

**Re-Imagining Collaborative Composing: Insights from a Text-Based Role-  
Play Game Forum**

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*Abstract*

The purpose of this investigation was to gain a deeper understanding of participants' composing behavior in a text-based role-play game (RPG) forum. Within the context of socio-cultural literacy practices, two central questions were addressed: (1) In what ways does an online text-based RPG forum provide adolescents and emerging adults opportunities for sharing their writing and for shared writing; and (2) What can forum postings tell us about participants' involvement in new forms of web-based collaborative writing? From analysis of records of participants' interaction, we share the ways the forum provided affordances and opportunities for what we are calling enhanced collaborative writing. In our elaboration of collaborative writing, we share forum postings of participants' involvement in construction of story threads and accompanying elaborative social texts in this online, fan community. Findings from this study illustrate how participants engage in collaborative composing while navigating and manipulating popular culture and technology.

*Keywords:* composing, role-play-game, online learning, collaborative writing

“...in all role-playing games, ...the more you play and the more you have accomplished, the higher the level of your character, in terms of his or her skills. Higher-level characters can do more and go more places than can lower-level ones.” (Gee, 2003, p. 172)

This understanding of role-play relies on characters interacting in the same game competitively. What if characters were instead living within a rich, text-based interaction that is noncompetitive and exist in an online space? How do these differing circumstances in a role playing, semi-canonical shared online writing environment that is text-based change these notions of expertise in digital writing? For that matter, how do participants know they are collaborating in a unified writing genre that is defined by their practices and outcomes (Miller, 2014) in contrast with “just playing a game”?

Historically, studies of collaborative writing have been positioned in opposition with researcher presumptions regarding independent authoring. Yet, certain other studies have shown that collaborative writing may foster unique processes such as shared reflective thinking, particularly when learners explain or defend their ideas with peers (Higgins, Flower, & Petraglia, 1992; Keys, 1994). More generally, Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of collaboration envisions learners’ exposure to meaningful input from partners through shared practice and provision of effective linguistic feedback for learners on productive and receptive sides of the collaboration. The context, tools and participants within the learning environments are seen to mediate collaborative learning (Arnold & Ducate, 2006).

With the emergence of the Internet, and more directly, social media, research examining composing processes has experienced a paradigmatic shift. Technology advances have increased the social aspects of composing. With this in mind, online collaborative spaces may enhance output simply because participants are provided more opportunities for

practice (Oxford, 1997).

The purpose of this investigation was to gain a deeper understanding of youths composing behavior in an online text-based role-play game (RPG) forum (see appendix B for definition). Drawn from our analysis of records of participants' interaction, we share the ways the forum provided affordances and opportunities for what we are calling *enhanced collaborative writing*. In our elaboration of collaborative writing, we share forum postings of participants' involvement in construction of story threads (appendix B) and accompanying elaborative social texts in this online, fan community.

In the RPG forum, *Trelis Weyr*, participants scaffolded each other's writing development in multiple ways in order to: (a) move the narratives of role-play, (b) construct codes and styles of language that supported role-play, and (c) develop a discourse of collaborative composing that facilitated role-play. To accomplish these discursive initiatives, participants utilized their shared knowledge of a particular fantasy literature written by Anne McCaffrey and deployed communication resources, such as social media networks and chat functions, to support their developing understanding of emerging collaborations that resulted in compositions. Additionally, forum participants were actively involved in reading and writing across multiple texts infused with the discourses of *Pern* fandom (McCaffrey, 1967).

Two central questions were addressed in this study, within the context of socio-cultural literacy practices (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007):

1. In what ways does an online text-based role-play game forum provide participants opportunities for sharing their writing and for shared writing?
2. What can forum postings tell us about participants' involvement in new forms of web-based collaborative writing?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The nonlinear approach we take to describe writing processes in this RPG forum involves collaborative interaction grounded in the social-constructivist paradigm of language learning. From this perspective, “learning is a social, dialogical process of construction by distributed, multidimensional selves using tools and signs within context created by the various communities with which they interact” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 181). In contrast to one-way delivery of knowledge from a teacher, and in writing for that teacher, learning understood from a socio-constructive perspective involves members in a community who share and build knowledge together to accomplish a writing task (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, meaning is co-constructed through negotiation and self-reflection (Higgs & McCarthy, 2005). Yet, other than in verbal protocols (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995), data examining meta-text, such as the participants’ commentary in these types of RPG forums, has been scarce. The text-based, RPG forum in this study, as both an asynchronous and synchronous form of computer mediated collaboration, provides this illusive type of data.

Our understanding of this RPG forum was also informed by close analysis of participants’ interactions as social dialogue, in which writing is seen as a medium of expression and to communicate ideas. RPG forum interaction fosters critical thinking through a multiplicity of voices and perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), as participants collectively contribute through text-based role-play. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) shared people learn genres through these social interactions. Consequently, the content and process of these interactions within communities, such as this RPG forum, contain an entire “repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow” as participants’ interactions become more complex (Chapman, 2002, p. 24).

Dyson (2003) used Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia - voices of others - in her

studies of young children's conversations during the writing process. In this context, heteroglossia referred to the multiple variations of language, and the ideas or perspectives within those languages; the different ways people speak to each other, and how each person appropriates another's speech or ideas and attempts to make it their own. According to Bakhtin, these ways of thinking and communicating are distinctive because of class, gender, culture, dialect, accent, demographics, and so on. Dyson's research indicated students draw on many voices surrounding them when they write (e.g., songs, play, games, sports), and these appropriated voices enter into their talk and texts during writing. Dyson's work helped us anticipate and understand how participants engaged in this RPG forum appropriated voices from their daily lives to form ideas, to frame talk, and ultimately to write.

Theories addressing how communities interact also assisted in our 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. However, communities also play through language. Pearce's (2009) "community of play" offers a counterpoint to "community of practice". 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; Vasudevan, 2015). We find Pearce's suggestion particularly compelling for our study of this RPG forum as a community of practice *and* play, offering insight into how the forum functioned collectively; how participants, in ludic manners utilized "knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases, [and] documents, which members share and develop together" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 3).

## **Literature Review**

To connect our study with relevant discourses in the research, we examined related literature to inform our theoretical and practical understanding of collaborative writing (e.g., Sengupta, 2001; Sotillo, 2002; Storch, 1999), online fan communities (e.g., Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2004; Stein, 2006; Tobin, 1999), online gaming and role-playing (e.g., Gee, 2004, 2008; Henry, 2003; McGinnis, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2008), and genre as social action resulting in textual products (Miller, 2014) within adolescents' everyday out-of-school literacies (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Gee, 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

### **Collaborative Writing**

Research indicates collaboration in writing contributes to increased complexity of the writing and a willingness to utilize the feedback peers provide (Sotillo, 2002). Increased grammatical accuracy, overall quality of writing (Storch, 1999), and learners' reflection on their own language production while creating meaning (Swain, 1995) can also be realized. Further, collaborative writing may encourage a pooling of knowledge about language, which Donato (1994) termed "collective scaffolding." This thinking aligns with understandings regarding the social process of language learning, where participants in a community collectively construct knowledge to achieve a task (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). However, some of these claims are premised on understandings that predate much of electronic communication and were offered as rationale for "legitimizing" collaborative authorship in its historical binary with more "real" independent composing behaviors, not taking into consideration the affordances for collaboration in online spaces.

