Ripples in the multiverse: What can role-playing games bring to disability pedagogies

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As we begin, we want to acknowledge that the land where we are gathered today, is the traditional territories of the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Bodwewadmi Nations. Many other tribes like the Myaamia, Hoocak, and Menominee, as well as the Sac and Fox, also call this area home.

This presentation was researched and prepared on various other traditional, unceded territories, including those of the Kwikwitlem First Nations, where I am currently very grateful to live and work, near what is today known as Vancouver, BC. Living, writing, and thinking on stolen lands carries a responsibility in our scholarship and work, and I hope to honor and make a contribution to that work.

This presentation explores how collaborative storyworlding practices, modelled through role-playing gaming, might disrupt or unbalance understandings of neurotypicality and dis/ability.

I picked up my first set of role-playing dice in October 2017. I joined a game for beginners at a local game shop, hoping to make a few quick contacts who might be willing to talk to me about their experiences. I had no idea that I would be entering a transformational space and process that is, to this date, continuing to unfold. I remember sitting in a sort of stunned silence on the train ride home from that session, my whole body buzzing with possibility. What I thought was an exotic game, populated with complicated statistics and folks in sorcerer's hats, was actually a collaborative storytelling practice,

And it would change my world.

Today, I will share three *propositions* (Murris & Bozalek, 2019) with you, which have emerged from walking through the entanglement of storyworlds that may seem radically different. Then, I will trace just a bit of my path through role-playing games, to breathe some life into the propositions, and illustrate how they might help us re/imagine disability pedagogies.

Here are the propositions:

1. Role-playing games support diversity, interdependence, and relationality.
2. Role-playing games are emergent and unpredictable.
3. Role-playing games require collaboration, and model power sharing.

Our panel was originally schedule for PES 2022, but we had to cancel our session. So, in preparing for this presentation, I had the opportunity to revisit something that I wrote over a year ago. I was struck by the phrase: "Roleplaying games are slippery spaces." A compelling thought! But what does it mean? And how does this help us understand disability pedagogies?

Role-playing games aren't dangerously slippery, in the sense of an icy road, or a wet kitchen tile. Nor are they out of control like a water slide or an unexpectedly muddy slope.

What is the opposite of slippery? Sticky spaces? Calcified spaces? I related to the way Deleuze and Guattari (2003) use the image of smooth versus striated. They describe how "lines of flight" become possible outside the warp and weft of striated spaces, which are organized in a predetermined way. Sort of like a classroom, or a designation. Perhaps classrooms could also be seen as spaces in which we can get stuck, because they can hold us fixed to perceived identities, as if we were wading knee deep in honey, or tar … or hardening concrete.

"Knowing," writes Barad (in Dolphijn, 2012), "is a direct, material engagement" (p. 52), gesturing beyond text, toward embodied and enminded understandings. What insights might be gained through a diffractive exploration of diverse *practices*, like role-playing games, classroom instruction, and experiences with neurodiversity advocacy, neuroqueering (Walker, 2015; Walker & Raymaker, 2021) and disability justice?

I won't try to tell you. Instead, come with me on a journey into the multiverse.

1. **Role playing games promote diversity, interdependence, and relationality, by allowing and requiring *all participants* to be engaged and in the moment.**

I play in a group that is entering our 6th year of a campaign in one particular storyworld. We return, again and again, and in fact sometimes go to great lengths, to make it to a session. I imagine we've returned to that storyworld at least one hundred times, though I haven't kept track. There's

another player who's the record keeper amongst us. We rely on them for that kind of detail. And this division of roles is something we'll get back to in just a bit, but for now I'll put it aside.

But what is it we get out of this space? Why do we keep showing up?

When I arrived that first day, I was planning to just observe and get the hang of things. But instead, I was handed a set of dice and a character sheet, and plunked down next to another player who had some experience.

