

Playing the Unreliable Text: AI, Horror Freeform Interactive Drama Salon LARP, and Interpretive Ambiguity in the EFL Literature Classroom

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Introduction: The Room That Holds Two Truths at Once

Picture a classroom in Taipei on a humid Tuesday afternoon. A student playing John in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" insists, with the gentle condescension of late nineteenth-century medical authority, that nothing is wrong with his wife. Another student, playing the narrator, has just finished describing the woman who creeps along the floor behind the wallpaper and slips outside in the daytime to crawl across the lawn. A third student, playing Jennie, watches the exchange and decides whether to keep what she has seen to herself. The room holds two contradictory truths at once, and nobody is allowed to resolve them. The teacher does not step in to declare which student has read the story correctly. What you are looking at, in that moment, is the architecture of literary interpretation made visible. Every speaker holds a partial truth. Every listener weighs evidence. The text sits on the desk, closed for now, waiting for the debrief that will follow.

That moment of doubled reality is what this essay is about, and the working argument can be stated plainly. AI-supported horror freeform LARPs deepen EFL learners' literary interpretation by allowing them to perform ambiguity, unreliability, and conflicting perspectives rather than merely identify them analytically. The umbrella claim is equally direct. AI does not replace literary pedagogy or LARP design. AI expands the teacher's capacity to generate playable structures, differentiated roles, and language-rich scenarios, while the teacher remains responsible for interpretation, classroom fit, and reflective learning. The phrase to hold onto, for our purposes throughout the essay, is teacher's capacity. Capacity is not autonomy. Capacity is the size of the toolbox the teacher gets to bring to class.

The Pedagogical Problem

EFL literature classrooms tend, under perfectly understandable pressures, to push students toward a single correct reading of a text. Time is short. The cognitive load of reading literary English in a second language is real and well-documented in research on working memory and language processing (Sweller). Assessment regimes, especially those tied to college entrance examinations or international proficiency tests, reward students who produce the expected interpretation efficiently. Teachers who have stood at the front of an EFL classroom know the gentle gravitational pull toward closure. A student says something half-formed about the narrator. The teacher, wanting to be helpful, completes the thought. The class moves on. The ambiguity has been managed.

Horror and weird fiction resist that move. Their meaning lives in irresolution. The Tudor governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* either sees ghosts or descends into a hallucination that endangers the children in her care, and the text refuses, with a precision bordering on cruelty, to let the reader pick. Gilman's narrator either shares the room with a supernatural presence or constructs that presence out of the wreckage of her own confined mind. Shirley Jackson's villagers either share a single belief about the lottery or harbor private horrors they cannot voice. The educational opportunity these texts present is precisely what makes them so hard to teach in EFL. They demand that students hold multiple readings simultaneously, in a second language, while resisting the very habit of comprehension that has gotten them this far.

The Intervention

Theatre-style interactive drama freeform LARP, supported by AI-generated role briefs, lets students perform ambiguity from the inside. You are not asking them to identify unreliability as a feature of the text. You are asking them to be unreliable, and to meet other unreliabilities in the room. Every character in a well-designed scenario carries a partial reading of events. Every encounter between characters is a small interpretive negotiation. The classroom becomes, for the duration of the play, a machine for producing readings that differ from one another along axes the teacher has chosen in advance.

The educational move that makes the form work is the debrief. Students travel from "my character believed this" to "the text supports or complicates this interpretation." That single sentence, spoken in roughly that order, is the entire pedagogical action of the unit. Students who have just spent ninety minutes inside a partial truth find that the analytical move from belief to evidence becomes available to them in a way it rarely is when they have only read the story silently. The play has given them an appetite for the argument.

Roadmap

The argument unfolds across nine further sections. Section two takes up the literary-theoretical ground, asking why ambiguity in horror and weird fiction has the structure it does, and why that structure is particularly difficult for EFL learners to handle through analytical instruction alone. Section three bridges from literary theory to performance pedagogy, showing how reader-response theory and unreliable narration scholarship anticipate the move into embodiment. Section four locates theatre-style freeform LARP as a designed form with two decades of educational practice behind it. Section five takes up the role of AI as a co-designer, with attention to what it does well, what it does badly, and what the teacher must continue to do regardless. Section six walks through the design architecture required to turn an ambiguous source text into a runnable classroom freeform. Section seven offers four worked examples drawn from "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Turn of the Screw*, Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," and Jackson's "The Lottery." Section eight takes up the debrief in detail, since the debrief is where the analytical learning happens. Section nine treats limitations, ethics, and considerations specific to the EFL context. Section ten consolidates and gestures forward.

What you will find, you may find, is that the argument develops in widening loops. The same claim is made at the level of theory, at the level of design, at the level of worked example,

and at the level of debrief practice. The repetition is intentional. The room of partial truths is not a single insight. It is a habit that has to settle into the bones of the curriculum.

The Problem of Ambiguity in Horror and Weird Fiction

Let's get started with the texts themselves. The literary-theoretical ground is the first thing to lay down, because everything that follows depends on a clear sense of what these stories actually do and why their ambiguity is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be inhabited.

Two Questions, Not One

The standard EFL comprehension question, "What happened in the story?", collapses on these texts. It is the wrong question, asked in the wrong key. When a student answers the standard question for "The Yellow Wallpaper," they typically produce some version of the following: a woman is locked in a room, she goes mad, she imagines a woman behind the wallpaper, and at the end she crawls around the room. The summary is not exactly wrong, but every word in it has been chosen to resolve an ambiguity the text refuses to resolve. "Locked" assumes coercion the narrator describes ambiguously. "Goes mad" assumes a psychological diagnosis. "Imagines" assumes the woman is not real. The summary smuggles a reading in under the cover of plot description.

The richer question for these stories is "Whose version of reality do we believe, and what is at stake in believing it?" That question opens the text rather than closing it. It treats the central interpretive uncertainty as the subject of study rather than as an obstacle to comprehension. The shift in question is small. The shift in pedagogical possibility is enormous.

Todorov's Hesitation

Tzvetan Todorov's structuralist account of fantastic fiction provides a starting frame. In *The Fantastic*, originally published in French in 1970 and translated into English by Richard Howard in 1975, Todorov locates the genre in a specific kind of hesitation. The fantastic, on his account, is the experience of a person who knows only the laws of nature confronting an event that appears supernatural; the genre lives in the moment of doubt before the reader chooses between a natural explanation (the uncanny) and a supernatural one (the marvelous) (Todorov 25). The fantastic ends when the choice is made. Stories that preserve hesitation indefinitely are pure fantastic. Stories that resolve toward natural causes become uncanny. Stories that resolve toward supernatural causes become marvelous.

Todorov's framework matters for our purposes because it names the precise pedagogical move the EFL classroom usually performs without noticing. When the teacher resolves the question for the student, the fantastic collapses. The text becomes either a story about madness or a story about ghosts, and the interpretive richness, which lived in the uncollapsed state, is gone. The horror freeform, by contrast, distributes the hesitation across the room. Some characters resolve toward the uncanny. Some resolve toward the marvelous. Some sit in the hesitation. The structure of the genre and the structure of the play match.

Carroll on the Cognitive Structure of Horror

Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* extends the analytical reach into questions of cognitive engagement. Carroll defines what he calls "art-horror" as a specific emotional response to fictional monsters that combine threat with category violation, things that are at once dangerous and impure (Carroll 28). His framework is useful here for one reason in particular. Carroll distinguishes carefully between what a character believes about a monster, what the reader believes about the monster, and what the implied author appears to believe. These three layers can come apart, and when they do, you have the cognitive structure of unreliable horror narration.

In Gilman, the narrator believes the woman behind the wallpaper is real. The reader receives the story through the narrator's perceptions and must decide whether to share them. The implied author has constructed a frame that allows the reader to read against the narrator without requiring them to do so. The freeform mirrors this triple structure with three layers of its own. The character believes one thing. The student playing the character holds their own out-of-character readerly response. The class, when it convenes for debrief, looks at what the implied author has built. That triple structure is what makes the form a genuine engine of literary interpretation rather than a pleasant theatrical exercise.

Fisher's Weird and Eerie

Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*, published shortly before his death in 2017 by Repeater Books, gives us a vocabulary for two related but distinct modes that recur in this corpus (Fisher 9). The weird, for Fisher, is the sensation produced by something that does not belong, an alien presence within a familiar frame, a Lovecraftian fungus among the roses. The eerie is the sensation of a failure of presence or absence, a question of why something is here when it should not be, or why something is missing when it should be there. The eerie question, on Fisher's account, has the form "Who or what is responsible for this?" and the unsettling answer is often "We do not know."

