for its members. In analyzing both the artifacts from the forum, as well as transcripts from interviews with the three focal participants, I identified four themes that supported *Trelis Weyr* members' creation of a virtual participatory culture: members worked together to solve problems, were committed to continued play, created and used assets in their community, ultimately creating a culture for role-play interaction that produced collective narratives.

Working together to solve problems. Lark likened the hierarchy in the forum to the structure of a school, which helped to set the foundation for my understanding of how leadership and members worked together to solve problems:

The administrator is like the principal, and the moderators are assistant principals. Then there are people who have been around awhile, and they are like upperclassmen. They have more experience and know how the forum operates better. Since they have been playing longer too, they have shown their dedication to the site. There are people who have been there a while, so they are not exactly newbies, like your sophomores in high school. Then you have the newbies – the freshmen. They are the ones who have come to the site and are completely new to role-play game forums. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15,

2012)

Additionally, in response to a question about who had control of the site, Larkwing revealed:

> Basically, it is a pecking order. You have an administrator at the top that created the site, and often there are co-admins who have helped each other run the site and build up the site. They are the big-wigs on the site, and the ones in charge. They call all the final shots, and they have a staff of moderators. Sometimes you have members work on advertising to build membership for your site, or different people who work on graphics and others things as additional staff members. These leaders are the people players go to with questions. They are also the people you are supposed to go to if there is a problem with another member. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

These excerpts from our interview detail how leadership and the members of *Trelis Weyr* worked collectively to solve problems when they arose during in-character and out-of - character interactions. Lark shared it was her job as site administrator to try to discuss the issue with each involved member individually and guide these members to work out their conflict so all involved would be able to resolve the issue and move forward. When necessary, Lark and the moderators removed writing and other textual items posted by members from the site, in the case of controversial things the group decided should not be a part of their role-play. On some RPG forum sites, Lark stated leadership even banned members from participation because of conduct issues, but that never happened in either *Trelis Weyr* forum (Larkwing, personal conversation, December 15, 2012).

When there were differences of opinion affecting all members of *Trelis Weyr*,

Lark explained the active membership would discuss the issue out-of-character and then vote to make a decision regarding the direction they wanted to take as a group. Sometimes an out-of-character thread would be created to discuss the situation on the information board, and at other times there would be less formal discussions between leadership and membership using the private messaging feature. When a vote was called, a majority would carry the decision and members would need to adhere to the new guidelines created in this process. If members were not in agreement with the majority decision, they could also choose to leave the forum. Lark indicated there was only one situation where a few members left *Trelis Weyr*, and it was related to plot developments the members involved didn't agree with (Larkwing, personal conversation, December 15, 2012).

Commitment to continued play. One of the key areas of contention that surfaced periodically involved members' commitment to sustained play over time. It was important for the continued growth of the forum as a whole that members exhibited a commitment to continued play when they became involved in threads on boards and sub-boards. As Lark shared, "If someone doesn't post for a long time, play stops on that thread. It isn't very much fun if you have to wait a long time for someone to post so you can continue to contribute to the story" (personal communication, December 15, 2012). Zi also shared this sentiment when she said:

> I place a lot of importance on activity. I would rather play with an inexperienced role-player who tries to play often than with an excellent writer who only pops on once in a blue moon. So, when a site has incredibly slow activity, I find I tend to lose interest. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

All three focal participants indicated *Trelis Weyr* members were committed to the forum and consistent in their play; much more so than with the other forums they played on regularly. It was one of the main reasons all three shared they enjoyed role-playing on *Trelis Weyr*, and why they felt motivated to continue to role-play there over time. They indicated most forums will close down in a few months because members do not maintain this commitment long term with one another; however, in the case of *Trelis*, members were extremely dedicated and on the forum quite often.

Larkwing shared insight regarding why members appeared to enjoy this interaction and stayed with the forum longer than might normally occur with other sites:

> Some people are not role-playing at all when they are online. You might just be chatting out-of-character with people. We are not actively role-playing all the time. I might have three or four posts I make in the several hours I am online, and the rest of the time I am talking to people out of character. You get into a conversation and it is like catching up with old friends. People might only be on once a week because that is all they can do right now. It is just nice to see them and say hi and find out what has been going on with them. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

All three focal participants discussed the role social interaction played in their continued involvement, beyond their development of the forum and in-character role-play. This social interaction involved collective problem solving that went beyond the confines of the RPG forum, extending into their authentic lives. Lark talked about having fun chatting with members and catching up, like you do with old friends you don't often see. She shared in this excerpt how happy it made her to share her life online with these

friends; to say hello to them and find out what had been going on with them. This type of social connection with forum members and development of social relationships that extend beyond role-play interaction was at the crux of understanding the motivational aspects of RPG forum involvement. Social interaction within the forum influenced participants' commitment to in-character role-play, but also supported the development of out-of-character social relationships that fostered online friendships and contributed to members' persistence at play over time.

Creation and use of assets. Though all forum members did not create their own assets, they did repurpose many items for their use during role-play. Chief among these assets were the stories created by Anne McCaffrey, which inspired their play and were used by members as mentor texts for their own creation of story. The forum was semi-canon, so items in the forum were both repurposed and newly created assets, though all things could have existed in the *Pern* world created by McCaffrey.

Additionally, members created many resources that could be used by others in the forum to support their play; including the creation of characters, as well as graphic or visual representations of characters and places. For instance, Lark discussed creating guides, tips, and assistance pieces she posted in the forum to help members as they navigated the space and interacted through role-play. There were 23 governing documents, including items that were informational in nature, those that provided guidance for creation of character profiles and entry into role-play, and "how to" pieces sharing tips and tricks useful throughout play.

Lark also spoke of creating drawings of characters she wrote, and posting those drawings on *Deviant Art*. She mentioned sometimes artwork of this nature was

commissioned by others, and those who created it were paid for their work. In sites like *Deviant Art* people actually can receive real money, but in most RPGs like *Trelis Weyr* people shared these items with one another freely because they liked to draw and were willing to create a visual for someone else. In some instances, players who contributed various texts beyond their contributions in role-play received points based on a system set up in the forum for bartering. In *Trelis*, these points are called "marks" because that is the term used for money in *Pern* literature. Marks were coins a player used to buy things in-character during the game. For example, if a player wanted to give herself a pen, she could buy the artifact in a market set up on one of the sub-boards. Lark shared:

> I have enjoyed doing the extra things on Deviant Art because I have been asked
> by other sites to do some of their artwork, since they liked my work. For instance,
> I've been asked to do the drawings to show the different colors and sizes of
> dragons in relation to each other. It was really fun to do, and it was nice because it
> made me feel special. I loved that site anyway because it has a great plot and a
> wonderful community, but also that is when I first began to feel accepted as a role
> player in the larger *Pern* fandom community. You start to get involved with
> others, and then across multiple *Pern* fandom sites. (Larkwing, personal
> communication, December 15, 2012)

Lark mentions here how much she enjoyed creating artwork for *Trelis Weyr* and other *Pern* fan communities because it made her feel special; she felt she possessed skills to create things other participants valued, and this involvement and support of others helped her to feel more involved in *Pern* fandom across multiple sites.

Creation of culture. The three focal participants also talked about the

excitement of creating worlds during their interviews; in particular, how this creation of

culture was motivating to them as an important underpinning for their continued role-play

over time. Lark shared, "It is really something to be able to work together to create a

world, deciding all the places that exist in our Weyr and the characters who live there.

Making something as complex as another society and creating the culture that exists

within it is empowering."

Additionally, the participants talked about things that occurred to create culture

within their forum in support of their role-play. Lark mentioned there were few days that

went by when the group couldn't find some sort of idea for a thread between characters,

or a funny remark about something that had happened (Larkwing, personal conversation,

December 15, 2012). However, she did admit there were times when it was frustrating to

work with other *Trelis* participants, just like in situations in her off-line life. Nevertheless,

one of the things Lark said she liked best about *Trelis Weyr* was that for the most part

members had fun together. Lark shared:

> Sometimes it was a bit frustrating as well, just like it can be with working with
>
> others in real life. Ideas clash, people try to vie for a place above others, some
>
> storm off when they don't get what they want. What I liked about this group was
>
> that most were not like that, and for the most part we were all there together to
>
> have fun. It wasn't about trying to be better than someone else, or to have more
>
> power than the others. Role-play wasn't about winning and beating everyone
>
> else. It was about creating a world where we could role-play characters we created
>
> and become a part of the Weyr we created on *Pern*. (Larkwing, personal

communication, December 15, 2012)

Lark also shared a key element explaining the close bond that appeared to exist between the active members of *Trelis Weyr*. She stated:

> The majority of the members in *Trelis* were people who had met on a different forum site, but it didn't last longer than a month. At that site, we had already been brought together over things we enjoyed and then found out it was ending. I created *Trelis* partly to give us a new place to keep role-playing, since the two admins at that site disappeared and left us stranded. That kind of bond between members is something you see in many sites, for similar reasons. They may have begun playing 3 or 4 sites back, and they continue to move their best loved characters forward to new sites and play together. Those old relationships between members establish a strong sense of comradeship at the core of a new site, and it has continued for us past *Trelis Weyr*, now that both forums are no longer active. Several members from the *Trelis* forums are playing together now on a new site. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Several members of Trelis Weyr had long-standing online relationships with one another, forged during their involvement on other forum sites previous to their role-play on *Trelis Weyr*. These older relationships were foundational in creating this new culture, when members joined together and began to role-play on *Trelis Weyr*. This movement across multiple sites with relationships transcending various fan communities is a very interesting finding that deserves additional research.

Production of Collective Narratives through Role-Play

In a role-play-game forum like *Trelis Weyr*, action is created through

collaborative creation of a literacy event; story threads were generated through participants' role-play, and collective narratives emerged. Analysis of data revealed two themes related to production of collective narratives during role-play: role-play was a form of new-aged storytelling; and, members were involved in sustained collaboration as they developed site-wide story arcs.

Role-play as a form of new-aged storytelling. For hundreds of years, knowledge has been passed from one generation to the next through storytelling. According to researchers in anthropology, storytelling has a close connection with how the brain works. Our brains use a story-oriented structure to process and recall things happening in life around us. These lived experiences are retained in long-term memory as narratives. Additionally, we are able to reconstruct experiences as new narratives and apply this knowledge to new contexts, deriving new meanings. Additionally, storytelling is a powerful communication tool because it affords the opportunity to involve our emotions to engage and move us.

Role-playing in *Trelis Weyr* was a type of virtual improvisation and a form of new-aged, collective storytelling; it was a joint narration created when players constructed meanings via textual interactions. However, these interactions took place through the mediation of characters, in the sense that participants narrated a story by having their character tell the story or perform the actions. In *Trelis Weyr*, members created story threads through text written in third person to describe what they would do as a character in the space, interacting with the other characters that joined them.

Additionally, information from interviews indicated members did not prepare what would happen in advance of their role-play for the most part. They may have

discussed a general idea during out-of-character interaction prior to and during role-play, but as the focal participants shared, members chose to allow the characters to drive the action during role-play. Kit stated:

> I always considered role-playing as pretty much the same as writing a story, only with lots of protagonists. I like being able to try out many different types of characters, and to me it's one of the best parts of role-playing; I had a blind man who was fiercely independent, a sour and ill-tempered queen rider, a friendly but lazy rider who ended up becoming the leader of the Weyr, and an ambitious rebel who bonded the lowest rank in the Weyr. I was as surprised as anyone else by the way their stories went, and that's something that could not have happened in a traditional story. (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013)

Kit's quote above indicated she felt role-play was much like traditional forms of story creation, but there were opportunities for her to try out different types of characters and see how they would respond during role-play interaction with others. She shared she was surprised by some of the things that happened during role-play with her character, which would not be the case had she been writing a story. When asked to clarify this statement, Kit shared because she was not the only person writing the story there would always be elements that emerged she was not in control of and she had not previously considered (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013).

Sustained collaboration developed site-wide story arcs. Individuals were involved in sustained collaboration within this virtual space, creating stories that emerged as each player contributed narration during role-play. All three of the focal participants talked about the collaborative nature of *Trelis Weyr*, and how members worked together

during site-wide events, as well as within small group role-play. Kit shared, "*Trelis Weyr* always required a lot of collaboration between the admin, the mod, and the members who were writing, especially when we were going to have a big, site-wide event" (personal communication, December 23, 2012). She further explained the forum became very active around the time of these events, when everyone ended up role-playing in related threads. Often these plots revolved around hatchings, but there were other story arcs with significant site-wide development. In all, 4 story arcs emerged from analysis of the threads developed during 8 months of role-play in *Trelis Weyr*, including 24 total story threads. Across these threads, between 2 and 11 members actively role-played to create these collective narratives, and threads ranged in length between 4 and 18 pages when downloaded to a single-spaced Word document (224 total pages).

The first story arc, which I named *The First Clutch and New Colors*, involved what Lark shared was "the starting point for the storyline when the site first opened" (Larkwing, personal communication, January 17, 2013). Within this first arc, 5 threads were created exploring the hatching of the first clutch of dragon eggs and the emergence of a new senior queen dragon, Weyrwoman, and Weyrleaders. Additionally, candidates were introduced as they stepped onto the hatching sands and waited to find out if a baby dragonet would impress with them and make them a dragon rider. Within this first arc and hatching, three new colors for dragons emerged, which was a departure from the canon established in *Pern* literature. Characters (and players) believed this was a mutation initially, but there were elements of foreshadowing in the threads about what this might mean for the future of *Pern*. The arc ended with a hatching feast as congratulations for all new weyrling pairs (dragons and newly designated dragon riders).

Interactions in these 5 threads took place for the first 2 months of the site's existence.

Three other story arcs developed over the remaining 6 months of play, including: a story arc I named *The Gather* (3 threads, 40 pages of text), another about the existence of a hidden clutch in *Ista Weyr*, which I named *The Hidden Clutch* (6 threads, 45 pages of text), and a final arc about a storm that devastated one Hold and caused increased development in *Southern Weyr* (10 threads, 96 pages of text). I named this last story arc *The Storm and Southern Weyr*.

In domain 2, which is focused on role-play as a collaborative process, I shared an explanation of how collaboration plays a key role in supporting members' interactions as they engaged in role play. First, I identified members' engagement in active, social participation, sharing ways participants occupied positions in the community and had opportunities for new roles during continued involvement in the forum. Members also used tools for communication to support discussion between members, including within site and off site means of speaking with each other. Netiquette rules within the forum also governed appropriate interaction and content for posts, and what would occur if rules were not followed. Though these rules may have seemed restrictive at first glance, Lark shared they were in place to support fair, unbiased communication and protect members instead of hindering communication between them. Focal participants shared they had common goals and interests, supporting teamwork and defining *Trelis Weyr* as a community of practice and play. However, they also mentioned they had not always felt competent and comfortable as a role-player, so it was important they were made to feel a part of the group from the start as a foundation for the later development and success. As

well, being able to take on new roles and develop forms of mentorship supported

members' ability to become actively involved in the forum.

Next, I considered how *Trelis Weyr* was an example of a virtual participatory

culture. Members worked together to solve problems, were committed to play, created

and used assets within their community, and were able to create collective narratives

through role-play. I detailed how leadership and members of the forum worked

collectively to solve problems and the importance of commitment to continued playas a

key to successful role-play over time. Finally, I discussed the creation and use of assets to

support participants' role-play, and how empowering members felt as they created

culture. All these elements were important ultimately in collaborative authorship and the

production of collective narratives through role-play; an interesting form of new-aged

storytelling that produced four site-wide story arcs. Moving forward, domain 3 focuses

on the cultural ways participants used language, performance, and play as they interacted

within this RPG forum, extending our understanding of this space as a collaborative

community of practice and play. To this end, I identified four themes related to literacy

events, performance, and play: participants developed literacy skills, including

collaborative authorship and the development of players' competence; they were both

producers and consumers while interacting in *Trelis Weyr*; members performed during

role-play; and, they engaged in experimentation and problem-solving through play.

Domain 3: Literacy Events, Performance, and Play

In this section, I consider the cultural ways participants used language,

performance, and play to enact literacy events as they developed collective narratives

through role-play. I identified four themes related to literacy events, performance, and play evident in *Trelis Weyr*: participants developed literacy skills, were both producers and consumers while interacting on *Trelis Weyr*, performed during role-play, and engaged in experimentation and problem-solving through play.

Development of Literacy Skills

Gee (1991) stated literacy is more than a collection of decontextualized skills. Rather, it is deeply connected to "embodied action in the material and social world" (p. 714) as a socially and culturally situated practice. Today's literacy requirements demand a new understanding of what is "good" reading and writing, which was conventionally understood to be "individualistic, author-centric, and monolingual, and rigidly adherent to standard genres and conventions" (Black, 2009b, p. 422). This is the opposite of fan writing, which is collaborative, interactional, multimodal, and creative. Using this latter definition of literacies, I now investigate the literacy practices that emerged during my investigation of *Trelis Weyr*.

Collaborative authorship and collective narratives. Role-play afforded participants of *Trelis Weyr* the opportunity to engage in collaborative authorship, creating collective narratives as story threads emerged. Players had to write their character's story in third person and interact with other forum members who were role-playing characters they had created. Engagement in role-play took place on various boards and sub-boards of the forum representing different locations in the *Weyr* created by the site administrator. Members participated in the game by making their actions visible – by showing the features of their character through textual descriptions. They did not merely narrate

events and describe actions; they included descriptions of surroundings where these actions took place, and they interwove details about actions to be carried out in the future.

Participants worked jointly, creating a collective narration by relying on reciprocal expectations among participants that all would act predictably and consistently. Bruner (1991) calls this type of implicit contract "verisimilitude… governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness" (p. 4). In Table 7 below, I provide a portion of a thread called "Good Morning Dawn", collaboratively constructed by three forum members as they described the beginning of Maeleth's (a queen dragon's) hatching.

Table 10

Story thread from Trelis Weyr, posted August 26, 2011

Username	Thread Contribution
Kitsuneko Weyrling Female 120 Posts	It was early morning when Maeleth's eggs began to rock in earnest. The gold was dozing at the time, but fortunately, Maeleth was a light sleeper, and the quivering of the eggs closest to her was enough to wake her up. She crooned happily as she noticed the eggs rocking back and forth, paying close attention to her queen egg and the orange-swirled egg beside it. They were not ready to hatch quite yet, but it would certainly be today. The queen reached out to contact her rider. *Iskra, it begins,* she said, excitement echoing in her voice, and then she gave a loud bugle to alert the rest of the Weyr. More than a few people would already be awake, but those who weren't wouldn't be asleep for much longer. *The eggs are hatching!* Iskra was woken up from a sound sleep by her dragon's warning, and though she was still tired, she was too excited to be annoyed at losing a few hours of sleep. Finally, the clutch was hatching! The last few weeks had been hard on the Junior Weyrwoman, with everything that had happened since the kidnapping and being forced to remain at Trelis with

Table 10 (continued)

Kitsuneko	Maeleth, but her son and the other children were back home now, and safe, and another obsidian and her newly-hatched clutch had been discovered. After this Hatching, hopefully things would settle down and go back to normal. Iskra hoped so.