"Don't worry," they assured me. "The best way to learn is to just jump in and do it." And, I hesitated. I recalled ill-fated attempts to learn to play soccer the same way, which did *not* go particularly well for the team or the match! I knew that throwing a player with zero experience into the field disturbs *everything*, and gets in the way of the players who know what they're doing. It could only end in irritation! I felt guilty, sure I was ruining everyone's fun for the day. But they insisted. And, I did as I was told.

As the lead storyteller, known as the Dungeonmaster, started speaking, a hush fell around the table. Through the next few hours, it became clear that they were not just being politely reassuring. Adding a new player *did* indeed change things – but not for the worse. Dagmar, the name I gave my prefab character, *did* set off ripples in the multiverse. But they were ripples that further diffracted the already complex wave patterns that are part of a storyworld that is always, already unsettled. The "multiverse" of a role-playing game emerges through a multiplicity of different ways of being, and different directions of movement. What we did, Dagmar and I, was to add a new layer of interest and experience to the storyworld being created.

I wasn't in anyone's way! In fact, even with my lack of game knowledge, silly questions, and fumbling dice rolls, I was actually enriching our shared experience.

This isn't to say there are no bad experiences around the table! I've been very lucky to play in careful, open, and inclusive communities, which I do think is quite common. But I've also heard terrible stories of players treated badly, or storyworlds created that reproduce the same – or worse – versions of inequality, violence, and prejudice that many of us live with every day. There are plenty of groups and games that are *not* inclusive of difference or disability.

However, if we dig into the game mechanics, it's interesting and instructive to see the ways in which they produce collaborative storyworlding. The structures and supports that allow *everyone* to be part of the process are intentionally *built into the system*.

Before you can play in a game, you create a character. They are based on certain pre established categories, from which you make choices that determine what kinds of things the character can do in the game – or at least what they will do well. The tendency of new role players, and I think especially young people, is to create a character that is as powerful as possible. Or that was my experience starting a D&D group for middle schoolers. Everyone wants to be the strongest hitting fighter with the flashiest sword, or a Paladin knight with a lot of shiny armor, from a noble family. Or maybe if you like magic, a wizard with the biggest fireball spell.

However, if role-playing games were a movie, they would be an ensemble cast, not an action film. They're more Ocean's 11 than Die Hard, more Lord of the Rings than Indiana Jones. And players – including middle schoolers – soon realize that you *actually need* a diversity of characters to overcome the obstacles in the game. Sure, there are frontline fighters and magic users, whose role may be to do the hard hitting, or to shield characters that are less physically powerful or resilient. However, no scenario goes well without a healer to keep everyone well, and a bard to facilitate social situations and encourage their companions.

It doesn't take long before players stop competing to be the strongest, and begin to thoughtfully explore what characters might contribute to an interesting, rich, and complex storyworld. In my role-playing group, we *actually celebrate* very low dice rolls when creating a character, which gives at least one low stat. It adds to the story, and increases the characters' interdependence, letting us all share the spotlight. Players quickly begin to see themselves as part of a group that relies on one another, and which only succeeds because everyone contributes, and everyone's contributions are unique and necessary.

The rules and goals of the game mechanics *fundamentally challenge* normative ideas of individual success, failure, and progress, which are so tied to our educational ideals, and which inevitably position certain people as disabled, less, and even burdensome.

On the surface, the goals of a role-playing game are to get through different "encounters." This might be a puzzle that needs to be solved, a foe that must be defeated or outwitted, a social situation to

be navigated, or ritual to be performed. But the *true* delight comes in the unexpected moments where the action slows to a crawl, and there is space for creativity, and character and relationship development. The Gamemaster has the least influence here, and the interaction becomes more character driven. *This* is collaborative storyworlding, and creating something interesting and delightfully unexpected *together*.

In these moments, relational details are on full display. What I find most instructive about this, is that it challenges the role of the "innocent bystander."

When the story slows, characters take turns. On each turn, they choose an action, which is communicated to the gamemaster, and the rest of the group. Of course, a player can always choose to do nothing on their turn, to skip or hold their action. But that is an also active choice. It is clear that consequences ripple outward from both action or inaction, and both affect the storyworld and the other characters.

