Roblox and the City: Exploring Race, Class, and Gender Through Digital Gaming

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Abstract

In this unit, children in grades 3 and 4 are made aware of their responsibility as citizens of their neighborhood and their city by calling attention to elements as it concerns race, class, and gender. This is accomplished through the reading of mentor texts, photo analysis, classroom discussion, and written reflections. Students then use this awareness to inform their responsibility as digital citizens. They critically analyze digital games and ultimately use that awareness to create their own digital game. This is accomplished through the use of digital tools in a gaming environment. Adaptations will be made for limited use of technology in the classroom. The game that will be critically reviewed and analyzed will be "Brookhaven," a popular game in the "Roblox" platform. Students will think about the city through the lenses of race, class, and gender and engage with social justice challenges that are triggered by these categories. Students will then use these observations to create their own digital game.

Keywords

digital games, cities, elementary, digital citizens, technology, race, class, gender, digital literacy

Content Objectives

Introduction

As students become inundated in digital media, especially in light of remote learning, the need for students to become more critical about what they consume digitally is even more urgent. Included in the use of digital media is gaming. A fairly recent survey found that 64% of 4,000 households had at least one member who played video games in the home for 3 or more hours per week (Blumberg, et. al., 2019). A survey by Common Sense Media found that children between the ages of 0-8 interacted with games at least 25 minutes daily (2017). These are all pre-pandemic numbers. With children staying home more, it would be no stretch to imagine a greater increase in gaming. As students interact with the "structure" of digital media, and gaming in particular, the ability to find "agency" within these powerful modalities can feel daunting, especially for young children.

From "What is a City?" one of our first readings for our class, the urban historian Lewis Mumford defined the city as an "economic organization, an institutional process, a theatre of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity" (p. 29). This definition conjures an image of possibility within a highly defined structure. So, I wondered: *How are our young people positioned in the digital matrix (structure) around them, and what is their response (agency) to this positionality?* The second half of this question captures the potential for young people to act and participate in meaningful ways that transform them from consumers of digital spaces to producers of it. Mumford goes on to say that "To embody these new possibilities in city life, which come to us not merely through better technical organization but through acuter sociological understanding, and to dramatize the activities themselves in appropriate individual and urban structures, forms the task of the coming generation" (pp. 31-32). For this project, I envision a unit that takes young elementary students where they are in the gaming world and as young citizens of a city to a place where they see themselves as creators with agency.

After this introduction, the unit will have four additional parts. They include a discussion of the **content objectives** for the unit. After I offer some context, I will outline in bullet form four specific objectives to mediate the learning problem I am trying to address. Next, I will discuss **teaching strategies** at a high level. I will begin this section first by listing the academic standards tied to the objectives. Then, the **classroom activities** section will follow where the teaching strategies will be fleshed out in practical form. I will outline in detail the first three days of the unit. A brief conclusion will wrap this unit up by including the scholarship of John Paul Gee, a renowned linguist, who provides a helpful framework for thinking about gaming and identity. This unit will end with **resources** for teachers and an **appendix** that will list all the standards covered as well as material needed for the unit.

I found that on almost any given moment, during remote teaching and learning, students would become bored of the lesson and move on to something of more interest. This could range from keeping the Zoom camera off and wandering away to the kitchen for a bite to eat, to shifting over to a new tab to watch a favorite YouTube video. Whether a teacher knew it or not, whether they liked it or not, students in the age of remote learning were firmly in control through their own electronic devices. They could shut a camera off and tune a teacher out just as quickly as they could turn it back on and engage at their pleasure.

For some children, games were a favored distraction and past time. It was through a meeting with one particular third grade class that made me interested in Roblox, a platform where users choose to play the games developed by professional game makers and other players. For a long time, I have wanted to harness this rabid interest in games for my benefit as a teacher of digital literacy, but I am not a gamer myself. I am also not particularly interested in gaming personally. But as the saying goes, "when you can't beat

them, join them," or at least try to understand them. I marveled at how lively the conversations became when issues drew out their gaming experiences. For instance, in one class, after a discussion about online responsibility, a student chimed in with her recent experience in "Adopt Me," one of several popular games in Roblox. What surprised me most was that I never would have pegged her for a gamer. She never referenced games prior to that discussion, and if I am to be truly honest with myself, I think I also operated out of a gender bias that positioned boys as players and girls as uninterested. Part of my inquiry for this curricular unit has been to examine my own biases about gaming and to challenge myself to explore potentials for learning where I would not have thought of before.