The gold rider spared just enough time in her weyr to appear presentable, and then rushed to the hatching sands to keep Maeleth company. The normally sedate gold was getting antsy as the candidates started to enter, keenly aware that soon she would have to let her children leave her side to Impress and not happy about it at all. She curled her neck around the golden egg and shot a glare at the candidates who had arrived so far, before Iskra admonished her. "You'll have to step aside eventually, Maeleth," she said, stroking the gold's shoulder. "Your children will be fine, dear." |
| Kitsuneko | Some of the eggs were already cracking, and she hoped the candidates arrived faster than the eggs hatched. One of the smaller eggs already had a sizable hole at the bottom with the forked tip of a tail starting to poke out, though the rest of the shell was more or less in one piece. Iskra watched the clutch. It wouldn't be long now. |
| Akira

Topazrider

Female

464 Posts | Akira hadn't slept much last night, so she was just lying on her bed, waiting for something to happen. Then, like a sign from Faranth, the candidates were told that the eggs were hatching. She couldn't resist smiling as she jumped out of bed, and pulled out her robes and sandals. Blue crooned sleepily, but when he saw His pulling out her white robes and her sandals, he growled, and went back to sleep. **You really are lazy Blue.** She giggled as she spoke to her fire lizard.

Akira quickly pulled on her robes, and ran, all out, for the hatching sands. She was literally gasping for breath by the time she got there. **Hi...Maelath...Sorry...out...of breath.** She bowed to the golden queen, and hoped that her apology would suffice for now, at least until she caught her breath. She slowly walked over to her place where the female candidates normally stood. She was standing in just about the same place she had stood during Loraketh's hatching. |

Table 10 (continued)

Akira	Some of the eggs were already cracking, and she hoped the candidates arrived faster than the eggs hatched. One of the smaller eggs already had a sizable hole at the bottom with the forked tip of a tail starting to poke out, though the rest of the shell was more or less in one piece. Iskra watched the clutch. It wouldn't be long now. Akira hadn't slept much last night, so she was just lying on her bed, waiting for something to happen. Then, like a sign from Faranth, the candidates were told that the eggs were hatching. She couldn't resist smiling as she jumped out of bed, and pulled out her robes and sandals. Blue crooned sleepily, but when he saw His pulling out her white robes and her sandals, he growled, and went back to sleep. **You really are lazy Blue.** She giggled as she spoke to her fire lizard. Akira quickly pulled on her robes, and ran, all out, for the hatching sands. She was literally gasping for breath by the time she got there. **Hi...Maelath...Sorry...out...of breath.** She bowed to the golden queen, and hoped that her apology would suffice for now, at least until she caught her breath. She slowly walked over to her place where the female candidates normally stood. She was standing in just about the same place she had stood during Loraketh's hatching. Akira smiled hopefully when she saw that one of the smaller eggs had already cracked, and had a small forked tail sticking out of it. *Please Faranth, don't leave me standing again.* She closed her eyes, and turned her face upward as she sent the silent prayer to the skies. She didn't want to be left as a candidate again, she wanted to find her life partner in this clutch. She looked back at the eggs, silently praying that one of them would hold a dragon for her.
Demetri	Demetri was sound asleep, but when Iona started humming and fluttering around on their bed. **Please Iona, let me sleep.** He mumbled the words into his pillow as he tried to fall back asleep. Iona wasn't going to let him though. No, Hers needed to go to the sands so that one of the gold Large One's eggs could pick Hers. Though, secretly the gold fire lizard was hoping that Hers wouldn't impress one of the Large One's eggs.

Table 10 (continued)

Demetri	That way he would have more time for her, just as it should be. Demetri practically growled at Iona when he finally sat up. Then he realized why she was humming. The gold flit had sent him a picture of Maelath's eggs, which would mean only one thing coming from her. **Oh Faranth their hatching!!!** He threw the blankets off of himself, and accidently on top of Iona. **Sorry girl!** He apologized to her as he attempted to hurry into his robes. He yelped when he fell on his butt while trying to force himself into his pants. Demetri finally finished dressing, and ran straight to the hatching sands. Iona new better than to go anywhere near the Large One and her eggs, so she flew to the stands, and perched there, watching as Hers finally arrived and greeted the gold Large One. Demetri smiled, and bowed to Maelath before trying to speak to the gold dragon. **Greetings Maelath, I hope you and one of your children deem me worthy as a rider.** His voice was a little less breathy than Akira's had been. Though, it actually didn't take him as much energy to run to the sands as most shorter people. Demetri didn't understand that really, and pondered why that was so as he made his way over to where the male candidates stood. He looked over at the large clutch of eggs, and smiled broadly when he saw one of the eggs had started to hatch, and there was a tail sticking out of it already. *I guess you really are impatient.* He chuckled at his own thought, and wondered if the dragonet would hear him.
Zirin Topazrider Female 458 Posts	She was tired. She was always tired these days. Between the dragon lessons and chores during the day, and the wher lessons and duties at night, Yufa was beginning to think she wouldn't be able to continue on for much longer. As it was she had been beyond thankful to have a shortened lesson the previous night, allowing her to flop into bed earlier than normal. It had only felt like a few minutes, but hours had passed since she fell asleep, and it was time for her to get up. She always woke up early in order to make sure she was presentable, but it was definitely becoming harder and harder.

Table 10 (continued)

Zirin	Cassim cheeped a second time, his tail swishing as His failed to wake up at the sound. He knew His would be upset if she slept in, he had made the mistake of allowing her to sleep in once before and would never repeat
	that mistake again. He chirped again before nipping at her ear, quickly darting out of the way as Yufa shot up in surprise. She was about to berate him for waking her, but he beat her to it and sent an image of the just rising sun. *Oh I am so sorry, my little Cassim. You are wonderful as always.* She thought to him, making sure he could feel the happiness and love she felt towards him. She glanced around the room, hoping she hadn't woken her roommates, though in the dark it was quite difficult to see.

To be active participants in role-play, forum members created a joint narration in which players constructed meaning via textual interactions. This thread was initiated by Kitsuneko (Kit), who established the setting and time of day, as well as initial actions occurring within the space as a possible vehicle for continued plot development. Kit shared it was early morning and Maeleth's eggs were about to hatch. You could sense the excitement inherent in this plot development because of the tone used by Kit in her writing. Kit introduced several characters in this opening segment as well, including Maeleth (the dragon mother of this clutch), and Iskra, a Junior Weyrwoman impressed to Maeleth. Kit also alluded to previous plot developments and connected this new storyline with narratives that had been written in previous threads. This first segment ended as Iskra emerged at the edge of the hatching sands and comforted her dragon, Maeleth about the welfare of her children who would soon be born.

Next, a second member (username Akira) added to this thread, entering play as she joined other candidates at the edge of the hatching sands. Within the first few paragraphs the reader is made aware Akira has been a candidate at previous hatchings; however, she never impressed with a hatching dragonet. Akira shared in this segment she hoped this time one of Maeleth's eggs might hold a dragon for her. This second member (username Akira) also added information about a second character named Demetri, sharing he was also a candidate and describing Demetri's situation as he woke up and made his way to the hatching sands to await his own fate.

A third forum member (username Zirin) was the next contributor to this thread, sharing Yufa's connection with this sequence of events. Yufa, another candidate and possible future dragon rider, was described as she woke up and prepared to leave her quarters to make her way to the hatching sands. The thread then continued after Zirin's contribution, cycling back to Kit for a second installment. In this sequence (Kit, Akira, and Zirin) the thread unfolded as the story developed when each member provided a contribution in turn. This role-play sequence and related collaboration created a story thread; a collective narrative that would be impossible for one member alone to create, since all members' contributions were required for this story to be told.

Developing competence. Virtual spaces like *Trelis Weyr* afford youth the opportunity for creative, virtual collaboration, where everyone can feel like an author or producer of text and collectively contribute, supporting each other's development of competence as literacy learners. The three *Trelis Weyr* participants I interviewed felt fairly competent as role-players, though they were not always comfortable with the contributions they were providing to make role-play satisfying for other players. For

instance, Kit shared:

> I feel pretty competent about the writing side of it [role-play], as I do think I have
> enough experience to be a pretty good writer. However, I am less sure of myself
> when it comes to interacting directly with other people. Am I replying to the
> thread often enough? Do my posts include enough information to give the other
> person something to reply to? Am I inadvertently deciding how someone else's
> character acts, which is bad etiquette? Stuff like that. It's because I've been
> writing solo a lot longer than I've been role-playing. (Kit, personal
> communication, December 20, 2012)

In general, the focal participants stated as they role-played more they overcame some of
the hesitancy voiced by Kit regarding the quality of their interactions with other forum
participants. They became more confident in their contributions during interactions as
they were more socially involved with others both in- and out-of-character, according to
Lark (personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Lark also shared role-play helped her gain insight into how to make her own
writing better, since members she believed to be better writers shared pointers about how
to insert more details and lengthen her responses in threads, to improve her narratives.
Lark stated:

> I feel that I have learned much about writing: how to make things detailed or
> succinct; how to write under pressure or time constraints; and, how to learn from
> reading other people's work and pull in elements into my own writing that others
> used successfully. I have also learned how to interact and communicate with
> others in various situations. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15,

2012)

Lark shared in this quote she learned a great deal from watching others during role-play and by analyzing their text contributions. Lark specifically discussed how she learned to add details to her writing to provide fuller descriptions and, in so doing, help other forum members understand what she was trying to share more clearly. As well, she clarified there were times she needed to learn to be more succinct as a writer, which she stated was a downfall in her own writing. Lark shared watching other players who were better at writing succinct contributions for role-play helped her see where her own writing could be streamlined (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Additionally, Lark stated she had struggled in school with writing under pressure; particularly when there were time constraints, such as when she had to write in response to state writing exams and AP tests. Lark believed her involvement in text-based RPG forums helped her to learn to respond to prompts more effectively; she expressed she learned to "think on her feet" and "to organize and write more quickly" (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). This was a skill Lark felt helped improve her ability to respond when she needed to write in more traditional contexts during assessments, when pressure and time constraints would continue to be an issue.

Lark also felt she had learned to communicate more effectively with others in a variety of situations. During the conversations in all Lark's interviews, she made unsolicited connections between her involvement in text-based RPG forums and how this type of practice positively impacted her abilities in various classroom contexts. Kit reiterated Lark's feelings, stating she had also experienced improvement in her writing, and specifically Kit spoke of ways her involvement in RPG forums improved her

research skills:

> Since role-play involves a lot of writing, it obviously helped me improve my writing skills and grasp of grammar and such, which has helped me with my English classes if nothing else. It also encouraged me to do research on various subjects so I could be sure I was getting details right. My blind character led to a particularly large amount of research, since I have no real-life experiences with blindness. I've inadvertently learned quite a lot about disability services and service dogs, and etiquette around blind people, in addition to other subjects.
>
> (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013)

Kit stated the important role she felt her involvement in RPG forums played in supporting her development as a writer: improvement of writing skills and grammar, as well as her ability to research topics she wanted to include in development of a character and plot so her writing and role-play was authentic. Kit indicated researching these related topics, such as blindness, supported her learning and acquisition of knowledge beyond the writing process.

Producers and Consumers

As introduced previously, the phrase "new literacies" signifies new ways of conceiving of and practicing literacy in conjunction with rapidly expanding forms of technology (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Luke & Elkins, 1998; Tyner, 1998). Communication technology has changed the nature of texts people encounter and holds significant consequences regarding our perceptions about adolescent literacy. Youth increasingly encounter multi-modal texts incorporating visuals, music and film, in addition to the more traditional forms of print (Luke & Elkins, 1998; Kress, 1997; New

London Group, 1996). Additionally, these texts are often computer-mediated and they allow new possibilities for expression, while simultaneously requiring new types of communicative competencies of both consumers and producers.

Literacy today is much more than reading and writing. Moreover, different types of text require different backgrounds and skills. For instance, some texts can be read in multiple ways, contingent upon an individual's experiences and the context and practices in which these texts occur (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). Thus, literacy today requires youth to generate and communicate meaning, as well as to invite others to make meaning from their texts. Livingstone (2003) shared:

> While to adults the Internet primarily means the World Wide Web, for children it means email, chat, games – and here they are already content producers. Too often neglected, except as a source of risk, these communication and entertainment focused activities, by contrast with the information-focused uses at the center of public and policy agendas, are driving emerging media literacy. Through such uses, children are most engaged – multi-tasking, becoming proficient at navigation and maneuver so as to win, judging their participation and that of others, etc…. In terms of personal development, identity, expression and their social consequences – participation, social capital, civic culture – these are the activities that serve to network today's younger generation." (p. 15)

Today's youth don't just listen to popular music; they construct play lists for personal listening devices rather than passively listening to broadcasts. Instead of simply watching television, today's youth cruise online video clips on website like YouTube to construct their own videos, as well as uploading and sharing them with others. Rather

than reading and writing being separate activities, today's youth are positioned as writers at the same time they are readers in online writing experiences, including experiences with wikis, blogs, social media, instant messaging, Twitter, text-based RPG forums, and more. Traditional distinctions between reader and writer, consumer and producer are now blurred.

Members of *Trelis Weyr* were involved in orchestrating multiple modes to make meaning, remixing resources located in various contexts and formats to create new texts and to share meaning with one another. Participants became producers, remaking content they found in books and short stories written by McCaffrey, artwork and other visuals produced by *Pern* fan communities (see figure 12 below), and adding their own new twist to form a creative blend of these resources. As an example, Lark created visual images of the dragons for the Trelis Weyr forum using templates she located on another Pern fan website. She imported these templates into Photoshop and adapted them, added color, and changed sizes to produce the images of dragons who hatched on the forum.

These practices are common for youth, and there were several "experts" possessing various talents they shared with each other on *Trelis Weyr*. This in-community scaffolding of practice supported everyone's collective growth and learning as they role-played. Jenkins (2006a) describes this type of remixing as a "culture of appropriation", where participants sample and combine distinct materials that would otherwise occupy different cultural niches.
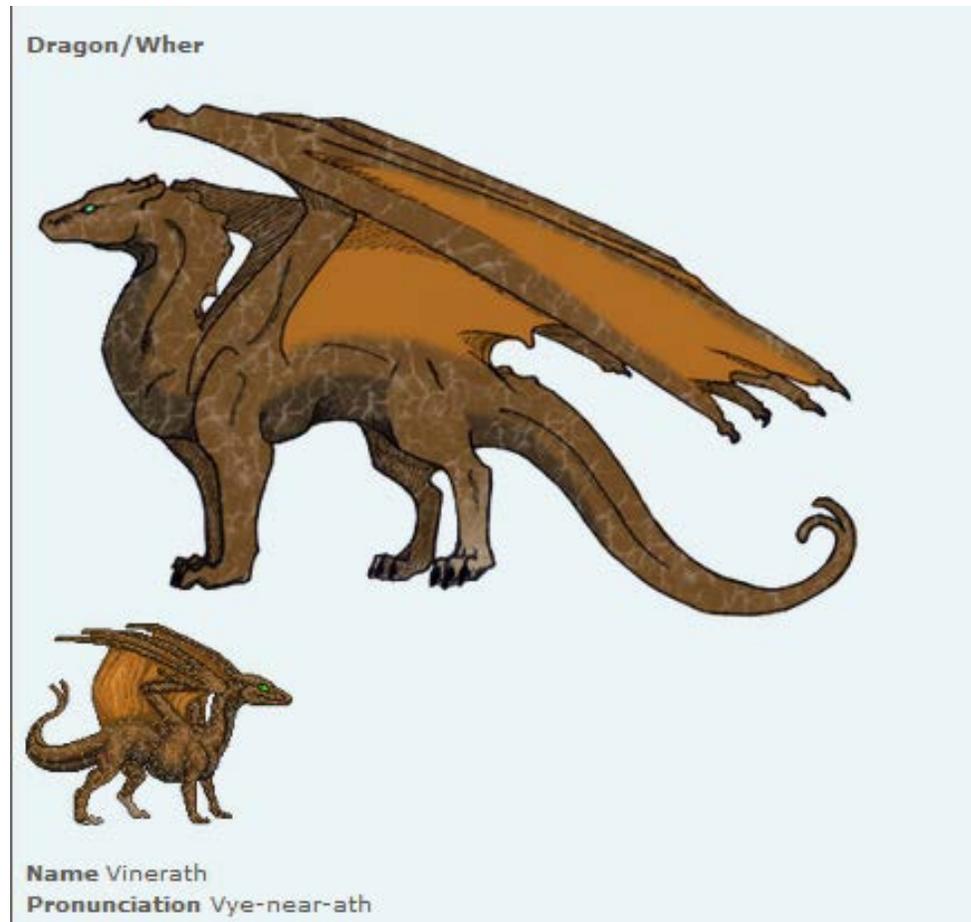
Figure 12. Visual created by Lark; remix Pern dragon.

Role-Play as Performance

The term performance is broad, encompassing artistic and aesthetic performances like concerts, theatrical events, and performance art; sporting events; social, political or religious events like rituals, ceremonies, and public proclamations; certain kinds of language use; and those components of identity requiring a person to do, rather than to be, something (Schechner, 2002). The term is also employed as a heuristic principle to understand behavior, known as the "performative turn" (Schechner, 2002). The assumption underlying this principle is that all human practices are "performed", so any action can be seen as a public presentation of the self.

Researchers have used performance and the performative turn to focus on the active, social construction of reality, as well as the way individual behavior is determined within the context it occurs. In this capacity, performance functions as a metaphor and an analytic tool, providing a frame to analyze social and cultural phenomena. Performance is seen as a bodily practice producing meaning; the interaction between the social actor and his or her environment (Schechner, 2002). Schechner understands performance as a continuum; everything can be studied as a performance, though not everything is meant to be one in actuality. Performativity is also associated with gender theorist Judith Butler, who posited a "performance of the self" is repeated and dependent on a social audience. I will use the performative turn as a tool to consider participants' interactions in *Trelis Weyr* as they role-played, exploring the way forum members' active, social construction of reality, and their individual, performative behavior were exhibited in the forum.

Active, social construction of reality. *Trelis Weyr* participants' role-play can be considered a form of active, social construction of reality. Forum members constructed characters and interacted in a virtual reality created by members collaboratively; creating collective narration through the posts they uploaded to boards and sub-boards. Members' behavior supported their development of skills in relation to something they embraced as a common interest. This concept of performative behavior aligns with aspects of RPG forum involvement, which also supported a community of practice and play and participants' collaboration. Lark shared:

> Every time I post, I am collaborating with others during role play. Sometimes we
> will be chatting, discussing possibilities or talking about what the character thinks
> of what has happened before even making the next post. Other times we plan it to

go a certain way, but half the time the characters go in another direction despite

our original plan. Everything about role playing revolves around having to

interact and talk to one another, whether that is as commentary or as a planning of

what should happen as a starter for a thread, and possible where they want to go

with it next. It is not uncommon for people to pull in others in the middle of their

threads because they think it could add something, or they put in other characters

and pull previous ones out of the thread to see what will happen. (Larkwing,

personal communication, November 26, 2012)

Lark points out in this quote active, social construction of reality occurred through forum

participants' interaction and joint planning. They talked with one another to plan what

they wanted to do together in the story threads, using private messaging, AIM, and other

communication options. When they wanted to add something different to a thread, they

actively pulled in other forum members' characters to create twists and develop the

storyline. These threads were collectively written by members to support their role-play

in the virtual space they created together.

