

Developmental Issues in Guided Fantasy Roleplaying for Children and Young Adolescents for Jewish Education

The Personal Journey in Jewish Spiritual Praxis

A survey of the praxis of *tefillah*, the experience of prayer practice in Judaism, reveals five stages, or gates. Each gate must be entered in order to attain the mental state in which “prayer” is experienced. The initial gate is one of calming one's mind. This can be done with a mantra, by counting, or with a melody. The second is love, love for one's fellow, an appreciation of the structures permitting and fostering togetherness. The third gate is fear, fear of the unknown, posing the statement “Know before whom you stand,”¹ to one's psyche and recognizing that what may be approached demands a distinctly different manner of thought. Before this gate stands an angel with a flaming sword, glaring at your audacity. Do you enter?

The fourth gate is joy, and the mind experiences a quickening, a stimulation in which thoughts begin to rush forward as if suddenly caught in a current, attaching themselves one to another in such a creative torrent that the euphoria of knowing and appreciating the gift of one's mind and all that from which it has emerged carries one forward to the fifth gate: experiencing *lev nishbar*,² the “shattering of one's complacency,” an entrance into a different state of consciousness.

This mystical description of prayer as praxis, independent of particular theurgical goals (e.g., to change reality through a metaphysical intervention), or devotional goals of *devekut*, cleaving (to the divine breast for existential succor), is expressed in the language of Jewish mysticism, but it also describes ascents expressed in stories of ascents. The dangerous ascent and descent is described mythically in early medieval *hekhalot* literature which abounds with strange entities categorized only generically as “angels.” The hero of these adventure journeys are rabbis, again only a generic classification. The Talmud abounds with more earthbound, but no less fantastical journeys. Antecedents of these stories are found in still earlier sources forming a foundational mythological literature to draw upon, and allude to in so many suggestive and meaningful ways, but all describing an adventure of self-discovery and realization.³

What connects the dots between Rabbi Yishmael's ascents to the heavenly palace, Rabba Bar Bar Hana's travels to the edge of the world, the Children of Israel's passage through the *symplagades* of the Sea of

1 *Da Lifnei Mi Atah Omeid* from Talmud Bavli Brachot 28b.

2 *Lev nishbar*, from Psalms 51:19. literally “heart break” but with a different valence than in our post-Galen medical worldview. Until the early 18th century, the heart was understood in Judaism (and many other Western cultures) as the seat of the Intellect, rather than the seat of emotions (those, located in the *kishkes*, guts or kidneys). Thus, we've translated *lev nishbar* as “the shattering of one's complacency,” per the suggestion of Rabbi David Seidenberg.

3 Stories of adventure abound in the Torah: Abraham's Journey to Canaan, Joseph's Travail in Mitzrayim, Moshe's Journey in the Midbar, and the Adventures of Bnei Yisrael in the Midbar. Stories of adventure, such as Homer's *The Odyssey* (c. 6th century BCE), are some of the oldest stories that have survived from this period. In describing the concept of the “monomyth” in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell proposed that across cultures, heroic adventures stories followed a similar underlying pattern. The “call to adventure” is followed by a hazardous journey, and eventual triumph, expressed in many different forms. In Jewish adventure stories, triumph is often expressed in the hero's rescue of a community in peril after the hero is empowered with special knowledge and blessing often gained at great personal cost (cf. Avraham's escape from Nimrod, Moshe's return to Mitzrayim).

Reeds,⁴ Moshe's flight to and return from the Midbar, and Avraham's flight from Nimrod into Canaan? Each in turn, describes a story in pursuit of integrity, self-knowledge, self-realization and actualization in a particular mythic landscape. Through praxis, this mythic landscape is translated to a psychical one. Transitioning from one place to another is accompanied by a change of perspective, a change of consciousness.

Initiation into this praxis begins first with familiarizing initiates into the stories themselves, empowering them to know their own lives as journeys not unlike those of Avraham, Moshe, or Rabba Bar Bar Ḥanna. The practice is exercised daily, expressed repeatedly in the daily Jewish liturgy, an expression of the obligation to remember, every single day, both coming out of Mitzrayim and being taken out through a divine intervention.⁵ The practice demands the appreciation of metaphor and necessitates imaginative thought. The following early statement explains the practice as one of personal and imaginal transposition:⁶

בְּכֹל דּוֹר וְדוֹר חֵיב אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ
בְּאֵלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם. שְׁנַאֲמַר

In every generation one must view oneself as though they had personally left *Mitzrayim*, as scripture instructs:

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי
בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם:

“And you shall say to your child on that day, ‘This is because of what HaShem did for me when I left Mitzrayim.’”⁷

לֹא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בִּלְבַד גָּאֵל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.
אֱלֹהֵי אֲפֹתֵנוּ גָּאֵל עִמָּהֶם. שְׁנַאֲמַר

It was not only our ancestors that the Holy Blessed One redeemed. Rather, even we were redeemed with them, as scripture says:

וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם לְמַעַן הֵבִיא אֶתָנוּ לְתֶת לָנוּ
אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ:

“And G!d brought us out of there in order to bring us to and give us the land that he promised to our ancestors.”⁸

While *Mitzrayim* nominally refers to a mytho-historical and geographical referent (Egypt), in the Zohar and other midrashic literature the place name suggests a state of mind, that of constrained imagination.⁹ In contrast to Mitzrayim, the destination is one of openness and potential, the *midbar sinai* where the Torah is acquired through a theophany, a direct encounter with the divine. The experience of being in this mythic place is described in midrash in pedagogical terms necessitating the attainment of a certain state of mind:

4 Symplegades, or “Clashing Rocks,” a mythological motif. See, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Symplegades" in *Studies and Essays in the History of Science and Learning Offered in Homage to George Sarton on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday* (New York: M.F. Ashley Montagu, ed., 1947). The entrance into the fantastical realm through the motif of clashing rocks, slicing reeds, or flaming swords is a motif found across Mediterranean and Mesopotamian cultures, most famously in the upstanding, clashing waves of the Sea of Reeds.

5 The obligatory command (mitzvat aseh) is derived from Exodus 13:3, 20:2, and Numbers 15:41. Indeed, the particularly Jewish read of the Decalogue differs from non-Jewish reading, in establishing the first of the ten commandments with the statement witnessing divine redemption from Mitzrayim.

6 The statement is attributed in the Passover Haggadah to Rabban Gamliel, the great grandson of Hillel the Elder, who served as both Kohen and head of the first rabbinic academy in Yavneh after the destruction of the Temple.

7 Exodus 13:8.

8 Deuteronomy 6:23.

9 The now familiar practice of reading these place referents as geographical markers is strongly both innovative and opposite to the practice suggested. Mitzrayim is not literally Egypt, the state or place on an atlas. The modern Atlas privileges and structures our worldview in a fundamentally different way than the mytho-historical worldview of our ancestors, where places are more easily mapped to psychical states, and characters to archetypal characters.

”וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי” “HaShem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai wilderness”¹⁰.

אלא כל מי שאינו עושה עצמו כמדבר הפקר אינו יכול לקנות את החכמה והתורה לכך נאמר ”בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי”:

This teaches us that anyone that is not (*Sheh'ainu*) making themselves into an ownerless wilderness (*midbar hefker*) cannot acquire Wisdom and Torah, and so it is called in the *Sinai* wilderness.¹¹

As articulated in the central document in Judaism (which itself models mythical re-enactment in guided storytelling) the daily experience of being taken out of Mitzrayim is associated with a personal experience of divine intervention occurring in the present, in the personal cognitive journey of everyday consciousness from a mental state described as constrained. The practice directly associates the experience of imaginal transposition as occurring in a state of consciousness, which is sanctified with the imprimatur of divine activity.

What I believe the mitzvah of imagining oneself journeying between mythically signified mental states enjoins, and what I argue is a critical feature of the traditional pedagogy and spiritual initiation practice in Judaism, is a praxis founded in roleplaying:¹² re-enacting mythical adventures and through this re-enaction, psychically mapping new meaning into one's personal, developing, and in so doing, maturing ones self-understanding. While this pedagogical modality might not be familiar to every Jew in a religious context, I believe the practice of roleplaying deserves recovery, for its utility in helping young learners before and after their bar and bat mitzvah engage their imagination in developing fluency in Jewish myth, acquire a working knowledge of Jewish values practiced in consensus-built realities, and explore their own identity through experimenting in imaginary character development.

Scope of Research

In suggesting the recovery of roleplaying modalities in Jewish education, some basic concerns arise. Even if one may argue that Jewish spiritual practice demands a regime of exercises and activities to develop ones imagination, is attainment of these mental states desirable or developmentally appropriate for certain age groups? When are children cognitively prepared to even appreciate the depths of metaphor perhaps required for exploring meaning? What can we learn from comparable roleplaying experiences? What cognitive or other benefits is there for participants engaging in roleplaying exercises? What preparation is necessary for students and educators to participate, and what self and group diagnostics might be used to evaluate success?

This paper will explore the developmental issues for latency-age children (tweens and young adolescents, from around nine to thirteen years of age) engaging in guided fantasy roleplaying in which learners create a fiction together while inventing a consensus reality based on a commitment to rules and a suspension of disbelief. I will examine to what degree these modalities may be developmentally appropriate or perhaps even recommended, and looking at what important challenges educators might anticipate and integrate into the program they facilitate.

Specifically, I am interested in using these activities as a means of introducing learners to Jewish myth as participating explorers within a group adventure. Is it possible to design such an adventure based on the age and gender of the participants? What sorts of challenges might be considered important in

10 Numbers 1:1.

11 Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7. The midrash at play here is between the place name, *Sinai* (סִינַי), and the word *Sheh'ainu* (שְׁאִינוּ), literally, “that is not,” by transposing the ש and the ס, related phonemes produces with the tongue.

12 Roleplaying (also written “role-playing”), generally, is the assumption of a “role,” an identity signified to self and others through a behavioral change, or to imaginatively in ones self-expression through creative purpose. Role assumption can be less than intentional (e.g., unconsciously filling a social role, “wearing multiple hats at-once,” etc.).

complementing a child's innate sense of morality, and fair play? To what extent do rules help to mediate and structure imaginary realities, such that it's worthwhile to suspend disbelief?

I believe my role as a Jewish educator is in helping to grow children who appreciate the power of metaphor, the power of associative thought, and the import of symbolic association, not only for appreciating their own meaning making and that of their peers, but also as a basis for their reception of Jewish art and literature. Certainly part of the cultural genius of Jewish culture is the depth of these associations. Must appreciation of this depth begin in adulthood or can it be cultivated in childhood and adolescence, and if so, might tabletop fantasy roleplaying be another modality besides bibliodrama for creative engagement in it?

My research is in three overlapping areas:

1. Contextualizing my experience in tabletop roleplaying relative to related activities: theater games, roleplay scenarios, collaborative fiction and storytelling, improvisational theater, circle games, and open-ended games. What other experiential activities directly relate to it and how have they been used in education, especially with tweens.
2. Understanding the value of these activities in the developing minds of tweens and young adolescents for developing or expanding creative thinking and artistic ability, for exploring identity, and for providing a safe space by which learners can explore issues of morality, peer team building and puzzle solving, and form relationships.
3. Understanding the role of the Game Master, as behaving both as storytelling guide/referee of game physics, and as mentor to participants in their play.

In researching articles, I have focused on psychological and sociological studies of tweens playing the game Dungeons & Dragons. Related anthropological, pedagogical, historical, and anecdotal material related to the game, and the experience of structured improvisation were also consulted for relevant context. The scope of research is constrained by attention to latency-age children, and applicability to learning contexts.

Personal interest

My understanding of the project of Jewish education is to develop in students a fluency in the vast web of cultural symbols, associations, and languages by which they can become engaged creative participants in the making of Jewish culture. Fluency implies comfort and ease in both making associations, and expressing them a multiplicity of traditional and/or novel hermeneutics. This topic is important to me as an extension of a wider investigation into traditional pedagogies for meaning making with Judaism that might be expressed through innovative modes for storytelling.

As a pre-adolescent, I had my first exposure to guided, interactive storytelling in the context of the popular fantasy roleplaying game: Dungeons & Dragons. In the fall of 1984, I was a ten-year-old 4th grade student at a pluralist Hebrew Day School in Cincinnati, Ohio. I found some other children I knew sitting on the floor and rolling curious polyhedral dice. Asking to join, I was surprised that they dismissed me out of hand – it would take me too long to explain to me! But I found older students (12-14 year olds) who were willing to accept me into their circle, allow me to watch, and eventually, let me play along side them once I understood the basic rules and conventions of the game. What then transpired was very strange – and extremely moving.

Sitting around my parents oak dining room table, eight of us gathered with our character sheets and dice, listening to the Dungeon Master, the older brother of my sister's boyfriend, describe our progress through

a dungeon, accompanied by rolls of the polyhedral dice to determine our fate. As the game progressed, the more I was able to visualize our progress in my mind's eye. The mortal danger of my player character, whose health was diminishing with each confrontation with monsters in the dungeon, was sensed palpably. The awareness and empathy of other players in helping to preserve my health was something novel to me, and deeply felt. I didn't have any friends in my school, and their concern and intervention surprised and warmed me. I was happy to reciprocate their kindness as I could, except that my character, being an entry level Elf thief, seemed to be so weak, and always in danger of dying. And then, suddenly, my character's life was ended. All the vitality with which my imagination animated him still remained, but it had no more vessel. I experienced death and heartbreak for the first time, but also redemption. A cleric was summoned with a healing potion, which determined through a role of dice brought my character to the brink of life. Another die roll for divine intervention, and my twin ten-sided dice improbably landed twin double-zeros – 100%! My character, was still weak, but once again lived (!), and this through the fate of dice cast, through the unarbitrary game rules determining the metaphysics of the consensus reality experienced, and through the good-will of other players who came to my assistance.

