

# Story Monsters Ink

JANUARY 2021

The Literary Resource for Teachers, Librarians, and Parents



## BETTE MIDLER

LIGHTS UP THE PAGE WITH  
NEW CHILDREN'S BOOK

### GARY PAULSEN

TAKES YOUNG READERS  
BACK TO THE WOODS

### ASTRONAUT ABBY

ENCOURAGES KIDS TO  
REACH FOR THE STARS

### PETER SIS

HONORS A QUIET HERO  
IN NEW CHILDREN'S BOOK

### THE KEYS

TO UNLOCK UNLIMITED  
LEARNING IN 2021

### STEVE LIGHT

INVITES LITTLE READERS  
ON A ROAD TRIP

### MARIBETH BOELTS

PENS A PUFFY TALE ABOUT  
A GIFT GONE AWRY

### JUDY NEWMAN

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### TEACHING TOOLBOX

BACK TO THE CLASSROOM

Q&A WITH

### KELLY BENNETT

### ALANE ADAMS

WRITER'S NEW YEAR'S  
RESOLUTIONS

### THE BOOK BUG

MATTHEW CORDELL ON THE BEST  
WAY TO FEEL HOPEFUL AGAIN



LEVEL UP 21

# BOSS LEVEL



## EXISTING

*game*

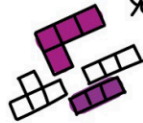
WHAT GAMES ARE YOU SEEING DIFFERENTLY NOW?

> WHICH GAMES CAN MAKE LEARNING MORE PURPOSEFUL AND FUN?



> WHAT IS SOMETHING THIS GAME TEACHES THAT YOU HADN'T REALIZED BEFORE?

> WHO IS ONE PERSON YOU COULD SHARE THIS



**AHA!**

WITH AND THEN INVITE TO JOIN YOU IN GAME PLAY?



## HACK

*a game*

WHAT PLAYFUL EXPERIENCE COULD YOU RECREATE WITH YOUR OWN SPIN?



> WHAT ARE THE MECHANICS, RULES FOR PLAY, THAT COULD TEACH SOMETHING IN A NEW WAY?

> WHAT COULD YOU LEARN FROM THIS GAME?

> WHAT WOULD THIS NEW GAME LOOK LIKE? HOW WOULD IT WORK?



## CREATE

*a new game*

IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND AND COULD CREATE THE ULTIMATE GAME,



★ WHAT WOULD IT BE?

★ WHO WOULD YOU CO-CREATE THIS GAME WITH?

★ WHAT SKILLS WOULD YOU NEED?



★ WHAT WOULD THIS NEW GAME TEACH?



★ HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE THIS GAME IS

**INCLUSIVE**



OF ALL POSSIBLE PLAYERS?

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# THE KEYS

TO UNLOCK UNLIMITED LEARNING IN 2021

by Lindsay Portnoy, Ph.D.

Walking past my 10-year-old's desk this morning, I notice the gigantic red headphones on either side of a tousled head of ungroomed hair, another reminder of our current state of isolation. Looking closer I see his camera off, speaker volume muted, sitting in a slouched position of silent compliance.



It is the silence that strikes me most. Not that I cannot hear the lesson, that's what those blessed headphones are for: their privacy and our sanity! Instead it's the constant reminder that whether in classrooms or living rooms during remote learning, so much of the way we "do" school remains stubbornly the same.

As a parent, researcher, and educator, I can't help but wonder how grown-ups across the country have quickly adapted tools to connect socially while physically distant, yet education looks largely the same as it did during the pre-pandemic times.

Making the rounds later that day to check on my remote learners, the scene has dramatically changed. The 10-year-old is on lunch break and is now playing *Among Us*, the social deduction game much like the board game *Clue*. With him are four friends from class. The talk is animated, the kids are collaborating to share their knowledge, and together they are working hard to make informed decisions. On display are the very competencies we strive for all our children to achieve in school and in life!

What if you had a magic wand that could actually help kids learn almost anything you wanted to teach? Would you use it, or lock it up and try to wish your family or classroom back to a time before the magic existed? It appears that the magic wand we've been searching for has been in front of our eyes all along. Actually, it's been in our kid's hands.

Just as the grown-ups use Zoom or Google Docs to work with others across the country and globe, there's already a tool in the palm of your child's hands helping them do the important work of childhood: play. It is literally in their hands. It is the controller they use to navigate alien planets and solve complex puzzles together with friends while physically apart.

To be fair, many educators are leveraging the power of playful learning in classrooms this year. In fact, the joy and pride in playfully creating something beautiful and unique was palpable as my 12-year-old came barreling into my office to play a song he created using a digital music creation platform in music class. No longer just another method for delivering a lecture, his teacher uses Zoom to connect kids who would never otherwise collaborate to troubleshoot together until confident and later working independently to create their own theme song to later share with one another.

Making a mental note to borrow those large red headphones from my younger child, it strikes me how the affordances of technology have created many new and exciting learning experiences for our kids during this physically distanced time.

Games like *Pictionary* are being played on whiteboards in elementary school Zoom sessions where students take turns drawing and guessing characters from recently read books. Sure they're identifying settings and themes but in a low-stakes way with no grades attached and plenty of laughter.