Individual performative behavior within the context. To consider this portion

of performativity, I focus on the creation of a character and enactment of a different

social identity in this virtual reality. As a part of my interview protocol, I asked the three

focal participants how they created a character for role-play. Larkwing shared advice she

gives first time role-players when they are creating a character, as well as her own

thoughts about how character creation has influenced her development of identity:

I can't count how many times I've seen first time role-players try to make a

character and be confused by the process. What do I tell them? Start simple, make

one somewhat like yourself. You know you, and it's much easier to put yourself

into a character than making someone different. Likewise, it's also very easy to

make someone who you are entirely opposite of. All you have to think about is,

would I do that? After making a few of those kinds of characters, you start to

almost wonder in real life, would I actually do that now that I think about it? Am I

shy enough to not do it? Am I strong enough to try to change? You start to second

guess things sometimes, but in a good way, which makes you reconsider who you

are. It also makes it easier to adapt to a situation in my opinion. You learn to slip

between different "characters" just like you would in online role-play. To be

honest, we often do it in real life as well, but are less aware. The self we portray

to our friends is different than the ones we portray to our family. (Larkwing,

personal communication, December 15, 2012)

I also asked my focal participants how much impact the way their character

looked (both visually and textually) had on their motivation to interact and role-play on

the forum, to engage with others in both in-character and out-of-character chat features,

and so forth. Two of the three participants felt the "look" of their character was important

to their interaction on the forum.

Lark and Zi both shared they used photographs to help them construct their

characters, both visually and textually in their character profile. Lark shared:

Personally, I am very artistic. I generally draw my characters, so having them

depicted well in my own mind as well as other members in the forum is essential

to not only my creation of them, but my writing of their character profiles as well.

When I want to make someone, I don't want you to just hear what they are saying

and see the actions they go through. I want you to imagine the exact shade of their

hair, the look in their eye, the way their fingers fidget, or that shy little glance

they are only able to send your way. What I want is for you to know the tone of

what they speak; the things they smell and taste as well. I want to, all at once,

become that character and to experience them fully. So, I would say being able to

visualize my character is very important to me. It makes it easier for me to do

these things, which is part of the reason the first thing I do is look for a play-by;

an image of a person that resembles the character the most in my mind. Later, I

may replace this image with a handmade one, whether I create it through photo-

manipulation or my own drawings. The look of a character really sets the tone

though when I create them. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15,

2012)

Lark's very detailed description of the importance of visualizing her character to

fully describe him or her textually is representative of both Zi's feelings and her own.

During our second interview, Lark spoke of using visual images to help her develop

character profiles she created (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

It was important for Lark to be descriptive enough so other members would be able to

imagine exactly how her characters looked, and to visualize the nuances of their actions.

Additionally, being good at visualizing characters was something Lark felt made it easier

for her to write character profiles. Lark shared she looked for play-byes most of the time

to begin to develop a new character; an image she found on various websites of a person

she felt favored the person she was already constructing in her mind. Lark shared she

would later change this image after she completely developed her character, replacing it with a personally created image.

Lark also mentioned during our interview she liked viewing other members' visuals because she was better able to understand and connect with their characters. Lark shared she used the provided picture if one was shared as a springboard to visualize the character, adding layers of understanding based on textual description and what she learned by role-playing with characters. However, the initial visual foundation was important to help Lark enter the game environment in her mind (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). When asked if she felt the visual images provided for characters affected which characters she might have chosen to role-play with, Lark emphatically responded it did not have anything to do with her choices. She chose interesting characters she felt would interact in unique ways with her own (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

Zi had much to say when asked how important visuals and text descriptions were as influences on her perceptions of characters:

I'd say both [visuals and text] are pretty important to me. Visually, I find a character's appearance can say just as much about who he is as his personality does. I want my character's appearance to reflect who he is and what he places importance on. For example, my anti-social woodsman has no interest in looking good for others and considers his hunting knife to be one of his most prized possessions. Because of this, he isn't a handsome man; greasy, often covered in mud, blood and who knows what, but with a ridiculously clean knife on his hip. I

don't think he would give off the same feeling if he was drop dead gorgeous, so appearance is definitely important.

Text, on the other hand, plays an important role of drawing interest. It is often the first glimpse other players have of your character and how you write. A poorly written, sloppy profile won't draw the same amount of attention as one that has had plenty of time taken to make it textually pleasing. I'd be more interested in role-playing with a character that had no visual attached to the description if that text was well written and the character profile was well developed, in comparison to a profile of a character that had incredible visuals but sloppy text. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

Conversely, Kit said she didn't actually think much about what her characters looked like, and it was one of her least favorite things to consider when creating a character profile. She shared:

I don't actually have a clear image in my mind of what they [my characters] look like most of the time, beyond their hair and eyes and maybe some other distinguishing characteristics, so it's not that important to me. I do consciously try to avoid making conventionally attractive people unless I have some reason for it, because I tend to notice an inordinately large amount of them among players who use played-by images. But generally, I try to make a point of having a wide variety of appearances. (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013)

In this excerpt from Kit, it is clear she doesn't share Zi and Lark's interest in visuals. She clarified when asked if visuals had any bearing on her choices about who she role-played with that it was not something she considered at all. As a matter of fact,

Kit shared she purposefully tried not to look at visuals because they often didn't match

the perception she had of the character in her own mind, based on the textual description

and the interactions she had during role-play. Kit felt pictures sometimes sidetracked

new members and kept them from being as creative as they might have been had they

only used textual descriptions (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013).

Experimentation and Problem-Solving through Play

Children's earliest learning is grounded in play; they invent new activities, try on

roles, experiment with cultural processes, manipulate resources, and explore their

surroundings (Jenkins, 2009). As children grow older, they use play in new and more

complex ways to learn. Play becomes the link between a person's inner life (e.g.,

feelings, ideas) and the outside world. There is an essential relationship between meaning

and action at the heart of play. When children play, meaning is attributed to actions

based on what children are acting out through play. As well, objects used in play are

pivotal to the construction of play.

Children interact with the world based on the meaning they give to objects and to

their actions (Jenkins, 2009). To better understand how play supported the enactment of

this literacy event (e.g., collaborative authorship through role-play), I now consider how

members of *Trelis Weyr* engaged in play within this RPG forum, examining the following

themes that emerged during my analysis of data: play and gaming; play, ritual and

performance; the play community; and, productive play versus ludic play, or playing for

the fun of it.

Play and gaming. When individuals play games, they are not necessarily having

fun in the traditional sense. Jenkins (2006c) shares:

When children are deep at play they engage with the fierce, intense attention that we'd like to see them apply to their schoolwork. Interestingly enough, no matter how intent and focused a child is at that play, maybe even grimly determined they may be at that game play, if you asked them afterwards, they will say that they were having fun. So, the fun of the game play is not non-stop mirth but rather the fun of engaging of attention that demands a lot of you and rewards that effort. I think most good teachers believe that in the best moments, classroom learning can be the same kind of fun. But a game is a moment when the kid gets to have that in spades, when the kid gets to be focused and intent and hardworking and have fun at the same time. (np)

There is a shift in Jenkins' definition of game play, from fun to engagement, when the individual expends a lot of energy to master skills, collect materials, or accomplish a short term goal of some type with the notion of achieving something later that is more significant. The key to this shift is that this type of activity is deeply motivated. The individual wants to go through difficulties that are part of the game because the goal matters to him or her immensely. In this state, the participant is fully engaged in the activity or game (Jenkins, 2006c).

When considering *Trelis Weyr* as a game ecosystem, it was apparent members of the forum were deeply motivated to participate in role-play because they shared a common passion for *Pern* literature and fantasy game-play. Though play took effort on the part of members, my three focal participants never referred to their involvement work; it was just good fun, and all three mentioned they were motivated to be involved in the site because they enjoyed interacting with the other members. They did not see their

involvement in *Trelis Weyr* as learning or development of reading and writing skills. The three participants I interviewed recognized they did learn through the experience, but the point of their involvement was not to learn; learning was a by-product of the fun they enjoyed role-playing with others (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012).

Play, ritual, and performance. Pearce (2009) further investigated play, extending definitions from new media literacy focused on play as the capacity to experiment with surroundings as a form of problem-solving. Pearce shared anthropologists have long noted the connection between play and more serious traditional forms of ritual and performance, many involving the adoption of alternative roles or identities (Schechner & Schuman, 1976; Turner, 1982). Mardi Gras and Halloween are both provided by Pearce as examples of ritual involving engagement in fantasy role-play, which is societally acceptable within short-term, provisional play communities.

Traditional forms of face-to-face role-play, such as Dungeons and Dragons, where participants dress up and act out their play are close approximations of this type of short-term, provisional play within communities. *Trelis Weyr* is a more complex type of role-play game experience, however. This type of role-play (text-based RPG) is played within an ongoing, long-term context and is often recognized as being outside societal norms. Nevertheless, Pearce (2009) shared this ongoing type of social play is a rapidly expanding category in entertainment, particularly in game play activities.

Play communities. In her research, Pearce (2009) defined a play community by sharing definitions for both play and community separately, and then considering these terms collectively. First, she shared a definition of play from John Huizinga, considered the father of "ludology" (the study of digital games):

A free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their differences from the common world by disguise or other means. (p. 5).

Viewing *Trelis Weyr* through Huizinga's definition of play, I see how role-play in the forum might qualify as a free activity. However, I can make no other connections between *Trelis* and the provided definition of play. Multiple discussions with my focal participants made it clear members would not agree role-play stood outside their "ordinary" life or that it was "not serious" in nature. For example, Lark stated when asked about the virtual nature of role-play:

In some ways the people that know you online know you better than those in real life, even if they do not know details of your personal life. They understand the you that only is shown in an online setting; what normally would not appear in reality. And to be honest, calling it virtual reality versus reality is silly in my opinion. They are both a form of life for the member, and those interactions done online are with live people, and in that way it is not differing from your normal life in the sense that it is a lesser interaction; just a different way of interacting. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

In Lark's opinion, interactions in the forum are as "real" as her off-line interactions in what many call her authentic world. Lark views both her off-line and her on-line

interactions as important; one is not a lesser interaction, but rather a different way of interacting.

Further, Huizinga's definition stated play was not connected with material interest or gain, proceeded in its own proper boundaries of time and space, and promoted social groups who surrounded themselves in secrecy to stress how different they were from the common world. Again, based on discussions with my focal participants, members of *Trelis Weyr* would find fault with most of this reasoning. As shared in previous discussions, role-play can, at times, involved material interest and gain either through sites like Deviant Art where members sell artwork, or within the forum through "marks" earned during play (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). Additionally, players' interactions often cross boundaries of time and space (e.g., earlier discussion about lack of geographic and time constraints). Finally, there are no elements of secrecy associated with *Trelis Weyr*, which was an open community that would welcome anyone who shared their interest in *Pern* fandom. Thus, for the most part Huizinga's definition of play did not align with analysis of play as experienced in the forum.

Pearce (2009) also shared a definition of community from sociologist Ferdinand Tonnie, which stated community was, "an association of individuals with a collective will that is enacted through individual effort" (p. 5). Pearce extended this definition by explaining a community may take varying forms, from a neighborhood to a religious sect, and was most often characterized by affiliations around a group identity, including "shared customs, folkways, and social mores" (Pearce, 2009, p. 5). Pearce stated she developed the theoretical framework "communities of play" as a direct counterpoint to

Lave and Wenger's (1991) "communities of practice". Though she admitted communities of practice and communities of play shared many things in common, she said "play practices warrant their own understanding of how communities form and are maintained" (Pearce, 2009, p. 5).

Pearce (2009) believed the context of technologically mediated play in particular would create new affordances for play communities, extending non-digital forms of play and enabling entirely new play experiences and "playscapes". These new play opportunities "amplify the scale, progression, and geographical reach of play communities, allowing them to grow much larger much faster than their offline counterparts" (Pearce, 2009, p. 5). Though I agree with Pearce regarding the affordances technologically mediated play has provided, I think a merging of Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice and Pearce's ideas about play ecosystems can inform each other and neither theory on its own will fully account for the complexity of game ecosystems like *Trelis Weyr*.

Productive play versus ludic play. Pearce (2009) identified three forms of productive play in the context of her own research regarding play ecosystems. The first involved inventing new game activities, social rituals, and cultural practices by repurposing the game environment and existing artifacts. The second involved carrying culture across virtual worlds by creating new artifacts and objects derived from or inspired by other games and media. The third entailed the creation of entire game environments, either derived from other games and media or using original concepts influenced by them. I now use these same forms of productive play as a construct to share themes that emerged from my analysis of *Trelis Weyr* as a play ecosystem. I then

close this section by contrasting the concept of productive play with ludic play, or playing for the pure pleasure of the interaction.

   Inventing activities, ritual, and cultural practices. It can be argued, members of *Trelis Weyr* are inventing new activities, social rituals and cultural practices as they interact in the RPG forum and role-play, creating collective narration in story threads. The administrator who created *Trelis* began the process based on McCaffrey's foundation in her *Pern* literature. Larkwing then added a new *Weyr* to the *Pern* world and invited participants to join her in populating it by creating new characters who did not exist in McCaffrey's fictional world. Additionally, members have repurposed the game environment (a text-based forum) to allow the interaction and play they want to engage in to occur.

   Members also create new social rituals and cultural practices, as well as repopulating existing rituals they gleaned from other Pern related sites, remixing these existing elements with new as part of their development of *Trelis Weyr*. These remixed locations, and the flora and fauna and animals that inhabited them, were created as settings for role-play and objects or elements members could interact with during play. Further, members have repurposed artifacts from other locations in the *Pern* fan community, including using other *Pern* RPG forum's information threads and rules to compile their own governing documents. They also used artwork and other textual pieces to repurpose and remix materials for use in *Trelis Weyr*.

   Carring culture across virtual worlds. All three of my focal participants shared they carried cultural creations across virtual worlds, creating new artifacts and objects in one RPG forum that were inspired by or derived from objects in other game-spaces and

Pern fan communities. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Larkwing discussed how much she enjoyed posting her artwork, stories, and character information on Deviant Art to share her work with a wider, global audience. These artifacts were carriers of meaning for members of *Pern* fandom, regardless of *Weyr* forum affiliations. They transcended belonging to one *Weyr* in particular, being a part of the wider canon associated with McCaffrey's *Pern* literature directly, and often originating in her texts. The Red Star is the threat in each *Pern* fan community, as is the fall of *Thread*. *Pern* Weyrs and Holds are patterned on Feudalistic society, though *Pern* is leaning towards a utopianism as well. Additionally, there is migration across *Pern* fan communities, in that forum members often play in multiple forums simultaneously, and they may also be involved in other forms of *Pern* fandom like artwork creation, other types of games, fan fiction, and so forth.

   Creating new game environments. Larkwing and other members were originally playing in another *Pern* RPG forum, but it closed after a month of interaction and the administrators disappeared (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). At the time, these forum members wanted to continue to play together, so they began to consider other *Pern* RPG forums where they could meet and role-play. After a few weeks of false starts when members tried to interact in other forums, Lark decided to try to create a forum herself that would better meet the needs of the community. During our discussion, Lark shared various ideas she wanted to implement to make a forum more user friendly, but she also stated she just wanted to provide a place where she and her friends could meet virtually and have fun (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). As several forums were established on ProBoard forums, Larkwing decided to

use their service to create *Trelis Weyr*. It was derived from other similar games online, but incorporated a few of Larkwing's original ideas as well.

> ***Playing just for fun.*** When asked why they participated in role-play forums like *Trelis Weyr*, all three focal participants shared they thought it was fun to explore the world of *Pern*. Zi explained why she felt role-play in *Trelis Weyr* was fun, and what she enjoyed about exploring the forum with other members:

> Roleplaying is a way for me to escape the limits of reality and the things that may stress me out over the course of the day. It allows me to leave behind the woes of work or bills or responsibility and enter a world where anything is possible; where I have the power to control what is going on in the lives of my characters in a way that is often difficult or impossible in the real world. (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Lark also shared forum role-play was a way for her to relax and she found it "honestly just fun" (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012). Lark further shared:

> There are just so many reasons why I love role-playing. I find it to be a wonderful creative outlet. I am a writer and an artist at heart, and both of those loves are something I can exercise through RP forums. I get to write with others, learning from them as they learn from me, and I get to share my love of art with the artists I meet on RP forums. I meet other people who feel the same way I do about these activities, and I feel I belong with them. They understand me and I feel at home. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Kit also spoke of the reasons she had fun playing in *Trelis Weyr*, and how specific aspects of the forum kept her attention over time. Kit stated:

One thing I particularly liked about *Trelis* was the number and type of dragon colors added to the canon about dragons. It gave me a much larger array of ranks and personalities to work from, and added some much-needed variety to the setting. I also particularly liked the history of *Pern* on *Trelis*, and how it affected role play. I was excited by a lot of the twists and turns provided by the role-play plots. (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012)

It was obvious in speaking with Kit, she felt *Trelis* was a more interesting and challenging space to role-play because of the variety added to McCaffrey's canon and the opportunities this afforded members to explore new ideas related to *Pern*. The complexity introduced in plot development by the administrator and moderators of *Trelis Weyr* provided constant fodder for members to explore new and intriguing aspects of life on *Pern*.

Though forum members talked about what they learned as participants of *Trelis Weyr*, they also made sure to state this was not a primary motivation for them as a participant. Lark shared:

What I liked most about the group was that people were there together just to have fun. We didn't think about whether we were learning something. We just wanted to get together and play. I liked role-playing in *Trelis* for the same reasons I like to play anything. There were many things that motivated me to stay involved too: the people on the forum; the themes, characters and plots we created; and, how everything came together in a fun, exciting, entertaining way. There was an allure about this good mix of things, and it made you want to come back for more, whether that be the members you became friends with, the

characters you just loved to play together, or plots that intrigued you and kept you

asking for more. These are really much the same reasons for reading a good book.

(Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Kit and Zi also shared their primary interest in role-play on the forum was to have fun. Zi

said, "I enjoyed simply having fun, socializing, and taking part in events and contests on

the site. The community was always warm and welcoming and there was always

someone willing to play. All in all, it was fun" (Zi, personal communication, December

29, 2012). Kit reiterated these feelings when she shared, "It was a joy to make threads

with other members, and I had a lot of fun, which is why I stuck around for so long" (Kit,

personal communication, January 3, 2013).

Motivational Factors

I now use self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) as a framework to

examine motivational factors that influenced *Trelis Weyr* members' interest in entering

play, as well as their persistence at play over time. SDT addresses factors facilitating or

undermining both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to SDT, individuals

possess inner motivational resources, which conditions can either thwart or support. If

these inner motivational resources are supported, individuals adopt an autonomy-

supportive style. Thus, autonomy-supportive environments identify, nurture, and develop

individuals' inner motivational resources. SDT also involves individuals' natural growth

tendencies and inherent psychological needs, focusing on the degree to which behavior is

self-motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). I used three key constructs from this framework to

analyze data; members' perceived competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Feeling Competent

Competence refers to an individual's effectiveness in dealing with their environment. This can manifest as an individual's need to understand his or her work to complete tasks successfully. When asked if they felt competent as role-players, my three focal participants all indicated they were effective role-players, and felt they were able to complete tasks with others successfully in the forum. Zi also shared what she believed made a role-player competent beyond the concept of personal effectiveness. Zi stated:

> To me, a competent role-player is not someone with just spectacular writing skills or an ability to create exciting characters and plot lines. I believe that a competent role-player is someone who is willing to admit there is room for improvement and who is always trying to grow as both a player and a person; someone who is friendly and approachable out of character, and someone who tries to be active and take part in the community, as well as being willing to accept and offer help to newer, less experienced players as they become part of the group. In that respect, I like to think that not only myself, but almost all members of *Trelis* were competent as role-players. (Zi, personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Zi emphasized a member's willingness to become a life-long learner, acknowledging he or she would never know all there was to know. As well, Zi expressed the importance of helping others who were new to the community become proficient. Being friendly and approachable both in- and out-of-character were important concepts Zi conveyed additionally. For Zi, being competent was not about what she could do effectively on her own, but rather it was about her ability to contribute to the community so everyone experienced feelings of competence.

