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Alejandro Campo April 10, 2024

Toward a Queer Roleplaying Game Praxis: The Role of Play in Building Identities, Communities, and Worlds

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Abstract

Toward a Queer Roleplaying Game Praxis: The Role of Play in Building Identities, Communities, and Worlds
By Alejandro Campo

Queer and feminist scholarship frequently grapples with tensions between theory and practice, striving to bridge the gap spanning our thinking about where we want to be and our actually getting there. This thesis presents roleplaying games (RPGs) as models for developing a queer praxis, arguing that this genre of game is uniquely suited to honing key skills in identity-building, community-building, and world-building. By drawing upon interdisciplinary research and making scholarly interventions in the fields of ludic studies and queer studies, this thesis examines the personal and political stakes of playing RPGs and the transformative potential of play as a powerful analytic and applied tool for social change. Chapter 1 opens with an exploration of psychosocial theories of identity formation, development, and transformation to establish the primacy of identity as a means of engaging with RPGs simultaneously as a player and as a character. The first chapter also illuminates how RPGs historically and contemporarily represented aspects of identity like gender, sexuality, and race, highlighting how queer artists use fantasy to envision alternative affects and embodiments to reach a sense of self-acceptance. Chapter 2 grounds itself in the collective experiences of RPG players of the past and present to discuss how RPGs function as exercises in compassion and collaboration that encourage participants to better understand themselves and others, fostering accommodation, attentiveness, and inclusivity through roleplay. Chapter 3 argues that RPGs distort our normative senses of spatio-temporality and are thus conducive to imagining new worlds and visions for the queer future, offering magic and play as frameworks for queer critique and worldbuilding. Altogether, this thesis presents the myriad ways that RPGs have been and can be used to imagine different, better, and queerer worlds.

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Lastly, many thanks to *you*, reader. Art needs an audience, and I am so grateful you have chosen to spend any amount of time with this work. I hope that you find something meaningful in these pages, and I hope that you let yourself play sometime soon. We all need to play.

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INTRODUCTION

Rediscovering the Power and Potential of Play

I have always been drawn to fantasy. There exists in fantasy an essence of otherness and alterity that speaks to something in my soul, a hope for not-this and a wish for what-if. In my childhood, I would spend hours in the sprawling forest outside my rural neighborhood that made me understand the inspiration for fey crossings, pacing ceaselessly across the trunks of toppled trees, brought low by the ferocity of storms, and de/recomposed as homes for many thousands of insects. Plodding through the woodlands in my rubber flip-flops, passing burbling creeks and dewy clearings illuminated by the sunbeams breaking through the canopy, I dreamt of becoming lost, of rounding a bend and winding up somewhere unrecognizable, perhaps someplace where the people were kinder to each other and to the Land. I could not resist taking in the vibrancy of life below me, above me, skittering and scurrying all around me to the tune of the birdsong and wandering aimlessly toward whatever new adventure this wooded wilderness held. The forest was my fantastical haven, one which I was willing to share because I knew that it was not meant to be anyone's exclusive demesne. I would loose my imagination on the landscape, convincing myself that mythic faeries and primordial spirits inhabited the ancient, towering trees and remained there even once they were reduced to stumps. In my daydreaming, I did not have to worry about who I was or was not; in whatever way I entered my verdant, cool otherworld, I knew it would hold me and leave me free to roam. I would march into the forest wearing my robe and wielding a whittled wooden wand and make-believe that I was casting spells (that sometimes coincided with the wind whipping up or a flock of birds appearing suddenly from their foliaged sanctuaries). Later on, I began to bring friends into the forest where we would call

each other by different names, pretending that our lives were different from those we had lived and that the world itself was capable of generating magics and mysteries. We gathered ingredients for 'potions' we would brew with muddy water in hollowed stumps or journey through the forest until we happened upon a family of frogs separated by a broken bough, retroactively deciding that we had been sent there on a quest by 'Mother Arbora.' My time in that forest formed a large part of who I am, helping me understand places like Wonderland or Narnia as well as offering a vision of what my own world could look like if it were stripped of all the antagonistic impulses that motivate its social structures.

"Toward a Queer Roleplaying Game Praxis" is about the power and potential of play to re/imagine ourselves, our communities, and the worlds which we inhabit. Its origins are inextricable from the extended romps I would take in the woods of my youth where I got to experience myself, my community, and the world around me in ways that should be universal, but which are rarely accessible due to the hostile social and material infrastructure within which we exist. I think it is one of the greatest tragedies of humanity that we are taught to abandon play as we enter adolescence, sometimes even earlier. Through play, we learn how to make sense of our surroundings, what behaviors feel most comfortable to embody, which outlooks and attitudes are most attractive to those around us. In addition to being educational, play is healing; after a scolding or when something disappointing happened, a brief period of imaginative play could set me right again. Play, like art (which could itself be considered a form of play), is generative—its outcomes are creative, not destructive. Playing enriches our lives; it does not make them worse, and I argue that it actively makes them better.

This thesis is specifically about the power and potential of roleplay as channeled through structured roleplaying games (RPGs). Throughout this work, I will make the argument that RPGs

are inherently transformative, guiding us toward visions of imaginative alterity that do not exist solely in abstraction, but rather as embodied, practiced, and *true* reconstitutions of our realities. Playing an RPG is not necessarily more meaningful than participating in other forms of play, but I will present many reasons why RPGs are uniquely well-equipped for the task of reorienting our personal and political commitments. I was drawn to discuss RPGs because of my personal engagement with these kinds of games. Ever since I was very young, the games that I most enjoyed playing were those which could be classified as RPGs, which in many instances recreated the embodied sensation of escape I felt wandering through the woods in my youth. My love for this genre of play has only grown throughout my life, exploding into a full-fledged passion in 2019 when I first started watching Dimension 20's *Fantasy High* and learned how to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. This project is borne of realizations I've had sitting around the gaming table with my friends, sensations I experienced while playing RPGs that still live in my body, and connections I've made between the games that I love and the feminist and queer theories that have shaped my collegiate education as a scholar of gender and sexuality studies. Before we dive into the content, let us establish some shared language.

Key Concepts

Play is among the most universal experiences, like love. Its universality extends beyond the myriad range of human cultures to encompass behaviors that have been observed and characterized as biologically innate in several animal species.[1] Play transforms and recombines other activities, exaggerating and rendering them in such a way that they lack their 'serious' consequences or their instrumental/survival value. Play activities tend to contain an endogenous

[1] Gordon M. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

component (such as being voluntary, pleasurable, or autotelic) and tend to be performed repeatedly and in scenarios in which people are relaxed.[2] The activities carried out in the metamotivational state of playfulness are performed 'for their own sake' (like dancing or playing chess) rather than for the end result (like vacuuming or filing taxes).

Scholars tend to separate human playfulness from animalistic playfulness by the human capacity for **symbolic play**. Humans are capable of practicing symbolic forms of play otherwise only rudimentarily found in higher primates. Namely, humans are capable of practicing as-if or *pretense* play, socio-dramatic or *role*-play, and *rule* play involving explicit, pre-defined, and not spontaneously negotiable rules.[3] Philosopher Robert Caillois developed a fourfold typology of play which included *alea* (games of chance), *agon* (contest- and rule-based games), *ilinx* (locomotor-rotation play), and *mimicry*, where "the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself."[4] This model provides a helpful framework for engaging analytically with play, but Caillois notably distinguishes these forms of play as mutually exclusive, a notion that we can easily dismiss by observing contemporary forms of play. For example, roleplay makes use of both rule play *and* mimicry.

The rule play aspect of roleplay is what can transform it into a game. **Games** are commonly understood as involving goals and rules that turn attainment of those goals into a non-trivial challenge.[5] The game aspect of play distinguishes RPGs from other spontaneous roleplay activities like improvisational theatre (which itself frequently invokes the language of *games* to

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[2] Jaakko Stenros, "Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play," in *Transgression in Games and Play* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
[3] Melvin Konner, *The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, and Mind* (London: Belknap Press, 2010), 89-93.
[4] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 19.
[5] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

describe its proceedings and constituent activities). **Ludology**—the scholarly study of play and games—is a relatively recent academic innovation whose roots are most often traced to Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.[6] Ludic scholars following in this tradition continue to explore the articulation and application of play as a condition for generating culture. This thesis rearticulates the work of many game studies scholars and ludic theorists, and I count myself among those thinking within the discipline of ludology.

Mimicry finds its place in RPGs through the use of roles. **Roles** are behaviors and attitudes expected from a person occupying a specific social position.[7] The power of roles for scripting the structures and processes of society have made them a central concept of study in the field of sociology. Roles are fundamental to our identities and self-concepts, which are developed by interacting in situational roles with others.[8] The play aspect of RPGs allows us to enter and leave social roles at will, a privilege that we often do not have with our real-world social roles. Following this logic, RPGs land in a long tradition of rituals, celebrations, theatre, and other forms of performance where role-play is institutionalized for social functions and utilized to transform the social world and its actors (like in weddings, funerals, parades, and protests).

This thesis takes the **role-playing game** as its primary site of political and personal transformation and enactment. There are many definitions of role-playing games that identify different components as necessary to the execution of an RPG, such as players, a referee,

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[6] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press, 1950).
[7] Karen Danna Lynch, "Modeling Role Enactment: Linking Role Theory and Social Cognition," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 37, no. 4 (2007): 379-399.
[8] Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe, "Identity Theory," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. John DeLamater and Amanda Ward (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 31-60.

characters, a diegetic framework, interactive storytelling, decision-making, and many others. The definition which I most like and the one to which I refer when I use the terms role-playing game, roleplaying game, or RPG is the following from larp[9] theorist David Simkins:

> An RPG is a game, not a game system or product, but a game experience that a player plays, in which the player portrays a character in a setting. Each player's portrayal of their character must include three components: immersion, experiencing the character; acting, performing in character; and gaming, obeying and manipulating rules and goals in character.[10]

Simkins helpfully discerns RPGs as a categorical classifier separate from particular game systems, a distinction which I find important for differentiating between the broad corpus of RPGs that this thesis engages and specific RPG systems that receive overwhelming public attention (most famously *Dungeons & Dragons*).[11] Instead, I think it is more valuable to render RPGs as game *experiences* which are molded by and for the players who participate in them. While this thesis will necessarily discuss various kinds of roleplaying games (i.e. live-action roleplaying games or larps, computer roleplaying games or CRPGs, massively multiplayer online roleplaying games or MMORPGs, etc.), my primary focus will be on **tabletop roleplaying**

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[9] LARP is an acronym which stands for live-action role-play and which is still frequently used in roleplaying spaces. In recent years, several ludic scholars, non-academy intellectuals, and roleplaying enthusiasts have started using the term 'larp' as a noun and as a verb (i.e. "I designed this great larp," "Let's go larping tomorrow.") Like laser, radar, and scuba in the past, larp is in the process of turning from an acronym into its own meaningful lexical unit. To pay respect to the development of language and the invention of new terms to describe our reality, I have opted to use the word 'larp' throughout this thesis to describe the same type of play invoked by the acronym. While it may be a bit confusing to see 'larp' used alongside acronyms like TRPG or CRPG, I hope that it will be an instructive reminder of the ever-evolving nature of language and the usefulness of new terms (which queer studies generally treat kindly).

[10] David Simkins, *The Art of LARP: Design, Literacy, Learning, and Community in Live-Action Role Play* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 56.

[11] Kristian A. Bjørkelo, "I Am…Bothered About D&D," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 13, no. 1 (2022): 111-121.

games (TRPGs). The many forms and faces of RPGs each have their own subtleties and benefits that ludic scholars have identified as contributing to cultural meaning-making in different ways, but I emphasize TRPGs in this project because of their infinite content and genre malleability, their lack of spatio-temporal fixity, and their unparalleled accessibility compared with other forms of RPGs.

This thesis will interchangeably use the terms **players**, **role-players**, and **participants** to describe the people who engage in the game experience of playing an RPG. I also make frequent use of the term **playspace**, a concept which game studies scholars Tim Hutchings and Jason Giardino define as

> A merging of both the imaginary world of the setting and game rules/norms with the physical, geographical, real world location in space and time that players occupy to play a game . . . it is this combination of ideas and imagination (e.g., rules and setting), a tangible space (e.g., a kitchen table with 5 chairs around it), and a particular slice of time (e.g., a Thursday evening where a group meets from 6pm to 10pm to play the game) that constitute a "play space."[12]

Lastly, a discussion of RPGs will necessarily involve distinguishing between in-game, in-character, diegetic actions that take place in the game world and the out-of-game, non-diegetic experiences of a player participating in the RPG. Holding the existence of these two realities simultaneously is a key aspect of RPG play, and this thesis will ultimately argue that the actions taking place and emotions evoked in RPGs can be just as real for players as those they experience in the purportedly realer world. Thus, this thesis will make reference to our shared

[12] Tim Hutchings and Jason Giardino, "Foucault's Heterotopias as Play Spaces," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 7 (2016): 10-14.

reality as **mundane** (i.e. the *mundane* world, *mundane* reality, *mundane* lives, *mundane* identities). If ours is the world of the mundane, then it may be easier to conceptualize the worlds of RPGs as worlds of the queer—the other, the abstracted, the transcended, the unobtained, the alternative.

Queer Concepts

The subject of this thesis comes from ludic studies, but the argument I attempt to make in this project is grounded in queer theory. A reader unfamiliar with the concept of **queer** or the field of queer studies ought to be forgiven as even scholars who have been working in the discipline for decades still struggle to define the concept at the core of their intellectual engagements. Ironically (and dishearteningly for academicians committed to the 'rationality' of the 'hard' sciences), this continued mystery around the definition of queerness means that the concept has been intellectually successful.