Decisions on what to do during a turn are carefully considered, with ideas often collaboratively negotiated with the rest of the group – and that's perfectly okay. In fact, it's encouraged! And, when it comes time to act, *everyone* is invested in the outcome. It is clear in a game that the characters – and players – are deeply enmeshed in relationships of reciprocity and responsibility.

2. Role-playing games are emergent and unpredictable.

All role-playing games have some device that introduces an element of chance, to build a storyworld with unforeseen events, driven as much by the forces of destiny as by conscious choices, add to the relational and emergent quality of the world. In D&D this is a 20 sided dice.

The element of chance is used to determine everything a player, and much of what a gamemaster, tries to do in the storyworld. The dice decide whether your weapon is aimed correctly, how much you know about the history of an object you found, and whether you are polite enough to avoid offending the merfolk who are the guardians of the magic item you need.

This takes the pressure off individual players, because succeeding or failing at a dice role is not personal. It creates space for characters to try something new and creative. It also means that "failing" is something to be celebrated! It creates an opportunity to try something else, or push the story in a

different direction. Players are not only welcome, but in the best games, also *encouraged* to try new, unexpected, and even ridiculous things.

Unpredictability is what make the game – and the storyworld – a success, and the gamemaster must be ready to follow the unexpected turns that the dice throw our way.

I don't know about yours, but in my classroom, drifting from the syllabus or the "learning outcomes" is seen as a lack of expertise. I know my students have also expressed discomfort when the learning diverges from the syllabus. They want it tidy, and they see the syllabus as a set of rules to follow. Students have become accustomed to rigidity, and often complain about ambiguity, or see it as a lack of authority. In the system in which we live and study, learning has come to mean expected trajectories, and specific, predetermined outcomes. In the end, there is one right answer, and someone knows what it is.

However, there are many students for whom these outcomes do not fit, but especially those that have a learning rhythm that diverges from what is deemed "typical." Becoming a role-player has allowed me to see how my classroom practices and expectations of learning are often rigidly normative, and based in scientism (Oolong, 2022; Timimi & MD, 2018) and normopathy (Manning, 2020), instead of relationality and emergent practice.

Which can contribute to a disabling environment for our students.

In contrast, in role-playing sessions, we get to where we get to. The storyworld is flexible, emergent and alive, not necessarily fitting into the arc of a semester or a lecture, *or* my expectations of students' capacities and lives, *or* our performance of neuro-typicality.

3. Role-playing games require everyone to be willing to collaborate, share power, and interact with others in the spirit of "yes and." When I say all I mean *all*.

Sharing responsibility and power is perhaps the most important, and the most difficult part of gamemastering. At least if you are learning to be a Dungeonmaster after you've stood in front of a classroom. Erin Manning (Bozalek et al., 2021) challenges educators to question why we feel we need to be the centre of our students' attention all the time. I know that's true for me. I've worked hard to become an authority, someone who knows things. And that stance may be difficult to shed.

Role-playing games are the most authentically democratic and shared collaborative space I've ever participated in.

There is a delicious irony in the title of Dungeonmaster, or gamemaster as its known in other games. Titles like these conjure up images of dominance, control, and a willingness punish those who don't obey. But the reality couldn't be farther from the truth! As a gamemaster, you prepare the bones of a storyworld, and bring it to the other players as an offering. They take it up – or not – as they choose. The magic happens when they push and pull you into completely unexpected, emergent directions; trying to herd them in one direction the quickest way to ruin the game. The gamemaster is, after all, just another player, and it takes everyone to bring a storyworld to life.

Radical power sharing requires deep reciprocity. In my doctoral thesis, I asked experienced players and gamemasters about their best day of role-playing. They all came up with stories of times when unexpected and intimate moments arose. There was one gamemaster who told me with delight about giving over the reigns for close to an hour, while the players ad-libbed an emotional and pivotal scene for the story. It was made possible by the GM's willingness to repeatedly say "Yes, go ahead," and then pick up again wherever that led. I can tell you from experience that that required letting go of an awful lot of treasured ideas on the part of the gamemaster, not to mention prep time! Our own DM has put whole storyarcs aside again and again as we pick up on some unexpected trail.

