

Safety and Identity Exploration: How Queer TTRPGs Provide Structure for Players

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) industry has expanded and diversified significantly. While Dungeons and Dragons (Arneson et al. 1974) may still be the biggest player on the map, there are now numerous systems and universes to meet the needs of players with widely varied play styles and preferences. Narrative development, combat mechanics, and character creation are handled differently in each system, featuring contrasting methods of translating abstract human experiences into a numerical system. This study seeks to understand how character creation mechanics in TTRPGs can best facilitate queer play.

Queer gamers have been playing TTRPGs since their advent in the 1970s but have only recently been welcomed into the community of TTRPG players and creators. The growing field of queer games studies has included investigations into queer roleplay in digital games (e.g., Shaw et al. 2016, Ruberg 2020), suggesting that narrative ‘bleed’ in roleplaying games can make in-game experiences feel somewhat like real-world experiences (Waern 2011) and that the option to play a character as queer can provide a mechanism for reflection on the player’s personal relationship to queerness (Harper 2017). We identify TTRPGs as a potential site for amplified character bleed and as a safe space for queer exploration.

CURRENT STUDY

Responding to Ruberg’s notion of the “queer games avant-garde” where games are made by, for, and about queer gamers (Ruberg 2020), we sought out “queer TTRPGs” where queerness is centered in the design of a given TTRPG system and/or setting. Queer players are still not accepted at every TTRPG table, but a cluster of recently released roleplaying games have made it a priority to be explicitly inclusive on this front, with some games created specifically to mirror or highlight the queer experience. In this study, we first curated a ludography of seven “queer TTRPGs” that support the exploration of queer identity: *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (Walsh 2021), *Monsterhearts 2* (Alder 2021), *Dream Askew* (Alder 2018), *Alice is Missing* (Starke 2020), *Sleepaway* (Dragon 2020), *Lichcraft* (O’Connel 2021), and *Wanderhome* (Dragon 2021). For our purposes, queerness in these games often referred to games that existed beyond the bounds of cis-heteronormativity (i.e., being cis-gendered and heterosexual being presented as the norm). Using the player manuals of these games we were able to

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identify patterns in character creation mechanics, narrative setup, roleplay tools, and thematic guidance that contribute to a constructive and safe experience for players who are queer or playing queer characters. Here we present a couple of our early findings of this analysis surrounding character creation.

EARLY FINDINGS

Every queer game in our ludography was not combat-based. By this we mean, physical violence or fighting was not the central game mechanic. This has a downstream impact on how characters are created in queer games - rather than mechanizing their bodies and their physical abilities, instructions for creating characters focus on their emotions, relationships with other player characters and non-player characters, and their own inner conflicts. For example, in *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (Walsh 2021) players are asked to “choose a playbook that represents the emotional conflict and archetype you want to embody.” Players are free to invent backstories and aesthetics and have playbook moves to choose from that center around the chosen inner conflict. For example, players may choose to play as “the Beast” and even though this playbook centers around physical transformation the rulebook does not focus on how much damage you can do but rather focuses on the conflict of being who you are vs. fitting into the social order.

Collaboration was also a large part of character creation in the games, some as simple as asking each other questions to define relationships, and others used it to determine qualities about the characters. The queer TTRPGs all allow players to create queer player characters (regarding player character gender and sexuality). However, these games approach gender and sexuality in different ways. While these games may contain explicit allegories and/or explicit queerness they also leave a lot of the choice up to the players to make their game reflect the societies they want to exist in. Focus on characters' stories also emphasizes the central themes of the games like community and resistance which often exist in a queer context (Ruberg et al. 2017).

CONCLUSION

In our study, we identified how the TTRPGs we analyzed provide structure and safety for players to interact with queerness. However, they also remain flexible when it comes to player character identity and do not attempt to operationalize identity to impact gameplay. Our findings demonstrate that queerness in games goes beyond representation and is embedded in the themes and mechanics of the games. Our work contributes clearly identified elements that make TTRPGs queer - transcending the game industry's current understanding of what queer representation means. With this, we seek to uplift the work being done in the queer games community and identify patterns emerging in the work in order to create paths forward for even more radical inclusion of queerness in games. In future work, we would like to talk to players to understand how they create characters in order to directly understand how their characters may contribute to their identity exploration.

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