Roblox boasts 80 million players monthly (Dealessandri, 2020). Once I began to investigate Roblox more, it occurred to me that there were significant opportunities for students to create and learn rather than passively participate. This may be part of its enormous appeal. To begin with, the very nature of many games, including Roblox, is role play. Players create their own avatars and accessorize them. They also determine their destinies as they navigate through a variety of pre-created landscapes. In some games, there are strategies that need to be employed in order to meet certain outcomes. There is also a social component that players should be able to handle if they want to get the best experience playing within a community. Another opportunity for creation and interesting learning, with Roblox specifically, is "Roblox Studio," a building tool that, by the site's own words, "helps you build the places of your dreams." In Roblox Studio there are more advanced opportunities for players to create games and experiences from an almost blank slate. Several terrains such as volcanic islands, open savannahs, and cityscapes offer starting points for players to begin creating. For purposes of this curricular unit, students will be limited to "The City." When I surveyed three 3rd grade classrooms and three 4th grade classrooms, the overwhelming majority indicated they do not use Roblox Studio because of its difficulty. Their preference is to play one of the pre-created games.

This is the context from which I propose four objectives for this unit, one for each literacy area I would like this unit to focus on: digital literacy, geographic literacy, English languages arts, and social justice literacy:

- Digital literacy
    - Students will be able to use a variety of digital tools in order to create their own game and to share their game with others.
- Geographic literacy
    - Students will be able to apply aspects of the city through the lens of race, class, and gender into their gaming in order to critically analyze, experience, and create them.
- English Language Arts

- ○ Students will be able to make connections among mentor texts, the city, and the game environments they analyze, experience, and create, in order to reflect in writing.
- ● Social justice
  - ○ Students will be able to recognize various forms of bias in the community and city in order to take action through the creation of a digital game that addresses bias.

Above all, the expectation for the students after completion of this unit is to *gain and increased sense of agency over structures that seem difficult to interrupt*. I want them *to see themselves as racialized, gendered, and classed individuals living in a community* within a large northeast city. Rather than seeing these components as just labels, I want the students *to attain a sense of who they are as citizens in the city*, and *to demonstrate this awareness ultimately through the creation of a game*.

Student should be able *to make personal connections in their digital journal between their lived experience and the books that are read at each session*. Students should be able to make observations in their immediate community and the city at large and make connections to their own lives. Students will also be able to attain some mastery over digital tools found in Roblox Studio to create a game within the city landscape, and to incorporate issues addressed in class.

Teaching Strategies

Since I see every 4th grade class once every six days for a 45-minute period, I will need to be very intentional about the strategies that I use to teach the unit. For instance, I intend on reading a mentor text each day for the first four days of the unit to help focus our attention on a certain aspect of the city. I will also want a written reflection about what the student did that day in order to gauge the learning and level of integration that occurred while the student worked. Finally, while each student will be stationed at one desktop for this work, they will also need opportunities to engage with each other. Therefore, I intend on having students utilize **pair/shares** and the opportunity to work in in teams of two if they choose.

I want students to make observations in two ways. First, as student ethnographers, and second as photo analysts. As a specialist, I do not assign homework. However, for the duration of this unit, part of this work will require students to take on the role of urban ethnographers akin to scholars like Elijah Anderson and Alice Goffman. I will ask students to take note of observations they make about their neighborhood and the city

with regard to race, class, and gender. Each day will have a particular focus so that the students do not feel overwhelmed and so that the work is manageable.

Another observation strategy I will use comes from the "Wit and Wisdom" literacy curriculum students are already using in their classrooms. Students will be familiar with the five content framing questions they utilize to think about text. For this unit, I will be using the questions to analyze photos and screenshots instead of text. I will present one photo that will be used for the first four days of this unit that I believe will help drive home the points I want to make with regard to race, gender, and class. This photo is labeled with the Creative Commons license of share-alike/noncommercial. To help make sense of the photo/screenshots the 5 content stages and their questions provide a useful frame:

- Wonder
    - What do I notice and wonder about this photo?
- Organize
    - What is happening in this photo?
- Reveal
    - What does a deeper exploration of [photo-specific element] reveal about the photo?
- Distill
    - What is the essential meaning of this photo?
- Know
    - How does this photo build my knowledge of (race, class, gender in the city)?

