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# Role Playing in Children's Literature

## Zilpha Keatley Snyder and *The Egypt Game*



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Game historians usually trace the literary roots of role-playing games to J. R. R. Tolkien and other fantasy authors. In this article, the author argues that, although Tolkien indeed provided pioneer game creators with specific content, historians have missed the important early influence on game history of children's literature that advocates and illustrates role playing. Game scholars nod to such child's play as make-believe and playground games, they often cite accounts of personal experiences in the childhood play of game designers, and they credit game books as an interactive link to fiction, but they have not included children's texts in their histories. The author argues for placing children's novels in such histories, particularly Zilpha Keatley Snyder's *The Egypt Game*, which this article describes in full as a cultural forerunner in the history of role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons.

**Keywords:** games and play; game history; role playing; *The Egypt Game*

**G**AME HISTORIANS WHO TRACE the progression of role-playing games find the genre's literary roots in J. R. R. Tolkien and other fantasy authors. Although Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the creators of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), turned to Tolkien for such specific game elements as races and classes to make up their adventuring parties, and although other fantasy and science fiction authors such as Robert E. Howard and Fritz Leiber often gave game designers additional world-building and heroic-journey archetypes, these fictional texts do not themselves explicitly model role playing. Instead, they offer the kind of fantasy adventures that gamers aspire to re-create.

Absent from recent histories of role playing are mentions of children's literature that advocates and illustrates role playing. Game scholars have nodded to child's play such as make-believe and playground games, they have sometimes cited their own personal experiences of childhood play, and they have noted

that game books offer a link to interactive fiction, but they have not included children's stories and novels in their histories. I contend that specific children's novels, particularly Zilpha Keatley Snyder's Newbery Honor book *The Egypt Game* (1967), provide a previously unrecognized historical moment in role-playing history before Dungeons and Dragons.

I begin with a review of the scholarly literature that discusses role playing, I then place Snyder's *The Egypt Game* in discussions about role playing through an analysis of four key elements of this form of play found in the novel, which reveals how imaginative game play overcomes the culturally constructed obstacles of gendered play and racial homogeneity. This children's book from the 1960s outlines how role-playing games can provide even in this day and age—when questions of race and gender are ubiquitous in the news—a performative space of equality, acceptance, and freedom for children. Thus, I argue the book should be considered an early outpost in role-playing history.

## Literature Review

Scholars have approached the discussion of role playing from many disciplinary angles, including history, sociology, performance theory, game theory, and rhetoric and composition. In writing about the genre's early evolution, they have addressed war gaming and fantasy literature. They have observed the early imaginary games of children at play and studied interactive fiction and game books. In addition, they have studied texts produced within established game settings such as the many R. A. Salvatore novels. But we have seen no tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) histories that include the influence of children's traditional literary fiction.

We see the core, early fantasy TRPGs (the first codified rule sets in the larger genre of role playing) as a combination of narrative and mechanics, featuring a narrative inspired by fantasy texts and the game play mechanics of war gaming. Gygax and Arneson merged these two components in the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. Lest this seem a drastic simplification on my part, let me say that several texts discuss it in great detail. For example, game designer Michael Tresca (2011) opens his detailed account of the evolution of role-playing games with a chapter highlighting the structure and influence of *The Lord of the Rings*, dedicates his second chapter to analyzing miniature war gaming (and, briefly, collectible card games), and then culminates his treatment of both in the

following chapter in his discussion of tabletop role-playing games, specifically D&D. Approaching TRPGs from a rhetorical and compositional angle, Jennifer Grouling Cover (2010) also acknowledges “both the antecedent game genre (war games) and the antecedent literary genre (fantasy)” in the creation of D&D (9). And Jon Peterson (2012), in his exhaustive history of simulation games, war gaming, and role playing, details the minutia of the war-gaming roots for D&D.

Yet even before war gaming became a recognizable genre of gaming—first as the Prussian variation or *kriegsspiel*, and then as H. G. Wells’s 1913 *Little Wars* (“the first commercial war gaming system to be sold to the public for the purposes entertainment” Peterson, 265)—children played make-believe games. Peterson, using his comprehensive history of the umbrella term “games of simulation,” dedicates a few pages to linking childhood fantasy with later, rule-bound gaming. He discusses child’s play, referring to autobiographical articles by Gary Gygax that describe his games of Let’s Pretend, which “echo his future gamesmastering” (387). Not only game historians but also child development specialists and educational psychologists have studied role playing, although the latter’s research involves the observation and documentation of children at play, and sometimes they use a different jargon. For example, sociolinguist Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1992) conducted a case study of gender construction during role-playing performances in the play sessions of two three-year-old girls, but she uses the term “narrative games” to describe the make-believe role playing (182). Some folklorists also analyze children’s play, focusing on oral tradition and children’s verbal games and rhymes. Leading scholars like Iona and Peter Opie (1960) consulted children in addition to observing them, which resulted in the first collected writings—*The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*—to build a repository of these play traditions. Elliott Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith (1971), from the fields of recreation and psychology respectively, added to folklore studies like the Opies’ work and included a section on readings and bibliographies in their *Study of Games*. Certainly research that goes straight to the source has provided a foundation for the study of games in action with child participants, but we also need to consider how adult authors of children’s and young-adult fiction have internalized these games and presented them to the youthful consumer, especially in texts that the gatekeepers of children’s literature,—for the most part, librarians and educators—have deemed prize worthy.