At this point, I was thoroughly immersed and even more so wanting to reciprocate for all my fellow players kindness. As the adventure progressed, three, four, five hours into the afternoon our group of adventurers found themselves in the tower of an evil magician guarded by a basilisk, a giant lizard which can paralyze players with a gaze! One by one, each player fell victim to the basilisk, until only I remained. The singular attribute of my elven character was high dexterity, and my single skill as an entry level thief was in finding traps and secret doors. With the other players paralyzed, attention centered on me, who discovering the hiding place of the magical boots of dexterity, could manage to outrun the gaze of the basilisk, and discover the potion for re-animating basilisk victims. The party having returned to health, the basilisk was defeated and the lair ransacked for valuable magical artifacts. The magician, a dangerous Mind Flayer,¹³ was not in his office, and for that we were relieved since it was becoming late and we all needed to get home, but the game theoretically could have continued indefinitely.

And to some extent, even without the later resumption of the game, or any other friends to play it with, the game did continue. I had in that one game experienced something profound, a pronounced altered state of awareness. I had found myself in both the tower maze, with its secret rooms, traps, and basilisk, as well as in my parents dining room surrounded by players who accepted and cared for my imaginary well-being, something that also was translating into my emotional well-being. The experience stuck with me. For the rest of my childhood, while I sought pretty much in vain to recreate this experience, I found literature in which I could discover similar adventures and discoveries. I imagined sailing with Prince Caspian in C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and traveling between Narnia and Middle-Earth and still unimagined lands in an ocean linking all imaginary worlds.

The experience was a critical one for contextualizing my experience of Judaism, and in particular, its rules for behavior, the *halakhah*. When I was eighteen and in yeshivah, I reflected on how halakhah provides a ruleset for a sort of live-action role-playing in the consensus reality posited in the Jewish imagination. The degree to which these rules were adhered to helped explain to explain how groups of strangers could together invent a sense of sacred space in time, such as the Shabbat. The measure of the realness of this space might be explained in the degree to which participants adhered to the established ruleset. The reality of an imaginary world related strongly to both peer group conformity and a dedication to adhering to rules which provided the metaphysics of that world, mapped onto the physical world experienced by non-adherents. I began to understand the world as the cultural construct of many layers of overlapping

13 A magical being adapted from the mythos of H.P. Lovecraft. Mind Flayers are cthulhoids who derive nourishment from devouring minds.

conventions.

Through a singular experience of interactive structured storytelling, I had experienced and eventually come to recognize some powerful mechanisms of culture itself. While in college this gave me perspective and a viewpoint for relating to the structural philosophy and symbolic anthropology of Claude Levi Strauss, I wondered for years how this observation could best be shared, and ideally experienced by other Jews. If intentionally employed for specific purposes in Jewish education, could experiential educators create role-playing frameworks that could help students recognize themselves as player characters within given scenarios? Could the *mitzvah* to imagine oneself everyday as if one was exiting *Mitzrayim* and entering the *Midbar* be employed in a group exercise for entering productive consensus realities in which imagination, wisdom, and creativity flourishes? As my appreciation of Jewish wisdom developed, and my growing belief that some of the most odd and esoteric aspects of Judaism were artifacts of an obscure and powerfully relevant (and delightfully odd) worldview, I wondered how I could help others directly engage this world of Jewish imagination through its myths, legends, and lore.

Make Believe, Roleplaying, and Fantasy Roleplaying Games

"The first thing adults will ask about D&D (Dungeons & Dragons, a fantasy role-playing game) is 'How do you win?' Well, you don't win," explains hobby-shop owner Gary Switzer. "In D&D, you don't win or lose. You survive and you learn from your mistakes and you have a good adventure. It's a lot like life." (Krier 1979)

Tabletop fantasy roleplaying has an interesting *yichus* (pedigree). On the one hand it was an innovation of tabletop war gamers who played mock battles with miniatutes. This form of gaming among noblemen and army officers has been documented as early as the 18th century. A version of the game innovated by H.G. Wells in 1913, *Little Wars*, helped to democratize the experience for boys and girls.¹⁴ Notably, Wells intention was utopian. A pacifist, he set out to create a game in which wars could be played out in the realm of fantasy. An earlier work, *Floor Games*, utilized the same basic structure – a simple set of rules for guiding make believe play with toys behaving as props. Wells recognized that combing make believe play, with a bit of structure, opened up limitless options for children to role play their fantasies and explore the exotic worlds found in so many childrens books of that era. *Little Wars* proved popular among adult male hobbyists, and fueled a small market in the manufacture of miniature figurines of soldiers.

In *Little Wars*, a soldier might represent a phalanx, battalion, or an entire army. An innovation in the game rules by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in the late 1960s and early 70s offered the possibility of individual figurines battling each other, in fantastic scenarios inspired by the magical world of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth (1971, Gygax 1987). Further evolution of the game permitted the figurine itself to be completely abstracted into a character described and visualized entirely in gameplay. All one needed to play the game was some pencil and paper, friends, and a nice open span of time.¹⁵

This innovation and others proved wildly successful in 1974 with the official publication of a set of rules under the title *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D).¹⁶ The game required players to develop characters with a set

14 H.G. Wells. *Little Wars: a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books.*

15 An interesting parallel to note here between the use of figurines as fetish/totems, and the eventual displacement of such figurines as the goal of the game shifted from combat to completely open scenarios, fraught with danger, but no longer focused necessarily on individual combat.

16 "Gary Gygax, the game's co-creator and manufacturer, estimates that about 250,000 Americans now play D&D, a disproportionate number of whom are Californians. Gygax's TSR Hobbies, headquartered in Lake Geneva, Wis., sells

of attributes, strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma, all determined by dice rolls. Attributes scores determined player occupations.¹⁷ For example, high dexterity scores were necessary for players wishing to become thieves, high strength for fighters, high intelligence for wizards, high wisdom for clerics (the healer/medics of the game) and so on.

