

“I felt like I was them. I just didn’t know it.”: Exploring Queer Identity through TTRPG Play

Jailyn Zabala, Josie Zvelebilova, Alexandra To

Northeastern University

360 Huntington Ave.

Boston, MA, 02115

zabala.j@northeastern.edu, zvelebilova.j@northeastern.edu,

a.to@northeastern.edu

ABSTRACT

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) have been proven to both positively and negatively impact the well-being and mental health of people playing them. In this paper we discuss how TTRPGs may impact identity exploration, specifically for queer people. While there is extensive research on how video games and queer identities interact there is little research discussing TTRPGs and queer identity. Specifically we explore identity exploration, an important part of the identity formation process. We performed 12 semi-structured interviews with TTRPG players on their experiences creating and playing characters related to their own queer identity exploration. Participants shared with us the ways that TTRPGs helped them explore different possible identities by providing low-stakes, structured, social environments to practice them. We discuss how performance plays a role in our current ideas about the performativity of queer identity and ways that game developers can encourage players to foster safe game communities during TTRPG play.

Keywords

identity exploration, queerness, tabletop role-playing games

INTRODUCTION

The formation of queer identity, like queerness, is fluid, non-linear and complex. Some queer people feel like they knew they were queer since they were children, while others feel that their conceptions of gender and sexuality only became salient in late adolescence or adulthood (Sansfaçon et al. 2020; Hall, Dawes, and Plocek 2021). Queerness is something that can be “discovered” in that people often gain conscious recognition of their queer identity over time, even if it has always existed (Hall, Dawes, and Plocek 2021). Thus queer people may often have revelations retrospectively about their own queerness. This internal recognition is not to be confused with “coming out” or transitioning, which usually refer to the outward expression of one’s sexuality or gender identity. Although some researchers call this internal recognition “coming out” to oneself (Darakchi 2023; Sandler 2022). A person might be aware of their own queerness without being out to other people or labeling

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themselves more specifically than “queer.” For example, someone may be certain that they are not cis or straight, but may not exactly know what labels they want to use (e.g. bi, ace, lesbian, trans masc, demigirl). In this paper, we use the term identity exploration to refer to the process through which queer people experiment with aspects of their identity. For example, a person might start out using she/her pronouns and then start using she/they pronouns to explore a more genderqueer expression. This exploration has no predetermined timeline or endpoint—it can be shaped by various experiences, may continue indefinitely, and sometimes occurs without conscious awareness, as we discuss later in this paper.

There are many experiences that can impact a person's queer exploration. In this paper we explore how players use tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) to explore queerness. We specifically explore what role TTRPGs play in identity formation, recognizing that role-playing has the power to bleed into a player's real life (Hugaas 2024). TTRPGs are particularly interesting because they combine social play with individual imagination, each person's conception of their character remaining deeply personal as they interact in a shared narrative. We seek to build on the limited but growing research on queer TTRPGs by exploring the ways in which TTRPGs can be a valuable tool for queer identity exploration using phenomenological qualitative methods. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 queer TTRPG players in English to discuss how they used TTRPGs to explore their identities. We emphasized the relationship players' had with their characters and the way they communicated/role-played their choices. We aim to understand not only how players used the TTRPGs to perform queer identity exploration but also the role that TTRPGs play in queer identity formation. We found that, for our participants, the social environment around playing TTRPGs and the act of role-playing in TTRPGs provided a safe environment for players to explore many aspects of identity through their characters. We argue that the role play found in TTRPGs mirrors queer performances of gender and sexuality in real life.

POSITIONALITY

We include a positionality statement because we agree on the importance of including researcher positionality in qualitative research (Holmes 2020). We reject the notion of an objective researcher and recognize how our identities color our research. Having said that, we are HCI and games researchers who have extensive TTRPG experience. We are all queer with two of us being trans and two of us being people of color. Our research is impacted by our own experiences as well as intersectional and interdisciplinary research practices. This research is also informed by our own experiences with exploring queerness through gaming, specifically TTRPG gaming. All researchers are based in the US where the government continues to threaten the lives of the queer community.

BACKGROUND ON QUEER IDENTITY EXPLORATION

Here we briefly review literature on queer identity exploration and formation as important background context for this research. Specifically, we examine TTRPG play as a site of queer identity exploration.