While using this framework will keep the language consistent across classrooms, a simpler version of this framework that could be utilized for photo observation is: "I see," "I wonder," "I think." I will keep both options open.

Classroom Activities

Since my role is to teach students digital literacy, I will be guided by the [International Society for Technology in Education](#) (ISTE) standards, one of two bodies of standards Digital Literacy teachers in the School District of Philadelphia use to guide their teaching. The standards I would like to focus on for this project center on digital citizenship (Standard 2: Students recognize the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of living, learning and working in an interconnected digital world, and they act and model in ways that are safe, legal and ethical), and knowledge construction (Standard 3: Students critically curate a variety of resources using digital tools to construct

knowledge, produce creative artifacts and make meaningful learning experiences for themselves and others).

In addition, as students begin to think critically about their neighborhoods and the city, I will be guided by Pennsylvania Academic standards for geography. There are two standards that this unit will fall under. Standard 7.2.4.A Identify the physical characteristics of places; and, Standard 7.2.4.B Identify the basic physical processes that affect the physical characteristics of places and regions.

The English Language Arts standards tied to the objectives of the unit largely fall under those for informational reading: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text; and, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.7 Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text when it appears.

Since students will be reflecting in their digital journals after each lesson, one standard for Range of Writing also applies. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Finally, Learning for Justice (formerly known as Teaching for Tolerance), has developed a set of Social Justice Standards for its anti-bias framework. Many of the standards under the four domains of identity, diversity, justice, and action would apply to my teaching objectives.

See Appendix A for a full description of the standards and how they are addressed to specific places in the unit.

The following are lesson plans for the first three days of the unit. These are the days that introduce cities through the lens of gender, class, and race. They are offered in this order purposely so that by the time race is addressed (potentially a more delicate topic), students will have had practice with the format of the unit. The definition for race to be used in this unit was adapted from "The Conscious Kid" website.

Since I teach in a computer lab, I will have my students write their responses in a digital journal. Each day will begin with a "warm-up" question and end with two "wrap-up" questions. These questions could just as easily be answered in a traditional notebook. Additionally, I intend on allowing students to sign in to their Roblox accounts for the last 10 minutes of class to make observations and to prepare mental notes for how they will create their own game in the second half of the unit. If this can't be done, the lesson's

objectives can still be met without actual game play during classroom time.

DAY 1: <u>The City through the lens of Race, Class, Gender, and Roblox: Gender</u>

<u>Lesson Objectives:</u>

• SWBAT identify new ways of looking at the city through gender.

• SWBAT apply their learning about gender to an element of"Brookhaven," a Roblox game.

• SWBAT make preliminary plans for their own creation.

<u>Language Objectives:</u>

key vocabulary include "setting," "city," "gender"

<u>Direct Instruction:</u>

1. Start the unit by explaining to the class that each day will begin with a "warm-up" question which they will answer in their digital journal. Today's question is, *Are there different things for boys and girls to do in the city? What are things they can do together?* Allow the class some time to record their thoughts.
2. Next, begin by explaining to the class what will happen in the next 10 sessions: "*We're going to be doing something I think many of you will really enjoy! How many of you play video games at home? What are some of the games that you play?*"
3. Point out that many of these games take place in settings that may or may not be familiar. Have students call out some of the settings that they play in. Listen for any mention of the city.
4. Talk about how these games are fun to play in but also talk about how game players can use their own creativity and imagination to make a difference in these settings for the greater good. One of these settings is like the one we live in now, the city.
5. Ask, *When you hear the word "city," what do you think of?* List these ideas on a chart paper #1.
6. Ask, *Can you think of video games that have a city as their setting?* List these on chart paper #2.
7. Now ask, *Think about the ideas we listed about the city, and think about the cities you see in these games. I'm going to put you in groups of three and I want you to come up with similarities and commonalities between the cities you see in the games you play and the city we live in*.
8. Give students time to use a Venn diagram to think about similarities and differences.
9. Bring the students together for a whole class discussion about what they found.