Players remained free to choose their characters alignment Good, Neutral, or Evil in a rubric permitting some nuance: Lawful or Chaotic. Players wishing to be Paladins for example were required to play chaste knights conforming to a Lawful Good alignment. Deviation from character would then help to flavor the evolving narrative of a game spun out from the Dungeon Master, the referee of game activity and storytelling guide. As with *Floor Games* and *Little Wars*, a little structure can go a long way in facilitating make believe play. Rules adapted from *Little Wars* provided a structure for melee combat of groups of players, usually less than eight in number. Innovations permitted players to track their health in hit points,¹⁸ and gain experience points along with treasure gained in the game providing incentive for continuing game play. Attainment of higher levels corresponded with the acquisition of additional skills, and die rolls determining a player base number of hit points. Venerable players might, in this way, face more dangerous challenges, soak up more damage, and still survive.

The game is open-ended. Outcomes of actions, determined at will by players may or may not result in the need for a dice roll. The result is a collaborative fiction. Play takes the form of many other Circle Games in which everyone at the table is given a turn. In tabletop role playing games such as D&D, player take turns at exercising their free-will. However, unlike Picture Consequences and other Circle Games innovated in DADA and practiced by the Surrealists, the collaborative fiction is moderated by both the metaphysics imposed by game rules that intentionally work to create a consistency that makes the fantastical believable. In this, D&D took a lesson from J.R.R. Tolkien's theory for creating believable fantasy worlds, establishing their verisimilitude by adhering closely to the mechanics of our own world. For Tolkien, world building was a mystical praxis of *imitatio dei*, imitating the divine – just as G!d creates worlds with divine imagination, so too we create worlds with our imagination.¹⁹ Fantasy role playing allowed others to participate in his creation. What lands lie south of Mordor and east of the Iron Hills? Imaginative collaboration through the structure of “a game” made mapping the *terra incognita*, the lands beyond Tolkien's narrative ends – possible. Imaginary worlds encountered only separately, through an individual's reading of a story or viewing of a work of art (e.g the work of Hieronymous Bosch and Bruegel the Elder), could finally be explored, not as a solitary dream, but as a waking and shared experience. Exploring these worlds enabled a direct encounter with the language of myth itself, in act which was essentially one of participating in mythopoesis, the act of creating mythologies – through dialogue or imaginative interpretation of a mythologian's creation. As Gygax explained, “We [Americans] can not longer escape to the frontier of the West, explore darkest Africa, sail to the South Seas. Even Alaska

5,000 to 6,000 copies of the basic \$10 D&D game kit each month” (Krier 1979).

17 The use of these statistical models for determining occupation is evidence of the influence of behavioral psychology on the game design.

18 Damage to or from players and non-player characters in the game were tracked by hit points.

19 Moshe Idel, in *Golem* (1994) describes what I think is a parallel creative practice among the Hasidei Ashkenaz of 13th century Germany. For them, *imitatio dei* was expressed in the mastery of a kabbalist to animate an artificial anthropoid – a Golem. Animating the vitality of an imaginary character in a consensus reality experienced vicariously through that character, seems to me a not unrelated feat of the imagination in performing the mitzvah of *imitatio dei*. The mitzvah is derived from Deuteronomy 5:33 and a constellation of other verses founded on the premise that the Adam was made in the *btselem elohim* – in the likeness of Elohim. Late English romantics and socialists, mainly Christian, embraced this idea in associating the creative essence of Man, with the Creator. In this way, alienation from ones creative spirit (for example, in factory or mine labor) could be directly associated with alienation from G!d. Tolkien's religious worldview was steeped in these notions.

and the Amazon will soon be lost as wild frontier areas," (Krier 1979).²⁰

In describing the history of roleplaying, Gygax explains how until that time roleplaying was known in professional therapy, theatre, and educational contexts. The role of theatre is particularly important here since its origins are in the 1940s, Viola Spolin had been popularizing improvisational exercises in actor training learned during her time studying acting at Neva Boyd's Group Word School in Chicago. According to Spolin, Boyd's teachings developed among at Hull House, a settlement house for a fertile mix of German, Greek, Jewish, and Italian immigrants provided "an extraordinary training in the use of games, story-telling, folk dance and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self discovery and personal experiencing."²¹ Building upon the experience of Boyd's work, Spolin developing new games that focused on individual creativity, adapting and focusing the concept of play to unlock the individual's capacity for creative self-expression. These techniques were later to be formalized under the rubric, "Theater Games."

Ethnographic Data on Tween Fantasy Roleplaying

Undoubtedly, these parallel traditions directly influenced the game as it drew from the experience of an ever growing community of gamers. John Eric Holmes, another early innovator of game rules and a practicing dungeon master, was also a doctor of neurology at the University of Southern California School of Medicine. Holmes led games for tweens and adolescent friends of his children, and adult nurses and doctors at his hospital. His seminal article, "Confessions of a Dungeon Master," appearing in *Psychology Today* in late 1980, obliquely describes how the game might provide a platform for exploring sexuality and sexual identity. His description teems with red flags (e.g., references to *Dungeon Masters* being referred to as "God" by players, use of rape as imaginary play, and sexual pressuring of female players in evocative situations) many of which were highlighted by critics of the game, who by the mid-1980s became a cultural force, leading to burning of the game as an element of Satanism and witchcraft among Fundamentalist Christians. A handful of sensational reports on murders and suicides committed by adolescents and young men who happened to be players added to a considerable element of controversy around the game, most of which evaporated with some key studies into the personalities and behavior of mainly college age players (Simón 1987, Carrol & Carolin 1989, Renard & Kline 1990, Douse & McManus 1993). The question of how the game may be developmentally appropriate for pre-adolescent and adolescent boys and girls, beckons strongly from the piece, but never appeared to be well studied.

Popular articles on D&D focused instead on its appeal, largely to boys, and how it expressed the precocious intelligence of the players attracted to it. The first article of this type written by Beth Ann Krier for the *Los Angeles Times* in the Summer of 1979 was republished in *The Gifted Child Quarterly* (23:4, Winter 1979). Reporting from Los Angeles, Krier was familiar with the scene in which Holmes was innovating his "Basic Rules" set for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Krier solicits observations from parents, and provides an honest description (with accompanying photo) of what the game play of a group of tween boys looked like from the perspective of an outsider.

This is serious stuff, which parents quickly deduce when they see children – who formerly spent their free time roller skating or disco dancing – suddenly preferring to read up on the Middle Ages. Or spending the days between games drawing labyrinthine dungeons, figuring the odds on contracting "dreaded rotting mummy disease" or devising historically accurate magic systems. **More than one mother has observed a distinctly depressed state overtake her child when a character nurtured through an extended**

20 Fantasy role-playing could also be something essentially generic, "or, as 32-year-old accountant Bob Shively, an avid D&D player, puts it, 'D&D is an escape. An outlet for aggression. It's an ego trip--everything you could want.'" (Krier 1979).