Identity formation is a core part of human development usually beginning in adolescence and marked by confusion and experimentation (Erikson 1968). Identity

formation can continue into adulthood but extended periods of not having a committed identity can lead to identity distress (Palmeroni et al. 2020). Identity distress is associated with poorer mental health, poorer relationships and poorer communication skills (Palmeroni et al. 2020; Crocetti et al. 2008). Identity formation is not just an internal process it is often influenced by messages one is getting from their surroundings (Palmeroni et al. 2020).

The present research focuses on queer identity with an understanding that identity is intersectional (i.e., that identity is not additive and that many other identities such as gender, body, religion, race, etc. co-mingle to create new experiences (Crenshaw 1989)). Since we live in a cisheteronormative society most messaging is that “normal” people or people in the in-group are cis and straight. Therefore it may be difficult to develop identities outside of the norm especially if there are more inhibiting factors due to intersectional identity. For example, Cerezo et al. discuss how Latina women may avoid a queer identity formation because discussions of sexuality, especially non-heterosexual ones, were forbidden and could cost them their social support systems, especially connected to race and culture (Cerezo et al. 2019).

Identity exploration is crucial for identity formation (Marcia 1966; Luyckx, Goossens, and Soenens 2006; Crocetti et al. 2008). Our current understandings of identity formation build off the seminal theories of Erik Erikson’s identity vs role confusion and James Marcia’s identity status theory. Marcia’s identity status theory extends Erikson’s theory with four pathways through which identity is formed: identity achievement, identity moratorium, identity foreclosure, and identity diffusion (Marcia 1980). The most relevant for exploration is identity moratorium which is the stage of development in which people explore possible identities without fully committing (Marcia 1980). More modern theories focus on dual processing and how identity formation is “an iterative process in which youth form and revise commitments over time” (Crocetti et al. 2008). Our focus is on exploratory activities, which are considered a fundamental part of the identity formation process in multiple development theories (Flum and Kaplan 2006).

In this paper, we work from the understanding that queer identity is not linear or fixed. This view derives from the post-structuralist idea that there is no single absolute truth and that knowledge is contextual. For queer theory and discussions of identity, this means that “[...] we don’t have any kind of fixed stable identity that we are. Rather, certain identities - such as those related to gender, sexuality, race, or class - are culturally constituted through ideological and normative processes.” (Barker and Scheele 2016). Micheal Foucault and Judith Butler further solidify these ideas by discussing sexuality and gender as what individuals do rather than who individuals are (Foucault 1976; Butler 1990). Butler often describes gender as performative, which differs from the idea of gender as a performance, although the latter may also be a familiar experience for some people (Butler 1990). All “performance” is inherently constrained by existing social structures and power dynamics, particularly for those with intersecting marginalized identities. This underscores why exploration is so vital—it allows individuals to experiment with different forms of gender expression and discover what feels authentic within and despite the social constraints.

RELATED WORKS

Role-Playing Games and Identity

Role-playing games (RPGs) broadly “allow a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment” (Fine 2002). There are several categories of RPGs as well as communities that are built around role-playing. TTRPGs are considered the “original” form of RPG where players typically sit around the table and verbally describe what their characters do and where story and conflict and interpretation of the game rules are adjudicated by a game master (GM) (Deterding and Zagal 2018). The GM typically has an asymmetric role where they present and manage the setting and rules as well as play as all of the non-player characters. It is worth noting that with the modern flourishing of TTRPGs there are many games that break this classic form (e.g., game master-less play, single-player games, games where players do not play a single character). Differentiating from TTRPGs, live action role playing games (LARPs) center around physical interaction with the game world and other players. LARPs also overlap with other role-playing activities like cosplay, pretend play (in children), and some psychotherapy methods (Kamm and Becker 2016; Rognli 2008). Other forms of RPGs include single-player video games referred to as computer role-playing games (CRPGs) as well as multiplayer online role-playing games (MORPGs) (Deterding and Zagal 2018). What differs mostly between these forms is the structure and purpose of the role play involved. That is to say role playing has existed for a long time and there are many ways that role-play fits its way into everyday life. While all RPGs share some key features and have overlapping benefits, this review and paper focus specifically on the context of TTRPGs.

Through play, individuals can safely experiment with different ways of being, testing out behaviors and identities without the full weight of real-world consequences. This behavior is particularly evident in children's imaginative play, but continues to be valuable throughout life. Play creates what developmental psychologists call a “transitional space”—a space between reality and imagination where people can work through complex personal and social dynamics. In TTRPGs, this transitional space is formally structured through rules and character creation systems, making it particularly effective for intentional identity exploration.