10. Now transition to the introduction of the word *gender* by stating, *These were all really great observations about the city. Now, you can also make these observations through a lens. You know, like how you look through your eye-glasses for those of you who wear them. I want us now to think about the city through the lens of gender. Who knows what I mean when I say "gender?"*
11. Solicit responses, then offer this definition: *Gender is someone's identity as female or male or as neither entirely female or male. Some people will use the term "non-binary."*
12. Explain that people look at the world through whatever gender lens that makes sense for them. We can also look at the city through this lens.
13. Introduce the book *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* by Kai Cheng Thom, Kai Yun Ching. Complete the read aloud.
14. After the read aloud, the following questions could be asked:

   ● What was Miu Lan's gender?
   ● What are some things in the city that Miu Lan would not be able to do?
   ● <u>Should</u> there be anything that keeps Miu Lan from participating in the city?
   ● If you could design a city, how would you make it so that <u>anyone</u>, regardless of gender, could participate in the city?

15. Say, *some people say that cities were built by men, so the things many women do can be more difficult. Let me show you this picture and tell me what you see.* (see APPENDIX B for photo) [This photo will be used for the first days of this unit].
16. Solicit responses from students. If it is helpful, use the following questions adapted from the Wit and Wisdom framework:

   ● What do I notice and wonder about this photo?
   ● What is happening in this photo?
   ● What does a deeper exploration of the women in this photo tell us?
   ● What is the essential meaning of this photo?
   ● How does this photo build my knowledge of gender in the city?

17. Ask students what they would do to help the situation if they could build a city. Ask if there are other things they can think about.
18. Next, show the images from Roblox and ask the class, *what do you see in these two Roblox screenshots that make you think about some of the issues we have discussed regarding gender?* (see APPENDIX C for images)
19. Allow for a general discussion. The big goal is to impress upon the students that cities can be seen through different lenses. Gender is one of them.
20. Allow students 10 minutes to sign into their Roblox accounts with the specific instruction to play with a gender lens. Specifically, some of the questions from the

Wit and Wisdom framework can be useful to narrow the students' focus with the game:

- What do I notice and wonder about Brookhaven right now?
- What does a deeper exploration of what the women/girls are doing in Brookhaven tell me?
- How does Brookhaven build my knowledge of gender in the city?

21. Reconvene the class and gather some observations that they made while playing, making sure to keep the focus on gender. Conclude by reminding the class that we will be thinking about the city through different lenses. The next time, we will think about class.

Exit Assessment:

Students should be directed to their digital journal. They should answer two questions for their exit assessment in the "wrap-up" section.:

1. How did the book help you think about boys and girls?
2. What did you notice about what the boys and girls were doing in the city of Brookhaven?

DAY 2: The City through the lens of Race, Class, Gender, and Roblox: Class

Lesson Objectives:

• SWBAT identify new ways of looking at the city through social class.

• SWBAT apply their learning about social class to an element of "Brookhaven," a Roblox game.

• SWBAT make preliminary plans for their own creation.

Language Objectives:

key vocabulary include "class," "luxury"

Direct Instruction:

1. Have students answer the "warm-up" question for today: s*There are many different kinds of people who live in the city. How do people decide where they live or work, or who their friends will be?*

2. Then, remind the class what will continue to happen for the next 10 sessions: *Remember from last time, we are making observations about the city through a lens. You know, like how you look through your eye-glasses for those of you who wear them. We're looking through these lenses at the city we live in and the setting we play in Brookhaven. Today, we are going to think about the city through the lens of class. Who knows what I mean when I say "class?"*

3. Solicit responses, then offer this definition: *When we think about class we sometimes say "social" class. This helps us think of groups of people who live in parts of cities based on how much money they make, what kinds of jobs they have, what religion they believe in, and even their race and ethnicity.*

4. Remind students that we are thinking about gaming and looking at the setting of the city through lenses, like gender and now class. Also remind them that games are not only fun to play, but also talk about how game players can use their own creativity and imagination to make a difference in these settings for the greater good.

5. Say, *like we talked about last time about gender, people look at the world through whatever class lens that makes sense for them. We can also look at the city through this lens.*

6. Introduce the book *Everything Naomi Loved* by Katie Yamasaki and Ian Lender. Complete the read aloud.

7. After the read aloud, the following questions could be asked:

   - What were some of the losses Naomi and her friend Aida saw in their neighborhood?
   - Show the picture of the gleaming skyscrapers forming in the background with green fencing surrounding a construction site (as with most picture books, there are no page numbers).
     - What do you notice in this picture?
     - What is happening in the picture?
   - Why did so many people in the book have to move from their neighborhoods?
     - Who are the people who have to move?
     - Who are the people who get to stay?
     - Who makes these decisions?
   - If you could design a city, how would you make it so that it is fair for everyone?