21 Quote from Viola Spolin in *The Hollywood Reporter* "Comedy Special Report." January 26, 1988.

campaign is killed off and there wasn't anybody around to raise him from the dead. [emphasis mine]

This observation applying as it does to the wide community of D&D players, resonates strongly with my experience, and I believe supports my observation that the praxis of fantasy role playing has in its potential the profound trigger. Further study should examine the developmental issues around exploring mortality, as well as the phenomena of ego-death, experienced in some altered states of consciousness. The

By 1984, the game had spread throughout American youth culture, advertised in popular magazines such as *Boys Life*, and was being played largely but not exclusively by young males. Wherever surplus time permitted, small groups could be found playing it. Nussbaum (1984) describes a summer camp for campers 10-17 years old at Shippensburg University, exclusively devoted to *Dungeons & Dragons*, directed by an English professor, Keith Krauss:

These are the wimps, the kids who are probably the outcasts in a high school class, the last kids picked in a group," says Kraus, a tanned, tousled 50-year-old who also runs a tennis camp at Shippensburg. "But they're the ones who are going to go to Ivy League schools and will end up running things, or at least be important behind the scenes. They're very bright...But if you'll notice, they're pretty pale. I've got to chase them outside."

Nussbaum again highlights how participants are largely males, and that activity in the game is seen in popular culture to correlate with intelligence and academic excellence, and thus developmentally appropriate or recommended as an extracurricular activity for gifted students. Explaining the appeal of the game, 13-year old Shawn McKean adds,

"I like it because you can experience life and death situations without it being life and death for real," says McKean, who has been playing the game for six years. But he says some of his friends in Camp Hill can't join him because their parents and ministers are convinced the game, with its menagerie of mythical monsters, witches and spell-casters, is a sure path to hell.

The gender specific experience of the game play for an 11-year-old Mark Walters:

He's playing a paladin, a white-knight sort of character, and he's affronted that one of the older players in his group is asking about girls in their make-believe town. "Hey," he complains. "This is an adventure. Why do you want girls for an adventure?"

Underlying these caricatures was a truth, recognized by H.G. Wells in his extended title for *Little Wars*,²² that there was always a population of young girls attracted to the game, or actively recruited by brothers and friends eager and sometimes desperate for fellow players. Krier writes,

Consider 13-year-old [NAME REDACTED], who has been playing for about six months and currently participates as a player in three games and as a dungeon master in four others. Described by his father as a "B-plus student at a tough private school," [NAME REDACTED] invests far more time in D&D than he does in homework and has spent \$178 thus far on game materials. "It's his passion," says his father, attorney [NAME REDACTED]. He's been trying to teach me the game for months. Guess what? I can't understand it. So he's teaching his 9-year-old sister."

The element of permitting players, male and female, to drive narrative and determine the life lived for their characters in the imaginary world collectively built by player adventures is described by Holmes.

"Some of my teen-age friends were extremely violent when we started out. As they got older there was a strong elements of sexuality and less violence. Most of the characters got married. The female characters introduced the element of romantic fantasy. They were more interested in building families and dynasties."

The quote is important not only as ethnographic data but as an expression of latent sexism in an

22 See above ft. 12.

overwhelmingly male subculture. Whenever female player experience is described, it is always in the context of game sexuality.

Psycho-Sociological Studies of Developmental Issues in Fantasy Roleplaying

[NAME REDACTED], a psychologist, has watched her son's interest in D&D intensely over the months. She approves of the game and even volunteers to pick up the pizza the players have ordered for their dinner break. "It's really a good thing – it's very intellectually challenging. Fantasy is a great way to work out psychological issues. In every culture there are fantasies and myths that respond to basic human conflicts and needs," she says. "Dungeons and Dragons is a continuous encounter with unknown forces, which is essentially what adolescence is. In D&D, the issues are power, experience, heroic kinds of quests that are the symbolic ways of talking about growing up. In D&D, kids get to act out situations impulsively. They can have impossible encounters in which they're defeated and bloodied. And they can have enormous success. In real life, their encounters have to be much more moderate and controlled because the risks in our culture are so great."

"The dungeon master becomes a mystical, magical father figure who mediates the impulsive behavior of the players. And if a quest is successful, the dungeon master gives points for it and if it's a devastating failure he can resurrect you. The game answers a very human need for mythology." [Krier 1979, emphasis mine]

The overwhelmingly positive observation quoted above from an unknown psychologist and parent, provides quite possibly the first critical observation of roleplaying activity of tweens in the role of players and dungeon masters. What's surprising in this statement is the perspective of the dungeon master as a mystical and divine force given that Dungeon Masters were with the rare exception of adults like John Holmes, roles filled by still maturing tweens and adolescents. D&D's hobby literature contains numerous essays and theoretical writings on the ideal practice of the DM, that largely assume the DM to be competent and mature. I can note that the DM of my role-playing experience, only fourteen at the time, did reflect this ideal. I continued to look up to him as a model and mentor throughout my adolescence.

The first psychological study focusing on pre-adolescent boys was made by Zayas and Lewis (1986). The authors provide a theoretical background for understanding it in the context of group interactions, conflict resolution, and skill acquisition among "latency-age" boys (8 through 12 years old), as well as presenting a case study on the utility of the game in social group work. Zayas and Lewis note that group play helps tweens acquire skills for interacting with others outside the home (Bruner, Jolly, and Sylva, 1976; Erikson, 1950; Herron and Sutton-Smith, 1971). "Group interaction enhances the ability to think about what others think and feel (Piaget, 1951; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), appreciate differences among people, resolve conflicts cooperatively, and understand the complementarity of roles."

It is through the adoption of imaginary identities and role-playing with peers that much of this social development takes place. Frank and Zilbach (1979), noting that the child gauges their developing skills in cooperation and competition with other children, write that through ritual and games "the necessary work on identity... associated with this phase of development can be supported by group life as peers respond to the individual's trying on different roles for size" (p. 254). The social competence that accrues from completing tasks requiring collaboration among group members is similarly well-known to social workers. In group work practice with children the worker facilitates members' growth and group cohesion through mutually responsible interaction among members. By posing real or imaginary dilemmas that call for group problem-solving the worker naturally exposes the group to such aspects of mutual aid as the identification of common problems and tasks necessitated, division of labor with assigned roles and functions, and the formulation of a strategy for attaining the groups' goals.

In their study, they brought together an ethnically diverse group of boys from the Upper West Side, 8-9

years old, in a D&D adventure party. All boys were initially identified aggressive and violent acting-out. The interest of the study was to learn more on how the game might be a useful group activity for social workers. In their study, the case worker acted in the place of the Dungeon Master. The group was asked to agree to a social contract of behavior, but aside from this, play continued as any other and for at least 15 sessions. The game proved helpful in a number of ways culminating in “group problem solving and appreciation for individual uniqueness.”