There has been substantial research exploring the use of TTRPGs as therapeutic tools that encourage the development of social skills, creative thinking and self-reflection (Blackmon 1994; Bean and Connell 2023; Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022). However, researchers emphasize that this use of TTRPGs should be led by a trained therapist with the consent and knowledge of the players (Bean and Connell 2023). TTRPGs are not also a therapeutic method suited for all players like people going through psychosis (Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024). This is because while TTRPG play may provide a safe space for people to explore their feelings and aspects of themselves it can also negatively impact these behaviors without proper guidance (Bean and Connell 2023). In this context, the game master may create “therapeutic encounters” and “uses the mechanics of the game or the narrative pull of the story to give their players the opportunity to practice a desired skill set” (Bean and Connell 2023; Connell 2023).

TTRPGs are effective in this space because they provide a low consequence environment for players to practice and explore (Blackmon 1994). Generally these benefits on well-being extrapolate beyond clinical settings because “the nature of the fantasy world allows players to choose characters that represent their ideal self, future self, past self, and even the dark side of their real self, without any judgment or label from others” (Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024). Bowman, a seminal researcher on TTRPG play, concisely states three basic functions of role-playing in this context which are enhancing “communal cohesiveness”, providing a space that encourages and provides space for skill-learning, and providing “a safe space to explore alternative personas” (Bowman 2010). CRPGs have shown to provide similar benefits but the hard-coded nature of digital games tend to impose more restrictions on play (McKenna et al. 2022). Our work is built upon these positive opportunities TTRPGs present for the queer community because of the safe space they provide for identity exploration. Role-playing games in general are an important part of many queer people's identity exploration and affirmation journeys (Van Wert and Howansky 2024).

Queer Player Experience in TTRPGs

Stenros and Sihvonen illustrate the erasure of queer people in early TTRPGs and highlight the ways that newer games include queer representation through blatant and veiled methods (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015). Recently more researchers are recognizing the power of TTRPGs and role-playing in general have on queer communities. In their article, connecting performance studies, TTRPGs, and critical utopianism, Kawitzky argues that tabletop role-playing games serve as a method for players to exercise “their capacity for imaginative, potentially revolutionary, hoping” (Kawitzky 2021). Sottile highlights how TTRPGs provide “life-giving force for members of the queer community because it enables people to discover and render their identities legible in social utopian spaces at the table and rehearse their performance for life outside of them” (Sottile 2024). Dissertations and theses in this area highlight the importance of TTRPG play to queer community. Gobble recognizes the ways in which TTRPG may have positive clinical implications for queer people by providing community support and celebration and potentially reducing internalized transphobia and homophobia as well as other minority stressors (Gobble 2021). Alternatively, Barnhart surveys queer Discord users about their TTRPG experiences and discusses the potential for experimentation that they provide for queer players (Barnhart 2024). In their dissertation, Kemp specifically conducts semi-structured interviews with players to discuss how virtual play of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) allows queer people to “communicate and perform queerness to build community and to belong” (Kemp 2023). Prior work in queer TTRPGs has also identified game mechanics, theming, and structures that allow players to explore queerness and queer narratives (Berge 2021; Zabala, Zvelebilova, and To 2024). This work seeks to build upon these findings and continue to expand our understanding of queer identity making using TTRPGs.

METHOD

Study Design

We conducted semi-structured interviews, which are appropriate for this exploratory research because we are “exploring participants' perceptions, experiences and

attitudes” on queer exploration in TTRPG play (Harvey-Jordan and Long 2001). We recruited participants through the authors' social media accounts (Twitter and Tumblr) and the queer community app Lex. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years old, having created a character for queer exploration in any TTRPG system, and being available for a one-hour Zoom interview in English. Participants received \$20 compensation for their time. The recruitment form collected standard demographic information (name, age, ethnicity, and gender) as well as gaming-specific data, such as whether participants had played TTRPGs in the past 12 months, their favorite gaming systems, and their comfort level discussing their own queerness. These questions helped us identify participants who could meaningfully reflect on and discuss their experiences. In selecting our final interview pool, we aimed to include diverse perspectives by considering demographic factors such as age and racial/ethnic background.