Fisher's distinction lights up the source texts for our purposes. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is largely weird, an alien presence creeping in a familiar room. "The Turn of the Screw" is largely eerie, the question being whether something is present or absent, and whose interpretive failure has produced the ambiguity. Lovecraft is weirdness with a vengeance. Jackson's "The Lottery" produces an eerie effect because something terrible is present where nothing should be, and no one can say who is responsible for keeping it there. When students play characters in these scenarios, the design choices around the weird and the eerie show up as different mechanic options, which we will work through in section six.

Why EFL Learners Struggle Here

The cognitive load of holding ambiguity in a second language is genuinely heavy. John Sweller's foundational work on cognitive load theory established that working memory has narrow limits and that instructional design must be sensitive to those limits (Sweller 257). Reading a difficult literary text in L2 already loads working memory with vocabulary lookup, syntactic parsing, and inferential comprehension. Adding the metacognitive demand of holding two interpretations of the same event simultaneously is, for many students, more than the system can carry without scaffolding.

Gillian Lazar's *Literature and Language Teaching*, published by Cambridge in 1993 and still a standard reference in the field, surveys the pedagogical strategies that EFL teachers use to bring literary texts within reach of language learners (Lazar 24). Geoff Hall's more recent *Literature in Language Education*, published by Palgrave in 2015 in its second edition, updates the conversation with attention to digital tools and contemporary classroom practice (Hall 76). Amos Paran's evidence-based survey in *Language Teaching* provides the most thorough audit of what research actually supports about literature in instructed foreign language learning, and his careful treatment of the gap between teacher enthusiasm and student response is worth reading slowly (Paran 469). Across these sources, a consistent pattern emerges. EFL students often default to dictionary literalism when faced with ambiguous prose. They look up words, they assemble plot, and they hand back a reading that resolves the text against the grain of its own design. The default is not a failure of intelligence. The default is what working memory does when it is at the edge of its capacity.

The Interpretive Opportunity

When the text resists single readings, every student's partial reading becomes legitimate raw material. This is genuinely a gift in mixed-proficiency classrooms because it democratizes contribution. A student whose English is not yet strong enough to articulate a full interpretive argument can still hold and voice a partial truth from inside a character. A student at higher proficiency can play the same role with more verbal texture. The form is forgiving at the level of language and demanding at the level of stance. That combination is rare in EFL pedagogy and worth preserving.

The classroom that takes ambiguity seriously is also a classroom that prepares students for the kinds of texts they will encounter in higher education and beyond. Modernist short fiction, postcolonial unreliable narration, magical realism, contemporary autofiction, and the canonical horror corpus all share a commitment to unresolved interpretation. A student who has learned, through play, that holding two truths at once is a feature rather than a bug has acquired a transferable interpretive skill. That skill is what literature instruction is supposed to deliver, and what it often fails to deliver under the time pressures that govern most EFL classrooms.

The argument so far establishes that horror and weird fiction reward an interpretive stance the standard EFL classroom rarely supports, and that the cost of asking students to identify ambiguity analytically in L2 is high. The next section moves from literary theory to performance pedagogy, showing why embodiment offers a route into these texts that analysis alone does not.

Reader-Response, Unreliable Narration, and Why Performance Matters

Now we are going to take the bridge from literary theory to performance pedagogy carefully, because the move from analysis to embodiment is sometimes treated as a soft option, and it is not. Performance, when designed well, is a deeper engagement with the same theoretical claims that reader-response and unreliable-narration scholarship have been making for decades. The freeform does not sidestep theory. It literalizes it.

Iser's Gaps and Rosenblatt's Transaction

Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1978, argues that meaning lives in the encounter between text and reader, in the gaps that the text leaves for the reader to fill (Iser 169). The text is a structure of indeterminacies. The reader, drawing on prior experience and inferential work, completes the structure. No two readers complete it identically, and the text is not the same object before and after the act of reading. Iser's German phenomenological vocabulary can sound abstract, but the working idea is concrete. A novel is a partly drawn map. The reader walks across it and the walking is what makes the map into a place.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, articulated in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, published by Southern Illinois University Press in the same year, develops a parallel account from a different intellectual lineage (Rosenblatt 18). Rosenblatt distinguishes between efferent reading, which extracts information for use elsewhere, and aesthetic reading, which dwells in the experience of the text. The aesthetic stance, on her account, is a transaction between a particular reader and a particular text under particular circumstances. No reading is universal. Every reading is situated.

Both theories anticipate the move that the freeform makes literal. The gap that Iser describes becomes a scene. The transaction that Rosenblatt describes becomes a conversation between two characters whose readings of events do not match. The theoretical claim is not modified by the performance. The performance gives the claim a body.

Unreliable Narration as a Critical Tradition

The concept of unreliable narration enters narrative theory through Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1961. Booth defines a narrator as reliable when he or she speaks for the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and unreliable when he or she does not (Booth 158-59). The relational structure matters. Unreliability is not a property of the narrator alone. It is a relationship between narrator, implied author, and reader.

James Phelan's *Living to Tell About It*, published by Cornell University Press in 2005, extends Booth's framework into a more granular taxonomy. Phelan distinguishes between unreliability along axes of facts and events, knowledge and perception, and ethics and evaluation, and within each axis between misreporting, underreporting, misreading, underreading, misregarding, and underregarding (Phelan 49). The taxonomy may sound baroque, and it is, but the underlying point is simple. Narrators can be unreliable in different ways for different reasons, and pedagogy that treats unreliability as a single yes-or-no flag misses most of what the technique can do.

Ansgar Nünning's cognitive turn, articulated across several essays in the late 1990s including his contribution to *Recent Trends in Narratological Research* edited by John Pier and published by the Université de Tours in 1999, locates unreliability in the gap between the implied reader's frame and the narrator's reported frame (Nünning 69). Unreliability, on this account, is something the reader infers when textual signals fail to align with what the reader takes the implied author to want. The reader's interpretive labor produces the unreliability rather than discovering it ready-made in the text.

The freeform turns this triangle of narrator, implied author, and reader into a room of people. Each player holds a frame. The frames do not match. The text sits offstage as the implied author. The class, in debrief, reconstructs the gap and names what the text was doing.

The Limits of Analytical Instruction

When you ask EFL students “Is the narrator reliable?” you are asking them to perform a sophisticated metacognitive operation in a second language while parsing a difficult text. Many students bounce off the question because the question itself loads working memory beyond capacity. The standard response, if the student gives one at all, is something like “She is unreliable because she imagines the woman in the wall.” That answer is not exactly wrong, but it is not yet an interpretation. It is a paraphrase of a teacher’s hint.

Performance lets students inhabit the operation before they have to name it. A student who has spent ninety minutes playing the husband John, gently dismissing his wife’s concerns and frowning at her diary, has acquired a working model of how an implied author can position a narrator that the reader is meant to read against. The student now has somewhere to stand when the analytical question is asked. They have lived inside the gap that Nünning describes. The gap is no longer an abstract noun. The gap is the moment when their character said something the player knew was wrong.

Embodied Cognition

The cognitive science literature on embodied learning supports this move. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1980, established that abstract concepts are routinely understood through bodily metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 14). Arthur Glenberg’s research program on embodied cognition, summarized in articles such as his contribution to *WIREs Cognitive Science*, demonstrates that language comprehension recruits motor and perceptual systems, and that learning anchored in physical action produces stronger retention than learning that does not (Glenberg 587). When a student speaks lines as a character, the meaning lands in posture, breath, and inflection, not just on the page. When the student later writes about the text, the sensory memory of having stood next to another student and disagreed in character travels with the analysis.

The mechanism, for our purposes, is not mysterious. The body is a memory system. A claim about a text that has been physically performed has more cognitive purchase than a claim that has only been silently encoded. EFL students, who are already working at the boundary of their linguistic capacity, benefit disproportionately from anchoring claims in physical performance because the performance offloads some of the load onto systems other than verbal working memory.

The Practitioner’s Claim

The case for performance pedagogy is not new in the LARP literature. Sarah Lynne Bowman’s *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, published by McFarland in 2010, argues that role-playing supports identity exploration, problem-solving, and community formation in ways that other forms of learning do not (Bowman, *Functions* 13). Bowman’s work, alongside the broader corpus of nordic larp scholarship and the Wyrd Con companion books

edited by Bowman and Aaron Vanek, establishes a body of practitioner-scholarship that takes role-playing seriously as a developmental and pedagogical form. What this body of work shows, again and again, is that the embodied character produces cognitive and affective effects that exceed what reading or discussion alone can deliver.