Toles-Platkin (1986) describes the socialization process of fantasy role-playing games, which she explains parallels the model of socialization of George Herbert Mead, a model emphasizing the importance of games and play on childhood development. Each stage of character development in a player entering into the social setting of the game parallels this developmental model, beginning with imitation, then play, identification with norms, and finally, the ability to assume a number of roles at once while anticipating others expectations. Toles-Platkin:

The game [stage] introduces a level of role organization where the various roles are so interdependent that the child must anticipate what others will do in order to adequately perform his own role. The parallel to D&D is obvious. The player becomes fully involved in a network of relations, giving his character a fully rounded personality (often referring to the character in the first person), and extends his interaction to coordinate his action with other members of the group.

Toles-Platkin's analysis of the game advances understanding of D&D beyond one of group collaboration in achieving a common good, the characteristic of *Gemeinschaft* communities.²³ Her critical analysis of D&D group play shows a very different sort of grouping manifest. Toles-Platkin finds a group character similar to *Gessellschaft* societies – groups sustained to the degree they are useful to members' individual aims and goals, with the functions of each individual's character being highly specialized, differentiated and interdependent from the other.

Players work together while advancing their own objectives in vitalizing the lives of their player characters. Only through their player characters do players gain entrance into the imaginary world where make believe play is experienced.

Altered-States of Consciousness in Roleplaying, Acting, and Prayer

Could this highly individual coordination and negotiating with groups at play lead one to an altered states of consciousness (ASC), a *lev nishbar* experience? My own experience in D&D as a ten-year-old is anecdotal evidence that the answer may be so. What if Jewish prayer or Torah study could be structured in a way that provides for the sort of imaginary adventure I first described at the beginning of this paper? Specific exercises must help to stimulate a mental state, but what are they. This was an area of research in which I could find no data in psychological, sociological, or ethnographic writing on fantasy role playing, but I was able to find comparable experiences in a related arena: Improvisational Theatre.

Scheiffele (2001) surveys the writings of theatre theorists, actors, directors, educators, drama therapists, and psychodramatists.

Many theatre artists aspire to transform their consciousness through acting and for some this desire for heightened awareness and living in the moment is the main reason they are drawn to acting. The Living Theatre, for example, proclaimed: ‘Acting is not making believe, but living exquisitely in the moment’ (Neff, 1970, p. 74). Forms of improvisational acting are especially prone to altering the actors’

23 *Gemeinschaft* refers to groupings based on feelings of togetherness and on mutual bonds. The terminology is borrowed from the theory of social networks by the German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936).

consciousness, such as Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater: 'This practice turns the mind inside out' (1995, p. xxi).

According to Scheiffele, actors routinely enter into an altered state of consciousness, a subjective experience as defined in G.W. Farthing's reference text for psychologists, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (1992).²⁴

An altered state of consciousness (ASC) may be defined as a temporary change in the overall pattern of subjective experience, such that the individual believes that his or her mental functioning is distinctly different from certain general norms for his or her normal waking state of consciousness. (Farthing, 1992, p. 205)

According to Scheiffele, acting practices alters each of the 14 dimensions of this changed subjective experience: attention, perception, imagery and fantasy, inner speech, memory, higher-level thought processes, meaning or significance of experiences, time experience, emotional feeling and expression, level of arousal, self-control, suggestibility, body image, and sense of personal identity. He proceeds to examine each dimension in turn, recognizing the particular theories and practices employed in different school of acting affecting it.

The degree of material related to the experience of fantasy role playing is abundant. In the following chart, I list the fourteen dimensions along with the theoretical description that appears most relevant to fantasy role play gaming praxis. Some of these practices relate more strongly to the praxis of the Dungeon Master, others to Player Characters, and some to both. Concerns related to specific dimensions are noted afterward. I have also noted where I think there is an obvious parallel experience in Jewish spiritual practice, either in devotional prayer or in devotional study. There's no reason I know why these experiences would be limited to adult actors (or students of acting).

Dimension of ASC (Farthing 1992)	Relevant Praxis in Acting (Scheiffele 2001)	Related Experience in Fantasy Roleplaying (FRP)
Attention	<p>'To relax our attention into the present moment is extraordinarily simple, but, for most of us, it demands a lifetime of practice' (Zaporah, 1995, p. xx).</p> <p>Heightened awareness is mostly directed toward the external, with an increased ability simultaneously to be conscious of everyone in one's environment. Actors of the Living Theatre experienced 'an increasing, an uncanny, an extraordinary sensitivity to one another. ...We sense each others' details like lovers' (Beck & Malina, 1970, p. 655).</p>	FRP gaming increasing attention in the moment due to ever present sense of danger. Concern for ones own character engenders concern for other character's well-being, helping participants to develop empathy (Zayas).

24 Scheifflee notes that no objective way to determine a subject is in an ASC has yet been discovered. "there is no consistent brain wave pattern corresponding to ASCs, nor any other measurable physiological response (1992, p. 206). So we are left with questioning the subjects directly about their experience."

<p>Perception</p>	<p>The legendary acting master teacher, Sanford Meisner, in fact defines acting as ‘living truthfully under imaginary circumstances’ (Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p. 15).</p> <p>During character acting or in psychodrama during role-reversal we can even take on someone else’s perception, which often facilitates empathy. ‘When you truly role-reverse there is a shift of perception either during or after the process’ (Moreno et al., 2000, p. 15).</p>	<p>Tension and danger in game orient players to a defensive position, suggesting possible dangers as seen by their player characters in their minds eye that may have been unimagined by the Dungeon Master describing their environment.</p>
<p>Imagery and Fantasy</p>	<p>Experienced improvisers can create and immediately enact fantastic stories. The scenes evolve naturally without much thinking or planning. There is a ‘sense of fantasy, absorption and imagination which is involved with creating drama’ (Pickering, 1997, p. iv).</p>	<p>This dimension might describe fantasy gameplay for some dungeon masters who do not prepare a narrative or use a pre-written adventure to guide their player.</p>
<p>Inner Speech</p>	<p>During role-reversal it is even possible for the protagonist’s inner speech to change into that of someone else, a very strong form of alteration. ‘So the protagonist must really step outside the self and become the other person’ (Moreno et al., 2000, p. 14).</p> <p>‘This continuous thinking while another character speaks, or during pauses in your own lines, is called inner monologue. ...Images and inner monologue are essential steps toward building the character’ (Moore, 1979, p. 55f).</p>	<p>This experience may be more common among Dungeon Masters who are constantly required to perform the roles of non-player characters which players must interact with. The experience is de rigeur for players assuming the role of their character.</p>