Queerness is partly meant to be elusive and somewhat obfuscatory, reflecting its intangibility and out-of-grasp-ness. To borrow my own language from the beginning of this introduction, queerness basically concerns itself with the imaginative realm of *not-this* and *what-if*. As queer anthropologist Margot Weiss describes it, "queer is less a term than a force field, an epistemological form that, in seeking to open new horizons of knowledge, instantiates other forms of closure . . . queer indexes that desire to reach beyond theoretical or conceptual closure to an *elsewhere*, the frustration when one's desires are thwarted, and then the return and reopening of new horizons." [Emphasis added][13] This emphasis on queerness as an attempt to identify or articulate an 'elsewhere,' an otherness, and an alterity to present reality is the

[13] Margot Weiss, "Always After: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 627-638.

formative element of queerness which I will mobilize throughout this thesis to identify and articulate interpretive openings in RPGs and roleplay theory that are conducive to exploring or that transport us to this 'elsewhere.' Influential queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz offers us some spatio-temporal directionality to guide us in finding these meta/textual moments of queer interjection:

> The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. [Emphasis original][14]

'Queer' is most likely to appear in/alongside feminist scholarship, but its epistemological reach is not limited to questions of gender and sexuality. Indeed, since its introduction to the academic canon, scholars have produced work that "spins the term [queer] outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all."[15] Academicians and non-academy intellectuals alike have found analytical utility in the concept of queerness for approaching questions of race, ability, ethnicity, nationality, transnationalism, global capitalism, diaspora, language, immigration, citizenship, national belonging, and necropolitics. Queer studies scholars continually advocate for a "subjectless" queer theory, one which refuses a "proper subject *of* or object *for* the field" since "*queer* has no political referent."[16] More recent contributions to queer theory situate this nonreferentiality in queerness's recognition of those left "outside the political, economic, and cultural mandates of the sovereign nation-state and the

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[14] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).
[15] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 9.
[16] David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (2005): 3.

liberal individual as its prized citizen-subject."[17] In other words, we might say queerness's 'subject' is the state's 'non-subject,' the unintelligible Other (with whatever form(s) their otherness may take) that falls outside of our collective semiotic boundaries. This conceptualization of queerness is capable of encompassing a multitude of identities and social positionalities, disrupting the 'identity politics' ideology of political unity through shared identity in favor of developing, as political scientist Cathy J. Cohen describes it,

> A politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades . . . if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin.[18]

The beauty of the term 'queer' comes from its defiance of classical forms of social categorization and its refusal to draw sharp boundaries around who/what is included by the term. Throughout this thesis, when I make reference to queer identity or to queer ways of being, I am primarily conceptualizing queerness by following in the tradition of scholars like Weiss, Muñoz, Eng, Halberstam, Puar, and Cohen: as a 'subjectless' social category with loose, wavering boundaries that refers more to proximity to power than to any particular sexual or racialized identity. The power of queerness, as Cohen points out, is the sense of unity it can provide through acknowledgment and attendance to our differences, not just those differences between

[17] David L. Eng and Jasbir K. Puar, "Introduction: Left of Queer," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 5.
[18] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* 3 (1997): 438.

one another but also between ourselves and our expected socially imposed and enforced roles and scripts.

The broad reach of queerness has made it applicable to many fields of inquiry including cultural studies, LGBT studies, trans studies, critical race studies, women's and gender studies, film and media studies, Indigenous studies, African American/Africana studies, diaspora studies, literary studies, communication studies, postmodernist studies, decolonial studies, anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, political science and more. This thesis is an attempt to bring queerness into a place of greater prominence in ludology and ludic studies, examining the interdisciplinary intersections between play, games, queerness, and politics.[19] My arguments will center queer games, queer players, queer characters, queer community formations, queer forms of kinship, queer struggles, and the queer worldbuilding praxes that we can observe in, through, and around RPGs.

Play as Praxis

When we play a roleplaying game, what are we playing *with* and what are we playing *toward*? These are the questions at the heart of this thesis about play and playfulness. The remaining pages of this project are dedicated to answering these questions through a multidimensional, multidisciplinary examination of RPGs and their constituent queer elements.

If we take 'seriousness' as the rationalizing, totalizing, and essentializing force that upholds the ideological superiority of hegemony and works against the creative forces of

[19] I want to take a moment to recognize other scholars working at this intellectual intersection of ludic studies and queer studies whose works influenced me. Not all of these scholars are cited in this thesis, but the research pursuits and publications of Felix Rose Kawitsky, Bonnie Ruberg, Adrienne Shaw, Katherine Angel Cross, Josephine Baird, Evan W. Lauteria, Haoran Chang, and Cody Jay Mejeur were all profoundly grounding as I developed my own disciplinary intervention. I would like to imagine that this thesis works in dialogue with works these particular scholars have produced.

dreaming and possibility (i.e., "['Radical' concept] is a nice idea, but be *serious*. It's never *going to happen*. Get *real*!"), then perhaps we can consider 'play' to be its queer antithesis. Engaging with the world in a serious way means blithely accepting the reality of our material and social conditions, closing off alternative ways of being as 'unrealistic,' 'unobtainable,' and 'unserious.' Alternatively, engaging with the world *playfully* means refusing the notion that things simply 'are the way they are.' Being serious means accepting something 'as-is'; play is its inverse, a step toward imagining something 'as-if.' Play invites us to explore the elsewhere and the otherwise that queerness attempts to articulate. Play is a rejection of the here-and-now and a movement toward the queer horizon of the then-and-there. Through play, we reorganize the rules that govern our interactions and our realities, bringing our variable subjectivities and alternative epistemologies to the fore while exposing the artificiality and intangibility of the rules and ideologies that presently dominate our lives. Play is an assertion that reality is malleable; it is the revelation that, if given the power, *anyone* could re/write an entire world.

Although I do not explicitly name this concept throughout this thesis, I call this embodied actualization of (role)play's power and potential for exploring identities, creating communities, and imagining alternative worlds a **Queer Roleplaying Game Praxis** (QRPGP). My argument is that playing RPGs can be a radical act of self-acceptance, care for community, and feminist world-(un)making. Through RPGs, we are not only theorizing about inclusivity, attentiveness, and acceptance, but also putting those ideals into practice. Play is praxis; it is an active *doing*, a movement toward 'not-this' premised by a 'what-if.' Throughout this thesis, I hope we can stay playful in our steady approach toward unpacking RPG play as a form of feminist and queer praxis.

With an idea in mind of what we're playing *toward* (QRPGP), we can measure our progress at achieving that goal by assessing what we're playing *with* and *how*. The multidimensional outlook of this project moves from the personal level of the individual to the social level of interpersonal interaction to the systemic level of the ideological foundations of our society. Assessing the effects of RPGs in these different dimensions is critical because of the fragmented nature of RPG play. Our experiences of play all exist within our bodies regardless of whether those experiences occur for the people who engage in RPGs, their adopted and temporally bound role as players in the game, or the characters that they portray; indeed, our experiences of play occur at each of these levels simultaneously.

In "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process," ludologist Markus Montola grapples with this affective split by proposing three 'frames' within which to situate the gameplay:

1. The primary (social) frame, inhabited by people;
2. The secondary (game) frame, inhabited by players;
3. The tertiary (diegetic) frame, inhabited by characters.

The many personal and political dynamics that can exist within each of these frames make roleplaying games a prime space for exploring a menagerie of social issues. These are games that depend upon multiple people interacting, not only to advance an in-game narrative, but also to enact the mechanics of the game. Montola posits that although the material reality of a playspace may be fixed, the social reality of a game's world comes directly from the participants of a game who all interact and communicate to re/define "the state, properties, and contents of

imaginary worlds."[20] My thoughts in this thesis are organized by this bottom-up framework, re-organizing Montola's model and moving in reverse order to first investigate how RPGs help us explore, negotiate, and navigate aspects of our identities, then to develop some insights into the elements of RPGs that make them conducive to community-building, and finally to examine how playing RPGs can reorient our relationships to the reality within which we exist. It will be important to keep our key concepts and our conceptions of queerness in mind as we think through what it means to enact a queer roleplaying game praxis.

[20] Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process," *International Journal of Roleplaying* 1, no. 1: 22-36.

CHAPTER ONE

Building Identities

Perhaps the most sensible place to begin this radical project of exploring how play and games hold the potential to deeply alter our affective and material realities and relationships is with the concept of identity construction. Indeed, the first interactions many prospective players or passers-by of RPGs would have with this media involve some process of identity formation, typically in the form of *character creation*. Almost all of the tabletop roleplaying games mentioned in this study make character creation one of the introductory subjects of their sourcebooks/rulesets. A common framework for introducing new players to an unfamiliar roleplaying game may involve an explanation of the setting or scenario through which the characters in the game will play, quickly followed by guidance on how to generate a character based on the mechanical rules of the game.[1] One of the key identifiers of a roleplaying game is that the player does not interface with the game primarily as her[2] real-world self; rather, she engages the gameplay and narrative as a *character* existing within the diegesis of the game world.

The conceit of playing a game as someone/thing other than oneself is not unique to RPGs. However, the roleplaying game—especially the tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) or live

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[1] Carlie Forsyth, "Roll for Initiative: A Player's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Libraries" (Working Paper, Western University, 2019).

[2] Clarification on player/character pronoun usage: For the purposes of this discussion on identity, I will generally be using the *she/her/hers* pronouns to refer to any hypothetical *real-world person* who might engage with the play of RPGs (i.e. anyone from an active role-player to a friend who participates in the character-creation process) and the *they/them/theirs* pronouns to refer to the *character* that a player might portray (i.e. the player-character/playable character, or PC). This distinction will hopefully be helpful in points we'll soon explore about identity formation, separation, and synthesis through roleplay.

action roleplaying game (larp)—distinguishes itself from other types of character-driven organized play by the high level of control and customizability a player has over her character. Unlike most video games and tabletop/board games where options for playable characters are limited (think of Monopoly where players can choose from among the top hat, Scottish terrier, and thimble to represent themselves) or even pre-assigned, roleplaying games leave some amount of characterization open to players. In the most freeform iterations of roleplaying games, players are offered mere suggestions of character concepts, leaving characters' personalities, appearances, backstories, and components of their identities to be invented by their players.

The considerable amount of freedom afforded to players in the process of character creation is a large part of the appeal of these games for many people. The ability to generate an avatar that will act on behalf of the player, according to the image the player chooses to project, and with the capacity and means to tangibly alter the (game) world around them is about as powerful an appeal to the ego as possible. At the same time, there arises some tension between the will of the player and the existence of the character. In purely technical terms, the character does not exist and cannot act without or against the will of the player embodying them; their existence is liminal and tied to a person in the real world who may or (more often) may not share attributes with that character. While the horizon of possibilities for a character's identity may be nearly limitless, the actual enactment of that character's reality is always bound by the positionality and perspectives of their player. This chapter is grounded in unpacking Markus Montola's tertiary frame of roleplay: the diegetic frame, inhabited by characters. Here, we will interrogate whether and how attempts at fantasy are always entangled with the messiness of social reality, how roleplaying games (and the fantasy genre that inspires many of them) have historically and contemporarily injected social commentary into their worlds and narratives, and

how invented, in-game expressions of identity can manifest in real-world reevaluations and reinventions of selfhood and social identity. We will begin with some theoretical underpinnings.

Playing with Identity

The field of sociology is fascinated with identity, particularly with questions of selfhood. Subscribing to this field's formulations of selfhood would indicate that our sense of self arises in and from interactions with others. Foundational sociological scholars like George Herbet Mead treat the self as a social structure which develops almost entirely—or at least primarily—in social experiences like communication or behavioral mirroring.[3] Following in this tradition, Erving Goffman offered a dramaturgical interpretation for how we order our interactions, bringing the setting of the stage and the concept of self and identity as performances to the fore of sociologically derived engagements with epistemological questions of existence.[4]

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan similarly theorizes about how we develop our subjective experiences of reality and interestingly also chooses to invoke the image of the stage in his writing. According to Lacan, all individuals pass through a life phase which he terms the *mirror phase* in which we first recognize ourselves as subjects or selves separate from the objective, observable world around us.[5] It is in this mirror stage when we first recognize our identity as an agentic individual with the capacity to observe, manipulate, and interpret the world around us. Lacan's mirror stage is reenacted communally in Brazilian drama theorist Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed which borrows some of the ideological principles of Lacan's work to externalize the experience of discovering selfhood through group performance of scenes

[3] George Herbet Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935).
[4] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1956).
[5] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966).

from practitioners' lives.[6] We will have the opportunity to revisit the Theatre of the Oppressed in Chapter 2's discussion of roleplay's applications in pro-social, community-building therapies, but here we recognize it for its usefulness in externalizing aspects of our identities and making them observable through performance.

Performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers-Letson reminds us to take care in engaging the concept of identity as "the singularity of the word . . . belies how identity is experienced as an inherent plurality."[7] Indeed, the history of Western white supremacist, cis-heteropatriarchal, racial capitalism has witnessed the construction and collapse of many categories used to delineate between normative and non-normative identities, as well as distinguishing between valid identities and questionable non-identities. The complications in examining identity's 'inherent plurality' have led scholars to coin new terms—like Kimberlé Crenshaw's now-omnipresent 'intersectionality[8]—to describe the ways in which multiple axes of identity can intersect, become entangled, coagulate, and be distilled in our still-messy attempts at sorting out the essence of selfhood.

This chapter deals with theories and practices of identity and works off an understanding of identity elements as social facts.[9] This first section will lay out some key theoretical concepts that will be useful in discussing how roleplay and RPGs are uniquely situated as sites that prioritize, structure, and support the de/re/construction of identity, allowing individuals to

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[6] Augusto Boal, *Teatro del Oprimido* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).
[7] Joshua Chambers-Letson, "Identity," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 117.
[8] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of an Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989).
[9] Emile Durkheim, "The Rules of Sociological Method," in *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Methods*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982).

express dreams, fears, and new visions of fantastical embodiment and empowerment while navigating and negotiating their real-world experiences of marginalization.

Multiplicity

Part of what elevates the nuance of examining identity-building in RPGs is that the identities under construction are typically not one's own—at least not evidently. In roleplaying, no matter what form it may take, there always exists some level of distinction between players/participants and their characters. This distinction is important and often self-evident to those who transgress between the mundane and the fantastical, but as we will better understand in Chapter 3, these games have transmutative properties that can complicate how we hold and experience our multiplicity of identities.

Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen describe the *role* in roleplay as functioning like an 'alibi.'[10] This alibi is basically an acknowledgement that characters are separate entities from their players; the fictionalized actions that take place in the fictionalized world are precisely that: *fictional*. Ludic scholar Sarah Lynne Bowman refines this concept of alibi, describing it as part of the social contract by which "players accept the premise that any actions in the game are taken by the character, not the player."[11] The alibi is effectively what allows a player to claim something like "I didn't yell at you; my character yelled at yours." Although the alibi may seem merely like a tool for gaslighting oneself and others into accepting an alternative reality, its uses are well-established and documented in fields that utilize roleplay. Most notably, drama therapists frequently engage the concept of *aesthetic doubling*, in which participants

[10] Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen, "First Person Audience and the Art of Painful Role-Playing," in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012), 16.
[11] Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Connecting Role-Playing, Stage Acting, and Improvisation," *Analog Game Studies* 2 (2015).

simultaneously perceive themselves as *both* themselves and their characters.[12] In drama therapy, exercising aesthetic doubling may be important for helping participants retain a sense of distance and control, even as they may reenact difficult, tense, or even traumatic moments of their own lives.[13] Discussions of the same concept in the field of psychology do away with euphemisms like *alibi* or *aesthetic doubling* in favor of the more straightforward *dissociation*, which actually works to sufficiently render how the mind shifts to alter one's senses of time, space, physicality, memory, and identity.[14]

While dissociation is most often associated with trauma or personality disorders, sociological theorist Sherry Turkle posits that experiencing multiplicity of self is actually already a common phenomenon of post-modern engagement with multiple media at once.[15] According to Turkle, each tab and window open on our computer screens, each phone call to a loved one, or each email sent to a coworker represents a new presentation of self and a new opportunity to explore a different aspect of our personalities. This is not far off from how legendary feminist scholar Judith Butler conceptualizes performances of gender as performed, multiple, and moving fluidly.[16] Similarly, critical race scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois wrote as far back as the late 19th century about the pervasive *double-consciousness*, a psychic state of dual existence, perception, and interpretation inhabited by African Americans in the post-emancipation United States.[17] A queer reading of dissociation might reinterpret the process of dissociating as a fragmented self

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[12] Anna-Lena Østern and Hanny Heikkinen, "The Aesthetic Doubling: A Central Concept for the Theory of Drama Education?," in *Nordic Voices in Drama Theatre and Education* (Bergan: IDEA Publications, 2001): 112.
[13] Judith Glass, "Working Toward Aesthetic Distance: Drama Therapy for Adult Victims of Trauma," in *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors*, ed. Lois Carey (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 60.
[14] Marlene Steinberg and Maxine Schnall, *The Stranger in the Mirror, Dissociation: The Hidden Epidemic* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).
[15] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
[16] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Rutledge, 1990).
[17] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClure & Company, 1903).

attempting to reconcile differences between material, embodied, psychic, affective, and intuited realities, pulling and stretching oneself to reconcile various simultaneous experiences of identity.

Some theorists suggest that exploring the multiplicity of the self can be profoundly productive for an individual's psychological health.[18] For instance, psychological research into theories like psychosynthesis—developed by Roberto Assagioli—bolsters this claim. The theory of psychosynthesis posits that each person holds several alternate identities within them, organized by a primary, overseeing persona dubbed the Integrator or Manager.[19] The goal of therapies which draw upon psychosynthesis is to identify, develop, and guide these multiple selves to greater cooperation, celebrating the multiplicity of the self as healthy and generative rather than working toward a more imposing identity 'unification.' Film and media studies scholar Bob Rehak pushes this idea into the ludic realm by suggesting that games can offer an opportunity for individual exercise of psychosynthesis. Rehak claims that, in games, we discover "a small square of contemplative space: a laboratory, quiet and orderly by comparison with the [mundane] world, in which we toy with subjectivity, *play* with being."[20]

Taken altogether, we can begin to understand roleplaying as a natural enactment of the will to understand our multiplicity of self. The characters we generate become the modes by which we explore the aspects of our personality that we want to cultivate or curate, effectively functioning like a Lacanian mirror-self in whom we may develop skills or qualities desirable to or different from our primary identities. Observing this mirror-self (which is, of course, always derived from an aspect of the mundane self) may facilitate a process of social learning and

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[18] Kevin Burns, "The Therapy Game: Nordic Larp, Psychotherapy, and Player Safety," in *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014* (Los Angeles: Wyrd Con., 2014).
[19] Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis: A Collection of Basic Writings* (Amherst: Synthesis Center, 2000).
[20] Bob Rehak, "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," in *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

identity development as theorized by Mead and Goffman. While we recognize our characters and their identities as separate from ourselves and our identities, their voices, beliefs, and behaviors are in a very real way projections of our psyches—and sometimes, we can commit ourselves to existing within the subjectivities of those projections in very powerful ways.

Immersion

Just as different characters may express different aspects of our multiple identities, so too do different players develop different relationships with their characters. Some players may understand their character merely as a manipulable object, like a toy or similar plaything that carries no will or capacity to act independent of the player. For others, the character is an extension of the self into a fantastical world, essentially an alternate-reality vision of oneself. Others still may view their characters as their own fully articulated personae with goals and feelings separate from the player's. For some theorists in the larp and tabletop spaces, the relationship between player and character—namely, how much 'control' a player cedes to their alternate persona—is the most important element in interpreting the phenomenology of player experience.

Game developer and larpwright Moyra Turkington describes four degrees of immersion measured by the affective distance between the player and their character: marionette, puppet, mask, and possessing force. The marionette of course represents the greatest degree of distance and control over one's character, whereas, in the possessing force, "the player abandons a personal identity and surrenders to the character object as a goal of play in order to directly experience the full subjective reality of the character."[21] This level of immersion is analogous to

[21] Moyra Turkington, "Getting in the Cockpit," *Sin Aesthetics* (November 17, 2006).

performances by method actors who make it an expressed goal to abandon their own identities so they may fully inhabit the consciousness of their characters.[22] The description of the possessing force is also similar to the 'ideal' level of immersion sought after in Nordic larp and other RPG communities.[23]

Immersion is a major focus of roleplaying game studies, perhaps because very few other artistic media have the capacity or the intention to immerse participants so deeply. The act of roleplaying comes with an implicit request on behalf of whoever/whatever facilitates the roleplay that participants let themselves be submerged in the alternate reality being enacted. The intensity of the immersion is measurable similarly to Turkington's degrees of immersion by the affective distance between player and character. Emily Brown and Paul Cairns describe intensity of immersion occurring at three levels, from weakest to strongest: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion. While 'total immersion' in the sense of a player forgetting completely who they are in favor of inhabiting their characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions is improbable-bordering-on-impossible, some players do report losing track of time or feeling "possessed" by their character for certain intervals of time. The subsequent dissociative state, in which the primary identity relinquishes partial control over the self to an alternate personality, is called *identity alteration*.[24]

Other ludic scholars have attempted to classify the relationships between players and characters in different ways. Jaime Banks' 2015 qualitative study of MORPG (Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) participants portrays four main relationships: *avatar-*

[22] Nina Bandelj, "How Method Actors Create Character Roles," *Sociological Forum* (2003): 387-416.
[23] Peter Bøckman, "The Three Way Model," in *When Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods in Larp* (Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003).
[24] Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Connecting."

as-object, *avatar-as-me*, *avatar-as-other*, and *avatar-as-symbiote*.[25] While Banks' research focuses on MORPG communities, her findings are largely applicable to TRPG and larp as well.

The *avatar-as-object* affiliation reconjures images of the player's character as a toy or plaything, a tool-like object by which the player accesses the mechanics of play. Players who align with this category also typically align with what Ron Edwards calls a *gamist* agenda, which focuses on achievement, problem-solving, and winning challenges, and which is the most distant of the four from the transformative identity-building work expounded in this chapter.[26]

The *avatar-as-me* relationship is one in which the character effectively serves as an extension or mirror of the player. Players who maintain this relationship will often give their characters roles, appearances, and personalities which replicate or approximate the player's. Such players may perceive their characters as *merging* with their experiences of self while they are playing.[27]

The *avatar-as-other* association considers the character a distinct social agent separate from the player. The character exists in their own fiction distinct from the player's reality. Players who hold this relationship with their characters are more inclined to create content around their characters' backstories, individualized experiences, and personal relationships that contextualize their narratives within the larger narrative of the game.[28]

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[25] Jaime Banks, "Object, Me, Symbiote, Other: A Social Typology of Player-Avatar Relationships," *First Monday: Peer Reviewed Journal on the Internet* 20, no. 2 (2015).
[26] Ron Edwards, "GNS and Other Matters of Role-playing Theory," *Adept Press*, October 14, 2001.
[27] Cristoph Klimmt, Dorothée Hefner, and Peter Vorderer, "The Video Game Experience as 'True' Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players' Self-Perception," *Communication Theory* 19, no. 4 (2009): 360.
[28] Robert J. Moore and Cabell Gathman, "Role-playing practices in massively multiplayer online worlds," presented at the *Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting* (Oakland, CA: March 29-April 1).

The *avatar-as-symbiote* relationship is the most interesting to the argument of this chapter. The character in this relationship functions as a costume,[29] mask,[30] or bridge between the player's actual self and her ideal self.[31] In this sense, the character *assists* the player with identity- and sense-making while allowing the player to practice desirable behaviors or embody desirable attributes.

It is this final relationship, in the *avatar-as-symbiote*, that the exploratory and transformative politics of roleplaying comes to the fore. This arrangement between player and character strikes the balance between the *avatar-as-me* and the *avatar-as-other* that affords players both an opportunity to extend themselves and their identities into a fictionalized narrative *and* allows them to preserve a distinction (but not necessarily a separation) between their mundane and fantastical identities.

It should also be stressed that the intensity of the immersion—absent the use of hypnotics or narcotics—is always determined by the role-player. Each player governs her own level of immersion and interaction with the alternate narrative reality and retains agency over her ability to dis/engage with the roleplay when she chooses. While it is critically important to ensure this level of agency is always available to role-players—especially in (therapeutic) contexts where the reality of the roleplay can trigger unwanted feelings or reactions—there is a simple reason why frequenters of RPG spaces prefer deeper immersion: it makes the game feel *realer*. In a medium where the goal is to collaboratively construct a playable facsimile of reality, it is more

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[29] Nicholas Merola and Jorge Peña, "The Effects of Avatar Appearance in Virtual Worlds," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 2, no. 5 (2010).
[30] Holtjona Galanxhi and Fiona Fui-Hoon Nah, "Deception in Cyberspace: A Comparison of Text-Only vs. Avatar Supported Medium," *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 65, no. 9 (2007): 770-783.
[31] Katherine Bessière, A. Fleming Seay, and Sara Kiesler, "The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in *World of Warcraft*," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 10, no. 4 (2007): 530-535.

desirable to become and remain engaged in the unfolding narrative. For players who allow themselves to be guided by their characters, roleplaying can prove to be a transcendent experience.

Development

Game studies scholar Sarah Lynne Bowman's 2010 study on the relationship between players and their characters includes a model for how players typically grow from an initial character concept to a more intimate understanding of their characters. Her model is based on four primary stages of character evolution:[32]

1. *Genesis Stage*, in which the player generates an initial character concept, typically prompted by others within the gaming group, and arising from thoughtful deliberation or momentary inspiration.
2. *Development Stage*, in which the player engages in tangible character-building activities such as filling out a character sheet, writing backstories, drawing her character, purchasing dice, painting miniatures, etc. A player may develop accents or mannerisms for their character and collaborate with other players to determine her character's in-game relationships.
3. *Interaction Stage*, in which the player actually begins to act as their character in the fictional game world. The character concept can change dramatically in this stage as the player discovers her favorite and most comfortable ways to enact her character (may involve minor aesthetic changes in voice or appearance or more impactful, gameplay-oriented changes such as changing a character's class or background).

[32] Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Roleplaying Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010).

4. *Realization Stage*, in which the player has a strong sense of their character as an entity distinct from herself. This stage most closely resembles Banks' *avatar-as-other* categorization.

This model provides a valuable framework for conceptualizing precisely how one develops a relationship with her character. Not all players move through each stage of the model, but stages are almost always encountered sequentially. Additionally, a player may move through these stages over the course of several days or even several months or years depending on the length and frequency of her roleplay sessions. Regardless of a player's speed or completion of passing through the stages of this model, Bowman provides critical insight for conceptualizing a sort of secondary identity or sub-identity formation.

In 1979, clinical psychologist and sex therapist Vivienne Cass developed a similar stage-based model for identity formation focused on sexuality (specifically homosexual identity).[33] Cass develops her model based on six stages, outlined below as:[34]

1. *Identity Confusion*: One realizes that homosexuality may have relevance to her feelings, thoughts or behaviors. This stage is characterized by inner turmoil and feelings of alienation, and one relies on the opinions of those around them to determine whether being queer is 'right' or 'wrong.'
2. *Identity Comparison*: The individual makes a tentative commitment to her homosexual self and begins to perceive herself through the opinions of her peers, family, co-workers,

[33] Vivienne Cass, "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4, no. 3 (1979).
[34] Suzanne Degges-White, Barbara Rice, and Jane E. Myers, "Revisitng Cass' Theory of Sexual Identity Formation: A Study of Lesbian Development," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 22, no. 4 (2000): 318-333.

and community at large. This stage is characterized by social alienation as individuals grapple with a perceived difference from the norm.