For the literature classroom, the relevant claim is narrower than Bowman's general argument but follows from it. When the literary text is itself about the failure of perception, about the gap between what a character believes and what a reader is invited to suspect, then embodying a character is a route into that very structure. The form mirrors the content. A student playing the governess in James does not need to be told that the governess might be unreliable. The student lives inside the question of whether they are.

Bleed

Bleed is the term, common in the nordic larp scene and theorized at length by Bowman in her article "Social Conflict and Bleed in Role-playing Communities" in the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, for the bidirectional flow of emotional and psychological material between player and character (Bowman, "Social Conflict" 4). Bleed-in occurs when the player brings their own feelings into the character. Bleed-out occurs when the character's feelings persist in the player after the game has ended. Markus Montola's contributions to the same journal and to the Knutepunkt anthologies have developed the concept further, distinguishing between bleed that supports immersion and bleed that compromises player wellbeing (Montola, "Positive Negative Experience" 156).

Horror freeforms produce bleed. That is part of how they work. The student playing the narrator in Gilman is not unaffected by the experience of describing a woman creeping behind the wallpaper. The student playing John feels the discomfort of dismissing concerns they suspect they should be taking seriously. The bleed is a feature of the form, not a defect. Handled well, the residue of feeling becomes pedagogically useful in the debrief, where students examine the gap between what their character believed and what the text actually says. Handled poorly, the residue can compromise both the learning and the student's wellbeing. Section nine returns to this question with the seriousness it deserves.

The bridge from theory to performance is now in place. The next move is to specify what kind of performance we are talking about, and why theatre-style freeform LARP, in particular, is the appropriate form.

Theatre-Style Freeform as a Pedagogical Form

Let's now establish that theatre-style freeform LARP is not improvisational chaos. It is a designed form with conventions, lineages, and roughly two decades of educational practice behind it. Those conventions translate to classroom use because they were partly developed in classroom-adjacent contexts to begin with.

Defining the Form

The terms vary by community, and clarity matters. Salon LARP, often used in North American contexts, refers to indoor socially focused games playable in a single room or suite of rooms, typically running between two and four hours, organized around intrigue, relationship webs, faction goals, and hidden information. Parlor LARP, common in the

United States, especially in the New England tradition associated with Interactivities Ink and Shifting Forest, emphasizes accessibility, minimal props, few mechanics, compact runtime, and character sheets that push players into conversation. Theatre-style freeform LARP, the term most often associated with the United Kingdom, Australian, and Nordic-influenced design lineages, emphasizes dramatic scenes, emotional arcs, character-driven play, and metatechniques such as monologues, flashbacks, workshops, black box scenes, and calibrated consent tools. Lizzie Stark's *Leaving Mundania*, published by Chicago Review Press in 2012, gives an accessible journalistic introduction to the broader LARP world and includes sustained attention to the freeform end of the spectrum (Stark, *Leaving Mundania* 198). For our purposes, the family resemblance is more important than the terminological distinctions. We are talking aboutLARPs played in a room or two, mostly through conversation, with characters whose interior lives carry the dramatic weight.

Design Lineages

The Nordic tradition is the most heavily theorized branch of the family. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola's *Nordic Larp*, published by Fëa Livia in 2010, documents thirty influential Nordic productions and includes essays that contextualize the tradition in relation to theatre, art, and games (Stenros and Montola 18). The earlier *Beyond Role and Play*, edited by Montola and Stenros and published by Ropecon in 2004, and *Playground Worlds*, edited by Montola and Stenros and published by Ropecon in 2008, collect academic and practitioner writing from the annual Knutepunkt convention and remain primary sources for design theory in the form. The Knutepunkt and Solmukohta anthologies, published yearly in conjunction with the convention, are the running record of the field's evolving conversation.

The North American theatre-style scene, less heavily theorized in book form, has been documented in the Wyrd Con companion books edited by Bowman and Vanek between 2012 and 2015, and in journals such as the *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Analog Game Studies*. The Australian and UK scenes have developed in close conversation with the Nordic tradition while maintaining their own conventions and design preferences. The differences between traditions matter for the teacher because they correspond to different design choices the teacher can make. Nordic designs tend to favor pre-game workshops, narrativist play, and explicit calibration tools. North American designs tend to favor character-rich packets and mechanical clarity. UK designs vary widely. None of these is the right tradition. They are a salad bar of design options.

The Educational LARP Tradition

The educational LARP tradition has a specific institutional anchor at Østerskov Efterskole in Hobro, Denmark, founded in 2006 as the world's first role-playing-based boarding school. Malik Hyltoft, the school's vice principal, has written extensively about the form. His chapter "The Role-players' School: Østerskov Efterskole" appears in *Playground Worlds* and provides the foundational account of what an entire curriculum built around edu-larp looks like in practice (Hyltoft, "Role-players' School" 12). His later chapter "Four Reasons Why Edu-Larp Works," in Karsten Dombrowski's edited collection *LARP: Einblicke* published by Zauberfeder in 2010, articulates the pedagogical theory underlying the practice (Hyltoft, "Four Reasons" 43).

The edu-larp scene extends well beyond Denmark. Michał Mochocki's article "Edu-LARP as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge" in the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, published in 2013, reports on Polish secondary-school history classroom use (Mochocki 55). Bowman and Anne Standiford's "Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study," published in the *International Journal of Role-Playing* in 2015, presents quantitative and qualitative results from a science curriculum intervention in a Los Angeles charter school (Bowman and Standiford 4). Mark Aaron Peterson and Aaron Vanek's chapter "Live Action Role-playing (Larp): Insight into an Underutilized Educational Tool" in Karen Schrier's *Learning, Education and Games*, published by ETC Press in 2016, surveys the broader landscape of educational practice across multiple subject areas (Peterson and Vanek 219). What this body of work establishes is that edu-larp is not an experimental curiosity. There is a research literature, however small, with empirical findings about engagement, retention, and student response.

What Freeform Brings That Tabletop Does Not

Tabletop role-playing also has classroom uses, and the literature on TTRPG pedagogy is robust. What freeform brings that tabletop does not is embodiment, time pressure, and the social fact of other bodies in the room making demands on you. A student in a tabletop session can describe their character's actions while sitting at a table. A student in a freeform must actually walk across the room to confront another character, must hold their gaze, must speak in their voice. The cognitive and affective load is different. The pedagogical effects are different.

For our purposes in the literature classroom, the bodily charge of freeform is the feature that matters most. The texts under discussion are about the failure of perception. Reading them at a table is one kind of engagement. Standing across from another student and refusing to acknowledge what they have just said, in character, is a different kind. The latter teaches something about what it is like to be the husband in Gilman's story that the former cannot. The bodily fact of the encounter is the teaching.

The Classroom Adaptation Problem

Most published freeforms run between two and four hours, with workshops adding another hour or two on top. A school period in a typical EFL context runs forty to fifty minutes. The mismatch is real and must be addressed. Section six returns to the design question. The point to flag here is that classroom adaptation is not a matter of running shorter versions of existing games. The temporal compression changes the form. It changes what mechanics can carry, what characters can develop, and what kinds of dramatic moments are possible. A teacher who tries to import a published freeform without redesigning it for the classroom is likely to discover that the form does not survive the transposition.

Calibrated Consent and Safety Mechanics

The safety mechanics common to contemporary theatre-style freeform are not optional bolts for horror content. They are load-bearing structures in any classroom use. The OK check, the X-card, the lookdown, and the cut-and-brake conventions are described in detail in Johanna Koljonen and colleagues' *Larp Design: Creating Role-Play Experiences*, published by the Knudepunkt Books series in 2019 (Koljonen et al. 273). Lizzie Stark's edited

collections and her ongoing work documenting safety practices, including her chapter “Where Do We Go from Here?” in *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, edited by Juhana Pettersson and published by Fëa Livia in 2012, provide additional practitioner perspectives (Stark, “Where Do We Go” 97).

The classroom case for these mechanics is straightforward. Students playing horror content need a way out that does not require them to explain themselves. The lookdown, a gesture in which a player looks at the floor to indicate they are temporarily out of the scene, costs nothing to teach and provides genuine protection. The X-card, a piece of paper or other token that any player can tap to signal that the current content needs to stop or shift, performs a similar function. These mechanics matter doubly in EFL contexts where students may not yet have the vocabulary to articulate discomfort in real time. A gesture or a token is faster than a sentence, and the student does not have to translate their distress before getting relief.