Authors sometimes play with literary forms to create nondigital, interactive fiction, such as the often-cited and inspirational early example of Jorge Luis Borges’s short story, “Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), which philosophically

ponders a labyrinthine future of multiple possibilities. Digital media theorist Janet Murray (2003) describes Borges's text as "both a book and landscape, a book that has the shape of a labyrinth that folds back upon itself in infinite regression" and credits it for "inventing fantasy information structures" (3). This detective story explores the way time branches into an infinite number of possible futures, and editors Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort include it as their first reading sample in *The New Media Reader* (2003), considering it a forerunner to hypertext and interactive fiction, both of which have links to role-playing games. In the first book-length critical work on interactive fiction, digital media theorist Montfort (2003) elaborates on the early history of non-digital, interactive fiction before he defines interactive fiction as "works that have text adventure-like interfaces and simulated settings" (8). He puts this electronic medium in a "literary, gaming, and computing context" (5) and includes D&D as an important predecessor to interactive fiction because it was a "framework for a theatrical interaction, for the exploration of simulated spaces, and for puzzle solving" (65). Daniel Keller (2007), who specializes in digital literacy and composition, also cites D&D as an origin for interactive fiction, specifically "the game's 'if-then' structure" and "imaginative depth" (280). We see this same if-then structure in literary forms, specifically in game books.

Often linked with electronic, interactive fiction, the term game book is synonymous with pick-your-path books such as *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Which Way*—two popular series of this genre. Game books are "quite like hypertext fiction; you read a passage of text, at the end of which you are generally called upon to make a choice . . . then turn to another passage elsewhere in the book that describes the outcome of the choice" (Costikyan 2007, 8). This specific form of nondigital, interactive fiction was directly marketed to a juvenile audience. Comparative and children's literature scholar Margaret R. Higonnet (1987), beginning her article with "The magic circle of a story holds a child" (37), discusses game books as narratives of paradoxical freedom, ones in which by "having exercised freedom of choice, the reader is bound again by the fortuitous narrative" (43). I will return to the issue of how the magic circle fosters freedom when I discuss fully *The Egypt Game*, but now I simply say that, although game books may provide a limited freedom, role playing exudes player choice.

Pick-your-path novels have attracted the attention of children's literature scholars and gamers alike. Rhetorician Jennifer Cover effectively links game books with D&D, stating that "game books technically started before TRPGs" but "D&D was, nevertheless, influential on their development," (24). This shows

a muddled relationship of reciprocity, in which game books influence D&D and enhance the recognition of its genre by creating their own genre. D&D's early manufacturer TSR published a choose-your-own adventure text and branded it as Endless Quest Books, which was usually situated in the same fantasy setting as D&D. But game books are a separate genre within children's literature, distinct from realistic children's fiction, and the individual texts of realistic children's fiction have been overlooked in the history of role playing.

Role playing has also inspired other fictional texts, specifically works produced within established game settings. Most notable are the many R. A. Salvatore novels in the Forgotten Realms series. Similarly, texts in the Dragonlance series include novels based in a universe that also relates to D&D campaigns. These texts are either fantasy novels or works designed as campaign source books for the game and published and marketed with various editions of D&D. Rhetorician Mark Gellis (2007) argues that gaming supplements, like the campaign source books, are "a kind of deliberately open-ended and incomplete work of fiction" (167). Also working in a shared-world format, George R. R. Martin, best known for writing the Game of Thrones novels, edited the Wild Cards series, which are anthologies based on a tabletop campaign for *Superworld* he ran in New Mexico (Martin 2007, 16). These texts all read like traditional novels, and they are inspired by the game's settings, characters, and campaigns. Yet none of these texts actually portrays characters role playing but are instead fictional chronicles of what role players imagine they are doing. This distinguishes them from game books that allow some choice of play for the reader. Thus both the shared-world, fantasy novels based on game settings and the game book texts based on player choice are role-playing inspired literature instead of literature depicting role playing as *The Egypt Game* does.

