

Guest editorial: Advancing critical gaming literacies in language arts and literacy education

Games proliferate in our modern world, ranging from online video games to board games and table-top roleplaying games, each with their unique communities and practices. Accordingly, it can be difficult for practitioners to know how to engage with games in classrooms and other learning spaces. From concerns about distinguishing the harms of gamification from the promises of game-based curricular design (York *et al.*, 2022) to concerns about ways of integrating video games into classrooms (Bacalja and Nash, 2023) and thoughtfully considering the role games and games media has in reproducing stereotypes (Garcia, 2017), educators have expressed difficulties with navigating this complex landscape of games. This special issue explores ways of taking up critical gaming literacies, with an emphasis on how gaming can be used for disrupting the status quo of literacy education and supporting English educators with attending to power, ethics and equity in learning and instruction.

Gaming is making a big impact on the media and entertainment industry. The global video game industry generates billions of dollars every year, and scholars have been taking note and engaging with these practices and communities. Even niche games like Dungeons and Dragons are gaining popularity, with more than 50 million people worldwide engaging with its game and products (Diamond, 2022) through expansive mediums such as TV shows, graphic novels, live action improv and video games. Indeed, since the release of the new D&D video game Baldur's Gate 3, 17.8 million people have downloaded it (Video Game Insights, 2025). In the USA, over 85% of teens report that they play video games (Gottfried and Sidoti, 2024). Recent scholars have surfaced concerns that gaming spaces foster toxic and harmful social practices, such as GamerGate (Garcia, 2017), and that these harmful tactics extend into online political discourse (Gray and Leonard, 2018).

Literacy educators have long been interested in the potential of gaming contexts for literacies learning, from linking concepts of learning, instruction and assessment with the idea of learning principles in video games (Gee, 2007) to exploring more embodied and affective perspectives, for example, exploring how video games can become entangled in relational Carescapes (Hollett and Ehret, 2015); how players intra-act with artifacts and materials to "(re)read" escape rooms (Wargo and Garcia, 2023); and how video gamers move toward freedom dreaming and speculative worldbuilding through play (Cortez *et al.*, 2022). Games have been shown to support literacy educators in developing more empathetic stances toward students and imagining more expansive curricular designs (Kim and Johnson, 2021; Killian Lund *et al.*, 2025).

This special issue offers multifaceted conceptions of critical gaming literacies. Across each of these scholarly works, this issue will present perspectives on practices that can support historically and presently marginalized learners in connecting to course material, and on critical considerations of games and gaming in a way that promotes equitable and ethical practices in English Education contexts. Below we provide an overview of the articles in this issue.

Our special issue features two theoretical explorations, one considering digital games and the other analog table-top games. Bacalja (2026) presents a framework for conceptualizing



digital games in education, considering intersections and divergences of the ways in which multiple fields (i.e. postdigital studies, educational studies, historical studies and cultural studies) make sense of critical learning across current gaming contexts and infrastructures. This piece troubles binaries that cast games as either saviors of or threats to education. We invite readers to engage with the author's call to seriously engage with "what English and literacy educators might do with and through such technology" (p. 106). Then, [Lalonde \(2026\)](#) challenges us to rethink how we conceptualize and teach narratives, drawing from the emergent, participatory and social processes of narrative creation afforded by solo and multiplayer table-top roleplaying games. This paper makes suggestions for teachers to consider ways they might intentionally design semiotic inputs and outputs of analog roleplaying games toward particular disciplinary goals that might include research, ethical decision-making, composition, rhetorical appeals, spatial and descriptive writing and more. We join Lalonde in considering how tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) can function as "sites of collaborative authorship, arenas of cultural critique, and laboratories for literacy learning" (p. 123).

Three articles in this issue explore analog and digital games in early childhood and elementary English education. Two of these articles leverage games designed specifically for the classroom. [Khozaei Ravari et al. \(2026\)](#) offer an AI-supported board game approach to support reading comprehension and reading metalanguage development for young children. [Tohari and Hasnawati \(2026\)](#) offer a study of a game designed to support social interaction and collaboration with school-aged children who are learning English and are undocumented Indonesian migrants. This piece frames game design as a space for fostering inclusivity and strengthening social connections in the classroom. [LaMear and von Gillern \(2026\)](#) explore a classroom unit in which they leverage the deep video gaming knowledge and enthusiasm of children and their parents. We invite readers to consider this innovative approach to honoring the shared gaming practices of children and their families while also supporting children in developing sophisticated literacies practices.