Zi also shared:

It's hard not to succeed as a role-player. If you put effort into playing, then that is

success right there. There is no true right way or wrong way to role-play as long

as you and the person you are playing with are having fun. (Zi, personal

communication, December 20, 2012)

This thought, voiced by Zi, was foundational to the beliefs of my focal participants; all

three young women indicated being competent as a role-player was not about being the

best in the group; it was about being the best you could be and having fun playing with

others. The kernel of this thought – that success equaled effort – was voiced by Lark, Kit

and Zi. In addition, they added there was more than one way to role-play, so there were

multiple pathways to success in the community. As long as you and those you played

with were having fun, then you were successful, or competent, as a role-player.

Kit stated she felt competent as a role player because she felt good about her

writing ability, but she was less sure of her aptitude to interact with others. Feeling less

than competent was a sentiment expressed by all three of my focal participants, who

indicated at some point and for different reasons they were concerned about their own

ability to successfully role-play. Kit's voiced her concerns, sharing:

I feel pretty competent about the writing side of it, as I do think I have enough

experience to be a pretty good writer. I have always been less sure of myself when

it comes to interacting directly with other people. Am I replying to the thread

often enough? Do my posts include enough information to give other people

something to reply to? Am I inadvertently deciding how someone else's character

acts, which is bad etiquette? Stuff like that. That's because I've been writing solo

a lot longer than I've been role-playing. (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013)

In this instance, Kit stated she felt competent as a writer, but she was less confident interacting with others. Additionally, she stated she felt more confident writing on her own, in comparison to writing with others.

When I probed why Kit felt more competent writing solo, she clarified she liked feeling in control of the entire process and knew she was up to the challenge, but she was hesitant regarding her own ability to be understood by others. Kit wasn't sure she was able to explicitly provide the information others needed to post replies to threads she developed. In general, Kit shared she'd had more practice writing on her own in comparison to writing with others in role-play. Her feelings of incompetence seemed to stem from concerns about social interactions rather than competence with literacy tasks. However, Kit stated her feelings of competence increased overall as she role-played in more RPG forums, so additional practice collaborating with forum members increased Kit's confidence regarding being able to write effectively with others through role-play (Kit, personal communication, January 3, 2013).

Feeling Related

Relatedness is the universal desire people have to interact with, be connected to, and care for each other. A person's need for belonging, to receive personal support, or to feel secure in relationships are all examples of relatedness. In the case of membership and role-play within *Trelis Weyr*, participants chose to be involved in this community of practice and play because they possessed a collective passion for *Pern* literature and fantasy role-play. For example, my focal participants all addressed feeling they belonged

within the group; they were comfortable with forum members who shared their passion and who they related to because of this common interest.

Additionally, my focal participants stated they were often motivated to enter play by friends who were already involved in RPG forums. For example, Kit stated:

> I first tried to role-play because it was something a lot of people I knew were doing. So, I felt comfortable entering the forum – like I belonged because I already knew so many members, having played with them on other sites. (Kit, personal communication, December 23, 2012)

Kit's confidence in being accepted by the group was supported because she already had relationships with some of the members. Thus, prior relationships paved the way for her entry into Trelis Weyr. Lark also discussed joining her first RPG forum because a friend at school she shared an art class with told her about role-playing (Larkwing, personal communication, November 26, 2012).

Zi voiced being interested initially in a few forum sites because she had friends on them, but she also stated beginning in newly created forums was helpful since she didn't need to worry about fitting in with an established group. Zi shared:

> I joined my first forum simply because it was brand new, so I was one of the first members and as such didn't need to worry about trying to fit into an already established group. It helped me to get over my nerves about joining a forum. I joined other sites, like *Trelis*, because I had friends there and felt I fit in. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

Brand new forums lacking established friend groups were more approachable for new members, according to Zi. It was easier to interact with others when she knew everyone in the forum began play about the same time, so there were no established patterns or structures she would need to gain access to. Zi shared the newer forums also seemed more welcoming because leadership was in a mode of actively recruiting membership. Thus, they were more encouraging, supporting member discussion and interaction to ease entry into the forum (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012).

Development of characters and engaging them in eventual role-play also allowed members to explore identity and try on various aspects of their own and other's personalities, which was influential on their thinking and feelings of belonging in the group. Lark mentioned:

You learn social skills by talking to other people. By role playing you put yourself into situation you would normally not be in too. So you are able to understand how you would react to things, just by doing it. Whether you want to admit it to yourself or not, especially early on, part of yourself will always be reflected in your characters, and part of yourself will always govern their actions. If you have a prejudice, it is very hard to completely take that prejudice away and just get down to the character itself. It is something that everyone fights with. So you learn the social skills, and you are able to take your characters into situations you wouldn't necessarily get into yourself. (Larkwing, personal communication, November 26, 2012)

Lark spoke of learning social skills by interacting with others; putting herself into situations and seeing how she'd react. Challenging commonly held ideas helped her think

beyond what she would normally experience, and according to Lark pushed her to learn new social skills. Additionally, she shared though a person might want to rid themselves of feelings of certain beliefs like prejudice, she recognized at least a small portion of those feelings would always influence action.

Zi also talked about socializing and how it helped her become a part of a community. However, she admitted it has always been difficult for her to comfortably relate to and interact with others in person. Zi shared:

I crave social activity, but as an introvert it can be difficult for me to socialize in person for long periods of time without feeling overwhelmed and drained. It [role-play] allows me the social contact I desire without forcing me to deal with the crowds and noise. It allows me to meet with people who share my interests. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

Thus, being involved with individuals in an online context was supportive of Zi's desire to be engaged in social activities with others, without making her feel overwhelmed by physically being in their presence for long periods of time. Role-play on the forum provide an outlet for Zi to meet others who shared her interest in *Pern* fandom, as well as providing opportunities for social interaction in a more comfortable environment, so Zi was able to successfully feel she belonged and interacted in this virtual community.

Lastly, Lark spoke about elements of a good community, and how members could help individuals feel they belong to a group. Opportunities within the community helped forum members feel they were needed by one another, supporting their feelings of comfort as they collaborated through role-play. Lark shared:

A good community will take you in and help you, give you advice, offer their

characters for play, and look over work you do sometimes if you need someone to

peer edit before you try to get a character accepted. All those things helped me

feel I belonged in the forum and supported my feeling comfortable with role play,

but only experience really made me feel finally able to succeed. (Larkwing,

personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Feeling Autonomous

Autonomy is the urge we have to be causal agents in our own lives and to act in

harmony with our integrated selves, though autonomy does not assume we are

independent of others. Autonomy can manifest as a person's need for control over

decisions, and his or her sense of choice within and between activities (Vansteenkiste,

Lens, & Deci, 2006). When asked to identify specific aspects of her participation in

Trelis Weyr that may have supported her autonomy, Zi shared:

Role-playing gives you a sense of freedom. It allows you to explore things you

are interested in and to express your own ideas. It empowers you to develop those

ideas and see them take shape and grow into something greater than you may

have even imagined. So, having that freedom to pursue things you are interested

in, and being able to choose what you want to do, who you want to play with, and

how you want your characters to be, all support autonomy. Also, being involved

in *Trelis Weyr* was comfortable for me, and allowed me to be myself. (Zi,

personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Autonomy-supportive practices mentioned by Zi included allowing members to explore

things they were interested in, and to express ideas freely. Additionally, members were

empowered to develop ideas and pursue them to fruition. She specifically mentioned

feeling free to choose what she wanted to do in the forum, including who she wanted to

play with and how she wanted her characters to develop.

When asked why she participated in *Trelis Weyr*, Zi further clarified:

It is a way for me to escape the things that may stress me out and allows me to

leave behind my cares and enter a world where anything is possible. I have the

power to control what is going on in the lives of my characters in a way that is

often difficult or impossible in the real world. (Zi, personal communication,

December 20, 2012)

Zi's freedom to explore a virtual environment and be empowered to develop characters as

she chose, enabled better understanding of the nuances in her own personality, as well as

character traits she endowed her characters with that she did not possess. Zi shared this

type of exploration was not possible in her off-line world; thus, this freedom provided

optimal autonomy support.

Finally, in response to a question about what kept her playing on the forum, Lark

stated her characters were tied to others in the forum, and the forum held good memories

of plot developments she'd enjoyed. Fellow members, the characters created in the

forum, and the plot members developed between them were the reasons Lark identified

she continued to come back and role-play. Lark stated:

Many of my characters were tied in some way to another. My rider Alyara to

another rider J'dol, my goldrider Inali to goldrider Iirla, and the twins I and a

friend played. These memories and the plots that happened between them were the reason I kept role-playing. I, and the other members playing with me, wanted badly to know what happened next, what the other would say, how they would react. We always said, "Hey. I have so-and-so, and you have what's-his-face. Let's put them in the same room and see what they do." It was fun, and it was something later people often laughed about in chats and other threads we made. Sometimes whole plots played off of characters, or characters came out of plots we wanted to do. They're the life we breathed into the site, and they are what kept everyone playing. (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012)

In domain 3, which focused on literacy events, performance, and play, I considered the cultural ways participants used language, performance, and play to enact literacy events as they role-played. I identified various themes related to literacy events, performance and play, including: developing literacy skills, becoming both a producer and a consumer of information, performing identities during role-play, and engaging in experimentation and problem-solving through play. In fan writing, like the collective narratives produced through members' role-play interactions, writing is collaborative, interactional, multimodal, and creative.

I also shared in this section how participants worked jointly to create collective narratives by relying on reciprocal expectations and acting consistently over time. Members of *Trelis Weyr* were involved in orchestrating multiple modes to make meaning, remixing resources located in various contexts and formats to create new texts and to share meaning with one another, developed a sense of competence regarding their own contributions to role-play. I also explored the way *Trelis Weyr* participants' active,

social construction of reality and their individual, performative behavior were exhibited in the forum. Finally, I considered the ways forum members explored experimentation and problem-solving through play, including play and gaming; play, ritual, and performance; and, the definition of play communities. I then concluded this section by examining motivational factors through the lens of self-determination-theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) that influenced *Trelis Weyr* members.

Conclusion

When I began this study, I hoped to investigate how participants in *Trelis Weyr* developed literacy and social practices in an informal, out-of-school learning experience. I believed their role-play was grounded in project-based collaborative writing with digital tools, and I hoped the study would inform educators and researchers regarding the techno-literacies youth engage in by choice. I was interested in how this type of virtual community was organized to provide opportunities for youth to read and write in a favorite genre (fantasy fiction), and how their involvement helped them to see themselves and others as successful readers and writers, and builders of virtual worlds. I was interested in how participants of text-based role-play-game forums utilized literacy and social practices to coordinate their reading and writing, and to negotiate the collaborative writing process with each other in this environment. I was also interested in the motivation youth had to enter and persist at play in this type of virtual environment.

Based on my review of literature and this study's findings, I posit popular culture and technology do provide young people with new contexts for literacy development. Youth involved in role-play in *Trelis Weyr* belonged to a community of practice and play

where they were able to make global social connections by sharing resources and

knowledge with other fans of McCaffrey's *Pern* literature series. Furthermore, these

youth integrated multiple modes and media to create and remix their work in purposeful

ways, challenging traditional notions of print-based literacy. As well, they enacted

multiple social identities (Hall, 1997; Holland et al., 1998), taking on various roles within

the class structure of *Pern* society (e.g., candidate, holder, weyrwoman, etc.).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROLES WE PLAYED: A DIALOGIC CONVERSATION

This chapter begins with a discussion of the "self" as a relational, dialogical concept, and how this understanding influenced my notions of relational reflexivity and responsiveness. Following this explanation, I provide a dialogic conversation between my daughter and me, encompassing our thoughts on the roles we played, sharing distinctions between these roles and how we "role-played" during our interactions regarding *Trelis Weyr*. We utilized several competencies to engage in this dialogic communication, uncovering our interactions as researcher and participant, mother and daughter, teacher and learner: dialogic storytelling (holding and describing your perspective); dialogic listening (being profoundly open); and dialogic interaction (maintaining the tension between telling your own story and being open to others).

Dialog is a form of communicative interaction between people in an exchange of utterances (Bakhtin, 1984b). Through dialogue, people engage each other out loud and themselves silently to articulate and express ideas. People jointly examine, question, wonder, and reflect on various issues, and these two-way exchanges help them to understand one another, as well as listen for the meaning in another person's perspective (Anderson, 2012). Dialog seeks orientation instead of being focused on identifying facts. It is an interactive, responsive process where meaning is derived through conversation.

This understanding of dialog, knowledge, and language is grounded in the belief that identities are relational and constructed through dialogue and conversation (Gergen,

2009). We speak, think, and act as the "multiplicity of voices" residing in each of us (Anderson, 2012). Hence, narrating continually shapes and reshapes who we are and what we think about ourselves; relationships and conversations are inseparable and influence each other. As relational beings, influenced by and influencing one another, we cannot be separated from the relationships and contexts we are a part of (Shotter, 1984). Thus, a dialogic conversation involves mutual inquiry; a construction of meaning through sharing, exploration, and the interweaving of our ideas, thoughts, and feelings, allowing fresh possibilities to emerge (Anderson, 2012). Below I share a dialogic conversation I had with Larkwing (my daughter) at the conclusion of data collection and analysis (Larkwing, personal communication, February 25, 2013), exploring the multiple roles we played during the three-year period we discussed text-based RPG forums.

In the Beginning: Developing an Interest in Text-Based RPG Forums

Kathleen's Perspective

Larkwing first shared text-based role-play-games with me in the winter of 2010, at the beginning of her junior year in high school. She was interested in participating in forum game play because one of her friends was involved, and she shared it with me as an example of web-based gaming when we talked about things adolescents do online. At first Larkwing played on "one-liner" sites, where she would create a character and post one or two sentence interactions with others involved on the website. Collectively, these youth created stories by contributing a few lines at a time, much like a round-robin style of writing in a face-to-face interaction where you add a line, pass the paper, the next person in the circle adds a second line, passes the paper, and so forth. These sites supported fast-paced, synchronous play, and in general youth involved in the sites were

early adolescents. As a mother, I was worried about Larkwing's safety online. Who else would she be interacting with? Who created and monitored the site? Would this be a positive experience for her?

Lark continued to play on "one-liner" websites for a few months, but soon lost interest because she shared that type of play didn't support her ability to write longer passages and explore the characters she was created in greater depth. About this time, towards the beginning of the second semester of her High School junior year, Lark decided to take a look at more complex text-based RPG forums. Another of Lark's friends was involved in a role-play forum based on Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* literature series, and Lark had read and enjoyed these books. Originally, Lark created artwork with her friend to share online in the forum. Lark and her friend were in an art class and the after-school art club together, and Lark enjoyed drawing and digital art, so it was a natural connection. Lark had also been writing fan fiction based on *Pern* stories since she was in middle school; though she didn't start posting to sites like *Deviant Art* until the beginning of high school.

Over time, Lark's friend encouraged her to get online and check out the RPG forum website to see what she thought. Since Lark's other love was writing, and there was ample opportunity in text-based RPG forums to write with others as a by-product of role-play, the thought of becoming a member appealed to her so Lark became involved in role-play on this first *Pern* RPG forum site. At this point, Lark came to me and shared the forum website, talking with me about what she had been doing. Knowing her friend had been involved in the community for several months, I was more apt to approve of Lark's involvement and quickly said it would be okay she had become a member. Little

did I realize at the time how that decision we both made would change our lives!

My own interest in text-based RPG forums was initially all about ensuring my daughter would have a safe, positive experience. I wasn't interested in playing myself or even in researching this phenomenon at first; I was completely engrossed in the "mother" role I played, making sure this would be a good experience for my child. However, after I felt confident Lark would not be harmed by her association with playing on text-based RPG forums, I was intrigued by the interactions of members and the literacy and social practices I felt were innate in this experience. I saw a great deal of text creation so that members could role-play, including the creation of character profiles constructed by interested participants, and the emergence of story threads as members role-played with each other in-character. I also saw members scaffolding each other's literacy growth as they developed skills to successfully interact and collaboratively author these stories. As well, I saw my child building social relationships with these new friends from her online life, and this appeared to be supportive and fulfilling. Thus, my "Mommy hat" quickly was replaced by a "researcher hat" as I considered the possibility of researching this phenomenon.

Larkwing's Perspective

Mom's already shared the basics, but I want to say a bit more so you'd know the whole story. I became involved with that very first RPG forum because I was helping my friend draw dragons in art class and she wanted to use them on the site. These dragons were very familiar to me because they were based on a literature series I had read and was familiar with already, and I love drawing fantasy creatures so I was enjoying helping

her. I asked my friend many questions about her involvement in the site while we drew characters, and she continued to share things with me about what she was doing over time. For example, when she first impressed a dragon and became a dragon rider she told me about the experience and how hatchings worked. I asked her questions about what she did on the site, what it was like working with the other people, and so on. She shared a lot with me, but I was hesitant to try it myself still because I wasn't sure if I would like it; I didn't know if I wanted to share my writing with other people. My writing has always been my baby, and I didn't see the appeal then.

After a little while I decided to do my own research into it and I found out what it was all about. That's when I came across a "one-liner" website based on the *Warrior Cats* literature series, which I'd also read and enjoyed. It was easy to write and I enjoyed it, but I left eventually because it was too easy and I got bored with it. Sometimes I do still go back and use this site as a creative muse – it helps me when I have writers block and I need to do simpler writing to get my head back into the game. The "one-liner" site changed too about this time. It was originally just based on the *Warrior Cat* series, but then it started to include other role-play that was about anything, based on what people wanted to do. I didn't like these changes, so I decided to actually join the site my friend was on based on *Pern* literature. However, it is true that I never did click with that first RPG forum I joined – the one my friend was also on. I stayed with it for the past three years, but it was never one I liked a lot and I wasn't comfortable on it. I didn't feel as accepted and welcomed as I had on other forum sites I would try later.

After I joined this first *Pern* forum, I later found a second *Pern* forum I joined. I really liked this second site because it was new and easier to become involved with as a

player. It is where I created my first rider and dragon queen, and where I created some of the characters that became favorites over time and I still play. I also liked the people on this site. These members would eventually become the starting members of the *Trelis Weyr* forum I created, transferring their characters and some of the other materials they had created on this forum to *Trelis Weyr*. The reason they transferred over to *Trelis* is because this forum was abandoned by the administrators who created it, so it died. The administrators of the site disappeared and we were left with no place to role-play together.

Part of the reason I wanted to create *Trelis* is because I had my own ideas by now about the plot and what I wanted to do on a forum site. I also wanted to create a space that held a lot of the expectations of literate RPing [role-playing] sites I'd been involved with, but still held the appeal of just having fun like what I experienced on the "one-liner" sites. Many times in the more literate role-play forums, members will have characters they create picked apart during the creation process. More advanced members of these forums write very well and expectations are high about a new person's development of characters, and whether they can write enough in threads to participate at the level required. I wanted to create a space where members were supported even if they weren't very strong writers themselves. There were several members who joined *Trelis Wyer* because they liked the idea of role-play. They were often younger and they didn't always create strong bios for characters, but over time they got better at writing and you could visibly see a difference in the quality and length of their writing. I wanted to create a forum where members felt empowered to become active and felt supported to improve their writing over time, as they become more involved as players.