3. *Identity Tolerance*: The individual moves from "I may be gay" to "I am probably gay." In this stage, one tends to seek out other sexual minorities and concretizes her own opinion about the desirability of a gay identity. If the individual can maintain a positive self-image, identity formation continues.
4. *Identity Acceptance*: One accepts a chosen queer identity label, views other sexual minorities positively, and becomes increasingly committed to gay subcultures. This stage is characterized by heightened incongruence between how one views oneself and how one thinks they are perceived by others.
5. *Identity Pride*: One is fully aware of society's rejection of queerness and embraces their identity anyway. The individual may perceive the world as divided between homosexuals and heterosexuals and may thus engage in activism and purposeful confrontation with the establishment to 'gain ground' for her 'camp.' Homosexuality becomes one's primary identity, and disclosure of that identity increases.
6. *Identity Synthesis*: The individual is able to integrate their homosexuality with other important aspects of her identity. Being homosexual becomes just a part (though an important one) of who they are.

A keen reader may already see the connections between these models, but allow me to lay it out: these two models of identity formation mirror each other and clearly demonstrate how aspects of our identities—both fantastical and mundane—develop along similar trajectories. Let us compare how these two models function parallel to one another to investigate the processes and mechanisms by which identities become significant and salient.

Bowman's *genesis stage* could be compared to Cass's *identity confusion* as the stage in which an individual first broaches the potential to generate a new subjectivity. These are encounters with the unfamiliar in which individuals choose to take up the charge of identity construction or fail to effectively envision that alternate identity clearly enough to pursue it.

Bowman's *development stage* folds in aspects of Cass's *identity comparison* and *identity tolerance*. At the same time as players begin to 'do the work' of character creation, the homosexual subject of Cass's model is beginning to 'do the work' of understanding their queerness. Individuals in these positions seek out others who have experienced passing through these stages—fellow players or fellow sexual minorities—and borrow from their experiences to shape one's own identity concept. This is also the stage that is most difficult to move through. Cass notes that the *identity comparison* stage is the one which queer people most struggle to pass as they either accept a queer subjectivity as desirable based on observation of queer others, or they reject the identity. Similarly, the role-player may have been very excited about a character concept generated in stage 1 but later find that they are not actually interested in mapping out how the mechanics of the game fit into that concept or that they would rather avoid association with other role-players.

The *interaction stage* is thus analogous to *identity acceptance*. The player begins to enact their character concept, the homosexual begins to accept their queer identity, and both individuals engage more proactively in their respective subcultures.

Lastly, Bowman's *realization stage* aligns well with Cass's *identity pride* and *identity synthesis*. The homosexual subject of Cass's model fully realizes her queer identity as a part of herself, and the role-player in Bowman's model has created a character with such distinct idiosyncrasies that they may be said to have their own identity. Both of these stages also involve

a reconciliation between the newly-formed identity and the subject-forming these identities. The homosexual subject-forming folds her new identity into her larger self-concept, and the role-player . . . well, something interesting happens to her self-concept that we will soon discuss.

Despite these overlaps, there are notable differences between these models. The clearest distinction between these two models is the psychic space in which they unfold: Cass's model is evidently directed at describing how subaltern aspects of mundane identity come to fruition as a part of one's self-concept in a decidedly unfriendly social context; meanwhile, Bowman's model establishes how identities may initially form external to oneself or separate from one's self-concept—generating and accepting qualities in a character is not equivalent to discovering and embracing qualities of one's own identity.

In making this comparison, I do not wish to conflate one model with the other or imply that individuals passing through the stages of these models overcome the same magnitude of social/psychic/stigmatizing hardship. As a queer role-player who sees past versions of myself reflected in each of the stages of these two models, I would not describe the identitarian outcomes of these models or the hurdles of passing from one stage to another as being wholly the same. Queer identities often form over much longer periods of time[35] and in far less supportive contexts,[36] particularly for queer people who experience other social marginalizations. However, these two models do reveal striking similarities between how we undergo the identity-building processes of accepting queerness in our mundane world and playing characters in imagined

[35] William J. Hall, Hayden C. Dawes, and Nina Ploeck, "Sexual Orientation Identity Development Milestones Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer People: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021).
[36] Christian D. Chan, Adrienne N. Erby, Laura Boyd Farmer, and Amanda R. Friday, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Identity Development," in *College Student Development: Applying Theory to Practice on the Diverse Campus*, ed. Wendy K. Killam and Suzanne Degges-White (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2017), 149-160.

worlds, and I argue that it is a worthwhile endeavor to queer one's self-concept by building a secondary identity and personality *alongside* one's primary, mundane identity (and I will later further argue that it is particularly beneficial to do this within a worldly context divorced from our socially constructed reality).

Bleed

Part of the reason why I find the comparison between Bowman's model and Cass's model helpful is also part of the reason why I choose to use the term *mundane* rather than *real-world*: for some role-players, experiences they have in-game can feel just as real or impactful as experiences they have in this reality. Moments of tremendous triumph or great grief that happen in-game can influence a player's actual emotional state. A character's memories can live in their player's minds, and a player's frustrations may be reflected in her character's violent actions. Many members of the RPG community refer to this phenomenon as *bleed*, which seems to originate in Nordic larp spaces.[37] In his 2022 master's thesis in game design, ludic scholar Kjell Hedgard Hugaas defined *bleed* as occurring "when feelings, thoughts, emotions, physical states, cognitive constructs, aspects of personality, and similar 'bleed over' from player to character or vice versa."[38]

This spillover, or *bleed*, is perhaps *the* key concept to understanding how roleplaying games can hold such transformative significance for their players. Psychologist Whitney "Strix" Beltrán theorizes about the related concept of *ego-bleed*, in which the identity contents of

[37] Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Eleanor Saitta, "The Art of Steering: Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together," in *The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book* (Copenhagen: Rollespilsakademiet, 2015): 106-117.
[38] Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, "Bleed and Identity: A conceptual model of bleed and how bleed-out from role-playing games can affect a player's sense of self" (Master's thesis, Uppsala Universitet), 8.

characters bleed into the primary identities of players.[39] Beltrán draws her theory from the Jungian concept of *individuation*, by which a person engages her active imagination and archetypal material (i.e. embodying a character in a work of fiction) and uses those experiences to re/construct her sense of self.[40] In this formulation, which emphasizes *bleed* as a core part of roleplay's personal meaningfulness, RPGs ostensibly become bloody affairs—visceral, tactile, embodied, gory, and deeply affective, not just through the violence present in some RPG systems, but in the ways that the very essence of the role-player's self and identity can be rent and sundered through the practice of roleplaying. However, feminist theorists like Tiffany Lethabo King remind us not to shy away from the corporeal, visceral, and 'bloodying' aspects of our realities, for it is in those moments that we most profoundly acknowledge our materiality and our capacity to experience change.[41]

In her undergraduate work on roleplaying games, sociologist and feminist scholar Katherine Angel Cross wrote around this concept of *bleed*, opting to use the term *becoming* in her theorizing. Cross draws inspiration for her work from that of feminist scholar Hilary Rose, who theorized about the repurposing of sci-fi as 'feminist myth-making.'[42] According to Cross:

> [Pen-and-paper RPGs] render social construction richly visible through their heavy emphasis on character, imagination, and story, which all work together as part of a process of constant enactment and engagement; a perpetual process of 'becoming' . . . Gaming, and roleplaying in particular, is an act of constant 'becoming' that allows for

[39] Whiteny Strix Beltrán, "Shadow Work: A Jungian Perspective on the Underside of Live Action Role-Play in The United States," in *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013* (Los Angeles: Wyrd Con, 2013), 97.
[40] Carl Jung, *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Cambell, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).
[41] Tiffany Lethabo King, "Flesh," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 93.
[42] Hilary Rose, *Love, Power, and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

> self-conscious (or at least semiconscious) social reconstruction. Feminist transformation—the constitution of new gendered possibilities and new arrangements of power—can be and often is one of those things.[43]

We will revisit Cross's concept of *becoming* in the following section as it relates to her roleplay-inspired gender transition, but this notion of roleplay as "a process of constant enactment and engagement" that "allows for . . . social reconstruction" speaks precisely to the points I attempt to make in this chapter. Playing an RPG has an uncanny way of making us question our relationships to ourselves and our identities because the practice of embodying, thinking, behaving, and believing as someone else demonstrably elucidates the fluidity of identity that scholars of race, gender, and sexuality have discussed for decades.

Roleplay's ability to foster this multiplicity of identity through immersion and identity development becomes embodied practice through the phenomenon that ludic scholar Mike Pohjola calls 'Pretending to Believe to Remember,' itself an interpretation of Richard Schechner's 'make belief':[44]

> By immersing into the reality of another person, the player willingly changes her own reality. The player pretends to be somebody else. But more than pretending to be the character, the player pretends to believe she is the character. It is this self-induced state which makes it all so cool . . . The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. The more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember. The more she pretends to believe to remember, the more she starts to really

[43] Katherine Angel Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-Playing Games as Resistance," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2012): 71.
[44] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35.

> believe to remember, and really remember to believe, and really remember and really believe. And she pretends to forget she is just pretending.[45]

Bleed, *ego-bleed*, *individuation*, *becoming*, *pretending belief*, *make belief, pretending to believe to remember*—these are all just different names to describe the same phenomenon of roleplaying as a revelatory, transformative, identity-shaping practice that can, through descriptive models, alter our self-concept and challenge the essence of identity. The following sections explore this phenomenon of identity re/de/construction in greater detail, focusing on particular aspects of identity and how RPGs have historically and contemporarily presented different identities from both a player angle and a procedural angle. I will note that while I intend to handle the topics and identities I discuss with great care, particular aspects of identity like gender, sexuality, race, dis/ability, etc. have not always been presented with such care in RPGs. Many systems and sourcebooks dealt with these subjects with all the grace typical of popular media in the late 20th/early 21st centuries, and depicting them accurately is not only academically responsible, but also rhetorically constructive for demonstrating the meta-level identity changes many RPG systems have undergone.

Playing with Gender and Sexuality

The concepts of gender and sexuality provide meaningful and approachable entry points for applying our theories of identity-building to RPGs. Several decades of feminist theorizing and sociologically oriented research conducted in transnational contexts have given us a more sophisticated understanding of sex/gender/sexuality as co-constitutive social identities which—

[45] Mike Pohjola, "Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering, and Emancipating Identities," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination* (Finland: Ministry of Education, 2004), 84.

rather than having any firm biological or universally essential basis—are largely dependent on cultural and historical factors. In other words, what determines whether someone is a 'man' or a 'woman,' 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual' is a complex combination of *performative* elements. The power to determine someone's success or failure at fitting into one of these stable sex/gender/sexuality categories lies not with oneself as an agentic subject, but rather how they are interpreted by the voyeuristic gaze of others reading them as a social object. It is not an essential 'maleness' or 'femaleness' that predestine someone for a particular identity, nor is it even a person's self-identificatory labels that direct others on how to treat them. Instead, we are graded on our ability to *perform* a particular sexual identity by society at large, and however we are *perceived* influences how we will be *treated*. Besides all that, Western ontologies typically privilege binary modes of thinking about sex/gender/sexuality, making this aspect of identity simply another tool of the state to categorize individuals into stable, predictable, and controllable categories. Sexual identity (like other aspects of identity) is fundamentally about *power* (who gets to decide *who is what*) and performance (what criteria we use to adjudicate *who is what*).

Again, none of this is particularly new knowledge. In her seminal volume *Masculinities*, sociologist Raewyn Connell states that gender is "contested because the right to account for gender is claimed by conflicting discourses and systems of knowledge. We can see this in everyday situations as well as high theory."[46] Our thinking and theorizing about gender and sexuality at all levels of society is often dictated by the (usually reproductive) needs of the state, which can shift certain expressions of identity closer to or further from the center of the collective sociological imagination. The state's ability to graft performative cues onto labels like 'woman' or 'heterosexual' and the shifting nature of these terms lays bare the theatricality

[46] Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 3.

inherent in our conceptualizations of sex/gender/sexuality. According to performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o, "contemporary gender and sexuality studies continues to confront the power of language to do things: its capacity to make and not just describe social worlds."[47]

This section concerns itself with the inherently performative nature of gender and sexuality as it manifests in RPGs. The roleplay aspect of these games makes them inherently performative (or at least performance-based), and the open-ended nature of identity in the fantastical settings of these games resists our mundane binarisms and creates opportunities for exploratory gender/sex play. Furthermore, the agency granted to players in the identity-building processes of character creation returns the power of sexual expression to the agentic individual, absolving the people with which they play of the 'responsibility' of interpreting their performance. If a player says her character uses a particular set of pronouns, we need not judge the propriety of that choice based on an outward expression of gender/sex; it is all performed and imagined, and that is *perfectly acceptable* for the game's characters and its players.

As we have already discussed, the experiences that a player has in-game and in-character can be deeply impactful for her own subjectivity, and this section will visit numerous examples of how these games can transform their players' perceptions of their gender and sexuality. RPGs offer us an outlet through which we can tinker with what it means to express gender and sexuality, sometimes giving us an initial, revelatory experience of gender euphoria or reshaping how we think about our sexualities through role-played scenarios. The RPG community—and RPGs by extension—have grown to be not only tolerant but celebratory of deviant expressions of gender and sexuality, but this was surely a process of *growth*. Before we could even consider

[47] Tavia Nyong'o, "Performativity," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 164.

queerness as part of our games, we first had to contemplate the place of womxn in our fantasy worlds.

Misogyny

Roleplaying games originally descend from tabletop wargames, a style of game characterized by complex rulesets used to develop strategies in simulations of military operations. The game form first developed in Prussia, designed by mathematician Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig for the purposes of training future army officers, but it would spread over the proceeding decades and eventually evolve into recreational 'board wargames.'[48] Early iterations of TRPGs closely resembled board wargames from the mid- to late-twentieth century in which "the game experience mainly consisted of pretending to be a character who would descend into a subterranean cave complex (to which the word 'dungeon' was somewhat inappropriately affixed), fight monsters, and recover treasure."[49] In this early era of simplistic gameplay, as the social worlds around these games were still being developed, many players relied on the tropes and affordances of earlier game systems to craft the political guidelines for participation in this new gaming medium. From the outset, there was one clear rule: no girls.