In more recent, online contexts, research suggests participants are actively engaged in online collaborative writing activities that share the affordances mentioned above. In

addition, participants in online contexts may also relish this interaction because of its shared nature, a sense of greater opportunity for sharing of information, and their own sense of accountability (Sengupta, 2001). In what could be described as a contained sense of “the social,” writing partners may experience an increased sense of public exposure or audience reception, while maintaining some sense of control, or partial privacy.

Unlike many previous studies on collaborative writing that have focused on pair and small group work, this study investigates a text-based RPG forum supporting a many-to-many form of collaboration within an online, self-selected context. In so doing, our perspective works outside the notion of the “solitary author” as a starting point. To date, very few studies have investigated the nature of such collaboration when participants produce a jointly written text; particularly this type of online space within an out-of-school, non-adult mediated context. These contextual factors re-envision composing from the perspective of those who choose to collaborate in their writing, specifically in online fan communities engaged in role-play.

### **Online Fan Communities**

One place where shared writing occurs is on sites devoted to fan activity. Online fan communities develop meaningful friendships between interested participants, though they 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. In these fan-based, textual communities, participants exhibited an “ethic of friendliness” (p. 121) constructed through various social norms developed when participants posted their messages in the Usenet newsgroup. However, these friendships often 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. Isaac, Tobin’s son, 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). Isaac was composing “new” friends.

In addition to facilitating friendship, such online communities function as collaborative learning environments. In many cases, youth engage in more complex literate activities in online spaces than those they experience within the classroom (Jenkins, 2004). Analyzing a student’s experiences creating and editing a fictional school newspaper for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from *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.). When students discussed *Harry Potter*, they made comparisons with other literary works, making connections through philosophical and theological traditions, debating gender stereotypes, citing interviews with the author, 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 writers’ language skills, as well as developing sophisticated, literate and social skills.

Fan communities also support the development of multimodality, or the integration of multiple modes such as visual, linguistic, and audio representations within one text. The New

London Group (1996) posited all texts are multimodal to some degree – even the ones that appear to be produced in a single mode. Several researchers have considered the multimodality of fan communities often centered on single, bounded online spaces where fans have gathered. Multiple studies have examined 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). The creation of fan art and fan-based songs also extended participants’ posts in a mode described as mono-polymorphic, similar to a single description that adapts and navigates “a range of media, styles, genres, and time to become a single rich and complex narrative” (Thomas, 2007, p. 160).

Other studies (e.g., Baym, 2007; Tobin, 1999) have noted fan spaces may consist of numerous interconnected websites, discussion boards, email lists, and listservs, supporting participation through a distributed, “quasi-coherent” network of sites, instead of a centralized online group. Reference to coherence suggests writers are following some kind of structure. Some time ago, Miller (1984) hypothesized that this structure is genre, which she explicitly related to social action or processes. It is clear that understandings of processes and texts drawn from fan writing sites have much to offer our inquiry.

### **Online Role-Playing Games**

Online role-playing games are rooted in the earlier tradition of role-playing, which can be traced to 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and traveling players who performed improvisational theatre, as well as 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century board or parlor games and miniature war gaming (Rilstone, 1994). Through role-play, participants take control of a character and play through that character’s thoughts, actions and motivations in an unfolding narrative. 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. Tyachsen, Newman, Brolund, and Hitchens (2007) looked at players' enjoyment and engagement in the game. Research 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). However, the majority of research has focused on massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG, see appendix B) due to an assortment of inherent literacy practices. Researchers reported that game-related literacy practices involved cognition, scientific reasoning, and collective intelligence, exceeding standards for reading, writing, and technology in comparison to in-school literacy activities and national literacy standards (Steinkuehler, 2008).

Online text-based role-playing games, the type examined in this study, precede MMORPGs and date from the 1980s with the creation of Multi-User Dungeons (MUD, see appendix B). These systems use multiple types of media (e.g., Internet forums, email, social networking websites), drawing heavily on the traditions of fanzines (e-magazines for fan groups) and off-line role-playing. Rather than following gameplay in real-time, players post messages in story format and other participants post role-playing responses. All responses are gathered into the evolving narrative called a story thread.

The events in this type of play-by-post (PBP, see appendix B) role-playing are not handled by software; instead, moderators (see appendix B) and participants make decisions or improvise. Players create their own characters and descriptions of events, as well as the setting for play; however, creation may be derived from fandom (see appendix B) surrounding novels, TV shows, movies, and such. Play-by-post RPGs are written in the third person

perspective because players share scenes (i.e., single role-play session in the same setting); plot is typically advanced when players read the latest post and create an open-ended response, allowing others to contribute to the ongoing story by taking turns.

*Trelis Weyr*, the forum we examined, is a play-by-post RPG forum, embedded in fandom related to Anne McCaffrey's (1967-2011) *Pern* young adult fantasy literature series. Many works have been developed related to *Pern* in response to interest generated by a large fan population. To avoid duplicating *Pern* canon and trademarks, role-play forums typically create a particular location and timeline different from the established history of *Pern*. *Trelis Weyr* is a semi-canonical *Dragonriders of Pern* RPG forum. In fiction, *canon* refers to text accepted as officially part of the story. The term was first used when referring to the Sherlock Holmes novels written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle when comparing his work to similar works of fiction by subsequent authors (Haining, 1993). This notion of canon has been applied since then in many ways, including the world of fan fiction where *canon* is defined as the original fiction created by the author of text the fan group is writing about. *Semi-canon, or partial canon*, describe texts that utilize information from sources other than the original fiction, but within the constraints of what could exist in the world created by the original author in that text. In contrast, *Fanon* (Parrish, 2007) is almost never regarded as canonical. *Fanon* describes text where fans write outside the canon completely, including ideas in their writing that would not have existed in the original author's text.

The *Trelis Weyr* forum operated on ProBoards, a host of free forums on the Internet, for approximately eight months of play. The *Trelis Weyr* administrator first created the site, and then advertised via ProBoards and messaged players in similar fan communities to share the opportunities available for players. Interested fans were asked to join and create characters for play. Within the first five days, nine participants joined the site and either created new

characters or brought existing characters from other *Pern* sites they had created and began to engage in role-play. At its height, *Trelis Weyr* engaged 27 participants in active play, creating story threads across four story arcs (i.e., continuous progression of a story's dramatic arc).