Of the 14 participants selected for interviews, two were removed from the dataset because of technical difficulties during the interview and another participant chose to end the interview due to discomfort speaking about queerness. We employed a semi-structured interview protocol, allowing flexibility to pursue relevant follow-up questions while maintaining consistent core topics across interviews. We stopped interviewing when we felt we reached saturation (i.e. when interviewees were mostly repeating ideas and not introducing new thoughts) (Cobern and Adams 2020). The interview protocol began with participant consent and introductory questions about TTRPG play, gender, and sexuality. We then moved to more in-depth questions about queer exploration in TTRPGs, including specific play processes and modes and methods of playing. In the exploration-focused section, we asked participants to discuss their most recent experience with queer exploration through a specific character in a TTRPG. This included questions about the role-play experience, similarities and differences between themselves and their character, and how they developed their character's gender and sexuality.

Summary of Participants

Ten out of twelve participants were in their 20s, with only two being 30+. Six of the participants identified as white, while the other participants identified as Hispanic, Arab, African American, Filipino, Asian American, and Middle Eastern. While the lead interviewer was in the U.S., location was not formally recorded nor a prerequisite for participants and some participants mentioned currently residing in other countries. Participants were also asked about their gender and romantic/sexual orientation, although not all participants disclosed this information. When describing their gender identities, some participants used multiple terms (e.g., "trans nonbinary genderfluid person"). Nearly all (9/12) of the participants were non-binary. This high proportion of non-binary participants emerged organically from our recruitment process rather than by design. The same effect was present in the Barnhart study, which similarly found a majority of genderqueer or non-binary respondents (Barnhart 2024). The remaining three participants included one cis woman and two transmasculine people. Other labels used by participants to describe their genders included femme, transfemme, genderflux, butch, and tomboy.

Three of the nine participants who revealed their sexual/romantic orientation identified as asexual. Of these three, one was aromantic and another was panromantic. Two participants identified as bisexual, two as demisexual, two as lesbian, and one as pansexual. Only three participants used the word “queer” to

describe themselves, while all participants identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Four of the participants had extensive GM experience.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2006). We used a mix of inductive and deductive analysis procedures where inductive open coding focused on identity exploration and emergent concepts and deductive codes were developed using findings reported by Zabala et al., 2024. Researchers familiarized themselves with the data by briefly reading the transcripts. All three researchers read one interview transcript and open coded it after which we compared the codes, resolved any disagreements, and created a shared codebook including both inductive and deductive codes. Then, two of the researchers open coded the rest of the interviews making note of any proposed changes and meeting to discuss. In open coding we developed inductive codes such as Social Safety, Gender Euphoria, Gender Dysphoria, Alter-Ego, Found Family Amongst Players, Immersion, Acceptance, Gender Affirmation, Gender/Sexuality First Character Creation, Character Description, Character Identity Expression, Safety Mechanics, Recurring Themes in Character Story and Guided Character Creation. The two researchers responsible for open coding then compared their codes and iteratively refined the codebook for breadth and specificity. Once all data was coded using the finalized codebook, the researchers grouped related codes together, combining and collapsing similar concepts and drew relationships between different codes and code groupings in order to develop themes. Our themes presented below as findings included feelings during role-play, character creation, game systems, impacts of other players on individual gender exploration, character creation and performing the character.

FINDINGS

Here we present findings describing our player participants' experiences. First we share the TTRPGs the participants discussed to contextualize their play experiences. Then we present our themes beginning with individual players' experiences of exploration through their player characters, followed by the aspects of play including necessary social safety, personal connections to play, and play as performance.

Games Played

Dungeons and Dragons was a common starting point for participants, particularly those with extensive gaming experience (ranging from one to 20+ years). All of the more experienced players cited D&D as their first TTRPG experience. Even if they had played *Dungeons and Dragons* a lot, many participants noted that D&D made queer character creation and role-play more difficult than other systems because of its focus on combat and numbers. Participants expressed preference for games that prioritized player connections, explicitly incorporated queerness, and featured clear safety mechanisms and boundaries. Some other games that participants discussed were *Wanderhome* (Dragon 2021), *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (Walsh 2021), *Dark Heresy* (Barnes, Flack, and Mason 2008), *The Monastery of Tuath* (Nelyhann 2014), *The Watch* (Kreider 2017), *Alice is Missing* (Starke 2020), *Pathfinder* (Paizo 2009), and *Spire* (Howitt and Taylor 2018). Not all games mentioned above were games that

were explicitly queer, but our participants did create characters that explored queerness.