In analyzing the manual to which many now attribute the origin of the RPG genre, games researcher Ian Sturrock notes that "the first TRPG Dungeons & Dragons does not mention love, romance, sex, or even, for that matter, women (player-characters can be Men, Dwarves, Elves, or Hobbits)."[50] While Sturrock generously chooses to attribute this fact to RPG's origins in

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[48] James F. Dunnagan, *The Complete Wargames Handbook Revised Edition* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 13.
[49] Paul Mason, "In Search of the Self: A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination* (Finland: Ministry of Education, 2004), 3.
[50] Ian Sturrock, "Love for Dice: Love, Sex, Romance, and Reward in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," in *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015): 64.

wargaming and medieval (European)-inspired high fantasy, the suggestion that *D&D* was devoid of sexuality from its inception conceals some darker truths. In fact, the original (1974) *D&D* sourcebooks and their supplements depicted naked breasts. These illustrations would disappear in the late 1970s, only to reappear in the 1990s.[51] Depictions of women like these align with what feminist media studies scholar Laura Mulvey calls 'scopophilia,' a voyeuristic perspective on the construction of a female object for the subjectivity of the male gaze.[52]

The misogynistic fantasy of early *D&D* presented a vision of the world in which women literally could not exist as independent, agentic individuals. Women could nominally exist in the game world, but only as non-player characters controlled by the Dungeon Master. In his ethnographic study of tabletop role-players, Gary Alan Fine observed that players utilized their physical constitution score, usually a metric of a character's physical health in battle, as a way to determine how many times their character cold have sex in one night (this is similar to many players' invention of mechanics to 'roll for penis length'[53]). Likewise, Fine observed the enactment of fantasy sexual violence against female non-player characters amongst all-male groups of players.[54] This observation is supported by Jon Peterson's description of *D&D* co-creator Dave Arneson's own gaming group, which played at the time of testing the rules for the upcoming game:

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[51] Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeon: Queer Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Sourcebooks," *Analog Game Studies* 10, no. 2 (2015).
[52] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 345.
[53] Ashley ML Brown, "Three Defenses for the Fourteen-Inch Barbed Penis: Darkly Playing with Morals, Ethics, and Sexual Violence," in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, ed. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (London: Routledge, 2015), 119-136.
[54] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Roleplaying Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

> [Arneson's] famous *Blackmoor* campaign, which built on Gygax's fantasy medieval wargame *Chainmail*, provided the playtesters for Dungeons & Dragons in his area. Contemporary records show them to be exclusively male, and as the game took after exuberant settings like Fritz Leiber's *Lankhmar* and John Norman's *Gor*, it contained play elements that might not have been explored in mixed company. For example, a surviving *Blackmoor* character sheet has an early attribute listing for 'Sex,' but rather than indicating gender it is a numeric value that came into play under certain circumstances.[55]

This sounds disturbing, and that's because it is. However, women wouldn't be kept out of the game for long. The next edition of *D&D*, 1977's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, simultaneously introduced female playable characters and sexual themes, such as the Harlot encounter table (colloquially known as the "Random Prostitute Table" by fans) that allowed the Dungeon Master to randomly determine which type of sex worker the player characters encountered in addition to whether or not they gain information or are robbed by the sex worker they encounter.[56] Official mechanics supporting both the inclusion of the ('obviously' female) characters of female-identifying players and their in-game sexual exploitation may have developed simultaneously in response to demands by players like Len Lakofka, whose 1976 article in the *D&D* fanzine *Dragon* expressed that "female characters should have a 'beauty' score' that connects to unique abilities like 'charm men' or 'seduce,' while women in combat should fight at the level of 'man -1.'"[57]

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[55] Jon Peterson, "The First Female Gamers," *Medium*, October 5, 2014.
[56] Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Master's Guide* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, 1979).
[57] Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018).

Even as gamers began to invite women into playspaces and interface with female player characters, these strands of rampant misogyny pervade the early days of *D&D*. This is ultimately a result of the fact that TRPGs were created partly as a way to materialize and gamify the stereotypical power fantasies in fantasy and science fiction stories written by and for cishet white men. Fine notes this in his ethnography, writing that these "games are structured particularly for male characters . . . Male players comment that female characters should be treated as property and not as human beings . . . [male players] commented that they often felt constrained by the presence of women players because it would 'prevent characters from engaging in fantasy rape.'"[58] Some sexuality studies scholars have justified this by explaining that "the existence of sexual violence in a game themed around war seems to make diegetic sense, even if it is distasteful and a morally questionable play activity," but contextualizing the gameplay in this way does not excuse the political violence inherent to these forms of enactment.[59]

Much of this loathing for women players comes from the fact that early RPGs were developed within a culture steeped in cis-heteropatriarchy by game designers bent on upholding and legitimating this status hierarchy to maintain their own social status and influence. African American Studies and Media Studies scholar Aaron Trammell describes how these structures are reinforced by teams of homogenous game designers (like those that designed the first editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*):

> Homogenous development teams develop homogenous games and are often blind to the racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes they reproduce in them. Discrimination in production and consumption reproduce each other: racist, sexist, and homogenous games chiefly

[58] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy*.
[59] Ashley ML Brown, *Sexuality in Role-Playing Games* (London: Routledge, 2015).

> attract relatively homogenous player communities, who reproduce their stereotypes and police their notions and norms of 'normal' identity.[60]

The invisible discriminatory mechanisms of the game industry remain pervasive even today. In 2012, a Twitter user posed the question "why aren't there more lady game creators?" In response, the #1ReasonWhy campaign initiated conversation between female-identifying game designers who expressed that "women in the game industry are (1) often evaluated on different standards than men and with more criteria other than professional accomplishments; (2) denied the recognition of status and expertise; and (3) silenced, dismissed, and made invisible."[61] Even as the gaming industry has produced criticisms like these from individuals working within that industry, game companies still draw the ire of (predominantly male) 'fans' for elevating women beyond functioning as decorative elements in games, and these same gamers can even experience wrath at female game developers being platformed within their artistic community. Trammell states that online reactionary controversies like #GamerGate "show how far gaming fan communities are from embracing diversity as a positive value or recognizing that how games represent social categories like race, class, or gender and who gets to play and make them has deep societal and cultural relevance."[62]

Positive change in representation is slowly but surely moving into RPG spaces. In 2016, the world's largest TRPG convention, *Gen Con*, finally reached gender parity in featured speakers (compared to only 6% female featured speakers in 2011).[63] Presently, about a quarter of contributors credited in the most recent (5th edition) *Player's Handbook* for *D&D* are female,

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[60] Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination."
[61] Amanda Ochsner, "Reasons Why: Examining the Experiences of Women in Games 140 Characters at a Time," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 5 (2017).
[62] Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination."
[63] Whitney Strix Beltrán, "Gen Con 2016 Sends a Clear Message That Gaming Is for Everyone," *Tor*, 2016.

compared to a fifth in the last version and about a tenth in the one before.[64] *D&D 5e* even chose to showcase the playable 'Human' race in the sourcebook's illustrations with art of an armored Black woman carrying a sword and shield.[65]

Toxic masculinity was and still is deeply pervasive in gaming spaces. As previously stated, many of these spaces were designed by and for cishet white men, and inviting individuals of other identities seemingly threatens to topple their sanctuary for fantasy sexual violence, queerphobia, and wish fulfillment. These gamers seek to maintain an idealized version of fantasy in which masculinity is normative, celebrated, and unchallenged (a masculine power fantasy, if you will). That being said, play and games cannot be monopolized for exclusive use by a singular group, and as such, a new wave of role-players have adopted the RPG hobby and devoted time, effort, and resources to remodel their beloved games to support a remarkably diverse class of role-players.

Affordances

Non-male players would not stay away from these game spaces very long. Despite the struggles many queer and non-male players, game designers, and game scholars had infiltrating these tightly restricted playspaces, their contributions would go on to reshape the games industry, particularly how gender and sexual identity are expressed within it. Presently, "increasing popular and industry attention is being paid to LGBTQ issues in digital gaming, and an

[64] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "*Dungeons & Dragons* Wouldn't Be What It Is Today Without These Women," *Kotaku,* June 26, 2017.
[65] Wizards of the Coast, *Player's Handbook* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 29.

independent queer games movement is growing" which has produced "300 [digital] games with more than 500 examples of LGBTQ content created between 1985 and 2016."[66]

As we move into discussions of queerness in RPGs, I will critically distinguish between tabletop/live action RPGs (TRPGs/larps) and online/virtual/digital RPGs because the former group of RPGs is much friendlier toward attempts at transgressive play than the latter. Video/computer games are necessarily more restrictive on queer expressions of gender and sexuality because game designers can only code a limited number of options for player-character identity customization that will inevitably fail to capture the expansiveness or myriad performances of gender and sexuality one could inhabit. Conversely, tabletop or live action RPGs do not share this restriction, and players are often actively encouraged to discursively invent their character's identity and (to borrow Cross's terminology) *become* their characters through identity construction and enactment.

Scholars working at the intersection of ludology and queer studies express frustrations with the identity-building models in online/digital RPGs. Ludologist Meghan Blythe Adams explores the restrictions on enacting sexuality in online/digital/video games, particularly in Bioware's *Mass Effect* series.[67] In her discussion, she engages feminist poet Adrienne Rich's concept of *compulsory heterosexuality* to describe how the player-character's options for romantic and sexual attraction are limited to those coded by the game's designers.[68] She argues that the impossibility of accessing romantic options outside of those scripted in the game's

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[66] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
[67] Meghan Adams Blythe, "Renegade Sex: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in the Mass Effect series," *Loading…: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2015).
[68] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (1980).

surpasses even compulsory heterosexuality (which, despite being a privileged social norm, can be refused)—beyond being a social imposition, this limitation is a *mechanical restriction*. Adams' argument also engages queer theorist Gayle S. Rubin's formulation of the *charmed circle*, describing how the scope of opportunity for video game players to enact their sexual identity "literalizes and ultimately closes" the charmed circle.[69] This difference between these two categories of RPGs can be classified with what theatre and performance studies scholar Stephen Greer calls a game's 'queer affordances':

> The affordances of a particular game world may be expressive of particular cultural values – extending beyond what might appear to be purely mechanical aspects of game play . . . to include the possible skin tones for your player-created avatar, its gender and whether the character relationships described within the game are anything other than heterosexual . . . the affordances of a given game world might describe the constraints within which one is able to improvise and the ways in which those constraints are materialized as coherent norms within the rhetorical logic of a game . . . If 'gayness' is not a feature that is explicitly 'coded in', but also not a feature that is omitted, forbidden or 'coded out' (see Consalvo 2003: 187),[70] how is it acknowledged? How and where does it emerge through play?[71]

In terms of queer affordances, tabletop RPGs reign with the most customizable character creation systems simply due to the fact that there are no prescribed identity formations. Indeed,

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[69] Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
[70] Mia Consalvo, "The Monsters Next Door: Media Constructions of Boys and Masculinity," *Feminist Media Studies* 3 (2003): 187.
[71] Stephen Greer, "Playing queer: Affordances for sexuality in Fable and Dragon Age," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 5, no. 1 (2013): 7-8.

players may need to select from pre-determined mechanical options like available classes, races (more on this soon), and skills, but the aspects of characters' identities that are most congruent to those we experience in our mundane lives—appearance, mannerisms, speech patterns, gender/sexual/racial identity—are determined by their players. There is ample opportunity within TRPGs (and in larps, to some extent) to create a character-avatar that a player would call *ideal*. Even relatively older TRPGs like the 5th edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* make queer affordances clear to players in their sourcebooks. The 5e *Player's Handbook* informs players that:

> Think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectations of sex, gender, and sexual behavior . . . you don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender. The elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous, for example, and some elves in the multiverse are made in Corellon's image. You could also play as a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for male. likewise, your character's sexual orientation is for you to decide.[72]

Compared with what we read from earlier versions of *D&D*, this is very cool! Perhaps it feels a bit forced or has that sheen of corporate identity-speak, but it is certainly a far cry from the way older RPGs answered questions about non-normative identities (remember, we started with *no women at all*). Since the late 1970s, players, game designers, artists, and visionaries have reimagined the depth of experience possible in these games, and through these games they have been able to access otherwise inaccessible parts of themselves.

[72] Wizards of the Coast. 2014, 36.

One of the clearest examples of this is the phenomenon of *crossplay*. Ludic scholars Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schrier define *crossplay* as "the act of playing a character whose gender is different from one's own."[73] Gender studies scholars recognize crossplay as a descendent practice of cosplay with the simple twist that crossplayers enact a gender identity different from their own mundane identity.[74] Through the conscious enactment of gender in crossplay, "individuals become active in undoing gender through engaging in direct, bodily performance of the gender[ed] other. Such performance does not challenge or ridicule norms, but pushes individuals to actively figure out for themselves how gender is performed."[75] In short, crossplay exposes "the artificiality of gender" and is often "manipulated for comical effect in the form of drag performances"[76] At the risk of belaboring the point, crossplay is an innovative, creative, and potentially generative sexualized interjection to normative expectations of sex/gender performance. Its comparison to drag art once again invokes the writings of Judith Butler, who writes:

> In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural

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[73] Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schier, "Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[74] Elween Loke, "To be or not to be the queerest of them all: Investigating the Freedom of Gender Performativity within the Queer Space of Cosplay/Cross play," *3rd Kanita Postgraduate International Conference on Gender Studies* (November 2016).
[75] Anastasia Seregina, "Undoing Gender through Performing the Other," in *Gender After Gender in Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.
[76] Catherine Thomas, "Love to mess with minds: En(gendering) identities through Crossplay," in *It happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic essays on a pop culture phenomenon*, ed. Ben Bolling and Matthew Smith (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 29-39.

> and necessary . . . we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity.[77]

If we consider crossplay as a meeting place between roleplay and drag, then we can understand and accept that queer culture already suffuses roleplayed worlds and that role-players actively engage with the queer elements of those worlds. For queer players who engage with these games, these affordances are not merely tangential or supplementary to the rest of the roleplay experience; rather, they are an integral and fundamental part of how these players engage with and remember their RPGs. Playing in RPGs with high levels of queer affordances—like crossplaying in a larp or in TRPGs—can be formative for queer players toying with their identity and self-concept, such that the phenomenon of discovering one's queerness through RPGs is not uncommon to hear from queer role-players.