8. Say, *Let's go back to the picture from last time and tell me what you see. This time, though, can you look at this picture through the lens of class?* (see APPENDIX B for photo)

9. Solicit responses from students. Again, if it is helpful, use the following questions adapted from the Wit and Wisdom framework:

- What do I notice and wonder about this photo?
- What is happening in this photo?
- What does a deeper exploration of the setting in this photo tell us?
- What is the essential meaning of this photo?
- How does this photo build my knowledge of class in the city?

10. Ask students what they would do to help the situation if they could build a city. Ask if there are other things they can think about.
11. Next, show the images from Roblox and ask the class, *what do you see in these Roblox screenshots that make you think about some of the issues we have discussed regarding class?* (see APPENDIX D for images)
12. Allow for a general discussion. The big goal is to impress upon the students that cities can be seen through different lenses. Class is one of them.
13. Allow students 10 minutes to sign into their Roblox accounts with the specific instruction to play with a class lens. Again, some of the questions from the Wit and Wisdom framework can be useful to narrow the students' focus with the game:

- What do I notice and wonder about Brookhaven right now?
- What does a deeper exploration of where people live and work, what kinds of cars they drive, and the friends they meet in Brookhaven tell me?
- How does Brookhaven build my knowledge of class in the city?

14. Reconvene the class and gather some observations that they made while playing, making sure to keep the focus on class. Conclude by reminding the class that we will be thinking about the city through different lenses. The next time, we will think about race.

Exit Assessment:

Students should be directed to their digital journal. They should answer two questions for their exit assessment in the "wrap-up" section:

1. How did the book help you think about class?
2. What did you notice about where people live and work, what kinds of cars they drive, and the friends they meet in Brookhaven?

DAY 3: The City through the lens of Race, Class, Gender, and Roblox: Race

Lesson Objectives:

• SWBAT identify new ways of looking at the city through race.

• SWBAT apply their learning about race to an element of "Brookhaven," a Roblox game.

• SWBAT make preliminary plans for their own creation.

Language Objectives:

key vocabulary include "race"

Direct Instruction:

1. Begin by reminding the class what will continue to happen for the next 10 sessions: *Remember from last time, we are making observations about the city through a lens. We're looking through these lenses at the city we live in and the setting we play in Brookhaven. Today, we are going to think about the city through the lens of race. Who knows what I mean when I say "race?"*
2. Solicit responses, then offer this definition: *For our class, we are going to say that someone's race is determined by how they look. Some people might say they are black. Some people might say they are white. Some people might say they are Asian. Some people say they are mixed. Can you think of other ways people look?* Wait for students to respond. Then, depending on responses, qualify the categories that students share with this additional definition: *It's important to remember that race also has meaning. It is not just how you look but it is also how you are treated, fairly or not fairly, because of how you look. Many people say race is something people make up.*
3. Remind students that we are thinking about gaming and looking at the setting of the city through lenses, like gender and now class. Also remind them that games are not only fun to play, but also talk about how game players can use their own creativity and imagination to make a difference in these settings for the greater good.
4. Say, *Remember, people look at the world through whatever race lens that makes sense for them. We can also look at the city through this lens* [If the teacher feels their students are ready for another term, "social construction" can be used in place of "lens."]
5. Introduce the book *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles. Complete the read aloud.
6. After the read aloud, the following questions could be asked:

   ● What did you think about John and Joe's friendship?
   ● Why do you think some people make wrong decisions based on race?
   ● What are you confused about?
   ● What are some of your ideas about how the kind of unfairness John and

Joe experienced could be prevented in the city?

7. Say, *Let's go back to the picture we have been analyzing from the last two sessions. This time, though, can you look at this picture through the lens of race?* (see APPENDIX B for photo).
8. Solicit responses from students. Again, if it is helpful, use the following questions adapted from the Wit and Wisdom framework:

   - What do I notice and wonder about this photo?
   - What is happening in this photo?
   - What does a deeper exploration of the setting in this photo tell us?
   - What is the essential meaning of this photo?
   - How does this photo build my knowledge of race in the city?