Theorists and game designers have joined fiction authors in broadening our available texts on role playing. For a concise categorization of "games that involve stories (or stories that involve some aspect of game)," game designer Greg Costikyan (2007) enumerates the types of role playing and role-playing media (7). His article appeared with more than forty others in *Second Person*, a seminal theoretical anthology on role playing that "focuses on two interrelated strands: *role-playing* and *story*" (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2007, xiii). It addresses all manner of role playing, from traditional D&D to literary interactive fiction to free-form role playing in a theatrical context. The collection indicates the breadth of discussions regarding this genre, yet nowhere does it analyze children's literature. James Wallis (2007) tangentially touches on children's books

with his discussion of card games, specifically including one game written and designed by Edward Gorey and one from the *Goosebumps* franchise, but his article focuses on story-making games and not children's novels. Thus *Second Person* has left open an opportunity for additional looks at how children's novels fit in the history of role playing.

Quite a lot of children's and young-adult fiction depicts role playing within the larger narrative. *Ender's Game* provides a well-known science fiction example, and I have discussed the multiple layers of games and the value of collaborative play in "'The Game is Everything': Collaborative Play with Global Consequences" (C. Martin 2007). *Little Women* is a classic example: The March sisters actively engage in role playing in their home. However, I am specifically arguing that a subset of children's realistic fiction—realism that incorporates sustained depictions of role playing—should be included in accounts of the evolution of role playing. What sets *The Egypt Game* apart is its sustained account of world building within a realistic fictional setting with a narrative nexus of role playing. Snyder has created within a work of realistic fiction not a game, per se, but a depiction of the primitive construction and implementation of a rule set by children for role playing—that is, she offers a model of role play for children. Her work predates D&D, the first commercial, tabletop role-playing IP (intellectual property) published in 1974, so the role-playing game had not been bound by formalized rules at the time of her publication.

I am not arguing that *The Egypt Game* directly influenced the creation of D&D. Such influences have been discussed at length by game historians like Peterson (2012), Tresca (2011), and Cover (2010). Yet Gygax, who was the father of six children, may have come across this text thanks to one of them. This is pure conjecture because *The Egypt Game* appears nowhere in the extensive biography of Gygax, which explores the contributing factors that led to D&D (Witwer 2015). Instead, I argue that, as a cultural commodity and material good, children's texts provide snapshots of childhood moments and that the recordings of role-playing games in children's stories need to be included in historical timelines of role playing, just as case studies of the subject are. I selected *The Egypt Game* for its sustained account of role playing, its publication date, and its notoriety. *The Egypt Game* won the Newbery Award, the oldest and most prestigious prize in American children's literature, which increased its sales at bookstores and its status at schools and libraries. In fact, the tale was so popular that the latest edition was reprinted in 2009.

*The Egypt Game* is realistic fiction, which “refers to stories that could indeed

happen to people. . . . The protagonists of these stories are fictitious characters created by the author, but their actions and reactions are quite like those of real people” (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown, 1993, 132). Although the novel is fiction, Snyder’s personal experiences connect to it. In the book’s “Introduction by the Author,” Snyder confides that she and her daughter each played their own version of the Egypt game. Snyder started when she was in fifth grade. She said, “I read everything I could find on [Egypt], made up my own hieroglyphic alphabet, and played my own rather simple, and very private Egypt Game” (n.p). Her daughter, in sixth grade, became intrigued by her mother’s past, “and started her own version of the Egypt Game,” though Snyder calls her daughter’s version more complicated than her own (n.p). Other nods to real-life inspiration include a father in graduate school, just like Snyder’s husband and the parents of several of her students. Indeed, the main characters—all six—are based on her former students.

To summarize the novel, six children (April, Melanie, Marshall, Elizabeth, Toby, and Ken) gather to play a long-running game pretending to be Egyptians in an unoccupied neighborhood lot owned by their enigmatic neighbor, the Professor. The novel begins when April moves into her grandmother’s apartment and meets Melanie and Marshall, her neighbors. The girls bond over games and stories, particularly imaginary games and stories of Egypt, which they ultimately formalize into the Egypt Game. The game includes developing Egyptian characters for the children, creating imaginary problems for the players to overcome via storytelling, crafting ritual performances, designing costumes and accessories to wear, and using historical references, such as to Egyptian deities, to build imaginary worlds. When Elizabeth moves into the girls’ apartment building, she also joins in the game. Toby and Ken unexpectedly crash the Egypt Game on Halloween and decide to participate too. The text largely focuses on how the children connect by constructing and playing the Egypt Game over a five-month span from August to Christmas. The children in the novel create the closed structure and rules of their game. They invent character names, design costumes, build an interactive physical play space, and devise very formal game procedures, including ritual and liturgy. For example, they perform a burial and conduct made-up religious ceremonies in which they ask the Oracle for advice. The six of them meet almost daily after school to play until a child is murdered in the neighborhood and all the children are afterward confined indoors. When April makes an impulsive trip back to the abandoned lot, the murderer assaults her. Thanks to Marshall and

the Professor, she is saved and the murderer captured, but this event effectively ends the Egypt game.