In a study observing a student-led afterschool gaming club for LGBTQIA+ students and allies, educators Scott Storm and Karis Jones describe how queer affordances in TRPGs are profoundly meaningful for young queer people. By observing and examining their interactions in play, Storm and Jones describe how "these youth embodied expressions of queerness, even those that might reinforce stereotypes, as an embodiment of an otherwise inaccessible queer identity. Many of the youth were not out to family members and discussed how they only felt comfortable embodying and playing with queer identities in *D&D*, citing that other spaces felt too restrictive for this subversive identity play."[78] For these young, queer role-players, having the opportunity to inhabit a version of themselves that did not need to present as cis or heterosexual both relieved them of the pressures of enacting an embodiment that did not feel right and revealed to them the

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[77] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[78] Scott Storm and Karis Jones, "Queering critical literacies: disidentifications and queer futurity in an afterschool storytelling and roleplaying game," *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 20, no. 4 (2021).

ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are pliable and malleable categories. Game designer Josephine Baird notes how "accounts of trans people using RPGs as a safer space to 'try out' another way to be gendered can be found in numerous sites – from the memetic, to the anecdotal, to the academic."[79] In her autoethnography, Baird describes her pre-transition participation with RPGs as one of the first spaces that afforded her a new way to understand herself:

> The game gave me a chance to consider a different "kind of me." In my mind and on the character sheet I created a role to play. In fantasy terms, she might actually have been considered quite plain . . . She was perfect however for a teenager who was trying to find herself by tentatively trying out being who she really was. As our party of adventurers awkwardly tried to find their way to an actual adventure, I was able to play out being her in fictional everyday environments by having conversations with other characters as her. I could play out scenarios and imagine and feel out how it might be to be this person – who seemed so much closer to a self that felt like me.[80]

Baird's experience echoes that of other queer and trans ludic scholars who recognize RPGs' capacity for identity trans/formation. Katherine Angel Cross (whose concept of *becoming* we discussed earlier) shares a similar experience and perspective on the queer potentialities that exist for gendered exploration and enactment in RPGs. Reflecting on her own personal engagements with RPGs, she writes that:

> Self and other dissolved, and I became aware of a process of becoming in my gendered life, a horizon that I might never reach but one worth pursuing. It was this cascade of

[79] Josephine Baird, "Role-playing the Self – Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in Live Action Role-Playing Games," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 11, no. 11 (2021).
[80] Josephine Baird, "Role-playing the Self," 100.

> realizations that led me to draw strength from my fictional characters . . . and realize that what was true in the virtual world may be true in the physical one.[81]

In her article, Cross invokes historian Susan Stryker's vision of trans-formation: "As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be."[82] In a very real way, RPGs are these sites where we get to *become* more than what we are told we can be, *extend* ourselves past our corporeality, and *ascend* to a realm of imagination that sometimes can't help but bleed over into our mundane identities. Chapter 3 will more thoroughly engage Johan Huizinga's concept of the Magic Circle which implies that the boundary between our playspaces and our mundane lives is *porous*;[83] aspects of our identities *bleed* in and out of the games we play as we *become* our characters more and more. Our final section on play with gender and sexuality will explore how RPGs can transform us (as Susan Stryker says) into "something *more*."

Transgression

If the old guard of fantasy RPGs like 20th century *Dungeons & Dragons* may be called 'normative play,' then a queer analysis of these games may turn toward what many ludic scholars call 'transgressive play.' Gender studies scholar Jenny Sunden explains that "the concept of transgressive play is usually taken to mean play against the 'ideal' or 'implied' player of the game, of playing the game and bending the rules in ways not anticipated by design."[84] This concept is supported and partially drawn from a model of transgression like that described by

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[81] Katherine Angel Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams."
[82] Susan Stryker, *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[83] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949).
[84] Jenny Sundén, "Play as Transgression: An Ethnographic Approach to Queer Game Cultures," *DiGRA '09 - Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference*, no. 5 (2009).

sociologist Chris Jenks as "play that can be considered to ‘violate and infringe’ on the play of other players."[85] Ludologist Jaakko Stenros theorizes about different categorizations of transgressive play, such as parapathic play, brink play, taboo play, or player-inappropriate play.[86] Basically, any play that bends the rules or expectations of the system within which that play is situated may be called ‘transgressive,’ and transgressive play is precisely where I situate expressions of queerness in RPGs.

If we take transgressive play as simply describing aspects of play that exist beyond what a game’s designer intended in her vision of its play, then we can identify many examples of play that can be considered transgressive across the genealogy of RPGs. For example, we can take the aforementioned case of crossplay as a manifestation of queerness in RPGs outside of the creators’ visions for what these games and their playspaces would become, and thus as an example of transgressive play. Additionally, the turn of the millennium brought with it the publication of many TRPG supplements which expanded the rules of already-existing RPGs for the inclusion of sexual activity, such as *Book of Erotic Fantasy*,[87] *Naughty & Dice*,[88] *Sex and Sorcery*,[89] and *Encyclopaedia Arcane Nymphology*.[90] Instances of practices and supplements like these demonstrate queer gamers’ commitments to engaging in roleplay on their own terms and molding the genre to their own interests. They are manifestations of how the creative affordances of RPGs and their mechanics can be stretched to accommodate virtually any expression of identity, desire, or even curiosity. By playing transgressively, players also transgress real-world

[85] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[86] Jaakko Stenros, “Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play,” in *Transgression in Games and Play*, ed. Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).
[87] Gwendolyn Kestrel and Duncan Scott, *Book of Erotic Fantasy* (Seattle, WA: Valar Project, 2003).
[88] Christine Morgan and Tim Morgan, *Naughty and Dice* (Seattle, WA: Sabledrake Enterprises, 2003).
[89] Ron Edwards, *Sex and Sorcery* (Chicago: Adept Press, 2003).
[90] James Desborough, *Encyclopaedia Arcane Nymphology* (Swindon: Mongoose Publishing, 2003).

norms and challenge which unexamined values or ideologies we un/consciously infuse into our games.

It's difficult to argue that these kinds of transgressions work against the intent of game designers. They may certainly ‘violate or infringe’ upon other players’ visions for a game, they are often enacted by players outside the ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ player for a game, and they definitely bend rules in unanticipated ways. However, these forms of transgression still cling to game systems that were plainly unintended to serve this kind of play. Here we encounter something of an ideological split in transgressive play, a dual interpretation of the term which I describe this way:

1. Transgressive play is transgressive because it boldly pushes past an idealized form of play. It transgresses from a base game, a normative play style, or an anticipated audience by introducing transgressive elements to a pre-existing system.
2. Transgressive play is transgressive because it generates entirely new styles of play through the creation of new/alternate game worlds and game systems. It transgresses from the RPG genre as it presently exists by inviting players to consider alternative ways we can construct games for the interest of their players.

These two branches on the concept of transgressive play provoke questions about the aims of transgressive play and also (I think) reflect two modes of queer being: a reformulation of normativity within an oppressive system and a refusal of normativity in favor of envisioning alternative systems of social belonging. To avoid deviating too far from my primary argument, I won’t make a value judgment about which path is more virtuous to pursue. It would feel injudicious of me to project a ‘proper path’ for queerness to follow, in games or out of them. However, I will admit that I find this second branch of transgressive play *more interesting* for the

enactment of queerness in RPGs because it radically decentralizes the process of game development and encourages queer players to create their own games, settings, and systems for fellow queer players which can be radically divorced from existing RPGs.

Though they are few, some game designers have taken up the charge to reimagine the limitations of RPGs by creating what I call *transgressive games*, and more of them are being produced each year. These are games which develop a dissatisfaction with existing game systems into entirely new roleplay settings and experiences for their players. Notably, in 1991, White Wolf Game Studio published *Vampire: The Masquerade* and introduced players to the *World of Darkness* setting.[91] Prior to *Vampire*, sexuality in games had historically been reduced "to a mechanic . . . which emphasized the systemic and simulation aspects of roleplay," but which obscured the "dramatic, narrative, and experiential results of sexuality."[92] The *World of Darkness*, "itself largely positioned as the alternative to the mainstream of fantasy," deliberately and explicitly welcomed players of "all alternative cultures, homosexual included."[93] As Paul Mason put it:

> *Vampire* and its successors took role-playing out of its core constituency (which could perhaps be pithily, if unkindly, be described as *Lord of the Rings*-reading social inadequates) and established an alternative fief – in this case that of undead-obsessed "goths."[94]

Vampire and subsequent *World of Darkness* games (such as *Changeling: The Dreaming* or *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*) "not only included suggestive queer imagery . . . but they also

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[91] Mark Rein-Hagan, *Vampire: The Masquerade, First Edition*, (Clarkston, GA: White Wolf Publishing, 1991).
[92] Ashley ML Brown and Jaakko Stenros, "Sexuality and the Erotic in Role-Play," in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[93] Ibid.
[94] Paul Mason, "In Search of the Self," 2.

extensively discussed queer sexualities."[95] Once the seal was broken and queer role-players and artists witnessed explicitly queer RPGs attain commercial success, others soon followed. Games like *Blue Rose*,[96] *Monsterhearts*[97]and *Our Traveling Home*[98] were expressly designed to construct and convey queer narratives. 2021's *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* openly advertises as a queer RPG pursuing the second path of *transgressive play* that I outline above:

> A sword duel can end in kissing, a witch can gain her power by helping others find love, and an entire campaign can be built around wandering matchmakers flying from system to system. *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* is a roleplaying game for telling queer stories with friends. If you love angsty disaster lesbians with swords, you have come to the right place.[99]

The increasing development of RPGs centering queer narratives is deeply heartening and hopeful for fostering a future of radical inclusivity in RPGs, one in which queerness is not merely afforded, but rather *intended*. Games that follow this trajectory demonstrate to the games industry, role-players, and culturally conscious consumers of media that, even in instances where queer people are afforded existence, queer folks *want* and *will create* new systems which will embrace the wholeness of our identities. Games that build queerness into their gameplay acknowledge the inevitability of queerness in roleplay's infinitude of identity possibilities and firmly center queerness in the experience of their play. There is no way to play *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* without an expansive imagination around gender and sexuality; queerness is inevitable.

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[95] Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons."
[96] Jeremy Crawford, Dawn Elliot, Steve Kenson, and John Snead, *Blue Rose* (Renton, WA: Green Ronin Publishing, 2005).
[97] Avery Alder, *Monsterhearts* (Buried Without Ceremony, 2012).
[98] Ash Kreider, *Our Traveling Home* (Indie Press Revolution, 2021).
[99] April Kit Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (Evil Hat Productions, 2021).

One of my favorite games to do this is Avery Alder's *Dream Askew*, which describes gender this way:

> A gender exploded, extracted from the society intact and made mutant . . . when you encounter a gender word, imagine. Ask your fellow players. Flirt with a search engine. If nothing comes up, invent. No matter how you come to your initial understanding, it's yours to continue to define through play.[100]

Writer Sarah Donnelly informs us that "the character sheets in Dream Askew each list a series of gender options that often seem to defy that descriptor, ranging from 'woman' and 'bigender' to 'predestined' and 'raven.'"[101] Games that play with sex, gender, and sexuality in this way are, I believe, moving us closer to what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls *queer futurity*. In the introduction to *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz lays out his interpretation of queerness:

> Queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future . . . Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.[102]

Part of what makes a concept like *queer futurity* so interesting to examine is the intractability of it, its intangibility and immeasurability. Can we know if we are approaching a queer futurity? How will we know that we've achieved it? Can you ever really 'arrive' at the future? I suggest that, even if we can't immediately or directly answer these questions, playing

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[100] Avery Alder, *Dream Askew* (Buried Without Ceremony, 2018).
[101] Sarah Donnelly, "My Gender is 'Predestined': Queer Tabletop Roleplaying Games." *The Lambda Literary Review*, July 13, 2020.
[102] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

an RPG like *Dream Askew* gets us a whole lot closer to a queer futurity than a lot of other things we do.

Playing with Race and Representation

Just as role-players have the opportunity to explore aspects of identity such as gender and sexuality through roleplaying games, they may also broach other elements of socially constructed identity such as race. The following sections will cover the many ways that RPGs have historically and contemporarily dealt with the matter of representing racialized identities. It is pressing to examine how race is conveyed in RPGs because while a player-character's gender may not have a significant influence on a player's mechanical experience of gameplay, her character's *race* is almost always enormously important, comprising not only a character's aesthetic qualities, but also some of their capabilities in gameplay.

It will be important to know going into this section that the term 'race' in RPGs has a very particular definition which is different from how we conceptualize race in our own world.[103] In mundane terms, we understand race as socially constructed—defined, determined, and redefined through multiple historical "colonial project[s] forged in Indigenous dispossession and African enslavement" (at least in the Euro-descendent, western hemispheric context).[104] However, the conception of 'race' in RPGs comes primarily from constructions of race in the fantasy genre which "often [have] little to do with the complex mix of cultural upbringing, color,

[103] I will also note here that this section makes use of the term 'class,' which similarly has a different meaning in RPGs than in our own world. Rather than describing a socially constructed hierarchical relationship usually tied to socioeconomic and/or racial/ethnic status, *class* in RPGs refers to the frameworks and templates from which players build their characters. *Class* could be understood as synonymous with archetype, profession, or specialization, and it typically indicates what abilities and aptitudes a character has. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, classes include Wizard, Paladin, Fighter, Cleric, Bard, etc.