Thirsty Sword Lesbians was often cited as an example of explicit queer representation. As Participant 7 said: “I love the queer representation and the overtness of *Thirsty Sword lesbians* a hundred percent... If you want people to show up to your party, you have to invite them, period. You have to say, this is queer, this is what it's about.” *Belonging Outside of Belonging* (Alder 2018) was also mentioned when talking about alternative game systems.

Players described needing to engage in more “homebrewing” (i.e., creating custom content) when using D&D to explore gender in meaningful ways. One complaint that went beyond D&D concerned species dimorphism and how the typical representations of “male” and “female” members of a species often made it difficult to explore queer bodies and gender expressions.

When giving recommendations or describing their dream systems, participants mentioned a focus on character connections, hopes, and flaws instead of numbers. Often, participants described games that either had good examples of queer characters or had storylines directly connected to queerness. We noticed that participants who mentioned systems that allowed them to create characters from scratch instead of customizing pre-made characters also had a stronger attachment to their characters.

Exploring through Player Character

Subconscious Exploration of Queerness

Even though we asked both about gender and sexuality when talking about queer exploration most players only talked about instances of gender exploration. This is similar to what happened in Barnhart's master's thesis where most participants that replied were genderqueer and mostly discussed gender (Barnhart 2024). These participants described playing a character with a different gender, pronouns, or gender presentation than their own. Participants who had been playing TTRPGs for a long time, typically were not “out” when they started playing TTRPGs. They described their gender exploration as largely subconscious and only drew connections between their role-play and identity later in life. Participant 7 describes this point of their life saying, “I was so straight. I was very cis most, yeah, absolutely. I mean like, oh my God, yeah. Oh my God, I'm so deluded. I was so fucking deluded. I had no idea.” Participant 12 describes the exploration as “I'm definitely always, even if I'm not conscious of it, exploring a piece of my gender, not so much my sexuality because whatever, I've forgot [sic] that all along. It's easy. Not to be like glib, but I'm ace. There's not a lot left there. I figure I've figured it out for now at least. But gender is kind of always this primordial soup and I'm like, all right, what little creature can I fashion out of it this time?”. Participants were not always making purposeful choices to explore gender or sexuality and felt that even in a time where they were not actively identifying as queer they still used TTRPGs to explore. Participants were also discussing these topics retrospectively which could impact their view on their feelings during these times.

These stages of subconscious exploration still included moments of affirmation and disaffirmation which often either hindered or helped with the players confidence on their real life identity. An example of this is when Participant 8 describes their experience role-playing a femme NPC during a D&D session. They said " [it was my] I didn't know it at the time, first overt experience of gender dysphoria as well, because I was trying to do the femme voice, but it was just male enough that it didn't feel quite right. It felt incomplete." They also describe how poor reactions of men at the table made them feel uncomfortable to keep exploring. Another example is Participant 9 who says "I played a guy so I could romance a female Npc. And that, honestly, that should have been like, you should start evaluating things about yourself." and further expands to say that they "I was only playing those because of the romance aspect and heteronormativity and all that." Although at the time participants did not realize they were exploring aspects of their queer identity retrospectively they acknowledge how impactful these exploratory play sessions were positive and negative.

Exploring Different "Ways" of Living

Participants described using gender exploration in games as a way to test potential real-life identities, whether consciously or unconsciously. Participant 3 describes this experience, saying "[my player characters] all impacted my journey one way or another, but at this point in my life, I'm pretty solid on my identity. I'd probably say around seven or eight [characters] were like, this is me looking for something." For some, this exploration was quite deliberate; Participant 11, for instance, describes using their character Goose to "hear [they/them] pronouns in reference to me more often, as well as exploring what it's like to play as a non-binary character in a fantasy world." Many participants characterized this exploration as a feeling of "being" the character they were playing. Participant 8 describes this feeling: "I felt like I was them. I just didn't know it." This connection between character and player identity could influence the player's real-world identity; Participant 1 describes coming out to the other players by saying "by the way, I'm Asher," which was the name of their character at the time. They did this to explain to their game group easily how their gender was the same as their character's.

Even in groups where participants felt safe enough to create trans characters or experiment with different pronouns and genders, they weren't always ready to express these identities as themselves. Many participants described using characters as "trial runs" to explore both how different forms of gender expression felt and how others might react to them. In situations where fellow players reacted poorly to this exploration, it greatly impacted how comfortable the player felt about doing it in real life. While our focus was on gender and sexuality, while discussing queer exploration, most players also mentioned other aspects that they explored in their backgrounds (e.g. personality, spirituality, religion, race) and physical appearances in their characters.