9. Ask students what they would do to help the situation if they could build a city. Ask if there are other things they can think about.
10. Next, show the images from Roblox and ask the class, *what do you see in these Roblox screenshots that make you think about some of the issues we have discussed regarding race?* (see APPENDIX E for images).
11. In Roblox, players can be creative with their avatars, including choosing from a variety of ways to represent themselves with different skin tones. There may be a discussion about how these different ways characters look make us feel.
12. Allow for a general discussion. The big goal is to impress upon the students that cities can be seen through different lenses. Race is one of them.
13. Allow students 10 minutes to sign into their Roblox accounts with the specific instruction to play with a class lens. Again, some of the questions from the Wit and Wisdom framework can be useful to narrow the students' focus with the game:

    - What do I notice and wonder about Brookhaven right now?
    - What does a deeper exploration of how players look in Brookhaven tell me?
    - How does Brookhaven build my knowledge of race in the city?

14. Reconvene the class and gather some observations that they made while playing, making sure to keep the focus on class. Conclude by reminding the class that we will be thinking about the city through different lenses. The next time, we will think about justice.

Exit Assessment:

Students should be directed to their digital journal. They should answer two questions

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for their exit assessment in the "wrap-up" section:

1. How did the book help you think about race?
2. What did you notice about how some of the players in Brookhaven looked?

DAY 4: <u>The City through the lens of Race, Class, Gender, and Roblox: Social Justice</u>

<u>Lesson Objectives:</u>

• SWBAT identify new ways of looking at the city through a social justice lens.

• SWBAT apply their learning about social justice to an element of "Brookhaven," a Roblox game.

• SWBAT make preliminary plans for their own creation.

<u>Language Objectives:</u>

key vocabulary include "social justice"

<u>Direct Instruction:</u>

1. Begin by reminding the class what has occurred the last 3 sessions: *We have been making observations about the city through many lenses. What have some of these lenses been?*
2. Solicit responses, then say: *Today, we are going to be talking about "social justice."* Write the word on the board and put a box around "justice." Many students may have heard about this word before and will be able to offer their own definition. After a few responses, offer this definition: *You all know what is means to be fair and unfair, right? Well, "social justice" is the same thing, but it can involve how people are treated based on some of the things we have been talking about the last few days: race, class, and gender.*
3. Tell students that they may not be thinking about their gaming as a way to think about fairness, but they have the ability to create a new game on their own you and social justice should be kept at the top of their mind.
4. Tell the students that they are going to be thinking about social justice with the help of birds. Pique student curiosity by asking how birds can teach us about fairness.
5. After some responses, introduce the book *A Place for Birds* by Melissa Stewart. Complete the read aloud.
6. After the read aloud, the following questions could be asked:

   ● What did you think about the book?
   ● Where did you see places of unfairness in the book?
   ● Why do you think this book about different kinds of birds can teach us

about living in the city?
- ● Why do you think this book about different kinds of birds can teach us about social justice?

7. The use of the book is intended to get the students to think about social justice and living in the city through the metaphoric use of bird habitat. The images and narratives in this book provide several good opportunities for this purpose. If these questions are too challenging for students. Use a direct example such as the spread in the book that talks about the "Eastern Bluebird." The books says, "Some birds can only build their nests in small hollow places. When people build nesting boxes that are the right size and shape, birds can live and grow."
8. Make the direct connection to housing in the city and how gentrification can stymie fair opportunities for some people to find housing.
9. Have groups of students develop a "T" chart. The top of the left-side column should say "a place for birds" and the top of the right-side column should say "a place for humans." Challenge students to move page by page and write how "a place for birds" might be similar to how humans would want to live in the city.
10. Ideally, each group would have their own copy of the book, but if this is not possible, consider making this a whole-class activity where you would leaf through each spread in the book as you give groups time to complete their "T" charts.
11. Another possibility is to jigsaw the activity, dividing up the pages evenly so that each group has a page.
12. Reconvene the class and gather some observations that they made while competing their "T" charts. Conclude by reminding the class that we will be thinking about the city as a place where social justice is a constant presence.

Exit Assessment:

Students should be directed to their digital journal. They should answer two questions for their exit assessment in the "wrap-up" section:

1. How did the book help you think about social justice?
2. What did you notice about how humans can learn from birds about living socially just lives?