[104] Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, "Race," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 178.

parentage or geographical origins. Instead, 'races' within RPGs are often not human but rather entirely different evolutional groups, with distinctive physical, cultural, and psychological attributes."[105] Put another way,

> Race isn't a social construct in the diegesis of those [fantasy RPG] universes, but an essential truth. Orcs aren't humans with a different appearance or culture, they are a race of humanoids with their own physical, mental and cultural characteristics.[106]

The mention of Orcs will become notable for our later discussion, but for now it will suffice to understand that race is literally coded into the mechanics of play and expressed through creative player choices guided by descriptions and suggestions in RPG sourcebooks. The social quandary we will soon encounter is that, although races as presented in RPGs are fictional, their inspirations often aren't, and representations of race in RPGs can work to reinforce negative racial stereotypes and prejudices.

As critical race scholar Philip Clements writes in his Master's thesis, *Dungeons & Dragons* "uses race as a biologically determined category that imposes sharp limitations on what a person can be and do . . . *D&D* tends to present nonhuman races as monolithic groups, with each individual simply being a variation on a single consistent theme."[107] The way that RPGs present race certainly upholds the idea that races are monolithic, and their biological functions (such as aging or vulnerability to certain environmental factors) are so distinct as to make the

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[105] Esther McCallum-Stewart, Jaakko Stenros, and Staffan Björk, "The Impact of Role-Playing Games on Culture," in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, ed. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018), 174.
[106] Samuel Heine and Antoine Premot, "The Human Fantasy: Exploring race and ethnicity through Dungeons & Dragons," *FDG '21: Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (August 2021).
[107] Philip Clements, *Roll to Save vs Prejudice: The Phenomenology Race in Dungeons and Dragons* (Master's Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2015).

concept of 'races' in RPGs more evolutionarily akin to 'species.' RPGs codify differences between races as attributes that offer characters various boons or banes and which often strongly influence a player's choice about which race to play. As games scholar James Mendez Hodes puts it, attribute adjustment "makes race literally real in-game by applying immutable modifiers to character ability scores, skills, and other characteristics. The in-game fiction justifies these character traits as absolute realities; they also just happen to be the same cruel and untrue things racists say about different ethnicities."[108] The legacy of race in RPGs is a harrowing one, and this section will trace how concepts and representations of this aspect of identity have been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by the players, artists, and designers who create RPGs.

Legacy

The history of the fantasy genre is unsurprisingly riddled with unkind and downright dangerous depictions of race and racialized identity. The racialized hierarchies that pervade stories written in the fantasy genre are largely attributable to the European Enlightenment and the concept of the 'Great Chain of Being.'[109] The Chain was purportedly divinely structured and ranks all forms of life and earthly material according to their proportion of 'matter' and 'spirit.'[110] The foundational Enlightenment belief that all beings could be categorically and definitively ranked by their matter and spirit wound its way from philosophers' salons into the works and research of contemporary scientists. Among the most influential of these was the

[108] James Mendez Hodes, "Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth: Part I," published in personal blog, *James Mendez Hodes*, January 14, 2019.
[109] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).
[110] The more 'spirit' and less 'matter' a being contained, the higher it was ranked on the chain. Consequently, God was at the top of the chain, followed by the angels, men, animals, and finally plants and minerals.

German medical anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach whose (1775) *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* forms the basis of most subsequent research on race. In it, Blumenbach differentiates groups of people by phenotype and geographic origin and names the five varieties or 'races' of mankind as: Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays.[111] With the exceptions of a few label updates and some expansions of these categories based on historical/political struggles, these races made their way into modern racial 'science' (and eventually popular consciousness) largely unchanged.

When considering how race found its way into the genre of fantasy (considering that race could, conceptually, be entirely sociologically different than in our reality), many scholars turn to J.R.R. Tolkien and his seminal *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien was not the first to write in the genre of fantasy, nor was he the first to depict different groups of people as akin to different racial groups, but he was the first to reach mass appeal with heavy elements of racialization in his work. In relation to fantasy RPGs, Tolkien's influence is nearly unavoidable as the races of Middle Earth correlate directly with the races that Gygax and Arneson, *D&D*'s creators, first chose to populate their worlds; as previously mentioned, the first playable races introduced in *Dungeons & Dragons* were Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits.[112] In Tolkien's works, these groups ally with each other primarily because of their racial proximity and descendance from the deities of the world.[113] Interestingly, Tolkien chooses to subdivide the race of Men as far back as the First Age,

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[111] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, "On the Natural Varieties of Mankind (Third Edition, 1795)," in *The anthropological treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach,* trans. Thoman Brendyche (Longman, Green, and Roberts,1865).

[112] In 1977, the Hobbit race in *D&D* was officially replaced by the Halfling race, and other creatures drawn directly from Tolkien's books were also renamed (i.e. Ents became Treants). This change happened as a result of the Tolkien estate's intellectual property lawyers sending a cease-and-desist order to Gygax's publishing house, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), forbidding the uncredited depictions of Tolkien's creatures; Nicolas Ricketts, "Cease-and-Desist: Don't Mess with Tolkien," *The Strong National Museum of Play*, April 22, 2021.

[113] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977).

in which they were split between three houses with notable phenotypic and behavioral differences. Scholars later mapped this tripartite racial division onto what William Ripley called *The Races of Europe*: the Nordic, the Alpine, and the Mediterranean.[114] Despite their differences, the noble races of Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits were willing to collaborate ostensibly due to their inherent 'goodness.'

We don't need to stretch the point very far to understand that Tolkien was making arguments for racial hierarchy, biological essentialism, and monoculturalism in his depictions of the races of Middle-Earth. The most virtuous of his races (namely Elves) were those closest in form and arcane attunement to the gods of Middle-Earth, placing them far higher on Tolkien's invented chain of being than other races we will discuss shortly. Tolkien also seems to represent all members of his imagined racial groups as being distinct and uniform with essentially the same behavioral, physical, and cultural characteristics, reinforcing an image of racial essentialism.[115]

What makes these representations of race in Tolkien's work significant for our consideration of identity in RPGs is the fact that these racial models made their way into RPGs without much critical consideration for their sociological implications, and differences between racial groups became quantitatively codified in mechanical modifiers and unchangeable characteristics applied to characters based on race. The 5th edition *Player's Handbook* for *Dungeons & Dragons* makes this explicit in saying that "the race you choose contributes to your character's identity in an important way, by establishing a general appearance and the natural

[114] William Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study (Lowell Institute lectures)* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899).
[115] Dimitra Fimi, *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

talents gained from culture and ancestry."[116] In *D&D* and similar fantasy-based RPGs like Paizo's *Pathfinder*, a character's core statistics (i.e. strength, dexterity, intelligence, charisma) can be numerically adjusted by a player's chosen race, giving them intrinsic, race-based advantages or disadvantages in gameplay. These mechanical modifications accompany aesthetic and behavioral differences. Once again using *D&D* as a benchmark, the 5e *Player's Handbook* offers these passages to describe the many races in the game:

- "And the people themselves people of varying size, shape, and color, dressed in a dazzling spectrum, of styles and hues represent many different races, from diminutive halflings and stout dwarves to majestically beautiful elves, mingling among a variety of human ethnicities." (p. 14)
- "Scattered among the members of these more common races are the true exotics: a hulking dragonborn here, pushing his way through the crowd, and a sly tiefling there, lurking in the shadows with mischief in her eyes." (p. 17)
- "Half-elves and half-orcs live and work alongside humans, without fully belonging to the races of either of their parents." (p. 17)

From the first point, we can gather that the writers share Tolkien's adoration of the idealized pale, slender elves reminiscent of a decidedly Victorian fascination with slim, stark white bodies.[117] But the issue of representation becomes more nefarious as we read on to learn about the inherent characteristics of the non-normative (exotic) races: words like "hulking," "pushing," "sly," "lurking," and "mischief" paint a picture of unfriendly and unwelcome others with dubious intents. Interestingly, half-elves and half-orcs get tossed in with the 'exotic' races,

[116] Wizards of the Coast, Player's Handbook (2014).
[117] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Morrow and Company, 2021).

recalling 'one-drop-rule'-inspired anti-miscegenation policies that purported the corrupting influence of racial mixing. The attribution of qualities like slyness or mischievousness also hints at pre-determined racialized dispositions, which we will discuss soon.

Notably, the monolithic cultures of non-human races do not seem to apply to humans, who are seemingly set apart by their *lack* of racial unity. In most RPGs—including *D&D*—humans are as close to a 'default' race as you can get in a game medium where the opportunities for character customization are virtually unlimited. As the 'neutral' or 'default' race, humans are afforded an intra-racial diversity denied to other fantasy groups, a quality which games researcher John Kim calls *humano-centrism*.[118] In their Master's research on the role of race in TRPGs, Jordan Gaudreau explains that "comparing fictional races, such as dragonkin, elves and gnomes, to the fictitious human ideal, makes it easier for new players to understand what makes each race unique. But the normative role of Humans in the games also obscures the distinctive qualities of the role, in a way that recalls whiteness as an unmarked racial category."[119] In this formulation, humans in fantasy settings basically exhibit a this-worldly construction of whiteness as an unmarked, hegemonic ideological category. We might say that humans in fantasy TRPG—like white people in our world—occupy "an invisible racial position that is not inherently dominant, but is ubiquitous."[120]

If humans represent the nondescript ideal of whiteness in Tolkienian fantasy, spanning the spectrum of morality in their ethnic disunity, then there are naturally moral extremes. The best thing to be in Tolkien's world is an elf: "a tall, willowy, beautiful, graceful, pale, immortal

[118] John Kim, "Race in RPGs and the Alternatives," *Live Journal*, May 15, 2009.
[119] Jordan Gaudreau, "The Role of Race in Fantasy TTRPGs" (Master's Thesis, McMaster University, 2022).
[120] Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, (London: Routledge, 1993).

creature, created by the greatest of the gods as Middle-earth's original sentient species."[121] On the canonical map of Middle-Earth, the elven homeland is in the far west, while the evil empire is headquartered in the far east. However, according to Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, a few unlucky elves "who came into the hands of [the Dark Lord] Melkor … by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes."[122] In a posthumous compilation of his letters, we would discover Tolkien's true intention in his depiction of orcs:

> The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the 'human' form seen in Elves and Men. They are squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the least lovely Mongol-types.[123]

There is no subtlety here. Tolkien wrote in the early 20th century following his tenure in the British military, where he undoubtedly encountered xenophobic stereotypes about oft-denigrated 'Mongoloids' that manifested in his writing as a distinctly grotesque and primitive martial race, a depiction that would become entrenched in fantasy's (including TRPGs') representations of orcs for decades to come. According to game designer and cultural consultant James Mendez Hodes, the characterization of orcs in Tolkienian fantasy aligns with the 19th century British imperial concept of the 'martial race,' a strong, violent, warlike culture "easily controlled by more graceful, cerebral people— a rare few whipped into shape as honorable soldiers for a good cause, more commonly forged into evil forces' rank and file."[124] The caricature of the martial race was applied across the British empire to basically every group

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[121] James Mendez Hodes, *Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth: Part I*,
[122] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977).
[123] J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter #210," in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: George Allen & Urwin, 1981).
[124] James Mendez Hodes, *Orcs, Britons, and the Martial Race Myth: Part I*, James Mendez Hodes Blog, January 14, 2019.

Britons sought to fold into their extractive, exploitative colonial scheme. The martial race myth became a common calling card for Britons subscribing to the 'civilizing' portrayal of colonial conquest, particularly in South Asia and East Africa.[125] This portrayal naturally lends itself to narratives of violence, in which Orcs must be either subjugated or exterminated for the danger they pose to more 'civilized' races. As Afrofantasy author N.K. Jemisin explains in her blog, "in games like Dungeons & Dragons, orcs are a "fun" way to bring faceless savage dark hordes into a fantasy setting and then gleefully go genocidal on them."[126]

It is notable that the application of the martial race myth was reserved primarily for darker-skinned racial and ethnic groups, typically those ranked lower in the caste or class system of their native culture.[127] It is interesting, too, to examine how fantasy chose to interpret and depict minority races that do not fall within the 'savage' caricature of orcs. One of the clearest and most-cited examples of codified racism in fantasy TRPGs is in *D&D*'s drow, which the 5th edition *Player's Handbook* describes like this:

> Also called dark elves, the drow have skin that resembles charcoal or obsidian, as well as stark white or pale yellow hair . . . to most, they are a race of demon-worshipping marauders dwelling in the subterranean depths of the Underdark, emerging only on the blackest nights to pillage and slaughter the surface dwellers.[128]

The drow are a creation of Gary Gygax, and since their introduction to TRPGs, they have been depicted as (1) dark-skinned and (2) inherently and immutably evil. Drow are infamously

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[125] Kaushik Roy, "Race and recruitment in the Indian Army, 1880-1918," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (2013): 1310-1347.
[126] N.K. Jemisin. "From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing," published in personal blog *N.K. Jemisin*, February 12, 2013.
[127] Heather Streets, *Martial races: The military, race and masculinity in British imperial culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
[128] Wizards of the Coast, *Player's Handbook*, 24.

depicted as slavers of 'lesser,' 'martial' races (including orcs) and are said to descend from matriarchal societies where cruelty, murder, and torture are part of the status quo. In all other respects, drow are virtually the same as elves, but their dark skin, geographic origins, and matriarchal (feminine) culture seem to be all the justification we get for this race's inherent evil.[129] It should also be noted that in the diegeses of *D&D* and similar fantasy TRPGs, 'evilness' is not an ascribed quality; it is a mechanical manifestation of moral and personal attitudes called 'alignment' which can sometimes restrict the abilities, equipment, and spells a character can access. Alignment is usually depicted on dual spectrums of good or evil and lawfulness or chaos. 'Exotic' races like tieflings and 'monstrous' races like orcs are stated in the sourcebooks to tend toward evil and chaotic alignments far more often than the 'common' races of humans, elves, and halflings. The following passage on alignment in the *Player's Handbook* makes clear that moral proclivity is not only innate and immutable, but also divinely pre-ordained:

> For many thinking creatures, alignment is a moral choice. Humans, dwarves, elves, and other humanoid races can choose whether to follow the paths of good or evil, law or chaos. According to myth, the good-aligned gods who created these races gave them free will to choose their moral paths, knowing that good without free will is slavery. The evil deities who created other races, though, made those races to serve them. Those races have strong inborn tendencies that match the nature of their gods. Most orcs share the violent, savage nature of the orc gods, and are thus inclined toward evil. Even if an orc chooses a good alignment, it struggles against its innate tendencies for its entire life.[130]

[129] Alex Augunas, "Guidance: The 'Rot' in RPGs – On Race and Racism in Tabletop RPGs," *Know Directions Podcast,* July 8, 2020.
[130] Wizards of the Coast, *Player's Handbook*, 122.