Social Safety is Necessary for Unencumbered Play

Safety was one of the most prominent themes to emerge in our analysis, particularly social safety, which we define as the feeling of being psychologically secure, without fear of judgment, exclusion, or harm. A common pattern across interviews was that participants rarely felt a sufficient sense of social safety to explore queerness in their

first playgroups; instead, they found safety for exploration among other queer people, close friends, and supportive family members. As Participant 1 explains, "It's definitely given me the community to be myself and to be queer that not having role play as an avenue would never have given me." Playing within queer communities offered distinct advantages, including a shared understanding of queerness that eliminated the need for extensive explanations and allowed players to engage more directly with the game. This sense of implicit understanding was particularly valuable, as expressed by Participant 5: "[...] it was nice to not be the token ENBY having to represent myself properly or anything."

The Impacts of Ambiguous Social Agreements

Social agreement within the playgroup was important for meaningful queer exploration. When this agreement was absent, it could severely impact players' experiences, as Participant 8 notes: "eventually their discomfort did just kind of kill the performance." Participants described a spectrum of negative experiences, ranging from uncertainty about their character's presentation to group conflicts that triggered feelings of gender dysphoria. The need to negotiate between authentic self-expression and others' understanding created additional challenges, as illustrated by Participant 4's reflection: "So I kind of put myself in that imaginary pigment to ensure that this is what I want, but then I don't know how others might see this, so I just feel the best thing to do is to make it look like what they would seem it is. But I have other definition for what I'm saying or for what I'm creating." This tension between personal vision and perceived acceptance highlights the importance of a supportive playgroup for identity exploration.

Another example is Participant 11 says that they "actually almost feel like it's the groups that you're with that kind of determine what gender you use. When I've played with groups of mostly straight people, I've generally played as either a woman or a man rather than a non-binary character. But when I've played with mostly queer people, I tend to lean a little bit more toward a non-binary character." In contrast, Participant 8 describes being discouraged by a "muddled" reaction from other players, saying: "It was something that I would've loved to explore more in an environment that was conducive to it, but the fact that my friends didn't react too greatly meant that I just didn't explore it."

Safety of Game World for Exploration

Many participants intentionally used TTRPGs as a protected environment for exploring identities they weren't comfortable expressing outside the game context. Participant 9 says that they "always joke about how D&D is a play therapy for us. We tend to use it to try to figure out or tackle some stuff that it's a safe space for us to tackle certain issues that you won't really be able to in real life." Participant 5 and 1 echo this sentiment, saying that the game was a "safe environment" and "without playing a tabletop role play, [they] would probably still be in the closet because it's the only place [they] feel like [they] really do have the space to experiment."

These participants emphasize the importance of this play space for working through their real world issues — how their play/characters contributed to their self-discovery. One aspect is that decisions that characters make do not necessarily need to be the ones the player would make because where there is a connection

between player and character there is also some distance. Participant 7 describes an in-game relationship between their player character who was a trans woman and a cis-woman NPC by saying that “it wasn't a connection that me as a player understood, but my character understood it.” They describe how they had not experienced that type of romantic relationship in their life and how instead of trying to draw on experience they didn't have they just role-played the character. Because of the way many TTRPGs are structured, players often don't have infinite time to make a decision on how they might respond in a situation so they are encouraged to react as their character would naturally. This structure is an aspect that many participants appreciated. Participant 6 describes being drawn to this aspect of the games: “[...] one of the reasons why I like tabletop is because it's a structured way to interact socially, and I really like social structure.”

A smaller subset of the participants talked about playing queer characters to educate other players at the table about queer issues. Sometimes, this was to support the process of coming out, while other times it was simply to educate fellow players about queerness and other identities. Participant 2 mentions that in their area, “the queer identity isn't very pronounced. It's not very, I just feel like playing it more would help make it more pronounced. More known.” In other instances participants described how other players who they considered good allies would do more of the education work for them.