### Methodology for Analysis

In addition to analyzing the role-playing traits, I draw on philosopher Bernard Suits's (1985) case study examining games within a literary context to analyze *The Egypt Game*. In Suits's discussion of his strategy for investigating games in literature, he applies his methodology to detective fiction, concluding that this genre "can be analyzed successfully in terms of [puzzle] games" (215). After all, the "stripped-down detective story is . . . a game to be played by the reader, because it is simply a puzzle to be solved by the reader" (201). Though Snyder's murder subplot invites her readers to analyze the story as a puzzle, it is the Egypt Game itself that drives the narrative as the central setting of the story and the catalyst for bringing the six children together. Because the creation and performance of the Egypt Game forms the nexus of the entire story, the role-playing game carries more weight in the work as a whole while the murder serves more as a plot device that disrupts the game for a time. In Suits's analysis of games in literature, he asks a fundamental question: Is the game "constructed, played, or viewed?" (215). For the Egypt Game, the answer is all three—it is constructed, played, and viewed. The reader becomes privy to the entire construction of the game in all its iterations, a game that the six child protagonists play with fervor and dedication regardless of gender or race, a game that the owner of the play space, the Professor, furtively views. This makes the Egypt Game different from other forms of literary games studied by scholars, such as books in the Choose Your Own Adventure series and others I have discussed. With game books, an author constructs a game that a reader plays in a branching narrative, but both the play and the story remain confined to authorial script. The story unfolds in a limited subset of story outcomes. In *The Egypt Game*, Snyder writes the game into the narrative, where it is constructed, played, and viewed by the protagonists within the novel. She scripts the role playing and game performance for the characters and models it for the reader.

In an interview about the children's novel and play, children's literature scholar John Morgenstern (2010) asserts that "the children's novel is a toy" and it is also "like a toy," basing his assertion on the fact that the pleasure it



gives comes from a manufactured object (393). *The Egypt Game* does this more specifically than a toy and depicts a particular type of game, a role-playing game. *The Egypt Game* reveals to the reader the construction of a world with a mythos, rituals, and characters. Therefore, in addition to being “like a toy” that facilitates entertainment, it is also a guidebook for a child’s imagination, leading her to enter the game space and play a role. Talking generally about early children’s literature, Morgenstern also posits that a “result of the invention of the children’s novel is that children began to use the novels as the source of scripts for their own play” (397). But “script” here implies exact stage directions and dialogue, a play that must be memorized and recited. Instead of providing a mere script, *The Egypt Game* provides a system for creating scripts; it functions as both a role-playing game tutorial and as a simple player’s handbook. This core text provides possibilities that readers and players modify and adapt to their own role-playing adventure, one to perform as opposed simply to regurgitating a prepared script.

The *Egypt Game* is a role-playing game, and much of Snyder’s text corresponds with role-playing game attributes, attributes many theorists have sought to pin down with a definition of role playing and role-playing games. I analyze several elements: world building, which includes the creation of the game world, the setting (physically and fictionally), the freedom it provides, and the narrative that accompanies the game within this world to sustain it; collaboration, which deals with participants coming together for party creation, cooperative teamwork, and the role of the game master; and role playing, the crux of improvisation and character interaction with both the players and the game world. The notion of immersion might also fit the topics of role playing and world building, but I want to consider it a separate category. So I will add the element of immersion to address issues of agency within the space of the game world. We see all these characteristics in *The Egypt Game* because Snyder participates in and contributes to the larger role-playing conversation. In the inaugural edition of *The Journal of Role-Playing*, game analysts Michael Hitchens and Anders Drachen (2009) provide a comprehensive account of the many definitions of role playing. They then distill them and determine that a role-playing game has the following elements: a game world, participants, characters, a game master, interactions, and a narrative. Though Hitchens and Drachen do not say so specifically, immersion is a likely by-product of role playing. I have incorporated the other features into my four key elements: world building, collaboration, role playing, and immersion.

## Role-Playing Elements: World Building

Without the secluded lot, the closed physical boundaries of its space, and its apparently safe environment for play, the children would have never developed the Egypt Game. Snyder's use of the descriptive term "magic" twice in conjunction with the discovery of the play space seems apropos, given that many game scholars follow Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1950) in his seminal work on play, *Homo Ludens*, and refer to game space as the magic circle. The magic circle forms a structured area, rule bound by the constructs of the game. When the children do not occupy the yard, it is no longer Egypt, no longer a "temporary world" housed "within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (Huizinga, 10). Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), in their textbook about game design fundamentals, call the magic circle a core concept of game design: "Although the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga's list of 'play-grounds,' the term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game." They assert that the "term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins," (95) thus echoing Snyder's own description of the Egypt Game: "And there it was, almost like magic. Very much like magic, in fact—and that's the way the Egypt Game was, from the very beginning" (Snyder 1967, 39). The yard itself embodies Huizinga's image of "forbidden spots isolated, hedged round, hallowed," (Huizinga 1950, 10), which Snyder describes as "surrounded by a high board fence. . . . The fence that surrounded the storage yard was high and strong and topped by strands of barbed wire" (Snyder 6–7). Within the first chapter of *The Egypt Game*, Snyder introduces the reader to the yard even before April, Melanie, and Marshall appear, and the author spends as much time describing the play space as she does a player, cementing the importance of this space as an important character in the world she has built.