Once the site had been created and was in existence for a few months - that is when I chose to show Mom. I wanted to share with her what I was doing online because I was proud of it, but also because we had a deal about my sharing things I was doing online so she knew I was involved in safe environments and not talking to people I didn't know, etc. I also knew she was interested in researching RPG forums because we had been talking about them for six months or so by this time, but she was concerned about being able to study them because they could be so fleeting – here one day and gone the next. She'd looked at a few of the forums I suggested and was going to contact some of the administrators of these sites to see if they'd allow her to research what they were doing, but I didn't know how people might respond and I wanted her to be successful. I knew that telling Mom about *Trelis Weyr* would give her a forum site she could study, but I also understood it would mean she would be watching my site and what we did on it. I had to think about whether I wanted her to know about it because I have always been pretty possessive of my writing. I also didn't want what we were doing to be critiqued and studied, where it ended up being shared as something I wouldn't even recognize myself. In the end, I knew if I was involved and she was studying *Trelis Weyr*, then I could help her and she would be able to report what really happened and get it right.

Mom has always thought I created *Trelis Weyr* for her, because I showed it to her during this time when she was grappling with how things were going to be resolved in her own research. I guess in some ways I might have been prompted partially to create *Trelis* because of all the things we were talking about then, but the truth is I created it a few months before I chose to show it to her so it already existed. I know that being involved in Mom's research gave me "permission" to do something I was already doing!

I don't think she would have said I couldn't create *Trelis*, but her research added to the reasons I was spending time on it beyond my own reasons. It also helped her to see that it was a good use of my time in the end so she didn't give me as hard a time about being online a lot, though we still struggled with that conversation. I am happy I created *Trelis* and Mom was able to use it as a location for her research. I know a big part of why I worked so hard on the forum site and tried for so long to keep both it and the second site active is so Mom would have enough to research when the time came. So, it was always a part of my thinking in some ways, and it makes me happy knowing I was able to help her accomplish her goals while I was working hard to accomplish my own.

The Roles We Each Played

Larkwing and I sat down to discuss our involvement during my research process, and what influence, if any, this had on our relationship. We also considered the roles we played during our interactions involving *Trelis Weyr* and other text-based RPG forums. In our initial conversation we envisioned four roles each of us played: I felt I had been a mother, learner, researcher, and teacher; and Larkwing believed she had been a research participant, teacher or expert in text-based RPG forums, learner, and a daughter. We talked for a few hours, exploring these roles we played and how they influenced our relationship, as well as the ways these roles may have influenced the research.

Kathleen: When I thought about our interactions during this time, I was thinking about the roles I played throughout this whole experience, because for me this was an experience that was much longer than these past few months

of data collection and analysis. It was a much longer period of time – probably beginning three years ago when you were beginning your junior year in high school and first started to describe text-based RPG forums to me to explain what you were involved with online. At that point, it wasn't even *Trelis Weyr* you were involved with; it was "one-liners" and other RPG options.

First, I was thinking about this experience as a **mother** because I was trying to make sure that you were in something that was safe, and that was good for you; something that involved other people who you would be safe interacting with. I also was concerned that you be able to balance this activity with all the other things in your life– school, after school activities like band, homework, friends and face-to-face activities. So, I was really a Mom at first.

I then think I quickly became a **learner** because there was so much I didn't understand about what you were experiencing and you had to teach me about it so I would be okay with what you were doing. Later, as my involvement with you changed over time and you continued to share things about RPG with me, I began to think like a **researcher**. Was it possible I could study this phenomenon? There seemed to be so many things pertinent to literacy research in what youth were enacting in these online spaces. To a certain extent, I also think I was a **teacher**, particularly when I shared the research process with you and the many discussions we had about what I was doing as a researcher. I can see these

four roles immediately when considering how we interacted these past three years. There may be more, but I see these four as central and important to explore. I wondered what you think regarding the roles you played.

Larkwing: Well, obviously there is the **daughter** aspect, because I am your daughter. That was particularly true at the beginning, when it was more about you and I talking about what I was doing because you were concerned and wanting to make sure it was okay and I was safe. Next, I would say I was a **teacher** or an **expert**, because I was teaching you about text-based RPG forums and helping you understand what they are and how they work. It is sort of funny, because at the same time I was teaching you, I was being taught by others online.

I already understood the less complex type of role-play, where you only had to write a few lines at a time. So, I had to become a **learner** and figure out how to contribute entries in the more complex forums based on *Pern*, where you had to compose more than just a few lines. I also had to learn etiquette on these types of sites. I then had to be a **teacher** again and share that information with you. I am not sure if it is because I am a writer at heart and so I understand a lot of the concepts that go into role-playing, or if it's just because of my age and how we are brought up with technology and other kind of media so it just clicks easier with us. It was just always a little easier for me to learn and understand than it seemed it was for me to teach you. Sorry Mom! [laughing]

Kathleen: No… that is funny, but it is true! [laughing] What specifically do you mean by that? Can you give me an example of something or expand on that thought?

Larkwing: For instance, there were certain concepts I seemed to understand or catch on about much more quickly than you did. I would explain something to you once, and you would kind of understand but not completely. I would have to go into the details and explain more to you so you would understand what I was talking about, but I didn't have to do that as much when explaining a similar thing to a new player on the forum.

Kathleen: So, why do you think that might have been the case? Why do you think it was more difficult for me to grasp certain concepts?

Larkwing: I don't know if it is just the age difference, or maybe it is because people in my generation have grown up with a different kind of literacy; a different kind of understanding about how to communicate and interact. Or maybe it is just because it is similar to other things we already use to interact, like social media, FaceBook, AIM chat, how to do different coding to create things online, etc. For example, I had to explain to you all about the hex codes and other things we use to create online.

Kathleen: Which I still don't understand! [laughing]

Larkwing: Right! [laughing] Generally on forums there are some things that are built in and you click buttons to make it happen, but other times you need to know how to create in code to make them appear the way you want them

to. As an admin, I had to **learn** a lot more than the average member does even. There was more in depth learning for instance about how to create the skin for the site, for boards, insert graphics I'd created, and so forth. And I am still learning.

Kathleen: Well, I know you were a teacher to me, but you were also a teacher to other people on the forum during the time I was looking at artifacts, and later when I lurked on the second *Trelis* forum.

Larkwing: Yes. And it wasn't just the idea of how to role-play and how to create characters, but also I taught a lot about things like coding and how to create different graphics. Also, how to get different resources, or how to use different programs to edit things. I had to be able to teach people how to find hex codes if they didn't have Photoshop. There were many times I had to teach people how to find things like this online so they could create for the forum.

Kathleen: How did you teach people these types of things? You and I were able to talk in person, but how did you teach them things when you weren't seeing them face-to-face?

Larkwing: It depended on what it was. Sometimes I could just give people a detailed description, including screen shots to show them things. For instance, if I was showing them how to do something in an editing program. Sometimes I shared things in the chat box if people were just asking a question about something. If it was more lengthy and private, I might use

the private messaging (PM) option in the forum or we would use AIM

chat outside the forum. We used AIM a lot. Sometimes we used the

messaging part of Skype too.

There were also threads I created and posted that shared how to do things.

If there was a great website I'd just used for something, I might share a

link in the c-box [chat box], telling them to check it out. Sometimes their

questions were at the time they needed to know how to do this or that, and

that is when the community aspect comes in. It wasn't just me. The whole

site answered questions for each other. There were four other moderators

who helped me on the site, but everyone who role-played helped each

other by answering questions in the chat box and PMing or AIMing each

other to give guidance when it was needed. Everybody was putting in their

two cents.

Kathleen: So everyone who was a member at that time and online was responding

and helping others.

Larkwing: Yes. Getting back to the roles I played, I think I was also a **learner**. Some

of the scientific knowledge I already had because of my involvement in

science fair through the years, and the classes I'd taken, like sociology and

psychology. Other things I had to be taught. I still don't understand half

the theories you told me about, but they were interesting. Even though I

understood some of it already from my own previous experiences, which

made it easier to understand what you were saying, you did teach me a lot about research I didn't know.

I also played a role as a **research participant** – as both a member and an admin. I really felt split in my role as a [research] participant because sometimes I was talking to you about what it was like to just be a member and player on a site like *Trelis Weyr*, but I was also the admin of *Trelis Weyr* so I was in charge of that community and playing with others I felt responsible for in that community. Even though those two situations have some overlap, they are quite different. So, I guess that about covers it – four roles I think I played.

Kathleen: So, what I was hearing you say is you felt you were a daughter, an expert or teacher, a learner, and a research participant, but you had two roles within research participant as both a member and an admin.

Larkwing: Yes. That's it exactly. I think all these roles happened at the same time too. We were moving back and forth between them as we interacted with each other, and as I was involved with people on the forums the roles changed too. Sometimes I was teaching you things, but then you'd become the mother and I would respond as the daughter. It changed a lot, depending on our conversations and what we were speaking about at the time, which could be confusing for me I have to admit. I felt like an equal talking with you when I was the teacher or expert, but then you'd share something you were concerned about as a mother and that would end.

How These Roles Influenced Interaction and Impacted Relationships

Kathleen: I wondered how you think this interaction between us involving role-play

may have impacted our relationship in the last few years, if at all.

Larkwing: It certainly has made it more interesting, because there was more and more

discussion. Particularly, as I got older and it got closer to the time when I

was going to be going away to college. I think having these conversations

and learning from each other made it easier for you to see me less as a

child and more as an adult over the years. Also, it has been kind of hard

for me in some respects, because it has been difficult for me to understand

why there were times when you would be so excited about what I was

doing online; you thought it was useful and that there were so many things

I was learning through that type of interaction online. Then there were

times when you were questioning the time I was spending and telling me I

needed to get off the computer; that I was spending too much time on it

and not enough time on other things. Asking me when I had free time why

I was doing that instead of doing something else, like practicing my flute

or doing homework. I would think to myself, I could be writing and

socializing and doing all these things you thought were good about being

online, or I could be sitting watching TV.

Kathleen: Do you think I was questioning how you used your free time, or was I

questioning your use of time related to other things in your life?

Larkwing: I think it was both, but at the same time as a child or the person involved in her own studies and life, thinking this is my free time and not necessarily time I need to be spending on other things. I've already thought in my head, I've done my homework, done any project work needed, practiced the flute already, and now I don't have anything else to do. I am going to go online and RP. You don't know all that though, but in my head it is already there and I know. So, when you asked me why I was doing this instead of something else, I was thinking something else like what? I know I have this time and this is what I want to do with it.

Kathleen: I can see how that was confusing to you because in our discussions about the site you knew I consider it a positive, productive way to spend time. However, as your Mom I talked to you quite a bit in the past few years about balancing your time and making sure you were getting everything done. Also, I talked to you about the importance of prioritizing things and putting studies and school related projects first always. I have questioned you spending so much time being online, and I know that is questioning whether you understand what you are doing at the time. Are you thinking about all those other things you need to complete, and are you balancing things? I thought of this as a check in with you, but I can see you thought of it as an example of me not trusting you and your judgment at the time.

Larkwing: Yes, and that is all a part of growing up. Learning to balance your time and prioritize things, which is something we have talked about a lot in the past few years! [Laughing] I think also since we have talked so much

about role-play, every time I am on my computer you automatically think

that is what I am doing, and it isn't what I am doing quite often.

Sometimes I was role-playing. Sometimes I was doing admin things with

records for the site. But, a lot of the time I was just messing with

Photoshop. Sometimes I was just talking to people, because like I said,

AIM is the main way that many of us kept in touch. So, quite a bit of the

time I was talking to people and catching up to see how they were doing.

Kathleen: Do you think our involvement during this time changed the way you

viewed role-play at all?

Larkwing: I have always looked at it with a scientist's mind in some ways, because

that is the way I think. But especially after you were discussing things you

were finding and theorizing about role-play. I did look at it a little

differently I guess. When I looked at relationships and different group

dynamics, both in-character and out-of-character, I did keep that in mind,

and again even more so since I have been discussing things with you.

From the beginning though, I have always just wanted to get across to you

the idea that role-play is for fun. It is reminiscent of kids' make believing,

just like they do in the sand box; just playing for the sake of play, because

it's fun, and because it's easy.

As an admin, I was also protective and motherly towards the site and the

people who were there. I wanted to protect them, and I wanted to protect

what it was I'd created so it would not be misunderstood or

misrepresented. Also, I didn't want it to be dissected too much, so the

innocence about the play was preserved. I didn't want you to try to make

more of it than it was really. There were all these little tiny things you

could have read into it that were there, but not really meant to be there.

That wasn't the purpose of the site. For instance, even though we did

collaboratively write and we did get better as writers, it wasn't the purpose

of why we were doing it.

Kathleen: What do you think that purpose was?

Larkwing: To be honest, part of it was that we just loved the fandom – that

connection with *Pern*. So it was fandom, just like fan fiction. Part of it was

the same reason people do MMORPGs. You know, the online graphic

based RPGs like *World of Warcraft*. Or maybe why people do table top

games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. It's just fun! It's a little nerdy, and

it's something that we can enjoy. A lot of us were writers, so it was a way

to get our own stories, thoughts and characters published somewhere.

Also, we got to meet people that were like us. It was a way for people with

common interests to come together.

I don't know what motivated us more – the ability to role-play and have

our characters interact; to explore things as we become them literally. That

is very addictive to be able to experience. However, there was also this

aspect of just being able to talk to your friends. Many times we went on

the site just to talk to people – just to feel like we were interacting with

someone. Forum members see you in some ways even more than the friends you have in the world, because they see different aspects of you through the characters you create. You are not just the person they see as the member. You are also all these different people you created.

Kathleen: So maybe they saw sides to you that you don't show to anyone else.

Larkwing: Exactly.

Kathleen: So, now I am wondering how young people juggle all of this with the rest of their lives.

Larkwing: Well, it isn't any different than all the things I juggle in my regular world. Part of it is the fact that you can multi task. Like I said, half the time when people were on the site they were just goofing off talking. So for instance, I might be writing a paper and I write a couple of paragraphs of the paper, but then I need a short break and I go over and make a post, talk to some people, and then go back to my paper. It helps me a lot because I cannot focus on one thing very long, like that paper for instance. Everything ends up becoming mush in my head. So I need to have multiple things happening simultaneously. And actually that is what a lot of people who role-play have found out about themselves. Really, you just juggle it like you juggle anything else in the real world.

Kathleen: Do you think that being involved in this has helped you to learn how to balance things better in your life?

Larkwing: Yes, honestly. It is partially because I have just gotten older and learned better how to balance things in my life, but it is also because I've gotten more used to it. I've also gotten a lot faster. What used to take me 30 minutes to write, takes me now about 10 minutes. I've actually done a lot of posts between things from my iPhone.

Larkwing Shares Implications for Education

Kathleen: Are there things you think teachers should consider that are used during RPG play? Do you think this type of thing should be replicated in a classroom? Do you think it would work in a high school English class, for instance?

Larkwing: I think it depends on how you do it. One of the reasons my friends didn't like their high school English classes, or really the English assignments, is because they felt like they were being forced to do something, and then it wasn't fun anymore. For example, instead of focusing on all the great, old literature, like the *Scarlett Letter* – and don't get me wrong, because I love that book and it is marked up on every page. But when you get into all these classics and that is all you get to read, it gets very boring because it is hard to relate to for many teens. The language, the dialogue they use. You know me – I love English, so I make myself get past all that and down to what it is saying. I actually enjoy thinking about how things were said back then, and the beauty of the language. But the average English student doesn't like all of that. I can't tell you how many of my friends

asked why they couldn't read something that was more contemporary and would be easier for them to relate to. Why couldn't we use *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*? Why couldn't we include modern classics? Allowing more choice would support motivation and really help.

Kathleen: So, do you have advice about aspects of role-playing that might be able to be used in the classroom?

Larkwing: The way I would think about it is to consider why it is motivational to us. First, it is going to be motivational for people who like writing. You could have someone who is incredibly creative, but they hate writing, so they are not going to want to do this probably. You can also think about the use of media and how that is motivational. Teachers can use technology to allow students to express themselves, to practice skills for reading and writing, and so forth. Text-based RPG is an example of how students use technology in their out-of-school lives, so letting students use technology in school to learn and to create things is something you can do in the classroom that will be motivating to kids. Even if you are reading very traditional books, you can use the technology to help students feel motivated to produce things that show their understanding and help them to connect with a book. It is easier for students of my generation to make these connections because they are able to use media they are surrounded by every day, but it is also more interesting to them than simply saying to read this book and then write an essay about it.

All role-plays are not created from books or other types of fandom too. Many are just your own ideas developed with others. One good thing teachers could do in the classroom is to have students create their own characters and then edit their profiles together. Let's say you are trying to teach students to use more descriptive language in an elementary classroom. You could have students learn to describe personality better by selecting various traits out of a hat and then figuring out ways of putting them together to develop full character descriptions. You could also pick a theme and create a character based on that theme.

Another thing you can do is pair students up to write with each other. One can be the first contributor to the story thread, and the second can add to the story thread after the first writes an introduction. They can then continue in sequence like we do until they finish the story. They don't need to be online to write collaboratively in the classroom. They just need the opportunity to write in groups instead of always making them write alone.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through discussion of three focal participants' experiences as members and leaders of *Trelis Weyr*, a text-based RPG forum, and analysis of artifacts from this forum, I hoped to create a greater understanding of technologies' influence on a new context for literacy, and its possible relationships to popular culture and social development. As evidenced throughout this investigation, these youth belonged to a community of practice where they used global literacy practices, made social connections, and collaborated with other fans of *Pern* literature. In so doing, they used various forms of fan publication by sharing resources and knowledge, and interacting via role-play to create collective narratives. Moreover, these youth were integrating multiple forms of media to remix or create new items for a social purpose. They also enacted multiple social identities (Hall, 1997; Holland et al., 1998), adopting various social roles (e.g., author, reader, moderator).

In this last chapter, I will explore identified aspects of youths' literacy and social practices, together with other related scholarly work on the literacy practices of youth; how youth enact identity; multimodal design and creativity; and, the motivational aspects of participation in RPG forums. This will be followed by discussions of the potential implications from this study for literacy and language educators and their students. I will end with a discussion of the limitations and delimitations of this researcher study, as well as suggestions for future directions in research.

Literacy and Social Practices of Youth

According to Gee (1991), literacy is much more than a collection of decontextualized skills; it is deeply connected to "embodied action in the material and social world" (p. 714). Literacy is a socially and culturally situated meaning-making process involving "the contingent use of semiotic resources in response to context, purpose, and desired intention" (Thorne et al., 2009, p. 813). This definition of literacy is in contrast with a more traditional concept involving the acquisition of "formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (New London Group, 1996, p. 61). The literate practices of today's youth demand a new way of thinking about what "good" writing looks like, which has been defined as "individualistic, author-centric, and monolingual, and rigidly adherent to standard genres and conventions" (Black, 2009b, p. 422). This traditional idea of "good" writing contrasts with the nature of RPG forum writing seen in *Trelis Weyr*, which has been shown to be collaborative, interactional, multimodal and creative.