### **Social Action Resulting in Textual Product**

Miller's (1984) classic writing suggests that genre can be defined as "social action" or impact of a text on the community. More succinctly, in this current instantiation of the theory as applied to *Trelis Weyr*, the genre is construed *as* the social actions that result in a textual product. It is a slight, but profound shift in the focus of Miller's original theory. Interpreting genre in ways that match a social-cultural approach to literacy practices, social actions of the writing community *are* the genre. In an update of her earlier thinking, after the emergence of the Internet, and after several studies of digital texts, Miller (2014) now points out the work of genre:

- Characterizes communities
- Offers modes of engagement through joint action and uptake
- Connects the flux of experience to the past and future
- Makes recurrent patterns visible
- Provides satisfactions and pleasures

From her vantage of 30 years of perspective, Miller (2014) is cognizant that the texts in her earlier work, based on a study of environmental protection texts, from her perspective, failed to coalesce into a genre. In retrospect, she believes one of the prohibiting factors was the authoritarian context of the content area. Whereas, she points out that much of the uptake for her 1984 theory of genre as social action was in linguistics, composition, literacy studies, and education. She reasons the difference is the client focus. In the latter group, the focus is

on the learner. Miller stated, “Another major difference among disciplines is the kind of category genre is taken to be. Does it belong to the research/researcher critic or does it belong to the communities of users” (2014, p. 66)?

This review of literature implies we have a research-based understanding of youths’ literate practices inside of schools, which is often used as a basis of comparison for e-activity. However, we are lacking a large body of research addressing adolescents’ everyday out-of-school literacies to connect our study with relevant discourse (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 2000; 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 practices appears to lend itself to literacy 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). The result of this marginalization of what youth might consider authentic content further alienates struggling students who rely on this type of unofficial cultural capital in social exchanges (Black, 2008). 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).

## **Methods**

This research study is a part of a larger investigation; a descriptive case study bound by the context of the *Trelis Weyr* online text-based RPG forum as a whole, focusing on the

interactions and composition within the group, and the artifacts and knowledge co-constructed by participants collectively. Selection of *Trelis Weyr* as a research context for this study was made due to convenience, since the first author was knowledgeable regarding this public forum because her daughter was the administrator for the site. The first author had discussed online virtual environments that teens were involved in with her daughter, who shared examples of text-based RPGs and explained them. After considering ideas for research related to RPG forums, the first author next spoke with the leadership of the *Trelis Weyr* forum (three moderators) and asked if they would be agreeable to having their forum as a context for research. The first author's daughter (site administrator) and the leadership team (3 moderators) unanimously agreed to allow access to resources on the site for this research study.

### **Participants**

Twenty-seven participants were engaged in role-play on *Trelis Weyr*. We secured IRB approval for this study, but we are unable to speak with certainty about the identity of these participants due to the nature of self-reported information on social media sites on the Internet. Data collected from member profiles and during interviews indicated most participants were female (n=25) between 14 and 24 years old. Most were citizens of the United States, though two self-reported they were Canadian. During observations of play on the forum, the first author noticed participants posted comments to the forum discussing in- and out-of-school interests, homework, and so forth. She also looked at links to participants' other fan interactions in spaces like *Deviant Art* and other role-play forums, and the anecdotal evidence reinforced participants' self-reported adolescent identities. Conversations with the university IRB committee guided our thinking as we dealt with ethical and logistical issues during research of this role-play space.

Participants were motivated to become involved in role-play on *Trelis Weyr* because of their interest in Anne McCaffrey's (1967-2011) *Dragons of Pern* literature series, and more specifically interest in *Pern* fan-related practices. 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. Beyond this information, we do not know specifics regarding participants' 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, we are not able to verify the information that was self-reported by members of *Trelis Weyr* due to the virtual nature of their participation.

**Forum Leadership.** Forum leadership consisted of the site administrator and three moderators. The forum administrator (first author's daughter) was the original creator who developed the site, including navigation and communications systems and basic governing documents. She then advertised the forum and generated interest, so others would participate in role-play with her. The three moderators of the *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. The site administrator was 17 years of age.

*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*.

**Focal participants.** To recruit three focal participants to interview, the first author used purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As she viewed story threads created by role players, she identified the usernames of members who created the characters being role-played and looked at their member profiles. Through these channels, the first author identified 17 potential forum members who had consistently participated in role-play during the eight months the site was active. She next asked the site administrator to send an invitation letter with attached consent, assent and parental permission forms to these 17 members' email addresses so interested individuals could contact the first author directly. Among these potential volunteers, six individuals contacted the first author as possible interview subjects. After multiple emails she obtained the required consent forms and secured three focal participants who were representative of the variety of participants on *Trelis Weyr* (e.g., length of play on *Trelis Weyr*, role on this forum, background RPing on other forums). One of these participants was the first author's daughter, the site administrator.

### **Researcher-Participant Positioning**

In her relationship with the focal participants who served as experts, the first author positioned herself as a fellow researcher looking at the collaborative writing phenomenon occurring in the forum. She intentionally shared her lack of knowledge about role-play-game activity in text-based role-play game forums in order to minimize the perception that she had a privileged position as a researcher. She encouraged all three focal participants to disagree with

her or contest her understanding of events because they were helping to paint a more representative picture of their experiences on *Trelis Weyr*. The first author deliberately positioned herself as a partner in the research process, explaining what she was unable to confirm was just as important as what she could confirm. The first author also made every attempt to accommodate focal participants' schedules 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.).

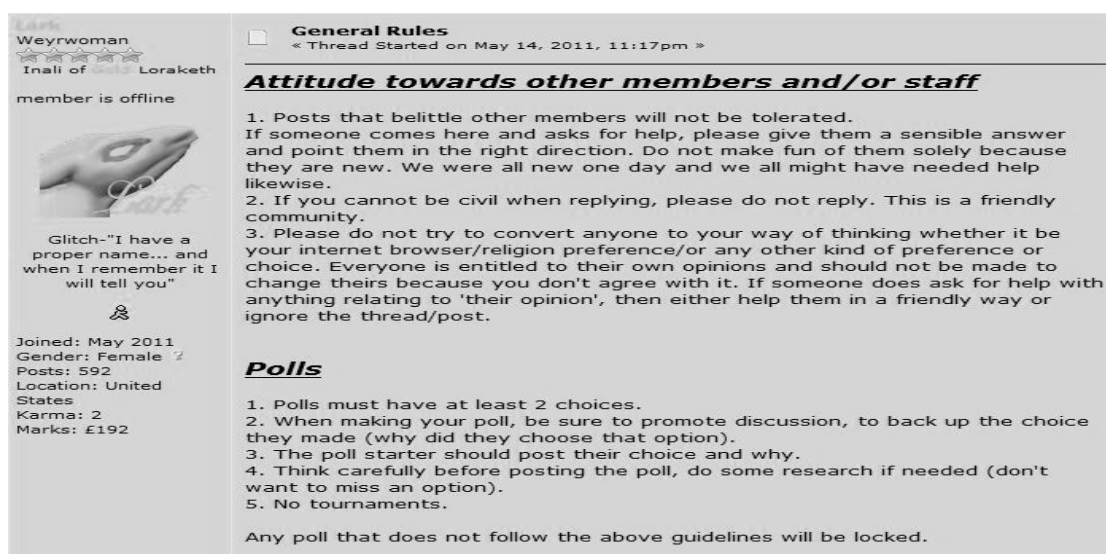
The first author let participants know if she approached them with questions during a time that was not convenient, they were more than welcome to let her know it wasn't a good time for them. The participants often didn't respond for several days or a week to questions, showing they were comfortable with responding when it best suited their situation and was most convenient. If the first author ever sensed resistance, she always offered participants an opportunity to talk with her at a later time or not to talk, as they chose to do moving forward. She reminded participants often that they were under no obligation to continue to talk with her as well, and that they could drop out of the research study at any time if they chose to.