<p>Memory</p>	<p>When acting a role in a scene, we can remember the past from someone else's viewpoint and thus take on a memory entirely different from our own.</p> <p>Farthing also includes in this category changes in the associations between words and images, and truly creative combinations of ideas. This often occurs in improvisational acting, where we make non-linear connections between concepts and events, for example when we use an audience suggestion such as a 'thunder storm' to create electricity.</p>	<p>Just to note that my memory of my ASC experience as a ten-year-old is fairly pronounced.</p> <p>Adventures often take place in dungeons designed as mazes, requiring mapping to occur in order to track one's progress. In Jewish Torah study, this experience suggests altered states of consciousness possibly related to the invention of midrash in the course of prodigious memory feats required of Tannaim and Amoraim in memorizing text. (c.f. exploring memory palaces, as described in Joshua Foer's <i>Moonwalking with Einstein</i>.)</p>
<p>Higher-level Thought Processes</p>	<p>Some ASCs enhance creativity and 'people sometimes come up with truly creative solutions to practical or artistic problems' (Farthing, 1992, p. 209).</p> <p>The advantages of entering ASCs through acting have also been cultivated by educational psychologists who use role-playing for problem solving: 'Through its various production techniques, role playing utilises altered states of consciousness to increase the chances of creative breakthroughs in conflict situations' (Torrance et al., 1996, p. 58).</p>	<p>Problem solving is traditionally a core activity of FRPG, and an obvious function for educators and social workers as Zayas and Lewis explored.</p>
<p>Meaning or Significance of Experiences: profundity</p>	<p>Acting often involves a feeling of being in tune, being one with other people and the environment. As in other ASCs, this 'ineffable experience' of 'oneness' (Farthing, 1992, p. 210) can be perceived as mystical, and is difficult to explain to people who have never experienced it.</p> <p>From personal and clients' experience we know that protagonists often remember their dramas for a long time, and sometimes consider them to be cornerstones on their life's journey.</p> <p>'A fairly common ASC experience involves the feeling that certain thoughts or events are profoundly important, perhaps of great creative or mystical significance' (1992, p. 209f).</p>	<p>Sense of kavvanah as the alignment of thoughts and cognitive function is described in kabbalistic mystical prayer (cf. Isaac of Acco).</p> <p>Performance of bibliodramas based on Jewish texts offers an opportunity to internalize textual meaning.</p>

<p>Meaning or Significance of Experiences: humorous</p>	<p>'In contrast to the feelings of profundity that arise in some ASC experiences, the other side of the coin is that some ASC experiences seem to be exceptionally humorous. This is another case of changed meaning or signigance of experience' (Farthing, 1992, p. 210).</p>	<p>In another experience roleplaying in college, I recall my entire session breaking down in uncontrollable laughter for what seemed to be 20 minutes. Afterward, it was unclear what shared experience initially triggered the humor.</p>
<p>Time Experience</p>	<p>When we are acting, time often seems to stand still due to our total absorption in the moment. As in other ASCs, we have a 'nonlinear experience of timelessness or eternal present' (Farthing, 1992, p. 211). During improvisation it is possible for time to slow down and our subjective experience to be altered in such a way that we feel we have all the time we need to make complicated decisions or perform complex actions.</p>	<p>FRPG sessions typically span a long range of time. Perhaps this is not only a phenomena associated with D&D being an open-ended game. An hour of gameplay may be describing melee combat taking place over a span of minutes, and minutes might be spent describing day long journeys.</p>
<p>Emotional Feeling and Expression</p>	<p>'The overt expression of emotions, such as affectionate touching, crying, or violent actions, may be uninhibited in ASCs' (1992, p. 211). Reactions to other people and events become more immediate and emotional. The stage is a safe place to be dangerous. We can express ourselves in new ways without suffering the consequences of real life. For example, we might yell at our parents in a psychodrama. In this way we can have the benet of releasing unexpressed emotions, without suffering the consequences of hurting our parents (cf. Emunah, 1994, p. xiv).</p>	<p>Anxiety over the transgressive activities that might occur in FRPGs relates strongly to this dimension. Christian teachings of not sinning "in ones heart" might come to play here. Jewish concern for "sinning in ones heart" may be different and deserves further research in suggesting differences in approach and concern regarding ASCs in general, compared with other religious groups. Is "sinning in one's heart" less acceptable if it is in an experience facilitated as part of a consensus reality?</p>

<p>Level of Arousal</p>	<p>Many Living Theatre performances ended with actors and audience in wild rapture, including, at least in the days of Paradise Now, sexual arousal and freedom. 'Here naked spectators and actors embraced indiscriminately, even copulating' (Innes, 1993, p. 187).</p>	<p>In my experience, this activity would be the most restrained in FRPGs, perhaps because players are sitting for such extended periods. Does this occur in LARPing (Live Action Roleplaying)? Certainly the erotic experience is suggested in the passion play of the mystical Kabbalat Shabbat, ending with consummation with one's partner, signifying a divine unification and rest of creative (and fecund) divine tension in the Godhead.</p>
<p>Self-control</p>	<p>The actor finds herself surprised by her own actions or words.</p> <p>'They [protagonists during role-reversal] step outside themselves and enact sides of themselves they would never allow to be shown otherwise' (Moreno et al., 2000, p. 14). Meisner echoes Moreno when he encourages this: 'You're allowed to do things onstage that you don't do in life. You're permitted to express yourself on stage and don't need to hold yourself back as you must in life' (Meisner & Longwell, 1987, p. 162).</p>	<p>This dimension seems related to Inner Speech, above. And so is also related to the role experience of both player characters and a Dungeon Master's experience with non-player character roles.</p>
<p>Suggestibility</p>	<p>Farthing defines: 'a suggestion is a communication from one person to another that induces the second person to change his/her behavior or beliefs, without any argument or coercion being involved' (1992, p. 211)...One of the skills learned in improvisational acting is the ability immediately to follow the suggestions of other players. When someone tells you that there are ies on your skin, you immediately accept the offer as reality and respond accordingly.</p>	<p>This highlights the power of the Dungeon Master in their role as storytelling guide and Mentor in a journey through an altered state of consciousness.</p>

Body Image	Actors skilled at character work are able to change their body image to that of a character. They are able to walk and move, for example feeling their body as much heavier or lighter than its actual weight.	This dimension relates to a kinesthetic experience which might apply more to LARPing. It would be interesting to survey FRP gamers and ask them whether they ever experience their player character and feel taller, stronger, more dextrous, etc. especially in tense situations calling for PCs to imagine their character responding to dangerous game stimulus.
Sense of Personal Identity	Enacting of a variety of roles can change and expand our perception of who we can be. Drama therapists use this process therapeutically. 'Drama is a vehicle not only for experiencing and integrating new aspects of ourselves, but also for expressing suppressed shadow aspects of ourselves' (Emunah, 1994, p. xv). Actors in theatre or psychodrama find it liberating to discover that they can choose to be different. They can enact characters completely unlike themselves. Farthing too is aware of this freeing effect of some ASCs. 'Sometimes a change in perceived personal identity is a positive experience, as when people feel rejuvenated or reborn' (1992, p. 212).	This points to the liberty of FRPGs to permit the exploration of identity, a crucial developmental stage for Eriksson. The experience of loss of personal identity in the assumption of another seems a bit beyond the experience of most gamers, whose roleplaying will be tempered by the conventions of other roleplayer. The game is flexible to accommodate the sort of radical roleplaying demanded above.