Next, we have several articles in this issue looking at late elementary and adolescent learning. [Burger et al. \(2026\)](#) explore a youth VR club where 9–11 year olds first played and analyzed VR games and subsequently prototyped their own games. Findings share embodied ways that youth made sense of the games as well as ways they collaborated through public talk, and drew from funds of knowledge for game design. The authors introduce the concept of polysyncretic composing, which "foregrounds simultaneity: gaming, reading, writing, coding, designing and bodily enactment all operating in an enmeshed ensemble" (p. 197). Readers are invited to think about ways that game-based learning can be "distributed, negotiated, and refined" (X). Next, [Croasdale \(2026\)](#) shares longitudinal research with adolescents, examining what students remember six years later after a curriculum where they created digital games based on classic literary texts. The author points to the lasting impact former students describe about the creative aspect of the composition and sense of community they experienced through the activity. We invite teachers to consider how shifting one's perspective from the short- to the long-term may shape what curricular choices we make.

Two articles dive into the ways that gaming structures, and the communities around them, can support players in engaging in critical and ethical action as both characters and players. [Nichols \(2026\)](#) played through the farming simulation game *Stardew Valley* to understand how digital games can be understood and read critically as interactive texts for English educators. Bringing together digital narratology and transactional theory, Nichols examines how spaces, evocative objects, character backstories, player choices and the ludic function of character interactions contribute to emergent storytelling. Through multiple playthroughs with different avatars, the piece demonstrates how divergent narrative paths can attune

PLAY CRITICALLY:

A game for reading this special issue. Play alone or with others. No experience req'd.

CHOOSE A ROLE:

OLDTIMER
Knows the discipline, but is skeptical of change.

ADMINISTRATOR
Understands institutional goals, but is accountable to them.

ENTHUSIAST
Eager to try new things, but may move on too quickly.

GAMER
Draws on lived play experience, but may struggle for critical distance.

TEACHER
Knows students and contexts, but works with constraints on time & resources.

INSIDER
Fluent in gaming discourse but less attuned to institutional pressures.

CHOOSE A PATH:

You don't have to read in order. Try a path:

- ⚡ **CONTEXT EXPLORER:** Compare how gaming operates across settings (early childhood, classrooms, online communities, etc.)
- ➔ **THEORY "MACHETE":** Read theory pieces first; use them to inform empirical work.
- ➔ **IMPLICATION HUNTER:** Track what each article suggests for practice. What matters for you?
- ➔ **NEXT GENERATION:** What uncharted waters will you explore in your own research?

INVENTORY:

(what you bring along)

- ▷ Personal play experiences
- ▷ Classroom context
- ▷ Research / theory background
- ▷ Observations of others (e.g., your kid playing Minecraft)
- ▷ Other: _____

ENCOUNTERS:

Each article is an encounter. As you read, ask:

- ▶ What is being challenged?
- ▶ Who benefits?
- ▶ What becomes possible?

PLAY MOVES

😊 **ROLEPLAY:** read through your chosen character's lens

🔍 **SCAVENGE:** seek connections across articles (shared citations, ideas, etc.)

☺ **CHAT:** Ask friends a no-context provocative question about what you read.

✍️ **FANFIC:** Imagine these authors talking to each other

✍️ **COMIC:** make a meme about your meaning-making. Tag #ETPC #literacies

▣ PLAY TO GROW ▣ GROW BY LEARNING ▣ WIN BY PLAYING ▣ CHANGE THE GAME ▣ ♥

V.K.L.

Figure 1. A game for reading this issue

players to the game world's implied ethical frameworks and to the moment-to-moment meaning-making involved in play. Finally, Storm and Ferris (2026) explore the gendered community dynamics of mobile war game communities. This piece examines how different methods of leadership had the potential to move the gaming community toward "discourses of domination or discourses of negotiation, cooperation, and tentative peace" (X), as well as examples of ways communities collectively moved against a troll that had betrayed them in-game. The authors argue that these examples have implications for ways that leadership structures and esthetics might be shifted in school classrooms as well.

We invite you to take a playful pose toward your reading of this special issue – not because this work is inherently light or trivial, but because we know that play is a way to dig deep, to inhabit roles, to experiment with possibilities. To support that, we offer a one-page roleplaying game (see Figure 1). The design invites readers to take up a particular stance, choose a path through the issue and treat each article as an encounter. The structure is light: choose a role, consider the inventory of knowledge and experiences you bring to your reading and explore how each article takes up critical gaming literacies.

There's no way to lose this game. You win when you notice things. It's a tool for reading otherwise; it can be taken up by individuals or in teacher education or graduate classrooms. In this way, the form of this editorial reflects our commitment to critical gaming literacies: that structures can shape engagement, that meaning is co-constructed and that play can be a serious and illuminating mode of inquiry.

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