Even though April and Melanie spent all of August researching Egypt at their local library, finding out about "tombs and temples, pharaohs and pyramids, mummies and monoliths," it was not until the beginning of September when they found the abandoned lot owned by the Professor that "the Egypt Game began" (Snyder 1967, 35). Snyder details its genesis: "April and Melanie and Marshall were on their way home through the alley when, by the sheerest luck, Melanie noticed the loose plank. It had moved stiffly, that first time, with a reluctant yelp and they peeked through into the hidden and deserted yard" that was "weed-grown and forgotten and secret" (38). Melanie and April have

to prepare the yard physically by pulling weeds, removing rocks and debris, and rearranging items. As the environment becomes a representation (or mimesis) of Egypt, their naming of the space imbues the yard with power, turning a “lean-to shed” into a “Temple” (42).

Like the space, the game play, too, becomes magical: “Ideas began and grew, and afterwards it was hard to remember just how. That was one of the mysterious and fascinating things about it” (Snyder 1967, 48). The game play undergoes an almost organic growth as the children spontaneously develop ideas in their magic circle. For example, in an early play session, April says suddenly, “Marshall can be the young pharaoh, heir to the throne of Egypt. Only there’s a civil war going on, and the other side is trying to kill him” (45). Melanie continues the idea that they can be high priestesses of Isis who protect him. April counters they could be evil high priestesses instead. These story ideas morph and become the rules and drive the actions of the game, thus within the space they obtain Huzinga’s “special rules” (Huzinga, 10). Sturm, Bosman, and Lambert (2008), in their study of secret spaces in children’s fiction, argue that there are “two main reasons for creating secret spaces: retreat/escape and control,” and they include *The Egypt Game* as one of the eighteen texts they examine (87). Within their secret space, the children immerse themselves in the game, gaining agency and freedom.

One of the empowering qualities of the children’s secret space is that the design of their game includes independence and autonomy. The closed physical boundary of the constructed play space helps create an ideological space of freedom manifest in the game play experience, and the magic circle in *The Egypt Game* provides a space of freedom for the children to explore, discover, and live. Additionally, they enact the various freedoms anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) presents as associated with play: “*freedom to enter*, even to generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment . . . *freedom to transcend social structural limitations*, freedom to *play*—with ideas, with fantasies, with words . . . and with social relationships” (68). The children enact all of these freedoms collaboratively within their magic circle while role playing their game.

### **Role-Playing Elements: Collaboration**

The Egypt Game is a collaborative game, as most TRPGs are, one in which players form a party or “the adventuring group that their characters belong to”

(Fannon 1999, 236). When playing a typical TRPG, the party comes together under the direction and guidance of a leader who runs the game, usually called the game master (GM) or dungeon master (DM). This leader sets the stage and role plays monsters and nonplayer characters (NPCs—i.e., anyone the party may come in contact with during their adventure). In the Egypt Game, the child players collaborate, and, in so doing, they overcome the sociological and cultural complications of gender and race. They accomplish this through party development culminating in a collaborative game that includes all six children. Although the physical boundaries of the play space enhance the game, ideological boundaries are slowly torn down during the game play to create an inclusive play space within their magic circle.

The play group is gendered female at its outset because its founders identify as female. The gender diversity emerges gradually, because the female duo of April and Melanie (with Marshall in tow) create the Egypt Game in September. Because Marshall is Melanie's younger brother and charge and because he is extremely young, he poses no masculine threat to the girls. In the beginning, April hesitates to allow new members, while Melanie acts more inclusively. For example, they discuss Elizabeth, a younger girl, when she moves into their apartment building and initially reject her. But when she resembles Nefertiti, the Egyptian goddess whose bust is in the lean-to temple, they indoctrinate her into the game. Her visual similarity to the Egyptian queen—literally her female visage—grants her access to the play space because as soon as April recognizes the resemblance, she and Melanie take it as a sign to let her join the group.