Adolescent Literacy Development

Today's youth must access socially constructed codes, or styles of language; codes taught within the discourse communities to which they belong. Successful youth must be able to access the conventions of disciplinary knowledge production and communication, and utilize that inherent power to read and think critically across various texts and disciplines (Luke & Elkins, 1998). Additionally, adolescents must be able to deal with differing forms of literacy and multiliteracies, in order to navigate texts from various discourse groups, as well as being able to negotiate various texts, infused with the discourses of a particular community (Luke & Elkins, 1998; New London Group, 1996).

In *Trelis Weyr*, youth scaffold each other to learn how to construct codes and styles of language supporting role-play interaction in the forum. Youth were able to utilize their knowledge of fantasy literature; in particular, the *Pern* literature series created by Anne McCaffrey. Additionally, their knowledge of online communication resources like AIM chat and social media networks supported their understanding and how an RPG forum worked; enabling them to be proficient as users of multiple forms of media they pulled in and remixed to achieve their goal of role-play to enter *Pern*. Members of the forum were also actively involved reading and writing across multiple texts, infused with the discourses of *Pern* fandom.

Collaboration and Interaction

Many researchers have argued that collaboration between learners is a positive influence on learning (Bruce, Peyton, & Batson, 1993; Storch, 1999). Arnold and Ducate (2006) contended the context, tools, and participants of a learning environment help to mediate collaborative learning, and Swain (1995) also concluded collaborative activities, "lead learners to reflect on their own language production as they attempt to create meaning" (p. 141). Additionally, Sotillo (2002) found collaborative writing contributed to increased complexity in students' writing, as well as their willingness to use peer feedback during the editing process. As well, research conducted by Storch (2005) identified an increase in grammatical accuracy and overall quality of writing.

Further, research findings lead us to consider the possibility that technology may be intrinsically connected to the evolution of collaborative writing, since new developments in technology provide new opportunities for collaboration (Kessler, 2009). Levy and Stockwell (2006) provided an overview of the similarities and differences

between various types of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and suggested asynchronous CMC may allow for more focus on form due to the additional time available for reflection. In other research, findings indicated students were more likely to actively engage in online collaborative activities due to the public nature of the information and their sense of accountability (Sengupta, 2001). Research also indicated, through the act of collaboration students were: exposed to valuable input from others, as well as providing effective linguistic feedback for themselves and peers (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978); encouraged to produce enhanced output (Oxford, 1997); and, given more opportunity for practice (Ortega, 2007).

However, text-based RPG forums were not included in this body of research. To my knowledge, the literature contains no evidence from research into the use of text-based RPG forums in the context of language learning. Nonetheless, fan fiction, which was previously mentioned in chapter two of this dissertation, has been extensively researched as a form of fan writing, and provides some insight regarding reading and writing done in text-based RPG forums. This research indicates fan communities foster friendship (Baym, 2000; Tobin, 1999); function as collaborative learning environments (Black, 2009a; Jenkins, 2004); and, support the integration of multiple modes such as visual, linguistic, and audio within one text (New London Group, 1996; Stein, 2006; Thomas, 2007). These same findings are supported by research conducted for this dissertation; *Trelis Weyr* forum provided opportunities for members to develop social relationships and fostered friendships, served as a collaborative environment that supported interaction through role-play, and was multimodal in nature.

Research also indicated games could be very productive in helping youth apply,

synthesize, and think critically about what they learned through active, social participation (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2001; Sandford & Williamson, 2005) because they required players to negotiate and cooperate. In texted-based RPG forums like *Trelis Weyr* this type of cooperation is not only important to gameplay, but it is also important in writing about and for the game because the community is actively communicating and collaborating both inside and outside the play space (Colby & Colby, 2008). Further, research findings from multiple studies indicated youth were engaged in critical thinking and complex forms of literacy and learning while involved in online game activities, which often matched or exceeded the types of literacy activities students were experiencing at school (Gee, 2000b, 2004, 2008; McGinnis, 2007; Williams, 2005, 2009).

In *Trelis Weyr*, interviews with the focal participants revealed members felt supported by one another and were provided tools that mediated their collaborative interactions. These activities supported participants' creation of collective narratives as a by-product of their role-play. This form of collaborative writing increased forum members' ability to improve their writing; for example, text complexity was increased according to comments from the focal participants. Further, there appeared to be a willingness among members to assist one another to improve the quality of their writing, since this would support the construction of better quality collective narratives within the story threads. Lark also shared she saw a marked improvement in members' writing over time, as they were mentored by more experienced role-players within the forum structure (Larkwing, personal communication, December 15, 2012).

In- and Out-of-School Literacies

Literacy research has focused on youth's literacy practices across both in- and

out-of-school contexts (Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Today's researchers look beyond a narrow set of literacy skills associated with in-school activities, examining how literacy development is embedded in social processes and practices and is associated with multiple contexts, including home, school, commerce, and community (Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

More recent research provides several examples of youth's literacy practices not typically associated with school, including those involving digital tools (Mills, 2010). Youth are identified as agentive individuals who actively construct literacy practices in relation to various contexts, including: new literacies (Hagood, 2009; Kist, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), popular culture and media production (Alvermann, 2002, 2010; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kinloch, 2009; Mahiri, 2004, 2011; Morrell, 2004; Ranker, 2007; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010), multimodality (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006), instant messaging (Jacobs, 2004; 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005), fan fiction (Black, 2008; Thomas, 2006), and video games (Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2007). This body of research is significant because it has redefined the literacy practices and agentive identities of youth (Alvermann, et al., 2006), providing contrasting examples to the deficit perspectives presented in other research that was based on narrow, decontextualized sets of literacy skills (Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kinloch, 2009; Mahiri, 2004; O'Brien, 2001; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009).

Research has addressed the ways youth adopt and adapt technologies in the classroom; however, little research has focused on examples of youths' non-adult mediated, out-of-school literacy practices. Specifically, research has not directly

addressed how youth think of themselves as literate individuals when they use these technologies in their self-selected literate practices occurring outside of school. This dissertation provides insight into this gap in the research, sharing focal participants' beliefs about their involvement in a text-based RPG forum outside the context of school. Findings from this study indicated members of this forum felt competent as role-players; however, they were not always confident in their abilities. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), competence refers to a person's effectiveness in dealing with their environment, and can manifest as a person's need to understand their work to complete a task successfully. Focal participants indicated during interviews they all felt less confidence initially in their ability to role-play, but over time and with support from other forum members their confidence increased.

We know youths' perception of their competence as literacy learners generally affects their motivation to learn (Bandura, 1977), so this self-perception is crucial for effective literacy instruction and engagement in literacy activities, regardless of the context in which they occur. Multiple studies have identified variables associated with motivation and gaming or involvement in virtual environments, including positive affect, competence, enhanced self-esteem, vitality, and participants' valuing of game tasks (Gee, 2003; Ryan et al., 2006; Wang & Wang, 2008; Warren, Dondlinger, & Barab, 2008). These same variables were associated with members' play in *Trelis Weyr*.

Enacting Identity in a Community of Practice

This case study illustrates how members of a text-based RPG forum were able to enact various identities as participants of a community of practice (CoP). The virtual nature of this community supported and extended connectivity, offering new forms of

negotiating identity and engaging in practice, and supporting new forms of community and new learning experiences. Identity was formed and transformed in this CoP, and this definition of identity was a full reflection of an individual's context within the world. In this section, I explore how identity was formed and transformed within this CoP, including positioning *Trelis Weyr* as a community of practice supporting members' development of identity through literacy events, performance, and play.

Community of Practice

Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as being created by people who share a concern, passion, or interest for something they do, as well as regular interaction with one another supporting collective learning and improvement of skills. Wenger (1998) shares this definition allows for, but does not assume intentionality; therefore, learning can be the reason the community was created or a secondary outcome of the interactions within the community.

Additionally, Wenger asserts everything called a community is not necessarily a community of practice. For example, a neighborhood may be called a community, but it is not usually considered a community of practice. People in a neighborhood may interact with each other, though that is not always the case. If they do regularly interact, they may not be assisting each other or collectively learning how to do something. This idea of productive interaction based on a common interest is at the heart of Wenger's definition of a community of practice.

The theoretical approach of Communities of Practice (CoP) integrates identity theory, theories of practice, and theories of social structure and situated learning (Wenger, 1998). In their research on situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) focused

on common practices of group members, active involvement within groups, and in-group awareness. Important inclusion mechanisms concerning a CoP are processes of collective learning, the production of shared meaning, and collective identity. Further, several researchers have used the CoP framework to understand cooperation, knowledge management, and collaborative learning (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Osterlund & Carlile, 2003; Wenger et al., 2002). As well, research studies have concluded the CoP framework supports understanding of virtual and distributed online-communities (Eales, 2003; Arnold & Smith, 2003). Thus, this framework is uniquely suitable to consider members' interactions in *Trelis Weyr*, a text-based RPG forum, for this study as well as for future studies of RPG forums.

Collective Learning and Shared Meaning

In CoP, individual learning is inherent in the processes of social participation in a group. Knowledge and learning in a CoP are not abstract models, but are instead associations "among people engaged in an activity" (Osterlund & Carlile, 2003, p. 3). During the processes of participation, a person might enter the community as a beginner but can gain a more central position over time through the acquisition of cognitive apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In *Trelis Weyr*, members joined the community as "newbies", at least in respect to being new to the ways of *Trelis*, even if a member was an experienced role-player on another *Pern* RPG forum. Over time, members acquired skills, creating character profiles and entering play with others on the boards and sub-boards of the forum. Additionally, if a new member was less experienced and struggling with any aspect of role-play, leaders of the *Trelis* community would scaffold the individual's growth, supporting his or her

needs over time. The longer a member was involved in the forum, the more opportunities he or she was afforded as well. Newer members were encouraged to take an active role in decision-making for the forum, and everyone's thoughts and opinions were valued regardless of status. Moreover, there were opportunities for members to acquire greater status as they created more complex characters and participated in site-wide literacy events like hatchings, where it was possible to impress with dragons and become leaders in this virtual community.

 According to the Community of Practice framework, cognitive apprenticeship is acquired through participatory observation of experts in the CoP, moving from simple tasks to more sophisticated tasks, and via coaching and feedback from experts. This acquisition process leads to an intensified inclusion in the social practice of the community. In this definition, learning is based on the process of outsiders becoming more and more like insiders though inclusion and mentoring (Wenger, 1998). This component of CoP was also evident in the *Trelis Weyr* community. Members learned how to role-play within the community through a behavior known as "lurking". They acquired knowledge and understanding by observing expert play in the forum, watching as leaders of the community role-played with others, and asking questions when tasks were more sophisticated and not as transparent. The coaching and feedback model with experts on the forum is aligned with CoP's concept of cognitive apprenticeship and participatory observation. Further, this acquisition process led to intensified inclusion in the literacy and social practices of the community, as defined in the CoP framework. Members of *Trelis Weyr* were included more seamlessly as their knowledge and skill sets grew; thus, inclusion intensified and some participants moved from members to

leadership roles. *Trelis Weyr* role-players were initially outsiders when entering the forum, but soon became more and more like insiders through inclusion and mentoring.

Individual and Collective Identity

According to Wenger (1998), development of a common practice, which defines the community, includes negotiation of meaning among members, mutual engagement in joint activities, and a shared repertoire of activities, symbols and artifacts. Individual and social identities are mainly determined by negotiating the meanings of situated experiences within the community, and the learning process an individual experiences in the community.

Within the *Trelis Weyr* forum, common practices were developed, including negotiating meaning with one another, engagement in joint activities, and the development of a shared repertoire of tools and resources. *Trelis* members collectively made decisions about forum business and large, overarching plot developments as a group. They were engaged in a common interest to role-play so they could enter Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* via role-play. But to enter meant to construct and activities on the site included creation of character profiles, production of collective narratives generated during role-play, and social interaction as a fan community.

Wenger (1998) further clarifies the definition of communities of practice by stipulating CoPs are not merely communities of interest (e.g., people who enjoy the same type of movies or music); members must be practitioners as well. Members develop a shared repertoire of resources, including experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice (Wenger, 1998). Additionally, developing a community of practice takes a great deal of time and sustained interaction.

For example, a conversation you have with a passenger you sit next to on an airplane who shares a similar job situation as you may give you information about that person, as well as insight regarding the common job you share. However, it will not make the two of you a community of practice. In contrast, individuals with a similar job (i.e., teachers) who meet regularly in a lunchroom and discuss their practice may not even realize their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to do their job. Nonetheless, during the course of those conversations they are developing a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice

Participants in *Trelis Weyr* were not just people with a similar interest in McCaffrey's literature; they became practitioners who developed a shared repertoire of resources including stories, helpful tools, experiences, ways of dealing with problems, and so forth. This interaction developed over time and involved a variety of elements, including: problem solving; information sharing; seeking experiences from others; creating or reusing assets; coordinating events, interactions, and collaboration; and discussing developments.

Play, Identity, and Becoming

Multimodal composition, like what is produced in the *Trelis Weyr* forum, foregrounds the role of play both as a pathway for identity construction and for allowing youth the autonomy to draw on semiotic resources to support literacy (Wohlwend, 2009). Bakhtin (1984b) theorized play as "a centrifugal force pushing against authoritative discourses" conducive of a state of carnival, and "the right to emerge from the routine of life, the right to be free from all that is official and consecrated" (p. 257). With this in mind, one could speculate members of *Trelis Weyr* emerged from the routine of their

lives, finding the freedom to explore the virtual world of *Pern* they created as a means of

pushing against authoritative discourses and becoming free from what the worlds deems

official and consecrated. Focal participants during interviews spoke of the joy of escaping

reality and things that stress them in their off-line lives. For example, Zi shared:

> Role-play allows me to leave behind the woes of work or bills or responsibility
>
> and enter a world where anything is possible; where I have the power to control
>
> what is going on in the lives of my characters in a way that is often difficult or
>
> impossible in the real world. (Zi, personal communication, December 29, 2012)

For many years, theory recognized play as an important condition for learning and

development; however, in practice play has received a much cooler reception, with

schools devaluing certain types of "play" in particular kinds of controlled learning

contexts. Nonetheless, Vygotsky (1978) recognized "play contains all developmental

tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development" (p. 102).

Further, Winnicott (1971) stated play provides an opportunity for transitional space; a

state in which the inner realities can be projected through the aid of a transitional object.

In essence, the online space created by Lark – Trelis Weyr itself – could be considered a

transitional object for play, providing opportunities for forum members to utilize a

transitional space, where inner realities are explored through role-play. Additionally, in

later research Winnicott (1997) theorized play enables people to make connections

between their inner and outer (shared) realities, thereby supporting meaning making. "It

is in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole

personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (p. 54).

Focal participants mentioned this connection between their inner and outer shared

realities, and how these realities often blurred and were simultaneously accessed to role-play and ultimately make meaning through the construction of collective narratives.

Play is also brought into focus as a condition of design and engagement in multimodal composing processes. Rowe, Fitch, and Bass (2003) examined children's play with toy figurines during writing workshop. In particular, the study examined toys as mediating devices for generating storylines and dialogue. This interaction gradually facilitated students' engagement with writing print-based narratives. I can see parallels with this research and that conducted for this dissertation, in that forum members used the *Trelis Weyr* itself as a type of computer-mediated toy or device to generate dialogue for role-play, and ultimately the storythreads that became collective narratives created through play.

Wohlwend's (2009) ethnographic study of literacy play in primary classrooms also revealed students used new literacy practices to foster sustained creativity and problem solving. Wohlwend tracked children's sign making across aural (speech, sound effect), visual (image), and manual (gesture, object, manipulation) modalities. In the absence of new literacy technologies in the classroom, children managed to integrate new literacies through transformation of classroom materials (e.g., crayons, markers, paper, and the act of drawing) to simulate cell phones, iPods, and videogames. Children's construction of text was non-linear in nature and the product was secondary to children's sustained engagement and collaboration on the text mediated. Likewise, text created through *Trelis Weyr* was repeatedly said by Lark to not be the primary focus of play. Instead, engagement in play by members and the fun they had was what motivated participants to enter and to persist at play (Larkwing, personal communication, January

17, 2012).

Motivation

In the past several decades, literacy research has concentrated on motivation's influence on students' literacy development (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Alexander, Kulikowich, & Jetton, 1994; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Across these research studies, findings emphasized the importance of understanding motivation and engagement as an aspect of comprehension and general school achievement (Moje, 2008). Motivation within students' interaction in social contexts (Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998), and intersections between learner knowledge and interest (O'Brien, 2001) including text features, and social and disciplinary contexts, have all provided pieces of the puzzle to help us better understand motivation's influence on literacy. However, as McCaslin (1990) shared, motivation is a construct in need of more in-depth study, which still holds true today.

Most research in motivation and gaming to date has looked at the motivational aspects of gameplay in an attempt to use these motivational elements to get youth to engage with and learn content (Gee, 2003; Ryan et al., 2006; Wang & Wang, 2008; Warren, Dondlinger, & Barab, 2008). However, newer research is beginning to consider the new literacy definition of play as a means of exploring and experimenting to process knowledge and to problem-solve. For example, in one study rich, media-based presentations were shown to support students' motivation and acquisition of knowledge in self-directed ways as they collaborated with each other to problem-solve and identify solutions to real-world problems in a multisensory environment (Liu, Horton, Omanson, & Toprac, 2011).

Play, in this definition, may lower the emotional stakes of failing, because players take risks and learn through trial and error (Jenkins, 2005). In many games, the underlying logic individuals use is that it is okay to "die" or lose the game because you can always play it again. This "do-over" attitude supports players' feelings they can build competence over multiple games played; thus, lowering their concern over winning or losing and focusing on mastery instead (Jenkins, 2005). Interestingly, unlike its graphic interface role-play-game cousin, text-based role-play-games do not have a built in win or lose mentality because the purpose of the game play is to create story through interaction and enter the virtual space, but there is no incentive to get to a certain level, to complete a task, and so forth. Thus, this form of RPG already has lowered participants' expectations of winning or mastery.

Additionally, Jenkins (2005) shared games construct interesting worlds that players move through and feel a part of, having a stake in events as they unfold. As well, games provide a rationale for learning because what players are learning is put to immediate use to solve problems in the virtual world (Jenkins, 2005). In *Trelis Weyr*, participants want to improve their skills as role-players, according to the focal participants, so they can enter play with others online and role-play in the virtual world of *Pern*. Additionally, Jenkins shared players are motivated to pick up games because of their own desire for challenge and complex interaction. Play as described here is more than a source of fun; it encourages experimentation and risk-taking, as well as the process of problem solving as a means to find answers (Jenkins, 2005).

Though Lark emphasized role-play in *Trelis* was primarily about fun, other comments by all three focal participants throughout our interviews indicated participants

also felt encouraged to experiment in the virtual world they had collectively created.

Within *Trelis Weyr*, players appeared to be motivated to enter game play and persist at

play over time because they wanted to interact with one another to enter the virtual world

they constructed; text-based role-play in *Trelis Weyr* and other forums like it was as close

to actually entering *Pern* as they could get. Zi shared:

> I love *Pern* literature and the dragons in particular. I have always had a particular
>
> fascination for stories that involved bonding with creatures like dragons, as in
>
> *Pern*, and it can be fun to explore how that works and the ramifications of it
>
> through role-play. At least when it comes to *Pern*, more fans seem to be involved
>
> in role-playing games than writing fan fiction or other types of fandom activities,
>
> so if I wanted to expand my experiences with *Pern*, the best way to do that was to
>
> join an RP.