The worst days were often characterized by heavy-handed gamemastering, where the leader struggles finding reciprocity and relationality. Many times, those resulted in games that withered away.

It seems quite different from the *social-emotional reciprocity* that is central to diagnostic language for autism, and which is often problematized as a fixed characteristic of autistic and neurodivergent folks within the "pathology paradigm" (Walker & Raymaker, 2021). From within that context, reciprocity is something that is identified and measured by those frequently positioned as experts, and found to be lacking in certain people. It sets up expectations of reciprocity as a trainable skill, rather than a relationship that emerges through mutual interaction and collaboration, over time.

I'm not the first to question this view of reciprocity. Disability scholar and philosopher Eva Feder Kittay (2013) writes about "reciprocity-in-connection." This view of reciprocity, writes Kittay, "invokes a set of nested obligations" (p. 68). It is a collective understanding of reciprocity, that means "when one is in the position to give care, one will, and when that person is in need another who is suitably situated

…will respond" (p. 68). It is not prescriptive or universalized, and does not necessarily emerge where or from whom we expect.

A role-playing game expects something of and offers something to everyone. How does that experience transform the way we understand and embody reciprocity?

The most important phrase of the gamemaster is, "You can try." But you have to mean it, and you have to be ready to follow through and make it work.

The propositions I have shared today emerged from themes of relationality, indeterminacy, and the sharing of definitional power that resurfaced again and again, through many conversations and countless game sessions. I have diffracted them through not only texts, but also my experiences with neuroqueering my own thinking, and classroom and parenting practices. I think these elements are part of the slipperiness, and part of the potentiality and transformative power of role-playing games (Bowman & Hugaas, 2021; Daniau, 2016; Transformative Play Initiative, 2021).

I want to go on record for saying that I'm *not* advocating for bringing role-playing games into the classroom. Or rather, I for sure think there's a time and place for that, but it's an entirely different presentation! What I *am* saying is there may be lessons we can learn about disability and inclusivity, from the experience of playing and leading role-playing games. I do think that becoming a role-player has perhaps helped me on my path toward becoming a better instructor?

In closing, I will pass on some practical tips from game creator Avery Alder (2019) on being an inclusive gamemaster. These bullet points are from the slide, "Sharing the Storytelling Spotlight," which is also a great headline for any learning space. I'm pretty sure I do some of this in the classroom, at least most of the time. I found them to be important ideas about how to support reciprocity, and becoming-together in slippery spaces. They help me embody relational ontologies, and neuroqueer my teaching and parenting:

- Notice who is talking the most and the least
- Frame scenes that let the characters shine
- Ask questions and build on the answers

And finally, most importantly,

- Hold lightly your own ideas

Maybe a role-playing game is slippery in the way water is, when you try to gather up a handful. You know it was there, but you won't be able to find it again, when it flows through your fingers, back into the pond, or gather the same handful a second time. It's also a little like holding onto one of those plastic water tube toys that I remember from my childhood in the 80s. I think they may sometimes be called a water snake? They just continue to slip right out of your hands when you grabbed them.

Eventually, you figured out that the trick was to hold them lightly, to let it balance gently on supporting hands.

Role-playing storyworlds are ephemeral; they emerge in the moment, and are held in the collective imagination of the players. We return again and again to produce *and* be produced as characters, to transform the storyworld, and be transformed by it, through many iterations.

We are never finished.

What if we hold lightly to our ideas of disability, neurodivergence, typicality? Of expertise, excellence, and success? What emerges if we hold our students lightly? Let our friends, partners, colleagues, and children balance gently on the supporting hands of community, deep reciprocity, and transformative becoming-together?

I'm not certain– but we should try!

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