Other Personal Connections Players Had

Navigating and Using Stereotypes in Character Creation and Play

Participants described complex relationships with stereotypes, both within the queer TTRPG community and in broader society. While often viewed negatively, stereotypes sometimes served constructive purposes, particularly as tools for signaling group membership. Some participants deliberately incorporated recognizable queer archetypes into their character creation, such as the “fratty gay man,” while others used traditional gender signifiers (like “women wear jewelry”) to subtly communicate their character's queerness. Participant 10 even describes how they signaled their characters' queerness using physical choices like having green hair and piercings. Participant 5 played with masculinity through role-play by creating a character they described as big and muscley and that people might think is a “brute”. They explained how they made this character a chef (aptly named Chef) because they were familiar with a stereotype that men were better chefs. In this instance the stereotype served as a way for a player to role-play a character that was more traditionally masculine in the player's perspective. Of course, participants also criticized harmful stereotypes, particularly those embedded in game worlds, such as the notion that “drows [dark elves] are inherently evil.” One participant describes their specific experience of character creation due to ethnicity. They discuss how they avoid support classes because of stereotypes around Filipino people being nurses. This highlights how real life can bleed into the game world and impact the choices the players make. The game space provided opportunities for players to challenge expectations about gender, sexuality, and identity, allowing them to explore alternatives to societal assumptions.

TTRPG Play as Performance

Many players compared playing a TTRPG to putting on a performance, primarily drawing similarities to experiences with theater, but highlighting the uniquely personal nature of TTRPG role-play. As Participant 1 notes, the freedom from scripted constraints makes the experience more akin to improvisational theater or LARP. The transformative potential of this type of performance is particularly meaningful for Participant 6, who describes role-play as their passion and explains that “it is an extremely powerful way of interacting and creating art and stories with each other because there's no separation between audience and story.” Participants highlight the importance of role-playing as a vehicle for human connection, intimacy, and mutual understanding powered by storytelling.

DISCUSSION

Here we discuss and analyze our participants’ experiences through the lens of queer performativity and discuss the social agreements that enable the necessary trustworthy play spaces for queer identity exploration.

Connections between Performance and Queer Performativity

Gender performativity posits that the social construct of gender is created and reinforced through ongoing acts of gender performance (Butler 1990). In this framework, gender performance is not just an expression of a pre-existing gender identity; rather, the performance is gender. When someone performs femininity, for example, through culturally-coded mannerisms, dress, or speech patterns, they are actively participating in the social construction of what femininity means in their cultural context. Sexual orientation is also subject to this ongoing construction. This conception of performance differs from the colloquial sense, which implies inauthenticity or pretense. Gender performance is a way of actively negotiating the cultural norms and expectations that shape gender. However, our participants’ experiences suggest that the colloquial sense of performance also has a role to play in this process. “Pretending” is sometimes an essential part of constructive gender performance.

The low-stakes context of tabletop role-play allowed our participants to test different forms of gender performance using a “toy” identity. Participants described using role-play to experiment with gender presentations they wanted to adopt in real life, indicating that the game world is a fertile environment for self-discovery. Several participants created characters that reflected a specific facet of their identity; for example, Participant 5 says that their character allowed them to explore their masculine side. The role-playing space enables players to take parts of themselves and externalize them, move them around, and inhabit them as much or as little as they would like. Participant 5 described how this character came about during a time where they were deciding whether they wanted to transition and start testosterone but after playing this character decided that they were happy where they were. Players can amplify latent or emerging aspects of themselves—whether those are different approaches to sexuality, various forms of gender expression, or other qualities—and explore how they might develop if nurtured. In contrast with the real world, where the construction and performance of one part of identity may be difficult to separate from the whole, the game enforces a distance that makes

experimentation feel less risky. The positioning of the performance is important to consider as unlike something like theater the “audience” of the performance are also the performers which gives players more control of the performance (Bowman 2015). Researchers specifically point out the flexibility of TTRPGs compared to traditional theater performances highlighting that TTRPGs have fluctuating understandings of performers and audience, character and player and performance and socialization (Kawitzky 2021). Through character creation and role-play, aspects of the self that were previously unintegrated can become substantiated. This externalization paradoxically enables self-recognition—by first experiencing these traits as belonging to an “other,” players can safely explore and ultimately recognize them as authentic parts of themselves.

Recognition happens over variable timescales. Several participants describe how role-playing a particular gender made them more comfortable with inhabiting it in reality. Participant 12, for example, describes discovering through role-play that they prefer they/them pronouns. Others describe looking back on past characters and realizing that they embodied a trait the player would later recognize as their own. These examples illustrate the permeable nature of the magic circle—the boundary that separates play from ordinary life—and the resulting productive tension between the “real” and the “performed.” Players bring their lived experiences and implicit understanding of gender into their character performances, while simultaneously allowing their character’s experiences to inform their own sense of gender. This two-way flow creates a feedback loop where in-game performance can catalyze real-world identity development, even as real-world identity shapes how players approach their characters. The two worlds exist in constant dialogue with each other, similar to everyday gender performance, where people perform and construct gender in a feedback loop. Managing this complex exchange of meaning using the scaffolding of the game is an opportunity to practice doing the same in reality, where queer people in particular face constant challenges to their sense of self.