Members of *Trelis Weyr* were encouraged to experiment within this virtual community,

using problem solving skills while they constructed characters and collaboratively

planned and created story threads through their role-play.

Implications for Classroom Practice

New technologies are creating a profound blurring of the classical boundaries

separating teaching, learning, research, administration, communication, media, and play.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is as much a way of life as it is a tool

for youth today; deeply embedded in every aspect of their lives. Living and learning are

interwoven, and youth expect a new type of learning ecology – one that interweaves

learning with the social, in an active, participatory manner in which their physical and

virtual worlds synergistically coexist. However, today's digital natives communicate in

ways many educators and educational researchers do not comprehend. Students are pushing learning to new dimensions, using a language of interpretation and expression founded in an interactive approach to learning, creating, and responding to information through a mixture of multimodal text. Continuing to teach them in time-worn ways is a mistake; thus, it is imperative educators use research-based information to inform changes practices that will better fit the needs of today's youth.

Recent interest in the use of online digital writing tools has increased, characterized by an emphasis on promoting new literacies in classrooms in response to new times and the advent of new digital tools (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Kellner, 2000; Leu et al., 2009; Merchant, 2010). Further, this escalation is apparent in policy statements and new standards for writing instruction, adolescent literacies, and 21st century literacies, all stimulating inclusion of technology, collaborative planning, and collective problem solving to prepare students for higher education and the workplace (Common Core, 2010; IRA & NCTE, 1996; ISTE, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Partnership, 2008). In the fields of literacy studies and writing research, the rationales for teaching new literacies like collaborative writing include: leveraging literacy practices characteristic of students' out-of-school literacy practices involving reading, writing and related semiotic systems (Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Herrington et al., 2009; Jacobs, 2011; Kajder, 2010; Wilber, 2010); creating new forms of social networks and relationships to support literacy practices related to writing development (Andrews & Smith, 2011; Hicks, 2009; Kist, 2010); and, preparing students for workplaces and other participatory cultures demanding an understanding of how specific digital tools are used in certain ways (Beach et al., 2009; DeVoss et al., 2010).

Teachers who leverage students' interests and literacy practices founded in out-of-school, informal learning experiences may find useful ways to support the new literacies we would like students to take up. As Gee (2003) shares, teachers should leverage the learning principals embedded within game designs for educational purposes. However, it is important that educators and researchers attempt to understand the activities youth find meaningful and motivating. Based on my findings in this study, I will now explore the important aspects of youth's digital literacy practices I feel could be applied to classrooms: the valuing of out-of-school literacy practices; integration of technology and popular culture; creation of collaborative, participatory environments; integrating performance into students' reading and writing lives; and, positioning youth as designers of text.

Valuing Out-of-School Literacy Practices

Research has shown there is a growing disconnect between youths' in- and out-of-school literacy practices, prompting a need for greater understanding of their new and rapidly evolving techno-literacies outside of traditional school contexts. This is particularly important when considering changing curricular requirements associated with educating students in the 21st century framework, including a shift in thinking towards informal learning across the lifespan, beyond traditional, formal learning occurring in schools (Black 2009a; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Barton (1994) posits "everyday literacy gives a richer view of literacy which demands a new definition of literacy, a new way of thinking about what is involved in reading and writing" (p. 5).

With the introduction of these new frameworks regarding literacy development, various literacy practices once thought to have little to do with being literate are now

deemed important. Today's youth are engaged in critical thinking and sophisticated forms of literacy and learning in out-of-school experiences, which often meet or exceed what is occurring in traditional classroom spaces. Thus, it is extremely important to value youths' out-of-school literacy experiences when considering how to make changes to in-school literacy instruction and activities. For example, research has shown youth are engaged in literate and textual practices through instant messaging, a central component of their social worlds in both on- and offline spaces (Lewis & Fabo, 2005). Lewis and Fabo emphasized the importance of understanding how different social spaces and literacies youth were engaged with enabled them to enact identities to make school relevant for them.

Findings from this dissertation regarding youths' involvement in *Trelis Weyr* indicated members' engagement in literate practices enabled them to relate to literature in an authentic, meaningful way. In our last conversation, Lark shared the focus on classic literature and lack of choice in high school English classes left many students feeling disconnected from the texts they were assigned. Lark shared her friends and she would have preferred to read more contemporary selections they could relate to, supporting their motivation for reading and discussion (Larkwing, personal communication, January 17, 2013). Lark's comments are supported by research, which has shown providing choice and access to a diverse collection of reading materials increased students' motivation for reading and enhanced their comprehension of self-selected texts (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). To address this in the classroom, educators could design curriculum incorporating a wider variety of forms of media (e.g., books, electronic readers, MP3 players) and modes (e.g., writing, images, and Internet resources) which are valued by

students outside of school.

Integrating Technology and Popular Culture

For the most part, until recently research has dismissed popular culture, scorning it and the media as frivolous uses of time that distracted youth from more worthy pursuits, like reading literature, studying, and learning about "high culture" (Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2002). Popular culture was not considered socially legitimate in the past. In fact, most schools banned popular culture artifacts because they were considered violent or too explicit and distracting. Thus, what youth might consider authentic content was marginalized, causing further alienation of struggling students who relied on this type of unofficial cultural capital in social exchanges (Black, 2008). However, there have always been researchers who argued about the importance of not negating the contributions of popular culture and their affordances in the classroom. For example, Dyson (1997) argued that disregarding popular culture would risk "reinforcing societal divisions in children's orientation to each other, to cultural art forms, and, to school itself" (p. 181).

Ultimately, this type of dismissal has prevented educators and researchers from recognizing potential opportunities within popular culture and affinity groups for the sort of learning and abilities becoming increasingly more valuable for students in the future (Black, 2008). Additionally, it is problematic because if students are to avail themselves of these opportunities outside of school, meaningful forms of participation and meaning-making utilizing activities of this nature will be limited to students who have access to technology, networks, and online learning, which is a significant issue of access and equity. Students who do not have access to these resources will fall behind in these skills,

while those with unlimited access with learn and master procedural knowledge and

digital literacy skills enabling them to excel in higher education and the world of work

(Black, 2008).

In my dissertation study, I endeavored to understand how youth in *Trelis Weyr*

coordinated online, social interactions and took up mediational means, such as online

digital tools and popular culture resources, to collaboratively plan and write through role-

play, creating collective narratives. I considered how participants in the forum negotiated

the coordination of their collaborative writing as a product of their role-playing. I

considered their collaborative writing as social action that unfolded over time, mediated

by a range of provided resources in relation to the literacy practices participants brought

to bear or constructed while role playing. These resources included "technologies of

inscription and distribution" (Prior, 2006, p. 58), which included the ProBoards forum

they used to post their writing through role-play, read each other's posts, and

communicate via site-specific resources like the boards and private messaging (a type of

email built into ProBoards forums), as well as off-site electronic resources they used in

support of ongoing communication and collaboration.

Findings from this dissertation study highlight practical suggestions made by

Lark, the forum administrator, regarding how educators might use technology and

popular culture in the classroom. In our last conversation, Lark shared:

> Teachers can use technology to allow students to express themselves, to practice
>
> skills for reading and writing, and so forth. Text-based RPG is an example of how
>
> students use technology in their out-of-school lives, so letting students use
>
> technology in school to learn and to create things is something you can do in the

classroom that will be motivating to kids. Even if you are reading very traditional

books, you can use the technology to help students feel motivated to produce

things that show their understanding and help them to connect with a book. It is

easier for students of my generation to make these connections because they are

able to use media they are surrounded by every day, but it is also more interesting

to them than simply saying to read this book and then write an essay about it.

(Larkwing, personal communication, January 17, 2012).

Popular culture offers educators opportunities to meet students where they are at.

Since students spend much of their time interacting with popular culture, using it within

the classroom allows educators to maximize students' knowledge. Meeting students

where their interests are also allows teachers to reach out to students who might be less

interested in discussing more traditional content. One classroom connection might be to

use popular culture texts, like music lyrics, in close reading. Students could take notes on

ideas found in the text and learn to read the material deeply, analyzing the lyrics to

improve their literary critical thinking skills. They could then move on to apply these

new found skills to poems by Robert Frost, where students could use these skills to

understand material they are not familiar with.

Creating Collaborative, Participatory Environments

Research indicates the power of a collaborative, participatory environment, where

people are supported and engaged to share creation, and where more experienced

individuals pass along their knowledge to novices (Lenhardt & Madden, 2005). Members

believe what they contribute to the culture matters, and they feel some degree of social

connection with other members of the culture. According to Jenkins (2006a), forms of

participatory culture include affiliations around various forms of media, expressions of new creative forms, collaborative problem solving, and circulation or flow of media. In considering the way *Trelis Weyr* was constructed as a collaborative, participatory culture, it was noted members worked together to solve problems, they were committed to continued play, and they created and used assets in their community in support of their objectives.

In a classroom, educators can construct a collaborative, participatory environment by adopting an inquiry-based teaching and learning model. This model is tied to the belief that learning is an active process, which increases students' intellectual engagement and fosters deep understanding through the development of a hands-on, minds-on, and research-based disposition towards teaching and learning. There are several teaching practices encompassed within this notion, including problem and project based learning. Inquiry-based projects increase students' engagement because they present opportunities for authentic investigation and the presentation of learning and support students as active learners who take charge, question, make decisions, analyze, think critically, create, and present their knowledge in meaningful ways.

Integrating Performance into Students' Reading and Writing Lives

Literacy work on the RPG forum was situated in the design of characters and role-play when enacting these new identities. Many young people used this development and enactment of characters as an opportunity to explore multiple identities in a safe, virtual environment. Considering the eagerness with which youth engaged in this work, educators might consider how character development and analysis in the language arts classroom can occur through technologies that allow learners to create virtual identities of

characters in the literature they study. For instance, students might create an avatar for a fictional character or a character profile for social networking sites. These activities require character analysis and composing through multiple modes. Assessment for such tasks may rely on students' justification of their design choices.

Positioning Youth as Designers of Text

Educators should create an environment in their classrooms where students can engage in multimodal design, allowing them to use the representational modes to become designers of text. There are several ways students can creatively engage in multimodal design, using their individual voices as meaning makers and digital proficiencies as they recombine different semiotic modes. To engage students, educators can create collaborative teams of students who are encouraged to draw on their collective capital and design websites, create online tutorials and curricular resources for classroom resources, provide peer assessment on message boards, and interact in online literacy circles. These types of computer-mediated practices create opportunities for students to acquire and share with one another multimodal design skills. Finished products can also be published online to extend the audience for students' completed work beyond the teacher and school community.

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Limitations and Opportunities for Future Study

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Every research method has its strengths and weaknesses (Patton, 2002). Thus, as with any study, there were limitations that should be acknowledged; however, limitations can also bring about opportunities for further study. First, this is an extremely context specific study, and thus findings are not transferable. Studies of communities of practice are by their nature limited, because as Lave and Wenger (1998) have shared, every

community of practice and the practices that community enacts are unique. While there is

much to be learned about collaborative practices within fandom and text-based role-play-

games, it is important not to over generalize findings from this study and think they can

be transferred to other, even similar, settings. Participants of this study are also delimited

to *Trelis Weyr*, the RPG forum I selected as the bounded context in my study as a unit of

analysis. This relatively small group cannot represent other RPG forum groups or other

online writing and fan communities.

Another important limitation of this study is that text-based RPG fandom groups

are anonymous in nature, so data on demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and

social and educational background is highly difficult to determine. As a researcher, I had

to rely on an element of trust, and it is uncertain if participants' true identities were being

self-reported. In online environments like *Trelis Weyr*, real identities can be secondary,

and in some cases the online identity of an individual might be very diffierent from his or

her off-line identity. Further, the data does not include the individual perspectives of

those who were not interviewed, but may have provided valuable insight for this analysis.

Interviews reflect a particular viewpoint, as participants were being asked to reflect on

past experiences. A longitudal study of specific collaborative practices in a text-based

role-play-game forum over several years could offer insight into how these practices

within the community shift over time, including how members both use and view literacy

and social practices within the community.

This analysis is also limited to the documents I perceived as being pertinent to my

investigation, or those items pointed out to me during interviews with participants. As

such, there may be other pertinent documents that I did not include in the analysis

because my participants or I did not identify them. I would also like to call attention to the idea of "skewing the discourse" that can occur during interviews for various reasons (Patton, 2002). For instance, interview participants, being aware of my status as an educator and researcher, may consciously or unconsciously have shown undue deference by responding in ways they assumed I would appreciate. Additionally, there was the potential for Hawthorne and Halo effect, wherein the presence of the researcher may alter the online events in some manner. One way to address "skewing of the discourse" and the undue respect for me as an educator and a researcher would be to position participants as researchers themselves through an action research model. Such a model would mediate the effect of the outsider/researcher influence, and possibly reduce skewing of the discourse. However, such an approach can also be seen as skewing the discourse in a different way – towards the participants – and what was needed in this study was baseline data.

Most importantly, I was intimately related to one of my focal participants. Larkwing is my daughter and our relationship afforded me increased access to her as both an expert in text-based role play, and as an interview participant in this research study. To address the situation, I utilized a form of relational reflexivity as a methodology. According to Welch (1994), relational reflexivity is a way for us to think of ourselves as researchers, but also as individuals who are involved in relationships with those we encounter during research. This type of reflexivity provides a means to include the voices of all participants, including a dialogue about our relationships. Through the use of a researcher reflective journal, I consistently interrogated my own thoughts, acknowledging relationality within the research process, recognizing the connectedness between myself

and Larkwing. In addition, I included two pertinent areas in my research design to address researcher reflexivity; the need for reciprocity and the question of validity. Nonetheless, access to Larkwing and use of her insider participant perspective that was reported inside our intimate relationship provided me a deeper access to the participants' understandings.

Moving forward, there are several aspects of the text-based role-play-game experience that should productively be investigated to flesh out the structure laid down within this dissertation by delving more deeply into both the acadmic and motivational sides of participation:

- Investigate RPG forums like *Trelis Weyr* as communities of practice and play to develop a social learning model for online, virtual communities to include prior theories of community and new contexts that speak directly to the virtual nature of online resources.

- Investigate the nature and type of play occurring in text-based RPG forums, particularly in light of supporting members' motivation to enter and persist at a tasks over time.

- Investigate competence in writing; what signifies competence for a participant as both a role player and as a writer, and are these two notions of competence compatible, mutually exclusive, and so forth.

- Investigate specific aspects of play in forums like *Trelis Weyr*, and their implications for classroom practice. In connection with this, further investigation in identity development related to text-based RPG play is warranted as well.

Final Thoughts

Throughout these pages, I have illustrated how youth engaged in various literacy and social practices while navigating and manipulating popular culture and technologies in an online text-based role-play-game forum. I sought to explore the structure of this space to describe this phenomenon from a structural perspective and suggest areas of future research to delve more deeply into specific aspects of the experience. It is my hope that through understanding youths' everyday literacy practices as manifest in a text-based role-play-game forum, researchers and educators may be able to better meet youth's needs and prepare them for the 21st century demands they will face as members of a global community. We must consider the roles technology and popular culture play in students' literacies, and try to bring them into the classroom to bridge the widening gap between youth's in- and out-of-school literacies. If we can achieve this, we potentially can make classrooms motivating, interactive communities of practice and play, similar to those students experience in their out-of-school literacy development.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Interview Protocol

Role Play Study

Thank you again for participating in my study on role playing in Trelis Weyr, a Pern related role play game forum. I would like to openly talk about your experiences and feelings regarding your practices as a participant in text-based role-play-game forums like Trelis Weyr; in particular, how they are organized to create a collaborative environment, the ways you are involved in these forums, and what makes you motivated to participate in these forums. By now you have had the opportunity to read the information provided to you that explains the purpose of this study. You have also signed the informed consent that clarifies your eligibility to participate in this interview. Please let me know if you have any questions about the documentation you signed or about the study at any time.

I have created a bank of questions to direct this interview. Please take your time with your answers and let me know if you have any questions, or if you change your mind about participating in this interview at any time.

Thanks for participating!

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Interview One

Demographic information:

1. What is your name (can be a screen name) and your age?

2. What is your gender? Is your biological gender the same as your performed gender online (what you identify as when you role play in characters you create)?

3. What best describes your race/ethnic background (i.e., African-American, Asian/Asian American, Hispanic, Native American, Caucasian, Other)?

4. How would you describe where you live: urban (in the city), rural (in country), or suburban (in planned communities)?

5. What grade are you in (i.e., grades 6-8, grades 9-12, college, out of college)? If you are in school, what type of educational setting do you attend (i.e., public school, private school, virtual school, home school)?

6. What are/were your favorite subjects in school? What are/were your least favorite subjects?

7. Do you have any brothers and/or sisters? What age are they?

8. Do you live with both or one of your parents, a guardian, or on your own? Do any extended family members live with you in your home (grandparents, niece/nephew)?

9. What is the predominant language spoken in your home? Is a second language spoken in your home (if so, what?)

10. What is the highest grade level your parents completed (i.e., grades K-12, college)?

RP experiences:

1. How long have you been participating in text-based role-play forums?

2. Do you participate in other fan-based sites? If so, what else have you participated in and for how long?

3. What were the first types of role play games you played?

4. What got you started role playing? How did it make you feel as a participant?

5. When did you start role playing in Pern forums, and which forums have you participated in?

6. How do you feel about the people you interact with in forums like Trelis Weyr? How does that make you feel about being a participant yourself?

7. Do you feel you are a competent role player? What makes you feel that way?

8. Can you share how your participation in an RP forum like Trelis Weyr supports your autonomy (e.g., choice in tasks, expression of your own ideas, feeling you can be yourself)? How does that make you feel?

9. How much time do you typically spend per week role playing? Why/how do you spend that time? Can you describe how you fit your role playing activities into your schedule? How is that different from making time for homework or other activities you participate in?

10. Can you describe the types of things you do as a participant in a forum like Trelis Weyr?

11. Have you created artifacts related to your role play activities that are hosted on other sites (for example, do you have a Flickr photo stream for images; do you blog or have a website to display creations; or, do you have a deviantART site)? If so, can you

describe any of these creations, and how it makes you feel to be able to create and share this work?

12. What are the most valuable resources that helped you become a participant and learn to role play? Are there resources that supported your growth (i.e., helped you improve)?

13. What parts of the Trelis Weyr site did you visit most frequently? Why? Did your use of the site change over time (if so, how)?

14. What forms of communication did you use with others on Trelis Weyr? What happens in that context (how does it work)?

15. Have you used what you have learned from role playing and making role play content in any other areas of your life?

Interview Two

1. Think about your overall experiences as a participant in Trelis Weyr specifically. How would you describe it to a friend who has not participated in Trelis Weyr or other Pern related role play games?

2. Why do you participate in RP forums like Trelis Weyr? Can you describe why it is important to you?

3. How competent do you feel about your ability to participate in role playing? Why?

4. Did you feel prepared to succeed in your role play on Trelis Weyr? Why?

5. Can you describe a time when you helped others and/or given advice on role-playing?

6. Can you describe a time when you collaborated with others during role play?

7. Can you share what you think you have learned from role playing in RP forums like Trelis Weyr? How does that make you feel?

8. Can you describe the kinds of conversations you have with other players through chat or other features in Trelis Weyr?

9. Do you talk to players about personal issues not related to role play? Why?

10. Can you share a time when a role play participant (online friend) offered you support when you had a real life problem?