### **Data Collection**

For this study data was gathered from multiple sources: (1) artifacts from the *Trelis Weyr* forum, including moderator-created governing documents, character descriptions, and story threads created during role-play; and, (2) transcripts of semi-structured interviews with three focal participants. Additionally, entries in the first author's reflective journal noting the various processes involved in creating characters and stories while role playing, informed our understanding during data analysis.

**Governing documents.** Moderator-created governing documents (figure 1) from *Trelis Weyr* helped to better understand how members interacted and were regulated within

this community. Moderators set the norms for participation in part by creating governing documents with rules and parameters for what should and should not be posted. These unique forum posts were pinned (i.e., permanently attached to the top of the page) to most areas throughout the site, and prominently displayed at the top of boards to provide members with point-of-need guidance. These titles were intended to draw members' attention to the directions before they posted in a forum area.



The screenshot shows a forum post titled "General Rules" with a sub-header "Attitude towards other members and/or staff". On the left, there is a user profile for "Weyrwoman" with a signature and statistics. The main content lists rules for behavior and a section for "Polls" with five numbered guidelines.

**Weyrwoman**  
Inali of 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

**General Rules**  
« Thread Started on May 14, 2011, 11:17pm »

**Attitude towards other members and/or staff**

1. Posts that belittle other members will not be tolerated. If someone comes here and asks for help, please give them a sensible answer and point them in the right direction. Do not make fun of them solely because they are new. We were all new one day and we all might have needed help likewise.
2. If you cannot be civil when replying, please do not reply. This is a friendly community.
3. Please do not try to convert anyone to your way of thinking whether it be your internet browser/religion preference/or any other kind of preference or choice. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions and should not be made to change theirs because you don't agree with it. If someone does ask for help with anything relating to 'their opinion', then either help them in a friendly way or ignore the thread/post.

**Polls**

1. Polls must have at least 2 choices.
2. When making your poll, be sure to promote discussion, to back up the choice they made (why did they choose that option).
3. The poll starter should post their choice and why.
4. Think carefully before posting the poll, do some research if needed (don't want to miss an option).
5. No tournaments.

Any poll that does not follow the above guidelines will be locked.

Figure 1. Screenshot of general rules posting.  
Retrieved from <http://trellis-anewdawn.proboards.com>. Reprinted with permission.

**Profiles.** Member profiles (see appendix B) and the character descriptions participants created also served as a source of information (figure 2). When participants joined *Trellis Weyr* they created a profile with a username, an avatar image/icon, their location, birth data, and contact information including email address, website, and instant messenger information. Members could also include a signature, which might be multimodal and contain hyperlinks to the user's story threads in the forum, as well as outside websites hosting *Pern* creations. To enter role-play, participants either adopted an existing character created by someone in the forum, or they created their own original character. Once a forum moderator approved a

character description, a member could enter play as that character, and participation took the form of role-play-game postings that created story threads.

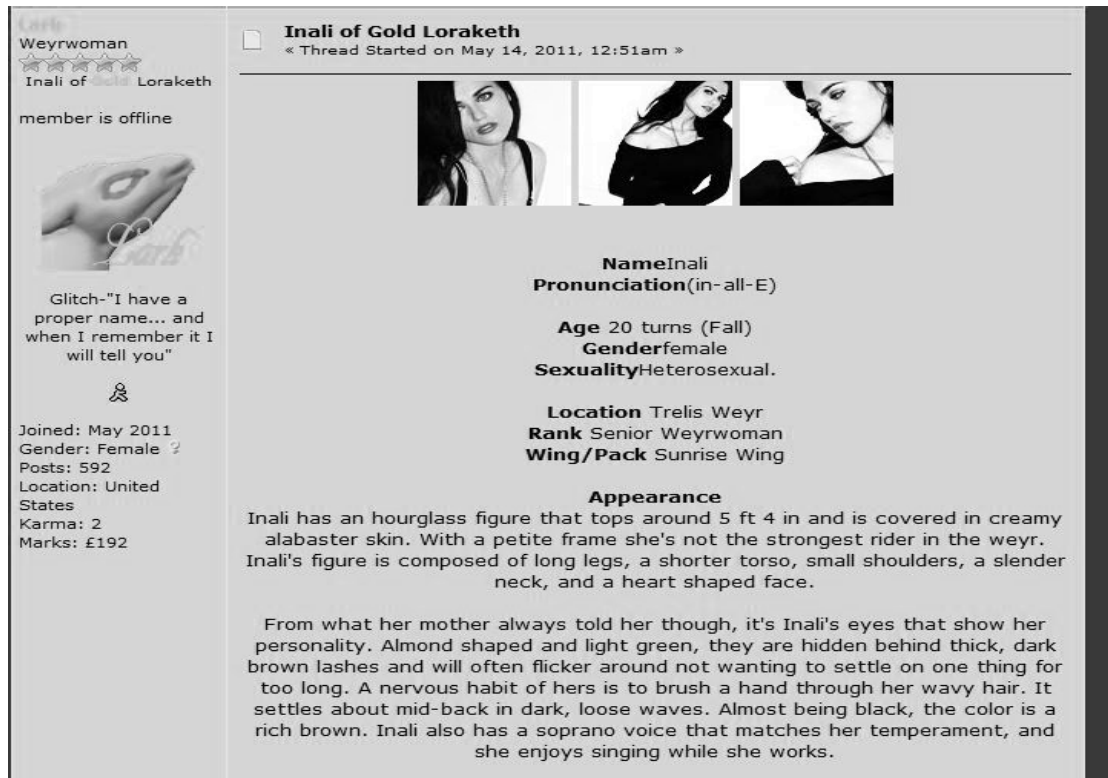


Figure 2. Screenshot of character description post.  
Retrieved from <http://trelis-anewdawn.proboards.com>. Reprinted with permission.

**Story-threads.** Most previous studies of collaborative writing have focused on face-to-face or computer-mediated communication, and limited meta-talk of learners as they progressed through collaborative writing tasks. This study relies instead on the data provided by the text-based RPG forum itself, rather than face-to-face observation. Over the course of 8 months of role-play in *Trelis Weyr*, participants' co-constructed 4 story arcs, including 24 total story threads (or story lines; figure 3). Across these 24 story 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 Microsoft Word document (224 total pages).