Establishing Trustworthy Play Spaces through Social Agreements

Zabala et al., 2024 propose that TTRPGs’ text and game mechanics provide social safety by explicitly communicating values, allowing flexible content modification, providing clear thematic guidance, promoting emotional and physical wellbeing, and integrating mechanics for handling sensitive topics. Participants in the present study reinforce these findings, describing feeling safe to explore their own queerness in the context of these games, particularly through the structured social frameworks they provide.

TTRPGs operate within a framework of rules that govern actions and interactions, providing a structure for social engagement. The rules provide clear expectations for behavior and communication, contributing to the sense of security felt by players in the game world. Unlike the often ambiguous rules of everyday social interaction, TTRPGs make explicit both the boundaries of acceptable behavior and the mechanisms for navigating social situations. Participants frequently highlight how other players’ attitudes toward queerness have shaped their sense of safety at the gaming table. Multiple interviewees draw distinct contrasts between playing in groups primarily composed of queer players and playing in groups with predominantly straight, cisgender players. This supports research into how queer gamers create their own spaces in gaming spaces where the implied player is not a

straight, white man (Sundén 2009). A supportive game group is a crucial feature of a space that enables identity exploration. In a similar vein, players may use in-game queer exploration to gauge the receptiveness of their peers before deciding whether or not to come out. Participant 1, for example, said that “knowing that I had these friends who were happy with it in character” made them think “maybe I could be this for real.”

Games that explicitly state their support for queer storylines create a checkpoint for anyone harboring prejudiced views, helping to ensure that the game space is safe. When game authors clearly state their values and intentions regarding queerness, they signal to players that the gaming space is deliberately crafted to welcome and support queer experiences. Rather than requiring players to carve out space for queerness or question whether their interpretation of queer themes will be accepted, these games provide built-in validation that such exploration is not only acceptable but intended. Some participants describe feeling more confident in their decisions to play queer characters when the game directly encourages it. The acknowledgment reduces the emotional labor typically required of queer players to assess whether a space is safe for identity exploration. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for players who may not yet be ready to identify as queer to play a queer character or follow a queer storyline.

The interplay between game structure, player dynamics, and explicit queer content creates layered conditions for social safety in TTRPGs. While the basic framework of rules provides a foundation for structured social interaction, the presence of supportive players and explicitly queer-friendly content builds additional layers of security for identity exploration. As our participants' experiences demonstrate, these elements work together synergistically—explicit queer content helps attract queer-friendly players, while also providing social cover for those beginning to explore their identities. The rules structure makes social interactions more predictable, while clear statements of queer support in game materials help prevent harmful interactions before they occur. Together, these features create spaces where players can safely experiment with different aspects of identity, supported by both the mechanical frameworks of the game and the social dynamics of the playing group.

CONCLUSION

This interview study examines how TTRPGs function as spaces for queer identity exploration, highlighting the unique interplay between performative play and social safety. Our findings demonstrate that TTRPGs provide structured environments where players can explore different aspects of gender and sexuality through character creation and role-play. The combination of game mechanics, clear social frameworks, and deliberate safety tools creates conditions that support identity exploration in ways that may be difficult to access in everyday life.

Through character creation and role-play, players can externalize different facets of identity and experiment with them. This process often leads to meaningful self-discovery, with many participants describing how their in-game explorations led to deeper understanding of their real-world identities. The feedback loop between game performance and lived experience allows players to gradually integrate new aspects of identity at their own pace.

Our findings highlight that the effectiveness of TTRPGs for identity exploration depends heavily on social context. Games that explicitly support queer experiences and groups composed of supportive peers create a safe environment that enables deeper exploration. This suggests that while TTRPGs can be powerful tools for identity work, their potential is best realized when both mechanical and social elements align to support queer expression.

These insights have implications for game design, particularly regarding how games can better support marginalized players in identity exploration. Understanding how TTRPGs facilitate identity exploration could also inform other contexts where people engage in identity work, from therapy to education. In a world where safety is not guaranteed to queer people we aim to emphasize the importance of play for our participants in realizing who they are (or want to be) and fostering community while doing so.

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