What the Form Asks of the Teacher

The teacher’s role in a theatre-style classroom freeform is light-touch facilitation rather than active direction. The teacher frames scenes, calls time, occasionally offers an offstage prompt to a stalled scene, and otherwise stays out of the way. The role is closer to that of a stage manager than a director. The play, when designed well, runs itself. The teacher’s heavy lift is in the design and the debrief, not in the running.

This redistribution of teacherly labor has implications for workload, which we will return to in section nine. The short version is that the teacher does more work before and after the play and less during it. For teachers used to managing a classroom moment by moment, the in-game silence can feel uncomfortable. The discomfort is part of the form. Students are doing the work the teacher would otherwise be doing, and trusting them to do it is what makes the pedagogy land.

The form has been specified. The next move is to take up the question of AI, which is what makes this kind of teaching practically scalable for working teachers who do not have weeks to design from scratch.

AI as Co-Designer of Interpretive Roles

OK, let’s talk about AI carefully, because the temptation in either direction, toward boosterism or toward dismissal, is real. The position this essay takes is the practitioner’s position. AI is a draft engine. The teacher remains the author. What you may find, when you actually use AI in this workflow, is that the teacher’s labor changes shape rather than disappearing.

What AI Does Well

The current generation of large language models, evaluated within the specific workflow of designing classroom freeforms, does several things well enough to matter. The first is generating draft character briefs from a single source text. Given the full text of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and a list of perspectives the teacher wants represented, an AI can produce first-draft briefs for the narrator, John, Jennie, and a doctor figure within minutes. The drafts will need editing. They will not be ready for the classroom. They will, however, be substantially complete first attempts at what would otherwise take a teacher hours to assemble.

The second thing AI does well is distributing evidence and contradictions across roles. Given a clearly stated interpretive ambiguity, the AI can produce a contradiction grid showing where each character's account of events overlaps and conflicts with each other character's account. This is genuinely useful design labor that previously took experienced freeform writers significant time to produce. The AI is not better at this than an experienced freeform writer. It is faster, and it is available to a teacher who is not an experienced freeform writer.

The third thing AI does well is producing variant readings. Asked to generate three different interpretive frames for the same character, with different evidence and different inferences, the AI will produce three drafts that differ along the axes the prompt specifies. The teacher then chooses, edits, and combines. The AI's variation is mechanical rather than insightful, but mechanical variation is exactly what is needed at this stage of the design process.

The fourth thing AI does well, and this matters disproportionately in EFL contexts, is producing parallel briefs at different proficiency levels for the same role. Given a B2 brief, the AI can generate an A2 version that preserves the dramatic situation while easing the language load. The translation is not always accurate without revision, and the teacher must check it, but the labor of producing differentiated materials, which would otherwise be prohibitive, becomes feasible.

What AI Does Badly Without Supervision

The same generation of models does several things badly enough that unsupervised use is irresponsible. The first is hallucination of textual references. Asked for a specific quotation from a story, the AI will sometimes produce a quotation that does not appear in the story, or that appears in a different story by a different author, with complete confidence. For a teacher building briefs that depend on textual evidence, this is a serious problem. Every quotation in an AI-drafted brief must be checked against the source text.

The second is flattening of ambiguity into plot summary. Asked what happens in "The Turn of the Screw," the AI will often produce a summary that resolves the central ambiguity in one direction or the other. This is particularly insidious because the resolution sounds confident and fluent, and a teacher in a hurry may accept it without noticing what has been flattened. The strategy that works against this tendency is to prompt explicitly for what each character believes and what evidence they have, rather than for what really happened. The reframe shifts the AI from omniscient narrator to character-bounded witness, and the output preserves more of the structure that matters.

The third is cultural insensitivity in horror tropes. Horror genre conventions developed in particular cultural contexts and do not transfer uniformly. AI trained predominantly on English-language Western horror will tend to produce briefs that reflect those conventions, sometimes in ways that land badly in other cultural contexts. A Taiwanese teacher adapting "The Lottery" for a Taipei classroom will need to attend carefully to which horror conventions transfer and which do not, and to whether the AI's drafts are reflecting the local cultural context or the dominant one in the training data.

The fourth, harder to name, is sycophantic alignment with whatever the prompter pushes for. If the teacher asks the AI to produce a reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in which the narrator is straightforwardly mad, the AI will produce that reading. If the teacher asks for a

reading in which the supernatural is real, the AI will produce that one too. The flexibility is useful for generating variants. The risk is that the AI's output reflects the prompter's preferences rather than the text's structure. This is the place where the teacher's content knowledge has to do most of its work.

The Teacher as Editor and Curator

The framework that captures this division of labor most usefully is Punya Mishra and Matthew Koehler's TPACK framework, articulated in their 2006 article "Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge: A Framework for Teacher Knowledge" in *Teachers College Record* (Mishra and Koehler 1017). TPACK locates effective teaching at the intersection of technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge. AI sits squarely in the technological corner. The teacher's pedagogical knowledge, knowing what students at this proficiency level can handle and what scaffolding they need, remains the teacher's. The teacher's content knowledge, knowing what the text is actually doing and which readings the text supports, also remains the teacher's. The AI does not have either. It has a statistical model of language that resembles content and pedagogical knowledge superficially but cannot substitute for them.

Neil Selwyn's *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates*, in its third edition published by Bloomsbury in 2022, provides a sober general account of the limits of educational technology that extends to AI without much modification (Selwyn 142). The pattern Selwyn documents, in which technological enthusiasm produces inflated expectations that crash against the actual conditions of classroom use, is worth holding in mind. AI in the freeform workflow is genuinely useful when the teacher's pedagogical and content knowledge are robust. AI is misleading when the teacher's knowledge is thin and the AI's fluency masks the gap.

Wayne Holmes, Maya Bialik, and Charles Fadel's *Artificial Intelligence in Education: Promises and Implications for Teaching and Learning*, published by the Center for Curriculum Redesign in 2023, provides a more recent and more enthusiastic account, with attention to specific applications and ethical considerations (Holmes, Bialik, and Fadel 56). Reading the two together, Selwyn skeptical and Holmes optimistic, gives a useful pair of frames within which to locate the working teacher's actual experience.

Practical Prompting Strategies

The prompting strategies that produce useful character briefs share a common structure. They specify what each character believes, what evidence they have, and what they are afraid of. They do not ask the AI to determine what really happened. They preserve the interpretive ambiguity by distributing it across briefs rather than resolving it.

A working prompt for the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" might run as follows. "Generate a character brief for the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' written in second person, suitable for a B2 EFL classroom. The brief should specify what she believes about the woman behind the wallpaper, what evidence she has from her own observations, what she is afraid will happen if she tells anyone what she has seen, and what she wants from John, Jennie, and the doctor. Do not resolve the question of whether

the woman behind the wallpaper is real. Preserve the ambiguity. Use the language of the story where useful.”

The same prompt structure, applied to John, asks for what he believes about his wife’s condition, what evidence he draws on (medical conventions of the period, his own observations of her), what he is afraid of (her illness becoming severe, professional embarrassment), and what he wants from her (compliance with the rest cure, recovery). Critically, the prompt does not tell the AI that John is wrong. It allows John to be a sincere late-nineteenth-century physician operating within the medical paradigm of his time. The student playing John then meets the student playing the narrator, and the gap between their two sincere readings becomes the dramatic engine of the scene.

What you may find, in practice, is that prompts which preserve perspective generate better briefs than prompts which ask the AI to render judgment. Perspective is what the form needs. Judgment is what the debrief is for.

Differentiation in EFL Contexts

The differentiation move deserves a few additional sentences because it is one of the strongest cases for AI in this workflow. EFL classes are often mixed-proficiency, sometimes spanning A2 to B2 within a single class. Producing differentiated materials by hand is labor a working teacher rarely has time for. AI can generate parallel briefs that preserve the dramatic situation while varying the language load. The narrator’s brief at A2 might use shorter sentences, more concrete vocabulary, and direct rather than indirect discourse. At B2, the same brief might preserve more of the original text’s syntactic complexity and lexical density. The character is the same. The scene the player will encounter is the same. The language is calibrated to the player’s capacity.