Scheffele offers the following warning that may be useful for educators if they become concerned in their role as mentors that participating players are losing perspective outside the game.

Sometimes we get so absorbed in a role that it is difficult to come back to ourselves. Directors should be aware of this and may use de-roling... 'Do you need to get free of the role? Move about, shake, and get rid of the role any way you need to'. One can really take over other people's ills this way if one is sensitive or especially vulnerable and does not know how to protect the self. We do that with any troubling role and call it 'de-roling'. (Moreno et al., 2000, p. 71).

With this one caveat, it appears that outside of the critical role of the mentor behaving in an ethical and responsible manner, aware that besides their multiple roles as referee, storyteller, roleplayer of non-player characters, they are also quite literally, mentors in the classical sense – guides of players journeying through a world that is at once mythic and shared, and psychic and personal.

Teaching to Myth and Spiritual Praxis with Fantasy Roleplaying Games

From everything we have described, the fantasy role playing game would appear to be an ideal activity for introducing and engaging students in a mythic landscape. From a constructivist standpoint, it also permits students to participate in mythopoesis – the creation of the landscape of myth through taking the meaning encountered in one place and associating it with another. This permits the post-structuralist metaphor of text as landscape, and the advanced literary idea of intertextual meaning to be taken quite seriously.

Fantasy role-playing would seem to be the one activity for structuring group exploration of ideas manifest in a participatory and unfolding story. Ronnick (1997) describes the suitability of using D&D as a platform for promoting greater interest in classical literature, leveraging the existence of clubs devoted to roleplaying on college campuses. Ronick does not go as far as suggesting roleplay in her classes, rather she suggests:

Written exercises or class lectures might compare/contrast the journey of the D&D heroes with that of Odysseus or Heracles . Students might ask the question of whether there is really no gain without pain, and try to explain the purpose of physical exertion and suffering that those on the hero's journey experience.

Other educators have pushed the envelope to directly engage their students in the heroes journey through fantasy roleplaying. Walton (1995) describes use of the simulation RPGs in the classroom, describing the work of David Millian, a history teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, who has used a live action role playing (LARP) game called Crossroads to teach the 30 ten and eleven-year-old children the Civil War. Millian however cautions, "Simulations and storytellings are not every learner's best avenue to understanding."

Experience in tabletop fantasy role playing games restricts most groups to a maximum of eight players. The Starting Point Project (begun in 2003) offers additional guidelines for teaching math, physics, and statistics are applications with RPGs in a problem based curriculum design, that can be adapted to teaching to Jewish myth. Starting Point warns educators that preparation time needed for such a curriculum design is considerable. The recommendation reflects over thirty years of experience from game masters of many roleplaying games. Educators, like Dungeon Masters, should budget at least as much time to preparing their map of the adventure and their narrative description of encountered environments, as there is time budgeted for game play (Gygax 1987, Starting Point 2013).

Conclusions for Jewish Education

Jewish education has, in the last fifteen years, only begun to explore the potential of bibliodrama for teaching Torah through a dramatic praxis in midrashic interpretation. It's somewhat surprising that the parallel roleplaying tradition of fantasy roleplaying has nor been similarly explored and worked into experiential Jewish education. It may very well be that activities similar to live-action roleplaying (LARPing) have been utilized in Jewish summer camps where so many Jewish professionals working in the field of Jewish bibliodrama gained their first experience in drama through skit production.

Perhaps one reason is that familiarity with Jewish myth, legends, and lore is woefully obscure. Even where fantasy roleplaying has been popular (informally in summer camps and during recess periods, for example), lack of familiarity with Jewish myth on the part of counselors and Jewish educators led to many years of wistful wondering of how exactly a Jewish D&D might play out.²⁵

In my work with the Jewish Journey Project, I made a first attempt at engaging students in a sleep-over to participate in a LARP called *Midbar Quest*. The game lasted about one hour in the setting of the JCC of Manhattan, and in completing the game students in small groups wandered throughout the entire building, aided by a map and clues directing them to puzzle pieces won by answering riddles. (Each riddle helped to assess learning in five distinct areas, or "paths" on the Jewish Journey Project curriculum. Each small group was assembled from students who had partaken of a class dedicated to one of these paths.) Every riddle was accompanied by a description of the imaginary environment in which each group found itself in

25 Rabbi Shaiya Rothberg, faculty of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem , has been working on a Jewish D&D module for years. He was kind enough to share his work, entirely written in Hebrew. The game may indeed be well suited for an Israeli-Jewish market where D&D has been extremely popular. Ironically, passionate player must hide their roleplaying interest to IDF recruiters responsible for populating elite units. The Israeli Army looks askance on roleplaying as the activity of psychologically unmoored fantasists (Greenberg 2005).

the Midbar. In this way, the well-known indoor space of the JCC and its eight floors could simultaneously be mapped to an unfolding imaginary space directly associated with the experience of wandering in the Midbar, here understood as a mythical wilderness, rather than as the historical, geographical Sinai desert). By associating the Midbar more directly with the experience of wandering for forty years, I could permit increasingly fantastical juxtapositions of environments and beings encountered, all drawn from biblical and midrashic lore. Many of the riddle answers suggested a multiplicity of answers which might reflect student understanding drawn from their earlier course work. (A copy of the game curriculum is included as an appendix.)

Measured by participant excitement, the activity proved to a great success. All the clues save one were discovered and in assembling the puzzle pieces one with answering each riddle, the small groups discovered the need to collaborate for mutual success and dispose of any lingering sense of competition. This ideal was an expression of a larger vision we had for our sleep-over – the formation of a larger community identity in mixing students from different classes and venues, many of whom were strangers to one another.

One important take-away from this experience again pointed to the importance of the small group chaperons in the game acting in the role of Game Masters, committed to their various roles as guided storytellers, referees, non-player characters, and as Mentors. Two chaperones misunderstood the importance of their role as storytellers, skipping the environmental descriptions and rushing straight to the riddles. One of these chaperones became affected by the competitive nature of the clue finding, left behind their role as a referee, and interpreted the game rules to better advance her group.

Mitigating these problems demands improved communication and commitment on the part of facilitators to the rules structuring the make believe play, and understanding better the larger educational benefits that fantasy role playing presents.

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