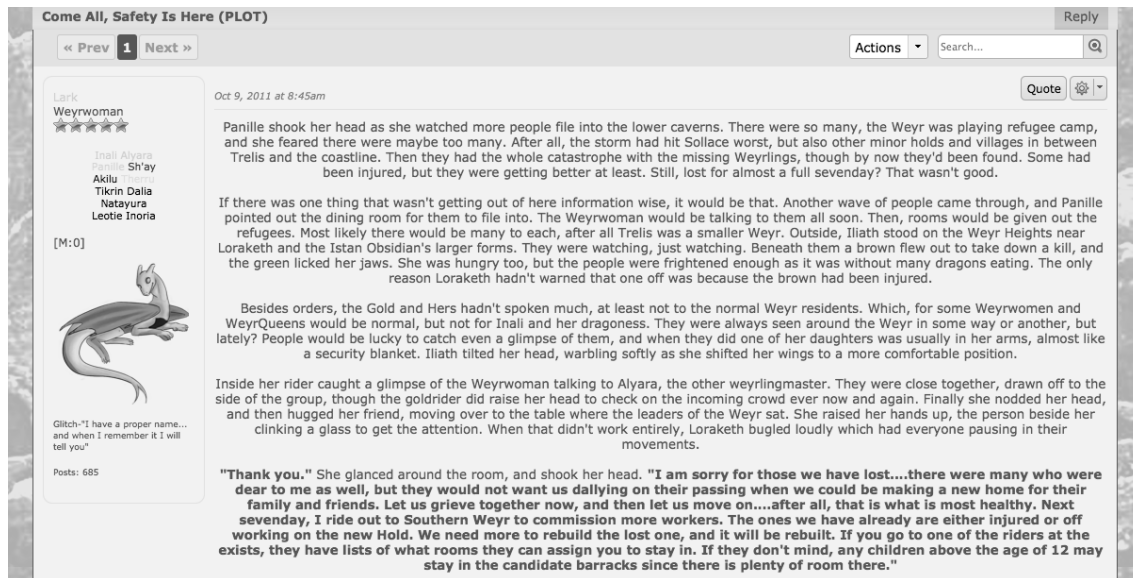


Figure 3. Excerpt from a story thread posted by Lark.  
Retrieved from <http://treliis-anewdawn.proboards.com>. Reprinted with permission.

The first story arc, named *The First Clutch and New Colors*, involved what Lark shared was “the starting point for the storyline when the site first opened”. Within this arc, 5 story 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. Participants roleplayed following a play-by-post protocol to describe the interactions of their characters in a selected setting. This type of play follows a format similar to traditional relay writing or shared writing experiences. These interactions created collaborative works of fiction; third person exchanges to further plot movement, contribute dialogue, etc. However, unlike roleplay where someone wins, text-based play-by-post RP does not have a goal of winning.

Instead, the goal is to move the story forward by collaboratively playing and writing. No one wins, and everyone wins, as long as the story moves forward.

Interactions in these 5 story threads took place for the first 2 months of the site's existence. Three additional story arcs developed over the remaining 6 months of play, including: a story arc named *The Gather* (3 threads, 40 pages of text), another about the existence of a hidden clutch in *Ista Weyr*, 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), named *The Storm and Southern Weyr*.

For this particular analysis, we used eight of the twenty-four story threads (or story lines) co-constructed by at least three participants. To select these eight story threads, we chose the two most active threads based on number of participants engaged in play, and the length of thread, from each of the 4 story arcs we identified. These eight story threads represented the most active play across the 8 months participants were engaged in role-play on *Trelis Weyr*.

**Interviews.** Focal participants were interviewed three times over a three-month period (see appendix A for sample interview questions). Lark, the administrator of the forum, was interviewed an additional two times to provide clarity when questions arose during the data analysis process. This is primarily due to proximity and ease of access with the first author, as Lark was the first author's daughter and co-habited with the researcher. However, all three focal participants were consulted for member checking. We used discourse-centered online ethnography (DCOE) procedures (Androutsopoulos, 2008) to examine the relationships among participants of *Trelis Weyr*, noting various processes involved in creation of characters and stories through collaborative composition during role-play in this community. DCOE

procedures include practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation: examining relationships and processes rather than isolated artifacts; moving from core to periphery (from interaction to interview); using repeated observation; maintaining openness; using all available technology; and, using observation insights as guidance for further sampling. Additionally, DCOE procedures specify guidelines for contact with internet actors, stipulating contact should be limited, non-random, and including various participation formats; confronting participants with their own materials; including repeated and prolonged contact; and, making use of alternative techniques whenever possible (Androutsopoulos, 2008).

Interviews were conducted virtually using email or Skype, based on the participants' preferences. Participants' virtual interview responses were transcribed and saved. This interview data collection process was iterative. Researcher familiarity with the practices in the *Trelis Weyr* community precipitated additional questions, sent as follow-up email messages to further explore participants' perspectives about various identified information and comments. The iterative nature of virtual interviewing allowed continued inquiry from an insiders' vantage point by requesting additional information from focal participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive throughout the data collection process as recommended for the qualitative research paradigm (Merriam, 2009).

Table 1

Research Questions and Data Analysis Methods

Research Question	Data Analysis Methods
1. In what ways does an online text-based role-play game (RPG) forum provide adolescents and emerging adults opportunities for sharing their writing and for shared writing?	Inductive analysis of artifacts, observation field notes, and interview transcripts identified opportunities for sharing writing and shared writing.
2. What can forum postings tell us about participants' involvement in new forms of web-based collaborative writing?	Analysis of idea unit; assignment of one of the 5 categories for each idea unit. Inductive analysis of artifacts, observation field notes, and interview transcripts

To analyze story threads, we used a modified proposition analysis method (Turner & Green, 1977; Bovair & Kieras, 1985). Our sampling of story threads was purposefully selected in that we chose two threads from each of four story arcs in the forum that included sufficient interaction and production (approximately one thread each month of play). We divided each story thread into *episodes* based on writers' individual contributions, labeling each consecutively with letters (e.g., A, B, C, etc.). Using the modified proposition analysis, we next segmented each episode into *idea units*. These *idea units* were then subjected to an open coding until repetition isolated a set of eight categories (character description, background, outside action, insider view, plot movement [action], plot movement [description], scene development and dialogue) representing our inferences for each author's



intent when constructing the idea unit.

Three of these eight categories based on inference of author's intent (character description, background and scene development) failed to represent sufficient *idea units* to be included in the emergent model. Thus, the remaining five categories formed a rubric for subsequent analysis of the already parsed texts. Using these five categories, we analyzed the story threads and a sampling of out-of-character social texts (e.g., chats) created at the time these threads were being constructed during role-play. Using the five categories, we developed a composing model based on our coding scheme. We shared the emergent model with the focal participants in a member check to ensure we were representing their rhetorical intent on selected instances of story threads each created.

To analyze transcripts, we utilized an inductive approach (Hatch, 2002) that involved searching for patterns in data and making general statements regarding the phenomena through a multistep process. First, we read the data multiple times and separated it into analyzable parts for further examination. Next, we uploaded framed transcripts and collected artifacts into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, and analyzed the dataset for domains (e.g., categories reflecting semantic relationships; Hatch, 2002). We then analyzed each domain for subcategories, as well as supporting and disconfirming evidence.