The teacher must check the differentiated briefs. AI is not perfectly reliable at proficiency calibration, and a brief intended to be A2 may include a B2 collocation that derails the student. The check takes time. The alternative, producing all the briefs at the same level and watching half the class disengage, is worse.

The Risk of Homogenization

A real concern in this workflow is that if every teacher uses the same AI to adapt the same canonical horror texts, classroom freeforms will start to rhyme. The AI’s stylistic preferences and structural defaults will impress themselves on materials produced across hundreds of classrooms. The result, over time, would be a flattening of the form’s variety.

The strategy that works against this tendency is to treat AI as a draft engine that the teacher then breaks, complicates, and localizes. The teacher’s local knowledge, of the specific class, the specific cultural context, the specific texts that the class has already read together, is what makes the materials distinctive. The teacher who runs the AI’s output unedited produces homogenous classrooms. The teacher who edits, replaces, and overwrites produces classrooms that share a form but differ in texture.

The toolbox metaphor matters here. The AI is one tool on the bench. It is not the bench. The bench is the teacher’s accumulated practice and understanding of the students in front of

them. When the AI is treated as a tool, the form thrives. When the AI is treated as the workshop, the form impoverishes.

The argument for AI as a co-designer of interpretive roles is now in place. The next section turns from theoretical framing to practical design, walking through the architecture required to turn an ambiguous source text into a runnable classroom freeform.

Design Architecture: Building the Horror Freeform

Alright. We have the theory laid down and the AI question framed. Now we are going to walk through the actual design work, step by step, the way you would walk through it sitting at a desk with the source text open and a blank document ready. The design architecture is where the abstractions either become a working classroom unit or do not. For our purposes, the architecture rests on roughly nine moves, and each move asks the teacher to make a deliberate choice rather than to default to whatever the source text happens to suggest.

Source Text Selection Criteria

The first move is choosing the text. Five filters, applied in order, will eliminate most candidates and leave a workable shortlist. The first filter is ambiguity that genuinely resists resolution. A text that looks ambiguous on a first reading but resolves cleanly on a second is the wrong text. The whole pedagogical apparatus depends on the text supporting more than one reading, with textual evidence for each. The second filter is manageable length. A novel will not work for a single-period or two-period unit. A short story or a tightly compressed novella is the right scale. The third filter is multiple viable perspective characters. The text must offer at least four characters whose accounts of events would differ. A story with a single first-person narrator and minimal supporting cast will not produce a freeform. The fourth filter is language accessibility, with possible scaffolding. The text must be readable by the class, in the original or in a sensitively prepared version, before the play begins. The fifth filter is ethical fit for the specific classroom. Some horror texts are simply not appropriate for every group of students, and the teacher knows the group.

The four texts we will work through in section seven, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *The Turn of the Screw*, Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space,” and Jackson’s “The Lottery,” pass the five filters differently, which is itself useful pedagogically. Each demonstrates a different combination of strengths and risks.

The Perspective Inventory

Once the text is chosen, the second move is identifying the perspectives that will become characters. For a classroom of fifteen to twenty-five students, you typically want five to eight playable roles, with multiple students assigned to each role in larger classes. The roles need to differ along axes that matter for the story’s central ambiguity. In *The Turn of the Screw*, viable perspectives include the governess, Mrs. Grose, Miles, Flora, the absent uncle as offstage presence reachable by letter, Douglas as framing narrator, the unnamed listener of Douglas’s tale, and possibly Quint and Jessel as ambiguous presences. Each of these positions carries different evidence and different stakes. The governess sees the figures and believes they are ghosts. Mrs. Grose has known Quint and Jessel personally and knows things the governess does not. Miles and Flora possess the central evidence but cannot or will not

communicate it directly. The uncle is responsible for the children but absent. Douglas frames the story decades later with his own interpretive distance. The unnamed listener stands in for the reader.

The teacher's choice of which perspectives to include and which to omit is itself an interpretive act. Including the ghosts as playable shifts the design toward the supernatural reading. Excluding them shifts toward the psychological reading. The teacher who includes both as ambiguous presences whose visibility to other characters is itself contested has built the design that most fully preserves the text's hesitation.

Information Architecture

The third move is structuring information across characters. A working approach uses three layers. Public facts are what every character knows, and these typically come from the agreed-upon backstory of the scenario. Private knowledge is what only this character knows, drawn from their position in the story or from the role's specific history. Interpretive lens is the frame through which this character processes events, the assumptions and habits of mind they bring to what they see.

In *Gilman*, the narrator's public facts include that she has been ill, that John has prescribed the rest cure, and that Jennie keeps the house. Her private knowledge includes the patterns she has been tracing in the wallpaper, the figure she has begun to see, and her diary, which she hides from John. Her interpretive lens is shaped by the late-nineteenth-century medical discourse that frames her as patient rather than agent, and by her own emerging counter-discourse of resistance to that frame. John's public facts are the same. His private knowledge includes his professional concerns, his correspondence with Dr. Mitchell, and his calculations about how long the rest cure can continue before he must consider more aggressive intervention. His interpretive lens is shaped by his medical training and by the gendered authority structure he embodies without examining.

Players will leak public, guard private, and reveal lens through play. The leakage and the guarding are dramatic engines. The lens, when it becomes visible to other characters and to the player themselves, is where the interpretive learning happens.

The Contradiction Map

The fourth move is the contradiction map. A grid showing where each pair of characters' accounts conflict, where they overlap, and where they fill in each other's gaps gives the design its motion. Without the map, the play can stall in pleasant agreement. With the map, every conversation has friction.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the contradiction between the governess's account of Quint and Mrs. Grose's account is the engine. The governess sees Quint and identifies him from the description Mrs. Grose has provided. Mrs. Grose has not seen the figure herself. The governess's account depends on Mrs. Grose's confirmation, but Mrs. Grose's confirmation depends on the governess's description, and the circularity is the point. When two students play this scene, the design supports them in producing the textual structure that James produced on the page. The play is not a translation of the text. The play is a parallel performance of the same interpretive problem.

AI is genuinely useful at drafting the contradiction map. Asked to identify the conflicts and overlaps between any two character accounts, the model produces a credible first draft within seconds. The teacher then revises, complicates, and adds nuance. The labor that previously took experienced freeform writers significant time becomes available to a working teacher in a single planning session.

Goals and Pressure

The fifth move is goals and pressure. Each character needs at least one strong goal that pushes them into conversation with at least three other characters. Without pressure, freeform stalls into polite chat. With excessive pressure, it becomes melodrama. The image to keep in mind, borrowed from the freeform design tradition, is dominoes set up in a room of caffeinated cats. You want motion, not chaos. The dominoes are the structures of pressure. The cats are the players. The teacher's job is to set the dominoes carefully enough that the cats can move through the room without knocking everything down at once, and yet things still fall.

The narrator in Gilman wants John to release her from the rest cure. John wants the narrator to comply with the cure so that her recovery proceeds. Jennie wants the household to function and the narrator's distress to subside. The doctor, when present, wants confirmation that his protocol is being implemented correctly. Each goal pushes the character toward conversations they would otherwise not have. Each conversation produces friction with another character's goal. The play moves on its own.

Mechanics for the Unsayable

The sixth move addresses how characters communicate experiences that are not straightforwardly speakable. A vision, a hallucination, a memory that may or may not be real, an encounter with something the character cannot name. Several mechanic options exist, each with implications for how the play resolves toward interpretation.

Monologue cards allow a character to step out of the ongoing scene briefly and address the room with a soliloquy. Used sparingly, they let the player render interior states the character would not voice in dialogue. Flashback scenes, common in jeepform design, allow two or three characters to enact a remembered event from their shared past, with the present-tense narrative paused. Shadow players, who voice unspoken thoughts of a character with whom they are paired, externalize the gap between what is said and what is felt. Written notes passed to the GM allow the teacher to introduce events offstage that affect characters without requiring them to be enacted publicly. Ambient sound cues, played at the GM's discretion, mark transitions or signal that a character has noticed something the others have not.

The choice of mechanics shapes what the play can teach. A design built around monologue cards privileges interior expressiveness and produces material the debrief can use to discuss narrative perspective. A design built around shadow players makes the gap between articulated and unarticulated experience visible and produces material for discussion of unreliable narration. There is no neutral choice. Every mechanic is also an interpretive frame.