A month after the game officially commences, two boys want to join, but as with many girls of their age, April and Melanie have a natural inclination not to trust or associate with members of the opposite sex, particularly Ken and Toby, whom they call "just ordinary (ugh) boys" (Snyder 1967, 92–93). When the boys crash their game on Halloween, April laments, "We just *can't* play the Egypt Game with those—those—*boys* there" (112). At first they fear the boys will make fun of them, then they worry that the boys will not participate fully in the creative game play. But not just the girls find it hard to accept mixed-gender play—"Ken and Toby didn't believe in talking to girls" either (114). Yet the game draws toward including both genders. The physical play space in the temple becomes balanced between male and female Egyptian deities. Set and Isis have their own altars, and both worshiped and featured in story creation. Thus the physical space of the lean-to models gender inclusion, but with the two female creators, Set's masculine half of the temple is underemphasized with its sparse

décor compared to Isis's traditionally feminine "jeweled and flowered throne" (123). Not until the boys join the game, bringing natural oddities found in any boy's room (such as rubber spiders, an animal skull, a theatrical dagger, and a stuffed owl), does the physical space become as balanced as the group dynamic and Set's altar as bedecked as Isis's.

An adventuring party in a role-playing game generally needs a group of characters diverse in race, class, and abilities to achieve balance. For example, in D&D, a party may consist of a fighter or tank that withstands significant combat damage, a cleric or healer who restores health to others, a wizard or spell caster who wields magic, and a rogue or thief who operates stealthily. Thus members enjoy complementary skills to complete quests better. Snyder models this with her players. Once complete, the Egypt gang comprises three girls and three boys of various ages, talents, and backgrounds: April, Melanie, Toby, and Ken are all in sixth grade; Elizabeth is in fourth grade; and the four-year-old Marshall is in kindergarten. Although the girls and the boys both have to overcome gender differences to play collaboratively, their racial diversity appears less of a barrier. Children's literature and social justice scholar Debra Dudek (2011) posits in a chapter on multiculturalism, "A rhetoric of tolerance often does not go far enough toward describing and enacting an ethical citizenry based on a deep respect for cultural difference" (156). Published in 1967, *The Egypt Game* progressively stages a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood that moves past mere tolerance and embraces inclusion, creating a strong multicultural medley. A commercial role-playing game like the iconic D&D typically defines race as a matter of species (e.g., Halfling, Elf, human), but a realistic novel like *The Egypt Game* depicts human races or ethnicities. Among them, the six kids represent four ethnic or racial backgrounds.

The widely varied racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of the "enlarged Egypt gang" of the six children (Snyder 1967, 121) embody the transcontinental status and complex culture of the country that inspired their game. April is a pale, freckled, blond Caucasian whose mother, a struggling Hollywood actress, abandons April to the care of her librarian grandmother. Melanie and her brother Marshall are African American. Their mother teaches, and their father attends graduate school, seeking a degree in English, which makes money tight. Elizabeth, a petite Asian, lives with her mother and two sisters after the recent death of her father. Ken is a "clean-cut, all-American Asian" from a wealthy family whose father sells real estate (93). And Toby—whose mother has died and whose father is an artist—is part gypsy. A diverse and motley crew, they evidence in part

the notion of racial respect socially constructed by their progressive university town. After April comments that, "I know a lot of black people. There are a lot of black people in show business," the children drop the issue and never explicitly mention race again (13). They nonchalantly embrace a culturally diverse play group. This may be more subtly progressive than if Snyder had them explicitly wrestling with gender integration, but it is progressive nonetheless.

Once the party is fully created, all six must play or the game is deficient. For example, after a dispute, Ken and Toby leave Egypt for a few days, but when they return, the girls are "glad to see them" (Snyder 1967, 131), and they feel the game can resume. This constitutes an about-face from their initial responses and illustrates how creative collaboration and game play instill a deep camaraderie.

Even given the collaborative nature of such games, one member, the GM, leads, and for the Egypt Game this member is April. With occasional help from Melanie and even Toby, April defines the game boundaries and leads the campaign, a term used to "indicate an ongoing series of gaming sessions that feature the same characters" (Fannon et al. 1999, 213). She initiates narrative trails; she sets the stage and lets the other children join the story. The party explores their fictitious world and has various encounters with both good and evil NPCs for whom April speaks.

Having April assume a role so similar to a GM gives leeway and flexibility to the rules of the game. Such flexibility in a TRPG is unique compared to stricter, rule-based board and computer games. Video game theorist Jesper Juul (2014) asserts: "Role-playing games are not normal games because with a human game master, their rules are not fixed beyond discussion" (40). Even though he was describing published TRPGs, Juul's point remains valid because negotiation is a feature of improvised games. The collaboration of the party influences their leader, and April in *The Egypt Game* has to negotiate a party of five other children. Sometimes this means she changes her narrative. For instance, one day in Egypt, April devises an opening narrative for the players to follow: "Throwing up her arms, she chanted, 'Almighty Set has promised his servants, the crocodile gods of the Nile, the bloody heart of the young Pharaoh, Marsh—uh, Marshamosis!' She dropped to her knees. 'Oh mighty Set, god of evil, we hear and obey.'" (Snyder 1967, 45). However, the player Marshall (and his character Marshamosis) wants nothing to do with losing his heart, so April must improvise. She scraps that particular event, and no hearts are sacrificed. But April continues the imaginary rivalry between Pharaoh Marshamosis and the god Set as a primary storyline, returning to it another day. Even with April

leading, all the kids contribute to the game, creating a cohesive and balanced game play that is fun for both the boys and the girls. April as GM works with her players to create the overall story of the game. The game essentially provides a sacred space of equality and gender acceptance, one in which both boys and girls contribute as collaborative participants to a meaningful play experience.