### **Dependability and Credibility**

To strengthen the design of this study, we used both data and methodological triangulation to ensure dependability and credibility (Merriam, 2009). We achieved data triangulation by gathering data from multiple data sources and different participants, and methodological triangulation by adopting multiple data collection methods, such as the collection of artifacts, observation field notes, and interviews. We maximized the

trustworthiness of interview data through a process of member checking in which participants reviewed the transcripts to revise and confirm accuracy and representativeness (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 crosscheck for report, and explain negative cases, which did not fit emerging patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, we engaged in discussions in order to check for transparency and confirmability of the data analysis and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To further foreground researcher reflectivity and transparency of analysis, we expanded our collection of field notes to include analytic memo writing.

It is important to note this research focuses on a particular niche of youth Internet users and therefore may not reflect patterns of online literacy for youth in general. Interaction in online text-based RPG forums can be compared to research focused on fanfiction that examines online literacy for a similar niche of users, though there are important distinctions between the two populations. In addition to facilitating friendship, online fanfiction communities function as collaborative learning environments, scaffolding participants as writers in specific ways.

## **Findings**

Findings indicated the text-based role-play-game (RPG) forum *Trelis Weyr* provided various opportunities for participants to share their writing, as well as for shared writing. Additionally, consideration of role-play as a combination of literacy and social processes provided insights regarding the ways participants interacted to collaboratively compose story-

threads, a new form of web-based collaborative writing. Story-thread data included a total of 31 *episodes* recovered from 8 story threads in 4 different story arcs. For these episodes, we coded in total 2080 *idea units* created by five different authors. Open coding of the individual propositional units identified five reliable categories for coding behavior, based on our inference of author's intent for the constructed text: (a) character action, (b) character insider perspective, (c) plot movement, (d) plot description, and (e) dialogue (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Categories and distribution of composing behaviors*

Category	Coding Definition	Rhetorical Intent
Character Action 43 % of total	Use of verb with particular character	Reveal character action within plot
Character Insider Perspective 20 % of total	Use of characters' interior thoughts, states of mind	Reveal character feelings, reactions, states
Plot Movement 18 % of total	Use of verbs in connection with story line	Use of omniscient, author mediated action in plot
Plot Description 17 % of total	Use of adjectives and adverbs not connected to specific characters	Use of descriptive language to enhance plot
Dialog 2 % of total	Text occurring within quotations	Language attributed to specific characters

Though the categories for the *idea units* were initially developed through open coding of the data, we continued analyzing the data in a second cycle of coding with these five categories. Each column in Table 2 represents a category for composing behavior based on our inference of author's intent. Row one in Table 2 is the percentage of comments created by participants during active role-play that were categorized as **Character Action** defined as the "use of a verb with a particular character" to describe action. The rhetorical intent we

associated with this code was to “reveal character action within plot.” Row two represents the percentage of comments created by participants during active role-play that were categorized as **Character Insider Perspective** defined as the “use of characters’ interior thoughts, states of mind.” The rhetorical intent associated with this code was to “reveal character feelings, reactions, states.” The third coding category (in row three) is **Plot Movement** defined as the “use of verbs in connection with story line.” The rhetorical intent of this code was “use of omniscient, author-mediated action in plot.” The category in the fourth row, **Plot Description** is defined as the “use of adjectives and adverbs not connected to specific characters.” **Dialogue** or direct address was the fifth category of comment coded and appears in row 5. The definition we associated with this code was “text occurring within quotations.” The rhetorical intent attributed to this code was “language attributed to specific characters.”

While the presentation of the arcs is the order in which they occurred, the arcs are not sequential. We purposefully selected arcs with sufficient propositions for coding. For the three selected arcs, we combined the parsed propositions from each of the various participants’ contributions and analyzed them within each arc. These results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Percentage comparison of use of five categories across three story arcs*

	Character Action	Character Insider Perspective	Plot Movement	Plot Description	Dialogue	Total
Arc 1	31.3 %	21.6 %	12.8%	7.7 %	26.5 %	99.9 %
Arc 2	40.3 %	20.0 %	15.7 %	13.2 %	10.7 %	99.9 %

Arc 3      42.6 %                  16.9 %                  16.0 %                  19.9 %                  4.5 %                  99.9 %

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Next, we selected three focal participants with adequate propositional representation across the story arcs to investigate their individual contributions: Akira, who often went by Zi; Larkwing, who mostly went by Lark; and Kitsu, who also went by Kit. These results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: *Percentage comparison of 3 focal writers' use of the five coding categories*

	Character Action	Character Insider Perspective	Plot Movement	Plot Description	Dialogue	Total
Akira	42.7 %	21.1 %	17.9 %	9.0 %	9.0 %	99.7 %
Lark	43.0 %	14.9 %	10.0%	16.9 %	15.1 %	99.9 %
Kitsu	35.6 %	16.7 %	17.6 %	18.0 %	12.1 %	100.0 %

A major difference between Arc 1 and Arcs 2 and 3 is clearly visible when consulting Tables 3 and 4. Arc 1 has a lower activity level for **Character Action** when compared to Arcs 2/3 (31.3% vs. 40.3% and 42.6%), and a much lower activity level for the category of **Plot Description** (7.7% vs. 13.2% and 19.9%). Instead, in Arc 1 there is a large reliance on **Dialogue** (26.5%). Arc 1 is the first appearing story Arc. Interview data revealed there might have been more to get done in terms of establishing the context for *Trelis Weyr* within this initial story arc, and according to Kit dialogue is normally the means to accomplish this task. “When we need to explain plot development or move the story along more quickly, we often

role-play between the leadership team and use a lot of dialog to let the characters explain the action,” stated Kit.

It is interesting that the writers chose to use a larger proportion of Dialogue, as dialogue is a difficult genre to master; developmentally (McCarthy, 1994), instructionally (Kreeft, 1984), representationally (Fabian, 1990), and theoretically (Nystrand, 1989). However, use of dialogue in this study is in line with research findings recounting participants who created a shared fiction by describing events and sharing dialogue (Bal, 1997; Busier et al., 1997). Participants reported during our interviews that “in-character thoughts and dialogue for role-play” were things they learned as they helped each other develop as role-players. Dialogue was one element in particular that participants stated allowed them to “put more description in writing”. Gergen (2009) shared identities are relational and constructed through dialogue and conversation. We speak, think, and act as the “multiplicity of voices” residing in each of us (Anderson, 2012). This idea aligns with Bahktin’s theory involving heteroglossia as well; the understanding that we appropriate the voices of others as we develop language to communicate ideas and understanding. Interestingly, as the story arcs progressed chronologically in *Trelis Weyr* we saw the writers use less Dialogue and more Plot Description.

Our discussion of distributions and patterns in the data must be conditioned by the selection factors we used. Our results are premised on “productive” users of the RPG forum, since we needed to analyze sufficient amounts of data. Our discussion for this paper does not consider the circumstances and outcomes of less productive, less active users. Major differences occur in Akira’s relatively small use of Dialogue. We suspect that she had a difficult time with this type of text. She was a relative newcomer to the forum and text-based

RPG interaction, and the chat data supports that Akira was being scaffolded by more experienced writers in her development of writing character dialogue. In contrast, both Lark and Kitsu are experienced in this genre and more facile with using dialogue.