Time Architecture

The seventh move adapts the form to the available time. Two-to-four-hour designs do not survive direct transposition into forty-to-fifty-minute periods. Several strategies exist. The multi-session arc spreads the play across two or three class periods, with each session covering one phase of the story. The pre-game asynchronous workshop assigns character preparation as homework, freeing class time for play and debrief. Compressed scenes with offstage time-skips let the play move through narrative time faster than real time, with the GM calling jumps to keep the pace. Hot-seating segments interrupt the play to put one character in the chair while the others ask questions, generating dense character disclosure in concentrated time.

The trade-offs are real. Multi-session arcs require students to maintain character state across days, which is hard. Asynchronous workshops shift labor to homework, which not all students will complete. Compressed scenes lose texture. Hot-seating produces information at the cost of dramatic momentum. The teacher's choice depends on the specific class and the specific term.

Workshops and Warmups

The eighth move is the pre-game workshop. The Nordic tradition has developed a robust pre-game practice, documented across the Knutepunkt anthologies and in Koljonen and colleagues' *Larp Design*. The workshop builds character voice, calibrates physical and emotional contact norms, and primes interpretive readiness (Koljonen et al. 145). For the classroom, a compressed workshop of fifteen to twenty minutes before play begins covers the essential ground.

Useful workshop activities include status walks in which players move around the room embodying different relative power levels, voice-of-the-character exercises in which players try out the cadence and register of their character's speech, evidence-sorting exercises in which players review the textual cues for their character and consolidate what they know, and two-truths-and-a-lie in character, which gives players a low-stakes way to practice making claims their character would make. Each activity primes a different element of the play.

The GM Role

The ninth move is the teacher's role during the play itself. Light-touch facilitation, as established in section four, means scene framing, time calls, occasional offstage prompts to stalled scenes, and otherwise staying out of the way. The GM is not directing the play. The GM is holding the frame so the play can produce something the class can think about afterward.

Specific moves the GM can make include calling a freeze and offering a private aside to a character whose play has stalled, suggesting that two characters who have not interacted yet might find each other in the next scene, introducing an event card that changes the offstage situation, and signaling time milestones so players can pace their own arcs. None of these moves directs the content of play. All of them maintain its momentum.

The architecture is now in place. The next section walks through four worked examples that show the design principles in action across different texts and classroom contexts.

Four Worked Examples

Now let's actually build four of these. Each example takes a single source text and walks through the design choices that produce a runnable classroom unit. The four cases are arranged to demonstrate different design problems. Gilman shows mechanic design. James shows information architecture and language adaptation. Lovecraft shows the language-fails mechanic and the EFL gift of admitted limitation. Jackson shows accessibility and the public-private gap.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The cast for a Gilman freeform includes the narrator, John, Jennie, Mary (the housekeeper or nurse, sometimes conflated with Jennie depending on edition), and the doctor figure based on Silas Weir Mitchell, whose actual rest cure protocol Gilman was treating with critical irony. A sixth role, the woman behind the wallpaper, can be played by a shadow player who voices what the narrator perceives without speaking it aloud, producing the play's central interpretive gap as an embodied feature of the scene.

The central interpretive question, framed for the classroom, is whether the narrator's experience is a medical pathology, a supernatural emergence, or a feminist allegory about confinement. The text supports all three readings. The brilliance of Gilman's design is that the readings are not mutually exclusive. The play preserves this by giving each character access to evidence for a different reading, with overlap.

The signature mechanic is the diary as physical object. The narrator's diary entries are written in real time during the play, on actual paper, and the GM determines when other characters discover or read fragments of them. The mechanic has several effects. It makes the text's central textual artifact, the diary, into a literal object in the room. It creates dramatic tension around discovery and concealment. It produces material that can be reread in the debrief alongside the actual story.

The EFL angle is the contrast between the language of nineteenth-century medical authority and the narrator's evolving internal voice. John speaks in the register of a confident professional. Mitchell, when present, speaks in the register of the published expert. The narrator begins in the same register and shifts toward something stranger, more associative, more disrupted. The play makes the register shift available to students as a felt phenomenon. They hear the difference between how John talks and how the narrator talks. The debrief then asks them to find the same difference on the page.

Hypothetical classroom run notes suggest that the diary mechanic produces strong engagement when the GM rations the discovery moments carefully. Releasing too many diary fragments too early dissipates tension. Releasing them at moments of dramatic peak amplifies it. Students playing John often report, in debrief, that they felt the gap between their character's professional certainty and the evidence the diary fragments revealed. That gap is the interpretive learning.

The Turn of the Screw by Henry James

The James freeform is the most demanding of the four. The cast includes the governess, Mrs. Grose, Miles, Flora, the absent uncle (accessible by letter only, with the GM playing his

replies), and Quint and Jessel as ambiguous presences whose visibility is itself a mechanic. The design challenge is preserving the central ambiguity, which is whether the ghosts are real or whether the governess is unraveling, when the form normally requires that things either happen or do not.

The signature mechanic is the seeing card. Any character may play their seeing card once during the play. When the card is played, the character describes what they see in the current location. Other characters in the same location cannot contradict the description, but they may say what they see in the same space. The mechanic produces overlapping accounts of the same scene without resolving which is correct. Two characters may both see Quint, neither may see Quint, or the governess may see Quint while Mrs. Grose sees the empty stairwell. The text's hesitation is preserved as a designed feature of the play.

The EFL angle is James's syntactic complexity. The original text is dense with subordinated clauses, indirect discourse, and qualified perceptions. Adapting role briefs for an EFL context requires careful translation work that preserves the qualifications without overwhelming the player. AI is genuinely useful here, generating drafts that simplify syntax while retaining the epistemic markers that make James's prose work. The teacher must then check the drafts against the source, because the AI's drafts will sometimes flatten ambiguities the simpler syntax was supposed to carry.

The information architecture is the design's heaviest lift. Mrs. Grose knows things about Quint's history with Miles that the governess does not. The governess knows things about her current perceptions that Mrs. Grose can only receive secondhand. Miles knows what he knows but cannot or will not say it. Flora knows what she knows and is younger and more easily silenced. The uncle knows the legal structure of his guardianship but is absent. The contradiction map for *The Turn of the Screw* is dense, and building it well takes the teacher real time.

When the play runs, the typical discovery is that students playing the governess feel the pressure of her interpretive position from the inside. They see a figure on the stairs. They are not sure whether to trust their own perception. They look to Mrs. Grose for confirmation. The confirmation, when it comes, is partial and equivocal. The student lives inside the governess's epistemological vertigo for forty minutes, and the debrief question, "How does James produce this vertigo on the page?" lands on a student who has just felt it.

"The Colour Out of Space" by H. P. Lovecraft

The Lovecraft freeform draws on the broader Lovecraftian corpus for design conventions but anchors in a single text. "The Colour Out of Space," published in 1927 and one of Lovecraft's strongest stories, has the advantage of relatively contained geography (the Gardner farm), a manageable cast, and a central interpretive question that is precisely about the failure of language. The cast includes the surveyor (Lovecraft's narrator), Ammi Pierce (the elderly farmer who knew the Gardners and tells the surveyor much of the story), members of the Gardner family (Nahum, Nabby, Thaddeus, Merwin, Zenas), and additional roles such as a skeptical academic from Arkham and a journalist who has come to investigate. The Gardners' arc spans the duration of the contamination, and players take their characters through stages of decline.

The central interpretive question is how anyone describes what cannot be described. The story's signature device is its insistence on the inadequacy of language for what the meteorite has brought. The colour of the title is not actually a colour in the usual sense, and Lovecraft's narrator returns again and again to the failure of his words. The cosmic indifference at the heart of the story becomes, in the classroom, a dramatic problem. How does a character communicate something for which they have no words?

The signature mechanic is the language-fails token. When played, the speaker stops talking and another player narrates what their character cannot articulate. The mechanic is, alongside its dramatic function, a substantial pedagogical gift in EFL contexts, because the form admits and uses linguistic limitation. A student whose English is not yet strong enough to render a complex perception in continuous speech can play the token, and the form turns their limitation into the very phenomenon the text is about. The student's L2 limit and the character's perceptual limit become the same limit. The play teaches what the story is doing by enacting the failure that the story enacts.

The EFL angle extends to specific vocabulary. The play teaches the vocabulary of perception, hedging, and epistemic modality. "It seemed." "Almost." "As if." "Something like." These are the moves Lovecraft's narrator makes constantly, and a student who has heard another student make them in character has acquired the vocabulary in a way the textbook does not produce.

When the play runs, the typical discovery is that students find the Lovecraftian register surprisingly accessible. The hedging is what the form requires. The students' uncertainty is what the form rewards. The debrief discussion of cosmic indifference and linguistic failure connects to the play they have just experienced, and the analytical claim about Lovecraft's stylistic choices lands on students who have spent ninety minutes inside those choices.