In middle school social studies classrooms kids are using *Minecraft*, a digital tool, to recreate the floor of Congress. Together they architect and later sit in the seats of their senators and congresspeople while learning about the three branches of government and their roles and responsibilities.

The unmistakable power of creative play is apparent to anyone who has watched a group of children use flashlights to play tag on a warm summer evening or listened as a group of kids strategically navigates the ever-changing terrain in *Fortnite* in their squad of four to win a victory royale (gamer speak for a win or a "dub," for the win).

All of the flexibility and quick thinking paired with the ability to shift plans and refocus with new information that we seek in learning is readily apparent in games and play. What's more, existing games collecting dust on your shelf can be hacked to invite these same skills into more engaged learning each day.

In my book, *Game On? Brain On!*, I share a variety of ways to level up learning and achieve boss level (the character you overcome to level up) using existing games, hacking those same games, or creating new games. For *Story Monsters* readers, I'm sharing an Easter egg (hidden gifts) from the book with a quick how-to for getting started:



### Level Up: Boss Level!

**Using an existing game:** Begin by taking inventory. Asking your kids about their choices during play. For instance:

What games do *they* choose to play? *Why* do they like playing those games over others? What is the best part about each game? What are those games good at teaching them?

Do your kids like to play endless runner games like *Alto's Adventure* where they snowboard down the Alps to round up furry creatures, or *Crossy Road*, an update to the classic *Frogger*? Are your kids excited to catch 'em all in *Pokemon Go* or would they collaborate with friends to build their own maze in the creative mode of *Fortnite*? Do your kids love playing a family game of *Slapzi* or *Uno*, or do they prefer the longer and more competitive play of *Ticket to Ride*?

**Here's where the magic comes in:** use their responses to discuss and **ask questions** about what learning is baked into that play. For instance:

What might help that chicken cross the road more safely in *Crossy Road* (an entry point to urban planning)? Why do you think certain *Pokemon* like specific locations (an invitation to consider habitats)? What is the most surprising item or outrageous claim that helped your item win a *Slapzi* (categorizing items and an opening to discuss divergent and convergent thinking)? What was the strategy that helped you be the first to shout *Uno* (a first foray into probabilities for older kids and the recall of numbers and colors for younger ones)?

**Hacking an existing game:** Based on the games your kids already play, ask them how each game might be hacked to teach something they're learning:

Can your kids use a tool like Scratch to recreate their own version of *Crossy Road* and also learn algebra or coding? Can your kids use the creative mode of *Fortnite* to recreate the landscape and also understand the perspectives of Native peoples during The Pequot War? Can your kids use hand drawn images to create a new version of *Slapzi* to more playfully engage with favorite characters, settings, and themes from their readings?



### Possible Clue Cards:

Creative character, Misunderstood character, Story that took place in the 20th century, Possible corresponding picture/image cards.

Elphaba (*Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*)

Holden (*The Catcher in the Rye*)

Joe Kavalier (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*)

"AS A PARENT, RESEARCHER, AND EDUCATOR, I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER HOW GROWN-UPS ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE QUICKLY ADAPTED TOOLS TO CONNECT SOCIALLY WHILE PHYSICALLY DISTANT, YET EDUCATION LOOKS LARGELY THE SAME AS IT DID DURING THE PRE-PANDEMIC TIMES."

### Creating a whole new game:

After talking about the games they love to play, invite your kids to try their hand at making a whole new game.

If your kids love *Pokemon* why not invite them to: Use the free tool iNaturalist to explore the indigenous phyla and phlora outside your space. Use *Minecraft* to recreate a map of you town where different *Pokemon* might live to enhance their spatial awareness and mapping skills.

If yours are eager *Uno* players, consider how to use those same game mechanics to make a new game to creatively categorize: Character tropes in stories; Elements of the periodic table; Parts of speech in a foreign languages.

If your learners love *Ticket to Ride*, help them consider how the mechanics of game play could be used to document migration of species over time and space across the continent or even the planet.

As our children find joy and connection in play, another part of the magic of games is that the play is also the assessment. Formative assessments, or the quick checks for

LINDSAY PORTNOY, PH.D.

FEATURE

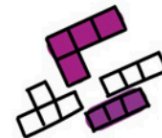
understanding before, after, or during instruction, tell you what your kids know and where they have room to grow. And in games, the play is the assessment. It's baked into play!

If a student knows how many seats are on the House floor, what major political parties hold each seat, and what the majority and minority party are in the current Congress it will be readily apparent in the space they create. No multiple-choice tests required.

But the power of play is not all rainbows and unicorns. In fact, it's precisely that games are challenging and require consistent effort to make progress that games are the perfect tool for applying to academic pursuits.

So will we lock this magic wand up and wish our family or classroom back to a time before the magic existed or will we use it? What we choose to do with it is up to us.

As we usher in a new year, let's level up the way we teach and learn. Let's use games and play to help all our kids learn. One household and one classroom at a time. I hope you will join me, I know our kids are already game. All we're missing is you! ●



**Lindsay Portnoy** is a cognitive scientist and author of the books *Designed to Learn* and *Game On? Brain On!* Her work has been featured in *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *World Economic Forum*, and elsewhere. She currently serves as associate teaching professor in the Graduate School of Education at Northeastern University, co-founder of an immersive games company, on her local board of education. She lives in New York with her partner, their two boys and five rescued fur babies along with whatever stray critters come tumbling out of the woods.