Lark differs from the other two co-authors in her sparse use of Plot Movement (10.0%) identified in her writing. Lark's interview data points to her desire to let others be involved in the direction of the plot. As the site administrator, she mentioned being conscious of others' needs to direct the plot. In talking about her goals when creating the site, Lark shared, "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." Lark was ever mindful of her role as a facilitator, which naturally curtailed tendencies she may have had to direct plot.

Smaller, relative differences were found as well. Akira used less Plot Description (9.0%) than did the other two authors (16.9% and 18.0%) and used somewhat more propositional units coded as Character Insider Perspectives (21.1% vs. 14.9% and 16.7% respectively). As mentioned, Akira is an inexperienced user of text-based RPG, thus writing about action may be easier for her at this stage in her own development as a writer. This difference in participants' use of code categories is the source of our speculation regarding their different approaches to writing together.

## **Discussion**

We hoped to create a greater understanding of technologies' influence on a new context for literacy; the engagement in web-based collaborative writing, and its relationships to popular culture, social, and literacy practices. As evidenced throughout this investigation, participants of *Trelis Weyr* belonged to a community of practice and play where they used global literacy practices, made social connections, and collaborated with other fans of *Pern*

literature. In so doing, they shared resources and knowledge, interacting via role-play to create multiple forms of media to remix or create new items for a social purpose.

### **Collaboration as Social Interaction**

In this study, the construct of collaboration was developed out of observable social interaction. While many previous studies of “collaborative writing” may have fixated on the documents produced, the current study re-considers written artifacts for what they can reveal about the collaborative processes that created them. Therefore, we suggest that collaboration (in this case, collaborative writing) is built upon the interaction patterns that construct it, and within the social situations in which it occurs. This RPG forum provided participants with a variety of collaborative opportunities to share their writing and for shared writing, resulting in literacies that were developed through performance and play within a community of writers.

Becoming a community of writers through role-play depended on participants’ shared interest, and that they chose to act on that embodied interest. After all, other readers of Anne McCaffrey’s literature might never participate in writing about it. Rather, these readers and writers decided to do something with their common interest in McCaffrey’s world of *Pern*. Participants also benefitted from both synchronous and asynchronous connections. In effect, they were set free from the restrictions of time and geography. The participants, who wrote from various locations and at any time they chose to do so, exploited these affordances. In participating as part of the community, the participants also were normalized into a particular way of communicating. They developed shared competence in both writing, and the framing of the discourse that precedes writing. There is a *Trelis Weyr* vernacular, and despite the disjuncture of time and location, the participants were joined in a common enterprise, the same activity, as a committed group, similar to Miller’s (2014) claims for “joint action and uptake” (p. 69).



Our second point is that participating in role-play, any role-play, with others is an act of collaboration. The creation of meaning in role-play depends upon all players being able to articulate their part in a larger whole, shared by the whole group, whether face-to-face or in virtual contexts. The participants demonstrated their commitment and coherence within the role-play metaphor through engaged time; they created and used unique tools for their communication, shared these tools as a team, and mentored new members into the habitus of their group through virtual relationships and mentoring. Through these forms of engagement, the participants created a virtual participatory culture. They also worked together to solve problems. They made commitments to each other in the form of continued play, further evidence for Miller's (2014) claims for ludic payoffs in genre. The accrual of linguistic resources, the communication modes (AIM, Chat boxes) utilized, as well as unique vocabulary and visual item register as the creation and use of a culture's assets, as recurrent patterns. One outcome of this accumulation of affordances is the collective narratives produced by the participants. In fact, we suspect it is a form of new age story telling, borne out of and responsible for sustained collaboration. Yet, we again caution, that the processes of this community are as much an outcome as are the texts themselves.

More pragmatically, in our third point we recognize that participation in the *Trelis Weyr* community resulted in what we regard as literacy events and skill. New skills are those needed to sustain membership in a chosen literate community, or modes of engagement. The participants learned how to write in collaboration with other writers. Looking more closely at this process within *Trelis Weyr* revealed successive entries in a long chain of narrative. This iterative process was inherently collaborative because all authors were writing in response to what their peers wrote before them, or they wrote in anticipation of what one of their peers might provide as a response. Writing in response and writing as a projective response (Gee,

2007) were both necessarily in collaboration with the other, who also served as reader. The other participants constituted a shared, authentic audience. Based on the governance documents for the group, feedback and general reception of one's writing output in a "space that is designed to be friendly" might have been less threatening for writers. Further, the community had a stated and demonstrated interest in developing each other's writing competence.

A second aspect of these literacy events is that everything was construed as performance within *Trelis Weyr*. Participants were involved in the active construction of a social reality. Therefore, in order to make it so for others, the intended reality was performed via a text entry. These performances for each other were also inverted when the performance space was reflexively utilized to experiment with genre innovations, solve problems through play or imaginary writings, and also the recognition by the participants that some of their play did strategically solve problems in their writing, while other play may have been just for the fun of it; ludic play and performance.

### **A Web-Based Collaborative Writing Genre**

Our interpretations of data suggest participants were guided by genre constraints created within this RPG forum (e.g., semi canon nature of story development, fantasy genre). Interestingly, the use of coding categories by the participants was strikingly similar across the profiles we developed for the participating writers. Likewise, the structural similarities in individual's coding across the different story arcs suggested the effect of genre awareness on the part of the writers, influencing their writing across time within the RPG forum. It is a genre shaped by collaboration of a particular type. While the contextual features of McCaffrey's original writing influenced the participants in *Trelis Weyr*, they did not copy her genre verbatim since participants agreed their work would be semi canon. Participants were

writing within heroic, dragon-based mythology as McCaffrey did, but their narratives did not follow the normal rhetorical constraints for heroic fiction.

Another aspect of this collaborative genre is the parallel writing that occurred. While writers participated in co-reference and thematic inclusion of shared content, the episodes each writer created were individually authored with scaffolding, modeling, and suggestions from the other writers. The episodes were also carefully linked to the previous episodes by shared characters, shared plot events, and shared goals. It was desirable and even necessary to reference content and characters from another writer's posts. However, the use of the co-reference strategy was more likely mentioning, or "inclusion-lite." Nonetheless, these cohesive ties bound the texts into a single work. This somewhat diffuse networking also afforded writers maximum freedom and flexibility, while anchoring them thematically and socially. These characteristics suggest to us an emerging, online genre and new insights for collaborative writing for semi-canonical fan fiction.

This text-based RPG form of writing, that is somewhat like parallel play, is a braided genre. As a semi-canonical writing experience, *Trelis Weyr* (based on the fiction of Anne McCaffrey) shares the constraints of other fan fiction sites. Pugh (2005) defines fan fiction (or fanfic) as "writing, whether official or unofficial, paid or unpaid, which makes use of an accepted canon of characters, settings, plots generated by another writer or writers." (p. 25) Or, "fanfiction can be defined as writing based on a canon invented by another writer or writers and shared by the intended audience" (p. 169) What Pugh's definitions do not exclude, but fail to explicitly note, is the profound and influential bias of these allegiance works exhibited by fans when they choose to write into popular canonical works, such as McCaffrey's *Dragons of Pern* series. In this investigation, writers used the themes and contexts provided by McCaffrey and braided their own plot structures into the existing (and

co-created) context. About such writing, Pugh adds: “It lives purely on the web...[and] tends to have more of an agenda than other fanfic universes, and the agenda in question is not about the personal fulfillment as a writer” (p. 27).