"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson

The Jackson freeform is the most accessible of the four and the one most often successful with lower-intermediate classes. "The Lottery," published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, is a short story written in plain American English with minimal syntactic complexity. The horror lives entirely in the gap between the village's collective practice and the private experiences of its inhabitants. The cast includes Tessie Hutchinson, Bill Hutchinson, Old Man Warner, Mr. Summers, Mr. Graves, several villagers with private opinions about the ritual, and possibly Tessie's children.

The central interpretive question is what the village believes and what each individual believes. The story's structure makes the public-private gap the central horror. Everyone participates. Few seem genuinely enthusiastic. Old Man Warner is enthusiastic, but his enthusiasm is itself disturbing. Tessie's protest comes only when she is selected, which is the horror of the story's moral structure.

The signature mechanic is the private thought pause. The GM freezes action periodically and each character speaks one sentence the others cannot hear. The sentences are spoken aloud to the GM and to the room generally, but in the fiction they are interior. The mechanic externalizes the public-private gap that the story builds. Students hear what their fellow

villagers privately think. They cannot react to the private thoughts in character. They must continue performing the public role of the villager who participates without complaint.

The EFL angle is Jackson's accessible language masking massive interpretive depth. Lower-intermediate students can read the text without significant scaffolding. The interpretive work is in what the text refuses to say. The form, by externalizing the private thoughts, makes the interpretive work available to students who might struggle to articulate the same gap from analytical reading alone.

When the play runs, the typical discovery is that the public-private gap produces visceral discomfort in students, even in classes that have read the story before. The play makes the participation physical. Students walk through the lottery's ritual stages. They draw papers. They watch their fellow villagers continue to participate. The debrief question, "What does Jackson's prose technique do to render the same gap on the page?" lands on students who have just performed the gap and felt its weight.

The four examples demonstrate that the design architecture generalizes across texts of significantly different shapes. The mechanics differ. The information architecture differs. The EFL pedagogical gifts differ. What stays constant is the move from text to perspective inventory to information architecture to mechanic to time architecture to play to debrief. The next section takes up the debrief in detail, because the debrief is where the analytical learning happens.

Debrief: Turning Bleed into Argument

OK, the play has happened. Students are still sitting in their character's energy. The room has the texture of having held something that was not entirely comfortable. The temptation, for a teacher, is to move directly to analytical discussion. That temptation should be resisted. The freeform is not the lesson. The debrief is the lesson, and the debrief has a structure of its own that, when honored, produces interpretive learning that the play alone cannot.

The Structural Move

Students must travel from "my character believed this" to "the text supports or complicates this interpretation." That single sentence, delivered slowly, is the entire pedagogical action of the unit. The freeform built the appetite for textual evidence. The debrief converts the appetite into argument. Skip the debrief and you have run an entertaining piece of theatre. Run the debrief well and you have taught literary interpretation.

De-roling

The first move in the debrief is de-roling. Bowman and others in the LARP studies literature have written extensively on why de-roling matters, and the practice has consolidated across the field (Bowman, "Social Conflict" 12). Emotional residue from horror play is not analytical material until it has been consciously held at a distance. A student who is still partly in the governess's panic cannot yet think about James's prose technique. A student still feeling Tessie's terror cannot yet think about Jackson's narrative distance.

Practical de-roling techniques are simple and fast. Players name three things outside the fiction (the date, what they had for breakfast, something they can see through the window).

Players physically swap shoes with a partner and back, marking a transition with a small ritual. Players speak their own name and one statement that is true about themselves outside the game. These techniques sound trivial. They are not. The cognitive shift from inside the character to outside is genuine, and the small physical acts catalyze the shift more effectively than verbal instruction alone.

Beth Gentry Beltrán's article "Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes," published in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2012* edited by Bowman and Vanek, treats de-roling as a Jungian individuation process and gives the practice a deeper theoretical frame than space allows here (Beltrán 89). For classroom use, the key principle is that de-roling is non-negotiable and takes only a few minutes when done properly.

The Three-Column Move

The second move is the three-column worksheet. Students populate three columns before discussion begins. Column one: what my character believed during the play. Column two: what actually happened in the play (events, dialogues, decisions). Column three: what the text actually says (with specific reference to lines, scenes, or passages). The worksheet does not require continuous prose. Notes are fine. The point is to make the analytical separation physical. Students see, in their own handwriting, the difference between their character's belief, the play's events, and the text's evidence.

The teacher who introduces the worksheet says the following, slowly. "Your character believed certain things during the play. Some of those beliefs were supported by the play's events. Some were not. Some of those beliefs are also supported by the original text. Some are not. Take five minutes and fill in the three columns." The five minutes are real. The students need them. The pause between play and discussion is the pedagogical action.

From Belief to Evidence

The third move is teacher-led discussion that pushes students from first-person claims to text-anchored claims. The recurring question is "Where in the story does it say that?" The freeform has built the appetite for evidence. The debrief is where the appetite gets fed. Students who would not, before the play, have engaged with the question "What evidence does the text give for the governess's reliability?" now have a personal stake in the answer, because they have just inhabited or interacted with the governess's position.

The discussion does not need to resolve the central ambiguity. In fact, it should not. The whole point of the form is to preserve the ambiguity while equipping students to argue about it on textual grounds. A successful debrief produces multiple readings, each defended with evidence, with explicit acknowledgment that the readings differ and that the differences matter.

Comparing Readings

The fourth move is comparing readings across the room. Different characters will have produced different readings. Different students playing the same character may also have produced different readings. The classroom is now a room full of partial truths held by named people. This is the structure of literary criticism in miniature.

The teacher might frame the comparison as follows. “The student who played the narrator just argued that her experience supports a supernatural reading. The student who played John just argued that the same play supports a psychological reading. Both students are drawing on what happened in the play. Now look at the text. Which reading does the text support more fully? Or does the text support both?” The question is genuine. The answer depends on what the text actually says, which is what the students are now equipped to investigate.

The Writing Follow-up

The fifth move is the writing follow-up. A short interpretive essay, evidence-mapping task, or scene-rewrite exercise locks the analytical move into language production. For EFL contexts, this is where the language objective lands hardest. Students are now writing about a text whose ambiguity they have inhabited, with vocabulary they have used in character, about questions that have personal stakes.

The writing prompt should be specific. “Choose one moment in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ that supports two readings. Show, with specific reference to the text, what each reading would emphasize. Conclude by saying which reading you find more compelling and why.” The prompt invites argument. It requires evidence. It permits, within argument, the acknowledgment that the alternative reading has its own grounds. That last permission, often missing from EFL essay prompts, is what the form has worked toward.

Assessment

The sixth move is assessment, which deserves its own brief discussion. The play itself should not be graded. Grading the play introduces performance pressures that distort the form and risks penalizing students whose linguistic confidence is lower. What gets graded is the debrief artifacts (the three-column worksheet, the discussion contributions) and the writing follow-up.

Rubric construction should attend to claim, evidence, and acknowledgment of counter-readings. A student who produces a clear claim, supports it with textual evidence, and acknowledges that the text supports a different reading has done the analytical work the unit aims to teach. A student who produces a confident single-reading essay without acknowledging counter-evidence has missed something the play was specifically designed to make visible. The rubric should reward the structural move from belief to evidence to argument with counter-argument, which is the structure the form produces when it works.

Hammer, Schrier, and others have written on assessment in edu-larp contexts, with attention to the difficulty of assessing both the play experience and the academic learning that follows from it. The general consensus, which holds in the literature classroom, is that the academic deliverable is the appropriate site for grading and that the play itself is the means rather than the end.

The debrief structure is now in place. The next section takes up the limitations and ethical considerations specific to AI-supported horror freeform in EFL contexts.

Limitations, Ethics, and EFL-Specific Considerations

Now we have to be honest about what can go wrong, who this does not fit, and what ethical stakes are specific to this combination of AI, horror content, and second-language learners. Some of the considerations that follow are non-negotiable. Others are matters of judgment that depend on the specific classroom.

Trauma and Horror Content

Students bring histories the teacher does not know. A scenario that seems pleasantly creepy in design can land traumatically on a student whose family or personal experience touches the content in ways the teacher cannot anticipate. The mitigations are familiar from broader trauma-informed pedagogy and from the LARP safety tradition. Pre-game opt-outs allow students to decline a role or a scenario without explanation. Content warnings, given before the play and again before specific scenes, allow students to prepare or to step out. The lines-and-veils convention developed in tabletop role-playing and adapted to LARP, in which players collectively name content that is off the table (lines) or that may happen offstage but not be enacted (veils), gives students agency in setting the boundaries of play. The ability to leave the room without explanation, established at the beginning of the workshop, is essential.