Students will be assessed in a variety of ways. Each class session will end with a reflective student entry in their digital journals. I have found that providing a prompt for each day helps students focus their written responses. As an example of what I am talking about, on the first day, when I read the picture book entitled *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* by Kai Cheng Tom to help address the lens of race in the city, I ask several questions for students to think about such as, *What are things that you see around your neighborhood that only boys can do? Only girls can do? Think of one example and*

think about how you can change that so that everyone is included. They will keep these questions in mind as they move to Roblox to analyze the city through the lens of gender.

I am generally not a fan of rubrics, but in this unit, I would like for students to reach the maximum potential for agency amid the structure of the games they play in Roblox. I also want to ensure that the observations they make of looking at their community and the city through the three lenses of race, class, and gender is reflected in their game creation, Therefore, in addition to the formative assessment illustrated above, I propose to use the rubric below as a summative assessment for the final Roblox Studio game creation. Each modified content objective is listed in the left column. They will be evaluated on the evidence that is observed.

Roblox Studio Game Creation: "The City"	Extensive evidence	Convincing evidence	Limited evidence	No evidence
Has the student been able to use a variety of digital tools in order to create their own game?				
Has the student been able to apply aspects of the city through the lens of race, class, and gender into their gaming?				
Has the student made connections between the mentor texts and the creation of their city as reflected in their digital journal?				
Has the student addressed a bias in the community and city in the creation of their digital game?				

In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee proposes three identities that are at stake while taking on role-playing games such as Roblox. The identities, which he calls "virtual," "real," and "projective," interplay with the general idea of Mumford's structure and agency. One's real identity, as a gendered, racialized, and classed individual is fixed, to a certain extent. There are limitations to living in the city based on the real identities that one possesses. In contrast, a virtual identity is created through the avatars available to any player of a Roblox game. A player can manipulate this identity to her liking, but here, too, there are limitations as the avatars are pre-made identities that must move through various Roblox worlds not

created by the player. The opportunity for agency is what Gee calls the projective identity. This is the interface between the real and virtual identities where the player/learner can transcend limitations and imbue the role play (for this particular unit, the city) with new possibilities that reflect the values of the player (2003).

This curricular unit aims to take advantage of what students already know about the structures they live out on a daily basis as members of families residing in a highly diverse section of south Philadelphia, a major metropolitan section of the United States. Our students come from Mexico and central America, various southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal, and Burma. We also have a smattering of African and African-American students along with some descendants of the Irish and Italians who settled here at the turn of the 20th century. Many of our recent immigrants come from cities with their own perspective concerning race, class, and gender. Lorber & Moore tell us we are all social bodies in social worlds in constant search of humanity within a community (2011). While the structures of digital spaces may feel confining and distant for our young learners, their unique positions can offer community, meaning, and agency in the city. By combining shared reading, reflective writing, and gaming experiences in Roblox, my hope is that the students will learn more about the city and their place in it.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers

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Reading List for Students

Stewart, M. (2015). *A place for birds.* Peachtree Publishing Co.

This brilliantly illustrated picture book talks about the behavior of birds while teaching young children how to care for them. This will be the mentor text when the focus is on justice (Day 4). As with most of the mentor texts for this unit, *A place for birds* will consider justice metaphorically.

Thom, K. C. (2017). *From the stars in the sky to the fish in the sea*. Vancouver: Arsenal PulpPress.

Miu Lan is a child who can transform into as many different forms as his imagination will let him. At school, the other children question his gender. With the encouragement of his mother, Miu Lan finds the courage to be what Miu Lan wants to be. This picture book will serve as mentor text for Day 1, when the focus is on gender.

Wiles, D. (2005). *Freedom summer*. Aladdin.

John, who is black and Joe, who is white are best friends living in Mississippi as it begins to desegregate. They are excited about doing things together until racist neighbors shut the community pool down to prevent integration. This book brings race front and center and will be used as the mentor text for Day 3 when the focus is on race.

Yamasaki, K. & Lendler, L. (2020). *Everything Naomi loved*. Norton Young Readers.

Naomi and her friend Ada witness the transformation of their neighborhood, including the buildings coming down to make way for gentrification. Nevertheless, Mister Ray teaches Naomi to paint murals to help her remember all that she is losing, including her friend, Ada, who was forced to move away with her family to a more affordable neighborhood. This will be the mentor text for Day 2, when the focus is on social class.

List of Materials for Classroom Use

The Conscious Kid website

This website is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping caregivers find resources and support for doing racial identity development for young people. The definition the site offers for race combines a classic definition by Frantz Fanon (race determined by physical traits) with the analysis that race is socially imposed and hierarchical.