This final observation by Pugh creates an important distinction for writers of a canonical and semi-canonical, fan-based homage to the original author. It is writing “in service” to another’s world, agenda and plans. In fanfic writing emanating from a canonical contract, writers compose to “fill gaps” in the original story. Filling the gaps presupposes the shared knowledge base held by the canonical readers/writers is more articulated and enriched, in order to add to the work of the original author. Elaboration on the original work is the writers’ desire for more, and in response they provide it themselves.

### **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. 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 provide 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). This escalation is apparent in policy statements and new standards for writing instruction, adolescent literacies, and 21<sup>st</sup> 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 including: valuing of out-of-school literacy practices, integrating technology and popular culture, creating more opportunities for authentic collaborative, participatory environments, integrating performance into students' reading and writing lives, and positioning youth as designers of text.

### **Future Research and Conclusion**

Findings from this study illustrate how youth engage in collaborative composing while navigating and manipulating popular culture and technology, providing a nuanced understanding of how a text-based RPG forum offers a range of multimodal, inter-textual, and hybrid reading and writing opportunities. By understanding participants' everyday literacy practices as manifest in this forum, researchers and educators may be able to better meet the needs of adolescents and emerging adults for the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands they will face as members of a global community. Reflexive analysis provides educators with a path toward increased relevance for academic writing that occurs as part of schooling. In concert with these applied understandings, we also suggest the results of this study confirm recent additions to Miller's genre as social action. Miller's elaborations to her 1984 theorizing are based on deep interaction with Internet texts.

Moving forward, there are several aspects of the online text-based RPG experience that should productively be investigated to flesh out the structure laid down within this study. First, investigate RPG forums like *Trelis Weyr* as communities of practice and play could help 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. Research could also investigate participants' competence in writing; what signifies competence for a participant as both a role player and as a writer, and if these two notions of competence are compatible, mutually exclusive, and so forth. Additionally, research might investigate specific aspects of play in forums like *Trelis Weyr*, and their implications for classroom practice.

In closing, texts created in *Trelis Weyr* are the result of the new social actions Miller (2014) has come to embrace. Rationales for inclusion of new literacies within curriculum involve leveraging students' out-of-school literacy practices involving literacies and related

semiotic systems (e.g., Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Haynes-Moore, 2015; Herrington et al., 2009; Wilber, 2010), and creating new forms of social networking and partnerships to support literacy practices (Andrews & Smith, 2011; Hicks, 2009; Kist, 2010). Incorporating the use of these types of digital spaces within curriculum deserves further examination as educators struggle with how to weave technology within literacy curriculum in purposeful, authentic ways. Educators who undertake this challenge may be able to leverage students' out-of-school literacies to create motivating, interactive environments within school; spaces that may decrease the existing disconnect youth experience today by creating a "permeable curriculum" (Dyson, 1993) that allows for interplay across the boundaries of youths' official and unofficial worlds.

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## **Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions**

### **Interview # 1 - Demographics**

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)?

### **Interview #1 - 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?

### **Interview #2 – Role-Play Experiences**

1. 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?
2. 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)?
3. 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)?
  4. What forms of communication did you use with others on Trelis Weyr? What happens in that context (how does it work)?
  5. Have you used what you have learned from role playing and making role play content in any other areas of your life?
  6. 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?
  7. Why do you participate in RP forums like Trelis Weyr? Can you describe why it is important to you?
  8. How competent do you feel about your ability to participate in role playing? Why?
  9. Did you feel prepared to succeed in your role-play on Trelis Weyr? Why?
  10. Can you describe a time when you helped others and/or gave advice on role-playing?

### **Interview #3 – Role-Play Experiences**

1. Can you describe a time when you collaborated with others during role-play?
2. Can you share what you think you have learned from role-playing in RP forums like Trelis Weyr? How does that make you feel?
3. Can you describe the kinds of conversations you have with other players through chat or other features in Trelis Weyr?
4. Do you talk to players about personal issues not related to role play? Why?
5. Can you share a time when a role play participant (online friend) offered you support



when you had a real life problem?

6. Can you tell me what it is like to work with others in Trelis Weyr?
7. How important is the way your character looks to you (i.e., visually and textually)?
8. Who or what encouraged you to participate in role play game forums like Trelis Weyr?
9. Has anything or anyone ever discouraged you from participating in role play game forums?
10. What do you like about role-playing in Trelis Weyr? What do you dislike about role playing in Trelis Weyr?
11. What parts of Trelis Weyr made you want to keep role-playing? Why?
12. Can you share what it is like to try out new roles and personalities with your characters?
13. Is there anything that you would like to add?

## Appendix B: Definition of Terms Related to Role-Play-Games

Term	Explanation
<b>Backstory</b>	The history of a character prior to the player's actively portraying him or her in a role-playing environment.
<b>Canon</b>	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.
<b>Character</b>	The fictional persona (human or animal) being played by an RPG participant within the context of a game.
<b>Character profile</b>	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.
<b>Chat</b>	This is the chat feature on <i>Trelis Weyr</i> ; a place where members can interact with each other out of character. It is a socializing space.
<b>DeviantART</b>	An online social networking site that connects artists and allows them to display their work ( <a href="http://www.deviantart.com/">http://www.deviantart.com/</a> ). One of the

participants displays her creations on DeviantART.

**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.

**Fandom** The state or attitude of being a fan.

**Forum** Internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages.

**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).

**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.

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**Term**

**Explanation**

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<b>Massively</b>	An online role-playing video game in which a very large number of
<b>Multiplayer</b>	people participate simultaneously. Players play the game, competing
<b>Online Role- Playing Games (MMORPG)</b>	against and cooperating with other players connected to an online network.
<b>Multi-User Dungeons (MUD)</b>	A multiplayer real-time virtual world, usually text-based. MUDs combine elements of role-playing games, hack and slash, player versus player, interactive fiction and online chat.
<b>Out of Character (OoC)</b>	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).
<b>Player or participant</b>	The physical person playing the game (i.e., not the character they play).
<b>Role-play</b>	The act of taking on the role of a character. May be done in any of several modes, including 1 <sup>st</sup> person dialog, 3 <sup>rd</sup> person narration of action, or even 1 <sup>st</sup> person improvisational acting.
<b>Role-Play-Game</b>	Role-Playing Game. Includes a defined set of rules and allows

- (RPG)** 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** The abbreviation for screen name or user name.
- Story Thread** A narrative thread, or plot thread. Refers to particular elements and techniques of writing to center the story in the action or experience of characters rather than to relate a matter in a dry “all-knowing” sort of narration.
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