These mitigations are not optional. A horror freeform run without them is irresponsible. A teacher who is not willing to honor a student's opt-out, or who would interpret the opt-out as a failure of engagement, should not run the form.

Cultural Fit

Horror tropes do not translate uniformly across cultures. Western ghost-story conventions land differently in East Asian classrooms, where ghost narratives have their own established conventions and may carry religious or familial weight that Western frames do not anticipate. Jackson's village ritual lands differently in cultures with active ritual practice. Lovecraftian cosmic horror, with its inheritance of early-twentieth-century anxieties about racial and biological contamination, requires careful handling regardless of context but particularly so in cross-cultural adaptation.

The Taipei classroom, where this writer is working, sits within a cultural context in which ghost stories carry significant traditional weight. Ghost month observances, family practices around ancestor veneration, and a robust literary tradition of supernatural fiction in Chinese all shape how students will receive a Western ghost story. None of these factors makes the form impossible. They make the form context-sensitive. The teacher's local knowledge is the necessary corrective to the AI's tendency to flatten cultural specificity.

The practical move is to prepare scenarios with explicit attention to which conventions transfer and which do not, and to invite students into the comparison rather than around it. A *Turn of the Screw* freeform played in Taipei can productively engage the contrast between Jamesian Victorian ghosts and the conventions of Chinese-language supernatural fiction. The play becomes, partly, a comparative exercise in genre.

Power Dynamics and L2 Vulnerability

Speaking in a second language is already exposing. Asking students to do so in character, in horror content, compounds the exposure. The mitigations include home-language scaffolds, character briefs that include language-level guidance, and generous improv-warmup norms that establish that linguistic stumbles are part of the form rather than failures within it.

A specific practice that works well is the codeswitch permission. The teacher establishes at the workshop that any player may switch to their L1 momentarily if they cannot find an English expression for what their character is trying to say, and that the L1 expression will be honored as character speech. The permission shifts the play's center of gravity. Students who would otherwise stall on language find themselves moving forward. The codeswitch can be brief or sustained, and the teacher's permissive stance signals that the play prioritizes character expression over English production. The English production happens anyway, and arguably increases, because the pressure has been relieved.

AI Bias and Hallucination

AI may invent textual evidence, misattribute lines, or produce briefs that subtly tilt toward dominant readings. The teacher's editorial responsibility is real and time-consuming. Every quotation must be checked against the source. Every interpretive claim must be examined for whether it preserves or flattens the text's ambiguity. The labor cannot be skipped without compromising the academic integrity of the unit.

A specific risk in the EFL context is that AI may produce simplified language that, while linguistically appropriate, removes the hedging and qualification that the source text requires. A James passage that depends on its subordinated clauses for its ambiguity may, in simplified form, become unambiguous in ways the original is not. The teacher must compare the simplified version with the original and verify that the interpretive structure has survived the simplification. If it has not, the simplification needs to be redone, often by hand.

Teacher Workload

Be honest. Designing a horror freeform with AI assistance still takes hours. The first time a teacher runs the form, the workload is comparable to a major project unit, and possibly heavier. Subsequent runs of the same scenario amortize the cost, but the initial investment is real. Teachers considering this approach should plan for it as a multi-week development project, not as a quick lesson.

The compensating return is that the unit, once built, can be run multiple times across cohorts with relatively minor adjustments. The character briefs, the contradiction map, and the debrief worksheets all transfer. What needs adjustment is the pacing, the specific scaffolding for the current class's proficiency, and the cultural framing for the current group. The development cost amortizes across runs in a way that conventional lesson planning often does not.

Generalizability

This works best with intermediate to advanced learners, roughly B1 and above. With lower proficiency, the freeform structure may collapse under language load. A2 and lower students

can engage with simpler scenarios, but the texts under discussion in this essay generally require enough English to support character speech. Scaffolds for lower-proficiency contexts include providing key phrases on character briefs, allowing more codeswitching, and reducing the number of characters in play. The form does not scale infinitely downward, and a teacher with an A2 class should consider whether the canonical horror corpus is the right fit, or whether the same techniques applied to simpler texts would serve the class better.

What This Cannot Do

The form does not replace careful close reading. Students who have played a freeform of “The Yellow Wallpaper” still need to read the text carefully, return to it after the play, and engage analytically with its specific language. The freeform builds appetite and produces interpretive material. The reading does the analytical work. A teacher who substitutes play for reading has misunderstood the form.

The form also does not replace the teacher’s content knowledge. A teacher who runs the unit without having developed their own clear sense of what each text is doing, what readings it supports, and what evidence the text gives for each, will produce a freeform that runs but does not teach. The AI does not supply this knowledge. It supplies drafts. The drafts depend on the teacher’s evaluative capacity, which is itself a form of expertise that takes time to develop.

The limitations are real. The form is not a universal solvent. The form is a particular kind of pedagogy that fits particular kinds of texts in particular kinds of classrooms when handled by particular kinds of teachers. The good news is that the conditions for good fit are not exotic. An intermediate or advanced EFL classroom, with a teacher who has time to design and a willingness to learn the form, is a perfectly common setting.

Conclusion: The Room of Partial Truths

We have walked together through theory, through design, through worked examples, through the debrief that converts play into argument, and through the limitations that make the form context-sensitive rather than universal. Let’s gather the threads.

The umbrella argument has held. AI does not replace literary pedagogy or LARP design. AI expands the teacher’s capacity to generate playable structures, differentiated roles, and language-rich scenarios, while the teacher remains responsible for interpretation, classroom fit, and reflective learning. The capacity is real. The expansion is real. The teacher’s responsibilities have not been reduced. They have been redirected toward editorial judgment, contextual adaptation, and pedagogical curation, which are the labors AI cannot perform.

The thesis has held also. AI-supported horror freeform LARPs deepen EFL learners’ literary interpretation by allowing them to perform ambiguity, unreliability, and conflicting perspectives rather than merely identify them analytically. The performance is not a substitute for analysis. The performance is one of the conditions under which analysis becomes possible for L2 learners working with texts that resist resolution. A student who has played the governess in James now has somewhere to stand when asked to write about James’s narrative technique. A student who has played John in Gilman now feels the shape of the medical-authority discourse he sustained. A student who has voiced a private thought in Jackson’s village now knows what the public-private gap weighs.

Return to the opening image. The classroom in Taipei on a humid Tuesday afternoon, with John insisting nothing is wrong while the narrator describes the woman behind the wallpaper. That room held two truths at once. That room is what literature classrooms can be when the form is given to them, and the form has been given to them. The materials of theatre-style freeform LARP, the safety mechanics, the design conventions, the educational lineage at Østerskov and elsewhere, exist. The AI tools that make scaling feasible exist. The texts are public-domain or freely teachable. What remains is for working teachers to decide that the form is worth the development time.

Future research could productively explore comparative studies across language proficiency bands, longitudinal effects on interpretive writing, the development of shareable AI-prompt libraries for canonical horror texts, and questions about how this method scales beyond horror into other ambiguous genres. Modernist short fiction, postcolonial unreliable narrators, magical realism, and contemporary autofiction all share the structural features that make horror freeform work. The toolbox extends.

What you may find, if you take the form into your own classroom, is that the first run will be uneven. Some scenes will land. Others will stall. The debrief will be longer than you planned. A student will say something in the discussion that makes you reconsider what you thought the unit was teaching. The second run will be better. By the third, you will have your own version of the form, with your own design choices and your own preferred scaffolds, and the form will have become part of your practice rather than an experiment within it.

The room of partial truths is not a single insight. The room of partial truths is a habit, settled into the bones of a curriculum, that produces a particular kind of student. That student holds two readings at once. That student looks at a difficult text and looks for evidence rather than for the answer. That student knows, from experience, that interpretive disagreement is an ordinary feature of literary thought rather than a failure of comprehension. That student is what the form aims to produce, and what the form, run with care over a term or a year, actually does produce.

Go out and play. Build a freeform from a story your students will actually read. Run it. Run the debrief. Watch what happens. Tell other teachers what worked and what did not. The form lives or dies on practitioner exchange, and the exchange is what every section of this essay has, finally, been arguing for.

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