11. Can you tell me what it is like to work with others in Trelis Weyr?

12. How important is the way your character looks to you (i.e., visually and textually)?

13. Who or what encouraged you to participate in role play game forums like Trelis Weyr?

14. Has anything or anyone ever discouraged you from participating in role play game

forums?

15. What do you like about role playing in Trelis Weyr? What do you dislike about role playing in Trelis Weyr?

16. What parts of Trelis Weyr made you want to keep role playing? Why?

17. Can you share what it is like to try out new roles and personalities with your characters?

18. Is there anything that you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

Master Domain Sheet for Trelis Weyr RPG Forum Study

Questions:
- In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized as a virtual environment?
- In what ways and for what purposes do *Trelis Weyr* participants engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose?
- What are the factors motivating *Trelis Weyr* participants to enter and persist at play?

Domain 1: Community factors are a way *Trelis Weyr* is organized to foster collaboration and collective composition during role play.
1. Enactment of a Shared Interest
2. Freedom from Geographic and Time Constraints
3. Development of Discursive Skills
4. Development of a Shared Competence
5. Engagement in Joint Activities

Domain 2: Collaborative factors are a way to foster *Trelis Weyr* participants' engagement in multiple practices as they read and collectively compose during role play.
1. Engagement in Active, Social Participation
2. Creation of a Virtual Participatory Culture
3. Production of Collective Narratives through Role-Play

Domain 3: Literacy events, performance, and play support collaborative composition during role play and participants' motivation to enter and persist at play.
1. Development of Literacy Skills
2. Producers and Consumers
3. Role-Play as Performance
4. Experimentation and Problem-Solving through Play

APPENDIX C

Study Information Letter

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Research Study
IRB Study # 7436

</div>

Title of study: Playing in *Pern*: Investigating Collaborative Authorship in a *Dragons of Pern* Role-Play-Game Forum

Dear RPG forum member,
My name is Kathleen Alley and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida – Tampa, in Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education. I will be conducting a research study focused on role-play game (RPG) forums looking at *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum you participated in between May 2011 and January 2012. I would like to request your participation in my study.

The purpose of this research is to examine adolescents' and emerging adults' literate and social practices within the context of Trelis Weyr, a role-play-game (RPG) forum, providing insight regarding how this space functioned and the ways participants collaboratively composed within this space. I will explore how members collaboratively developed story, investigating this group's posted collective thinking as they composed within this virtual environment. Additionally, I would like to interview four focal participants about their participation in Trelis Weyr and other RPG forums. To be eligible to participate in the study and be interviewed, individuals must have been participants in Trelis Weyr between May 2011 and January 2012.

Please do not feel pressured to take part in this study - you do not have to participate if you do not choose to. However, if you are interested in participating, I am requesting to interview you two times in a two month period. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes and can be completed using the mode of your choosing: AIM chat, email, Skype, or face-to-face (when geographically convenient for the PI and interview subject, and preferred by the interview subject). Finally, please know that even if you decided to participate, you can withdraw from this study at any time if you change your mind. Individuals who participate in this study will receive a thank you card and a $10.00 iTunes gift card in appreciation of their involvement, after the conclusion of the interview process.

If you have any questions about the study, I will be happy to answer them. If you are interested in participating, please download the informed consent form attached to this email, read it thoroughly, and then return the consent form to me within two weeks of receipt of this email. You can send me an email with it attached to the USF email address provided below. If you are under the age of 18, please share this information with your parent or guardian as well, discuss it together, and then return the parental consent form and child assent form as attachments to an email to my USF email address. My phone number is provided below so I may answer questions you have at any time during this process. Thank you for considering participating in my study.
Sincerely,
Kathleen Alley, Doctoral Candidate
University of South Florida – Tampa
kmalley@mail.usf.edu
(941)356-0827

Adult Informed Consent Form

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Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # 7436

The following information is being presented to help you decide whether or not you wish to be a part of a research study. Please read carefully. If there is anything you do not understand, please ask the investigator.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called: "Playing in Pern: Investigating Collaborative Authorship in a *Dragons of Pern* Role-Play-Game Forum"

The person who is in charge of this research study is Mrs. Kathleen Alley. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. Kathleen Alley is being guided in this research by Dr. James King, University of South Florida, College of Education, Literacy Studies. The research will be conducted by monitoring participants' postings and involvement in a role-play game forum.

Should you take part in this study?

This form tells you about this research study. You can decide if you want to take part in it. This form explains:

- Why this study is being done.
- What will happen during this study and what you will need to do.
- Whether there is any chance you might experience potential benefits from being in the study.
- The risks of having problems because you are in this study.

Before you decide:

- Read this form.
- Talk about this study with the person in charge of the study or the person explaining the study. You can have someone with you when you talk about the study.
- Talk it over with someone you trust.
- Find out what the study is about.
- You may have questions this form does not answer. You do not have to guess at things you don't understand. If you have questions, ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along. Ask them to explain things in a way you can understand.
- Take your time to think about it.

It is up to you. If you choose to be in the study, then you should sign this form. If you do not want to take part in this study, you should not sign the form.

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IC Adult RA Template – SocBeh Rev: 2010-09-05

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Revision #3, 11-06-2012

Page 1 of 4

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to examine adolescents' and emerging adults' literate and social practices within the context of a role-play-game (RPG) forum, providing insight regarding the ways they collaboratively compose within this space. I will explore the dynamics of how the space functions, and how members collaboratively develop story, exploring this group's posted collective thinking as they compose within this virtual environment.

Why are you being asked to take part?

I am asking you to take part in this research study because you were a member of the role-play game forum I will be researching, *Trelis Weyr*.

What will happen during this study?

This study is guided by the following research question: (1) In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized to create a collaborative environment?; (2) In what ways and for what purposes do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose within *Trelis Weyr*?; (3) What are the factors motivating participants to enter and remain engaged in *Trelis Weyr*?

I will gather data in two phases of research: (1) collecting and analyzing collaborative texts, governing documents, & character descriptions from the completed Trelis Weyr RPG forum; (2) two interviews with four participants who were in the *Trelis Weyr* forum. These sets of data will help me to gain detailed understanding about my participants and their literacy practices related to an RPG forum reading and writing. Such exploration will enable me to create a "thick description" (Merriam, 2001) of this online community, gain a rich sense of what it means to participate in this type of space, investigate the aspects of this space that promote the development of collaborative composition, and begin to understand how such spaces enable and motivate participants to engage as successful, critical readers and writers.

How many other people will take part?

Approximately 4 individuals will take part in the interview portion of this study.

What other choices do you have if you decide not to take part?

If you decide not to take part in this study, that is okay. Additionally, interview participants are able to withdraw their decision to participate at any time during this project.

Will you be compensated for taking part in this study?

I will provide a thank you card and a $10.00 iTunes gift card in appreciation of your participation at the end of the interview process.

What will it cost you to take part in this study?

It will not cost you to take part in the study.

What are the potential benefits of information from this study?

Though you receive no direct benefit from your participation, the information obtained from this study will familiarize educators and researchers with youth culture and the techno-literacies adolescents and emerging adults engage in by choice. Information from this study will provide nuanced understandings of how this type of online composition offers a range of multimodal, inter-textual, and hybrid writing opportunities in which adolescents and emerging adults express ideas.

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Revision #3, 11-06-2012

Page 2 of 4

What are the risks if you take part in this study?

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

What will I do to keep your study records private?

There are federal laws that say I must keep your study records private. I will keep the records of this study private by storing the results in login protected software programs. I will keep the records of this study confidential by assigning all participants a pseudonym and removing their names from the written products. However, certain people may need to see your records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. These include the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight to research studies may also need to look at your records.

- Other individuals who may look at your records include: agencies of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protections. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and safety.

I may publish what I learn from this study. If I do, I will not let anyone know your name. I will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, please email or call Kathleen Alley (941)356-0827, kmalley@mail.usf.edu.

If you have questions about your rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.

<div align="center">

Consent to Take Part in Research and

</div>

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true. I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Number: 7436
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Revision #3, 11-06-2012

Page 3 of 4

294

Study ID:Pro00007436 Date Approved: 11/12/2012 Expiration Date: 11/12/2013

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/ she understands:

- What the study is about;
- What procedures will be used;
- What the potential benefits might be; and
- What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

_____   _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent   Date

_____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Number: 7436   Revision #3, 11-06-2012
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Page 4 of 4

Teen Assent Form

Study ID:Pro00007436 Date Approved: 11/12/2012 Expiration Date: 11/12/2013

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Assent to Participate in Research
Information for Persons under the Age of 18 Who Are Being Asked To Take Part in Research

IRB Study # 7436

Title of study: Playing in Pern: Investigating Collaborative Authorship in a *Dragons of Pern* Role-Play-Game Forum

Why am I being asked to take part in this research?
You are being asked to participate in this research because you are a member of the role-play game forum I will be monitoring.

Who is doing this study?
The person who is in charge of this research study is Mrs. Kathleen Alley. This person is called the Principal Investigator. Mrs. Alley is being guided in this research by Dr. James King, University of South Florida, College of Education, Literacy Studies.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to examine adolescents' and emerging adults' literate and social practices within the context of a role-play-game (RPG) forum, providing insight regarding how the space functions, how members collaboratively develop story, and exploring this group's collective thinking.

Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?
The research will be conducted by conducting two interviews during a two month period, with approximately 2-3 weeks between interview 1 and interview 2. Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

What will you be asked to do?
Interview participants will be asked a series of questions about their participation in role play game (RPG) forums, and in Trelis Weyr as a specific example of an RPG. Interview participants will be able to select the mode of interaction for the interview that best suites them: AIM chat, email, Skype, or face-to-face (when geographically convenient for the PI and interview subject, and preferred by the interview subject). Participants will be interviewed twice over a two month period, with approximately two to three weeks between interview one and two.

What things might happen if you participate?
To the best of my knowledge, your participation in this study will not harm you.

Is there benefit to me for participating?
By examining the kinds of literacy practices embedded in an RPG forum, and the resources available to support your development of literate and social practices, this study will familiarize educators and researchers with youth culture and the techno-literacies adolescents engage in by choice.

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Page 1 of 2

What other choices do I have if I do not participate?
You should only take part in this study if you want to. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part. You are free to withdraw as an interview participant in this research at any time.

Do I have to take part in this study?
You should talk with your parent or guardian about taking part in this research study. If you do not want to take part in the study, that is your decision. You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer.

Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?
You will be given a thank you note and a $10.00 iTunes gift card as a token of appreciation for your involvement in the study at the end of the interview process.

Who will see the information about me?
Your information will be added to the information from other people taking part in interview process so no one will know who you are. Additionally, I will use pseudonyms for people's names in the study so no response to interview questions can be connected to you.

Can I change my mind and quit?
If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to change your mind later. No one will think badly of you if you decide to stop participating.

What if I have questions?
You can ask questions about this study at any time. You can talk with your parents, guardian or other adults about this study. You can also speak with Kathleen Alley, researcher (941-356-0827; kmalley@mail.usf.edu). Additionally, if you have questions about your child's rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.

Assent to Participate

I understand what the person conducting this study is asking me to do. I have thought about this and agree to take part in this study.

_____   _____
Name of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____   _____
Name of person providing information (assent) to subject   Date

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Version #1, 10-31-2012

Page 2 of 2

Parental Permission Form

Study ID:Pro00007436 Date Approved: 11/12/2012 Expiration Date: 11/12/2013

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Parental Permission to Participate in Research
Information for parents to consider before allowing their child to take part in this research study
IRB Study # 7436

The following information is being presented to help you / your child decide whether or not your child wishes to be a part of a research study. Please read carefully. If there is anything you do not understand, please ask the investigator.

We are asking you to allow your child to take part in a research study called: "Playing in Pern: Investigating Collaborative Authorship in a *Dragons of Pern* Role-Play-Game Forum"

The person who is in charge of this research study is Mrs. Kathleen Alley. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. Kathleen Alley is being guided in this research by Dr. James King, University of South Florida, College of Education, Literacy Studies. The research will be conducted by monitoring participants' postings and involvement in a role-play game forum.

Should your child take part in this study?

This form tells you about this research study. You can decide if you want your child to take part in it. This form explains:

- Why this study is being done.
- What will happen during this study and what your child will need to do.
- Whether there is any chance your child might experience potential benefits from being in the study.
- The risks of having problems because your child is in this study.

Before you decide:

- Read this form.
- Have a friend or family member read it.
- Talk about this study with the person in charge of the study or the person explaining the study. You can have someone with you when you talk about the study.
- Talk it over with someone you trust.
- Find out what the study is about.
- You may have questions this form does not answer. You do not have to guess at things you don't understand. If you have questions, ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along. Ask them to explain things in a way you can understand.
- Take your time to think about it.

It is up to you. If you choose to let your child be in the study, then you should sign this form. If you do not want your child to take part in this study, you should not sign the form.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to examine adolescents' and emerging adults' literate and social practices within the context of a role-play-game (RPG) forum, providing insight regarding the ways they collaboratively compose within this space. I will explore the dynamics of how the space functions, and how members collaboratively develop story, exploring this group's posted collective thinking as they compose within this virtual environment.

Why is your child being asked to take part?

I am asking your child to take part in this research study because he/she was a member of the role-play game forum I will be monitoring, Trelis Weyr.

What will happen during this study?

This study is guided by the following research question: (1) In what ways is *Trelis Weyr*, an RPG forum, organized to create a collaborative environment?; (2) In what ways and for what purposes do adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14-24) engage in literate and social practices as they read and collaboratively compose within *Trelis Weyr*?; (3) What are the factors motivating participants to enter and remain engaged in *Trelis Weyr*?

I will gather data in two phases of research: (1) collecting and analyzing collaborative texts, governing documents, & character descriptions from the completed Trelis Weyr RPG forum; (2) two interviews with four participants who were in the Trelis Weyr forum. These sets of data will help me to gain detailed understanding about my participants and their literacy practices related to an RPG forum reading and writing. Such exploration will enable me to create a "thick description" (Merriam, 2001) of this online community, gain a rich sense of what it means to participate in this type of space, investigate the aspects of this space that promote the development of collaborative composition, and begin to understand how such spaces enable and motivate participants to engage as successful, critical readers and writers.

How many other people will take part?

Approximately 4 other individuals will take part in the interview portion of this study.

What other choices do you have if you decide not to let your child to take part?

If you decide not to let your child take part in this study, that is okay. Additionally, interview participants are able to withdraw their decision to participate at any time during this project.

Will your child be compensated for taking part in this study?

I will provide a thank you card and a $10.00 iTunes gift card in appreciation of your child's participation at the end of the interview process.

What will it cost you to let your child take part in this study?

It will not cost you to let your child take part in the study.

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Revision #1, 10-31-2012

Page 2 of 4

What are the potential benefits to your child if you let him / her take part in this study?

By examining the kinds of literacy practices embedded in this affinity space, and the resources available to support adolescents' and emerging adults' development of literate and social practices, this study will familiarize educators and researchers with youth culture and the techno-literacies adolescents engage in by choice. Information from this study will provide nuanced understandings of how this type of online composition offers a range of multimodal, inter-textual, and hybrid writing opportunities in which adolescents and emerging adults express ideas.

What are the risks if your child takes part in this study?

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

What will I do to keep your child's study records private?

There are federal laws that say I must keep your child's study records private. I will keep the records of this study private by storing the results in login protected software programs. I will keep the records of this study confidential by assigning your child a pseudonym and removing his or her name from the written products. However, certain people may need to see your child's records. By law, anyone who looks at your child's records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your child's records. These include the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight to research studies may also need to look at your child's records.

- Other individuals who may look at your child's records include: agencies of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protections. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your child's rights and safety.

I may publish what I learn from this study. If I do, I will not let anyone know your child's name. I will not publish anything else that would let people know who your child is.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, please email or call Kathleen Alley (941)356-0827, kmalley@mail.usf.edu.

If you have questions about your child's rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.

IRB Number: 7436
IC Parental Permission Template – Med/SocBeh Rev: 2010-09-03

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Revision #1, 10-31-2012

Page 3 of 4

Consent for Child to Participate in this Research Study (Playing in Pern)

It is up to you to decide whether you want your child to take part in this study. If you want your child to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true.

I freely give my consent to let my child take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to let my child take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_____   _____
Signature of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study   Date

_____
Printed Name of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

_____   _____
Signature of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study   Date

_____
Printed Name of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

Signatures of both parents are required unless one parent is not reasonably available, deceased, unknown, legally incompetent, or only one parent has sole legal responsibility for the care and custody of the child. When enrolling a child participant, if only one signature is obtained, the person obtaining the consent must check on of the reasons listed below:

The signature of only one parent was obtained because:
☐ The other parent is not reasonably available. Explain:_____
☐ The other parent is unknown.
☐ The other parent is legally incompetent.
☐ The parent who signed has sole legal responsibility for the care and custody of the child.

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

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APPENDIX D

Permission to Use Trelis Weyr as a Research Site

University of South Florida Mail - Fwd: https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=962aad27d1&view=pt&sea...

USF   Kathleen Alley <kmalley@mail.usf.edu>

Fwd:
1 message

Kathleen Alley <kathleenalley@hotmail.com>   Sat, Oct 27, 2012 at 10:47 AM
To: kmalley@mail.usf.edu

Sent from my iPad

Begin forwarded message:

From: [redacted]
Date: October 27, 2012 10:09:12 AM EDT
To: kathleenalley@hotmail.com

To: Internal Review Board, University of South Florida
From: Cassandra [redacted] Trelis Weyr Forum Administrator

I am writing this email to share my support for Mrs. Kathleen Alley, Doctoral Candidate at USF, to conduct research about the Trelis Weyr Role Play Game Forum. Mrs. Alley is welcome to use all materials on the forum site, as it is a public forum open to any guest on the Internet. I am also willing to email the members who participated in this forum to share information about Mrs. Alley's study and ask that members who are interested in being interviewed contact Mrs. Alley. I will attach documents Mrs. Alley provides to this request for volunteers.

If you have further questions, please contact me using the information provided below.
Sincerely,
Cassandra [redacted]

Cassandra (a.k.a. Larkwing) is the creator and administrator of *Trelis Weyr*. She provided the letter above to share her permission for me to use *Trelis Weyr* as a research site, and to access artifacts from it retrospectively (after active role-play was completed).

APPENDIX E

Excerpt from Website Terms of Service, ProBoards

PUBLIC FORUMS:

"**Public Forum**" is any area, site or feature offered as part of the Website (including without limitation discussion forums, message boards, blogs, chat rooms, emails or personal messaging features) that enables You (a) to upload, submit, post, display, perform, distribute and/or view User Content, and/or (b) to communicate, share, or exchange User Content with other Website members or other Website visitors. You acknowledge that Public Forums, and features contained therein, are for public and not private communications. You further acknowledge that anything You upload, submit, post, transmit, communicate, share or exchange by means of any Public Forum may be viewed on the Internet by the general public, and therefore, You have no expectation of privacy with regard to any such submission or posting. You are, and shall remain, solely responsible for the User Content you upload, submit, post, transmit, communicate, share or exchange by means of any Public Forum and for the consequences of submitting or posting same. PROBOARDS DISCLAIMS ANY PERCEIVED, IMPLIED OR ACTUAL DUTY TO MONITOR PUBLIC FORUMS AND SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIMS ANY RESPONSIBILITY OR LIABILITY FOR INFORMATION PROVIDED THEREON.

The statement above is a part of the Website Terms of Service posted on ProBoards regarding the public nature of forums hosted by the service.
http://www.proboards.com/tos