### **Role-Playing Elements: Role Playing**

With April at the helm, the game evolves through role playing. In a typical TRPG, each member of the party first chooses the character he or she will play in the game. Then as the game progresses, the player's character (commonly known as player character or PC) takes on situations that call for the player to respond as if he or she is that character, thus the role playing. The Egypt party members also play roles by creating character names, designing unique symbols for their characters, making costumes, and reacting to elaborate rituals in character. Each member of the game has his or her own player character: Toby is Ramose with the icon of an owl; Ken is Horemhab hoisting a bloody sword; Melanie is Aida and a songbird; April is Bastet with the visage of a cat adorned with earrings; Elizabeth is Nefertiti (which April changes to Neferbeth creating a portmanteau of Nefertiti and Elizabeth) with the image of a heart; Marshall is Marshamosis topped with his pharaoh's headpiece. In many role-playing games, players begin to be called by their character names, and as the Egypt members get closer to each other, Snyder (1967) includes this piece of dialogue: "It'll be all right, Tobe—uh—Ramose,' Horemheb said" (139).

Once the players take on their characters, the game progresses, and April draws her narrative inspirations from the world outside Egypt, including school and the children's home lives. She assimilates the inspiration and structures the role playing of the Egypt game around ceremonies. For example, one day, their sixth-grade teacher offers a lesson on oracles, and it becomes the catalyst for the Oracle of Thoth adventure. This adventure, which lasts several days, centers on a "ceremony for Consulting the Oracle" (Snyder 1967, 147), which April leads. First, she lights "the candles and the incense and the sacred fire," then she puts "the fire-bowl on the floor in front of the altar" (153). Continuing with her performance, she bows before Thoth and starts "in on an elaborate ceremony, using some of the old things they'd done before and some new ones she'd just thought up. She walked around the altar backwards three times sprinkling holy

water. She pulled three hairs from her head and dropped them on the fire. Then she sat down cross-legged between the fire and the altar and began to chant." Then the others join in the chanting "Aie-ie-ie-ie!" following their leader. Their leader continues: "April chanted, making her voice go up and down the scale; and along the edge of the temple, the other Egyptians took it up. When the wailing chant was going strong, April suddenly cried, 'Stop! The mighty Thoth has heard us. The oracle has spoken!'" (153). This describes just one iteration of the oracle ceremony. Each child is supposed to have a daily turn asking the oracle a question by writing it out on a sheet of paper. Toby elaborately presents the slip of paper to the oracle, they wait overnight (with Toby secretly inscribing a response from the oracle), and April leads the ceremony the next day to reveal what the oracle had written.

In addition to taking inspiration from life, April sometimes adds elaborate narratives to the game to negotiate and rectify issues outside of the game. For example, when a neighborhood cat kills Elizabeth's pet parakeet, the children grieve by creating a ritual funeral, turning Petey the parakeet into "Prince Pete-ho-tep, son of the great Queen Neferbeth" who had "fallen in a battle with a terrible monster" (Snyder 1967, 132–33). They ceremoniously mourn, perform funeral rites, and mummify the body, laying it to rest under a brick pyramid. Spread out over several days, these funerary rites in the game help Elizabeth come to terms with her loss, while the children use their role playing to help them deal with adult matters such as death.

### Role-Playing Elements: Immersion

The act of role playing in the ceremonies of Egypt helps immerse the players in their game. As creators of the game, the girls easily lose themselves in their own creation, but they are surprised by Toby's fervor. Perhaps because of his artistic upbringing and his theatrical proclivity, Toby immerses himself in the game as fully as April or Melanie, rejecting after-school sports for the Egypt game and taking part "to an extent that nobody had expected" (Snyder 1967, 135). During the Ceremony for the Dead for Prince Pete-ho-tep, "Toby staggered around the altar, beating his chest with wild-eyed abandon, sprinkling real ashes—left over from Set's sacrificial fire—in his hair, and wailing like a wounded electric guitar" (137). His physical role playing helps him get more fully into the game.

In *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, Cover argues



that a primary feature of the tabletop role-playing game genre is “its ability to immerse the players in the world and the story that the game creates” (107). Furthermore, a “key immersive factor . . . seems to be the control that players feel” (123). Sociolinguist Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1992) agrees that when children engage in role-playing games, “they experience the universal social parameters of agency and exchange, of power, dominance, cooperation and alliance and gain experience of how to make their social actions effective” (179). As I said, through game playing the children gain agency and freedom when they become immersed in the secret space of the magic circle: “It had been a terrific game, full of excitement and mystery and way-out imaginings, but it had been a great deal more than that. It had been a place to get away to—a private lair—a secret seclusion meant to be shared with best friends only—a life unknown to grown-ups and lived by kids alone” (Snyder 1967, 197).