Wit and Wisdom Implementation Guide. (2017). Great Minds.

This K-8 English Language Arts curriculum is utilized throughout our school. The 5 basic "Content Framing Questions" are adapted in this unit as the framework for students to use to examine the Roblox game. This Implementation Guide is readily available online without purchase of the product.

Appendix A

<u>International Standards for Technology in Education (ISTE)</u>

Standard 2: Students recognize the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of living, learning and working in an interconnected digital world, and they act and model in ways that are safe, legal and ethical.

This ISTE standard will be addressed as students discuss what they observe in the screenshots of the games. They will also come back to this standard as they discuss the actions they took while gaming.

Standard 3: Students critically curate a variety of resources using digital tools to construct knowledge, produce creative artifacts and make meaningful learning experiences for themselves and others.

Once students have discussed the city through the lens of race, class, and gender, they will meet this ISTE standard in the second half of the unit when they enter "Roblox Studio" to create their own gaming experience.

<u>Pennsylvania Academic standards for geography</u>

Standard 7.2.4.A Identify the physical characteristics of places.

This standard will be addressed as the students critically analyze the screenshots of the game and the photo of the women and strollers. They will be encouraged to think about the setting of the city and how the characters/people interact with the setting.

Standard 7.2.4.B Identify the basic physical processes that affect the physical characteristics of places and regions.

Students will think about the interaction of their character with other players as well as the interaction with the setting of the city. This standard is addressed in the second half of the unit when students make their own game.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Reading: Informational Text Grade 4

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

This standard is addressed explicitly during and after each read aloud. This standard is also applied as the students consider the screenshots of the game, the photo of the women and strollers, and the actual game as a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.7 Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text when it appears.

Similar to R1.4.1, this standard is addressed explicitly during and after each read aloud and analysis of the screenshots of the game, the photo of the women and strollers, and the actual game as a text. Additionally, the reflections the students will complete in their digital journals at the end of each session will also synthesize this standard in the students' writing.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

This standard is included here because students will be expected to reflect in their digital journals at the end of each unit. Since this unit is designed with students in the classroom for only 45 minutes, the amount of writing will be brief, but will accumulate over the course of the unit.

Social Justice standards

Identity 5 ID.3.5.5 I know my family and I do things the same as and different from other people and groups, and I know how to use what I learn from home, school, and other places that matter to me.

This standard is not explicitly taught in any of the sessions in the unit, however, through interacting with different people who play in Roblox throughout the world, and through class discussions, students will gain an understanding that there are many different ways

of living life within Brookhaven and that we will use the time during this unit to examine them.

Diversity 6 DI.3-5.6 I like knowing people who are like me and different from me, and I treat each other with respect.

Diversity 7 DI.3-5.7 I have accurate, respectful words to describe how I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those who have other identities.

These two standards are treated through the lenses of race, class and gender. Through the mentor texts, and the application of the ideas in the texts to the gaming experience, students will learn about respect in digital spaces.

Justice 13 JU3-5.I3 I know that words, behaviors, rules, and laws that treat people unfairly based on their group identities cause real harm.

Specifically in the second and third sessions when students discuss class and race, this standard will come into play. I also hope that as students create their own city setting in their own game creation, they will consider equity in the landmarks they create.

Action 16 AC3-5.16 I pay attention to how people (including myself) are treated and I try to treat others how I like to be treated.

This standard will be addressed in the read alouds of the mentor texts as well as the discussions that ensue in groups and whole-class. Additionally, as with the Justice standard, my hope is that this standard will also guide the students as they think about equity when they create their games.

Appendix B

Title: "Sign of the Times: High Tech Strollers."
Author: Ed Yourdon
Source: Flickr
License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Appendix C

Title: "Roblox-Gender1"
Author: Robert Rivera-Amezola
Source: screenshot
License: none

Title: "Roblox-Gender2"
Author: Robert Rivera-Amezola
Source: screenshot
License: none

Title: "Roblox-Gender3"
Author: Robert Rivera-Amezola
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Title: "Roblox-Class1"
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Title: "Roblox-Class5"
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Appendix E

Title: "Roblox-Race1"
Author: Robert Rivera-Amezola
Source: screenshot
License: none

Title: "Roblox-Race2"
Author: Robert Rivera-Amezola
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Title: "Roblox-Race5"
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