Such immersion in the Egypt Game depends on space, and this space provides secrecy and freedom. Yet when a child is murdered in their neighborhood, adults ban all outdoor play, and the children’s yard, their secret space, is temporarily forbidden. Confined to the indoors, they try to re-create the game, but they do not enjoy same experience, which emphasizes the importance of the play space for the immersion: “Once or twice they tried to play the Game indoors . . . but it wasn’t the same at all. In fact, it was such a disappointment that it was frightening” (Snyder 1967, 74). They even ponder, “What if the magic was gone forever?” but conclude it is an issue of space: “Probably it was only that carpets and couches and curtains just didn’t make the right atmosphere for a game about hidden splendors and giant mysteries, in a land of mud and sand” (74).

The Professor ultimately grants the space to them, and he secretly watches over them. The children are troubled by the idea that any adult watches their play or knows about their secret game. The children want adults neither participating in the construction and play of their game nor even viewing it. They consider adults as Other, as outsiders to their magic circle, and their worry about adult viewers helps end their immersion in the game. The second time April and Melanie venture into the abandoned yard they dub Egypt, they discuss spectatorship after discovering a window that peers out onto the yard. They fear the gaze of the Professor at the window, and they say with trepidation, “He might be watching us through it” (Snyder 1967, 45). This fear of being observed is “almost more scary than the possibility of the Professor’s actually entering the yard” and it hinders their playing of the game. Only after they convince themselves that he could not see through the window do the girls feel “safe and secure.” When they believe

the Professor cannot view their game, they again feel free to play. Granted, the Professor's watchfulness over their game through the window eventually saves April's life, but the same voyeurism, when revealed, ends their game.

Ultimately, immersion in the game through world building, collaboration, and role playing provides the space children need to negotiate adult power and problems—a space for the growth and development as well as for pleasure. Our text shows the benefits and risks of unsupervised play and presents the tension as an issue for readers to consider. Should adults monitor play or should play go unsupervised? When children control their own game, they envision and live in a world liberated from the adult cultural strictures of prescribed gender and racial discrimination. This world is not real but created during role playing, and in this free state of play, children immerse themselves in the game. Snyder's argument comes from personal experience; she has reminisced about her own use of games, "Growing up in a rather limited, narrow environment, I escaped through books and games into a much wider world" (Snyder 1987, 189). And the six children in *The Egypt Game* escape into their game too.

## Conclusion

What begins as a simple story about creation by April and Melanie using paper dolls culminates in a role-playing game based on historical research and creative whimsy. Many theorists have defined this type of play. French sociologist Roger Caillios (1958) categorized this type of game play as *mimicry*, or "incessant invention" (23) in his work on games in which players become fictional characters in imaginary universes and make believe they can be someone other than who they are. Psychologist and play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) called this a "mind or subjective game" and named D&D as well as fantasy and imaginative play as examples. Snyder herself, through her character Melanie, specifically labels the type of play enacted in her text as "imagining games" (32). However, what Snyder codifies in her fiction and presents to young readers is a game in which a player assumes the identity of a character in a fictional setting. Nodding to Suits's definition of a game, April and Melanie do voluntarily create unnecessary obstacles and attempt to overcome them when they play their Egypt Game. To use computer game terminology, it is a game that resides in an open world or sandbox state of immersive creativity, which means it offers more freedom of choice than the usual linear structures of game play. And it is

a game that includes rules the players agreed to bring enacted via role playing.

As the children create their game, they model role playing for readers. This children's novel is not merely an escape, but also a guidebook, establishing possibilities for other children to read about and enact. It is not, as Morgenstern (2010) argues, that "when you read a children's novel, you are vicariously participating in a form of play that you would never imagine performing publicly" (394). Instead, when you read *The Egypt Game* you are being shown possibilities for role playing that you can perform whether in a playground, in an abandoned lot, around a table, or at a computer. A children's novel the narrative nexus of which consists of imaginary games can be discussed alongside the genre called role-playing games, and thus these texts serve as an early player's handbook, a source book or rule book for childhood role playing. Role playing is a fundamental game mechanic used in a variety of board, card, tabletop, and digital games, and it is a creative outlet that children can learn and explore in a novel and then enact alone, with friends, or in an online community. Although role-playing game historian Shannon Appelcline (2014), who focuses on commercially produced TRPGs, states that "before 1974 there was no role-playing industry" (6), there were at least model texts that helped illustrate what role-playing games might look like, involving a player's immersion in world building, collaboration, and role playing. A text like *The Egypt Game* that sparks the imagination and creativity of child readers stays with these children as they grow, continuing to provide the magic circles for fun and games.

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