Considering the racial coding of fantasy races alongside this framing of morality as racially dependent, TRPGs make the implicit argument that characters similar to the European and Euro-descendent writers and creators of these games have the capacity for moral agency, whereas nonwhite-coded characters lack the same capacity for moral reasoning. Writer and academician Antero García connects the dots between alignment and real-world race in describing how "the rulebooks privilege whiteness even when the characters are elves and goblins – aligning white-coded characters with the forces of good and rules-governed mechanical advantages and black-coded characters with villainy and mechanical disadvantages."[131]

Some fans of fantasy might argue that these depictions of racial minorities in TRPGs are just that: fantastical, invented, and purely for the function of make-believe. Indeed, an uncritical consumer of fantasy may defend these types of depictions as crucial for the diegetic narrative of the game, whether on the basis that inherently evil fantasy races create clearly defined villains for heroic player-characters to challenge or that conflict between racialized groups is 'historically accurate' and thus potentially more immersive for a player who struggles to envision alternative realities. However, these are bad-faith arguments that aim to depoliticize racism and the dehumanizing structures of colonialism on the premise that whatever is depicted in a fantasy is inconsequential to reality. We know (from our earlier exploration of how our identities are shaped and re/formed through roleplay and imagination) that the artistic content of these games can not only be interpreted but deeply internalized as part of one's self-image and worldview. This is why some of the nerdier circles in white supremacist groups online have taken to referring to Black and Brown racial minorities as 'orcs,' and this also contextualizes a 2007 post

[131] Antero García, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Roleplaying Games," *Mind, Culture, Activity* 24, no. 3 (2017).

on the white supremacist forum *Stormfront* entitled "Learn all you need to know about race from Dungeons and Dragons."[132]

Denigrating depictions of minority groups, fantastical or otherwise, are not benign. Our constructions and perceptions of our mundane realities are powerfully shaped by the images and media with which we engage, and when we engage with media on the premise that it references a reality that is not our own, we can lose our capacity to critically discern the political implications of that media. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins makes this explicit in her theory of *controlling images*. Through her examination of the stereotypes and images ascribed to Black women in the U.S. (like the mammy or the welfare-mother), Collins impresses upon the reader how these controlling images can make forms of social injustice like racism, sexism, and poverty appear natural and normal.[133] Likewise, the portrayals of fantasy races like orcs and drow function as controlling images that implicitly uphold systems of oppression by bolstering concepts like the martial race myth and reinforcing homogenizing stereotypes of ingrained malevolence in an imagined Other.

Tolkien and the fantasy genre that would adopt him as a founding father ultimately left a troubling legacy. Harmful depictions of fantasy races have long deterred players of color from entering or engaging with playspaces, and the implicit biases of white players informed and reinforced by these racialized depictions also facilitated a process of gatekeeping that evidently continues into the present. If a player wanted to play a nonwhite-coded character, they would be required to sublimate any character concept they might have to the intrinsic evilness of an entire playable race or else be forced into a narrative of constant struggle against an inherited brutish,

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[132] John Kim, "Race in RPGs."
[133] Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 70.

sadistic nature. For many POC, this experience too closely resembled their struggles with navigating their actual race, and the fantasy of TRPGs lost its escapist appeal. In other words, mapping mundane racialized characteristics onto entire populations turned race into a bioessentialist phenomenon rather than a socially constructed one, effectively taking the fun and freedom away from playing with this aspect of identity while simultaneously reifying colonialist and Eurocentric representations of otherness and pushing the fantasy genre into the legacy of white supremacy.

Challenges

> Throughout the 50-year history of *D&D*, some of the peoples in the game—orcs and drow being two of the prime examples—have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated. That's just not right, and it's not something we believe in. Despite our conscious efforts to the contrary, we have allowed some of those old descriptions to reappear in the game. We recognize that to live our values, we have to do an even better job in handling these issues. If we make mistakes, our priority is to make things right.[134]

The preceding statement comes from Wizards of the Coast. It was published as a news post on their official website in response to years of backlash against their portrayals of the aforementioned 'exotic' and 'monstrous' races, which remained largely unchanged for almost 50 years of the game's publication and commercialization. To Wizards and its audience of TRPG enthusiasts, this statement represented a massive leap in accountability and redress of the painful

[134] Wizards of the Coast, "Diversity and DnD," *Wizards of the Coast,* June 17, 2020.

stereotypes they had relied on to construct their fantastical narratives. The usual critics of diversity and inclusivity pushed back against Wizards for supposedly folding to requests by nonwhite players and spoiling their fantasies of committing genocide against purely evil races. However, the company marched forth in its quest to transform *D&D* into a DEI-friendly game, and in the same comment as above goes on to list how they will take the opportunities in new publications and reprints of old publications to be more racially sensitive and work with cultural consultants.

Part of these efforts involved updating these races aesthetically, illustrating Drow with purplish skin rather than the customary "charcoal black" and Orcs with green skin instead of a "sallow" grayish-brown. These updated skin colors mark these races as nonwhite without aesthetic comparison to any mundane racial group, effectively allowing them to stand in for *any* nonwhite racial group. In an analysis of Orcs' green skin as part of his Master's thesis on racial essentialism in high fantasy, cultural anthropologist and ethnic studies scholar Alex Ogilvie Kostrzewa invokes writer WJT Mitchell's exploration of dinosaur illustrations as an artistic comparison. According to Mitchell, "The modern (1900-1960) dinosaur was a uniform, monotonous gray-green color that served to unite perfectly the savage, organic, reptilian skin and the modern armored fighting vehicle. The lean, mean, fighting machine had to be green because war is a return to the state of nature, and camouflage is a natural adaptation."[135] The comparison Kostrzewa makes is that if racialization and otherness are defined by skin color (as in *D&D*'s updated depictions of Orcs and Drow), and green is the color of monsters (like dinosaurs), then green skin is the natural depiction for monstrous races.

[135] WJT Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Monstrous races weren't the only ones to get aesthetic updates in *D&D*'s diversity initiatives though. New artwork in recently published adventure modules and sourcebooks present illustrations of Dwarves and Halflings with Black and Brown skin, suggesting ethnic diversity among races previously presented as monoracial. Such depictions have been received positively by fans, and the imaginative potential of ethnic and cultural diversity within fantasy races has stoked excitement and conversation among TRPG players like the hosts of the Three Black Halflings Podcast (who joke in their pilot episode, "Why can't Halflings be Black?").[136]

Amidst the wave of cultural and racial sensitivity in fantasy games, other TRPGs have made efforts to clear the proverbial air of their racist pasts. Some have changed the language they use to discuss in-game race, such as Paizo's choice to replace the terms 'race' and 'subrace' with the less categorical and restrictive 'ancestry' and 'heritage' in the 2nd edition of *Pathfinder*,[137] or White Wolf foregoing racialized taxonomies altogether in favor of terms like 'Clan,' 'Tribe,' or 'Kith' in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, and *Changeling: The Dreaming*, respectively.[138] According to games writer Michael Tresca, "'Ancestry' is not just a replacement for the word 'race.' It's a fluid term that requires the player to make choices at character creation and as the character advances. This gives an opportunity to express human ethnicities in game terms, including half-elves and half-orcs, without forcing the 'subrace' construct."[139] In my own fantasy-inspired games and playspaces, I favor the language of ancestries and heritages far more than the dated racial taxonomies of yore.

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[136] Jasper William Cartwright, Jeremy Cobb, and Luyanda Unati Lewis-Nyawo, "'A Very Successful Pilot' – The Origin Story," *Three Black Halflings Podcast*, June 25, 2020.
[137] Paizo, *Pathfinder 2e Core Rulebook* (Redmond, WA: Paizo Inc., 2019).
[138] Mark Rein-Hagan. Clarkston, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
[139] Michael Tresca, "RPG Evolution: Do We Still Need 'Race' in D&D?," *EN World,* April 2, 2018.

In addition to aesthetic and linguistic changes, TRPGs have also made mechanical changes to the playability of 'exotic' or 'monstrous' races, primarily by reworking racial ability score modifiers. *D&D 5e* already did away with racial penalties to ability scores,[140] but until 2022, it largely retained racially assigned attribute bonuses. However, the publication of the sourcebook *Mordenkainen Presents: Monsters of the Multiverse* canonically did away with racialized attributes, instead offering all characters of any playable race three bonus ability score ranks (either +2 +1 or +1 +1 +1) to be freely applied as the player sees fit. This dynamic shift in the game system returns agency in character creation to the player, allowing her to build a character of any race without restricting that character's mechanical capabilities. Other creatives working in the TRPG space have come up with alternatives to race-based modifiers, like in Gabe Hicks' "Class Modifier Module for 5th Edition," which affords players the option of attaining their statistical changes from their character's chosen class rather than their diegetically pre-determined race.[141] Gameplay changes like these help challenge the bioessentialist narratives upon which fantasy has relied for decades and lower the mechanical barriers that may deter players from choosing to play as fantasy minorities.

Still, even if we recolor our characters, change our taxonomies toward 'ancestries' and 'species,' and rework the rules of the game to avoid penalizing players who portray nonwhite-coded characters, there remains the issue of how RPGs and their creators sow difference and racial disunity into their game worlds. For all the depictions of opulent High Elves and sneaky Wood Elves, intuitive Hill Dwarves and rugged Mountain Dwarves, we still only get one kind of Orc: the brutish, violent, and largely unsympathetic one. We are still operating within a

[140] In past iterations of the game, Orcish characters received a +2 bonus to Strength, which was 'balanced' by -2 penalties to both Intelligence and Charisma.
[141] Gabe Hicks, *Class Modifier Module for 5th Edition*, 2020.

framework in which intra-racial diversity is outside the ordinary and key aspects of individual behavior are tied to racial identity, a model which BIPOC individuals in the mundane world have consistently challenged since being confronted with this adversity through colonization. As Kostrezewa explains, "efforts to humanize Orcs and move fantasy games away from the mindsets of genocide and race war are laudable and necessary, but as long as these efforts are still operating in an essentialist framework, they will never meet their goals."[142]

Other members of the TRPG community have proposed ways to ameliorate the problematic nature of depicting fantasy races as monolithic and inherent to personal identity. Returning to John Kim's discussion of race in fantasy RPGs and their potential alternatives, he proposes de-emphasizing race by highlighting other aspects around a character's birth that may be influential, such as the character's birthplace, their chosen religion, or their sibling rank. Kim also suggests designing non-humanocentric RPG systems where Humans are not the central or 'default' race, instead choosing to center the perspectives of other fantasy races where "their abilities would be classified as 'everyman abilities'—similar to default abilities in other games, such as the abilities of vampires in the vampire games. In a game where elves were dominant, their abilities would be the standard, and humans might have the special weakness of 'night blindness,' along with a penalty to their Dexterity."[143] Alternatives like these present an opportunity to fully lean into the possibilities of fantasy as players have the option of inhabiting and exploring an identity wholly different from that which they already experience in their mundane realities. These suggestions also play into fantasy's power to explore worlds entirely distinct from our own and embody experiences completely foreign to us, such as systems where

[142] Alex Ogilvie Kostrzewa, "Racial Essentialism in High Fantasy" (Master's diss., Bowling Green State University, 2022), 78.
[143] John Kim, "Race in RPGs"

"everyone born in the forested highlands can see in the dark and speak to birds" or exaggerating aspects of our mundane world where "the difference between a Taurus and a Pisces could be as great as the difference between an elf and a dwarf in Tolkienesque fantasy."[144]

Another alternative for game designers and RPG enthusiasts is doing away with constructs of race altogether. For instance, *Budgie Smuggler Games*, creators of the *Xenovita* RPG, refrains from using the language of race and instead classifies its playable characters by species, within which playable characters defy simple categorization or reduction and exhibit a broad diversity of intra-species characteristics. *Budgie* writer JP describes the vision of the new system as follows:

> When putting together our species and character backgrounds Xenovita organizes our species categorization by an individual species' many physical characteristics, a sampling of their many different ethnic backgrounds and traditions, methods of communications, preferred environments, common technologies, and more. Statted NPCs will also benefit from a possible motivations section outlining just a few of the many ways a GM or player could use the character in their game, while emphasizing their discretion.[145]

Alternatives to race-based fantasies like those presented by Kim and JP are commendable in their efforts to make RPGs accessible and entertaining to players who may find their identities marginalized in the socially/biologically comparable epistemes of fantasy worlds. These alternatives may indeed be attractive to players turned off by fantasy's reliance on racial signifiers as drivers of conflict, bringing BIPOC into playspaces and giving them a chance to experience stories where race does not define characterization. However, the proposed solution

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[144] Ibid.
[145] JP, "Race and RPGs," *Budgie Smuggler Games*, August 19, 2022.

of eliminating race in stories that preserve narratives of difference poses the risk of invisibilizing this aspect of identity and denying players the opportunity to really play with race and representation or even to curate stories about racial/cultural empowerment or celebrating diversity. Perhaps the answer to fantasy's problematic racial depictions lies not in eliminating race from stories, but rather in handing the narrative reins to artists and creators who can handle the question of race and representation in RPGs with respect for the real-world groups and cultures upon which minoritized fantasy races are based.

Emb(race)

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Marxist sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall presents what he calls 'representation theory,' which basically describes how there is no such thing as 'true representation' of people or events in text. Instead, representations exist in multiplicities, and the various representations of an object are then subjected to social interpretation and subsequently elevated to hegemony, relegated to alterity, or land somewhere in between. Hall makes the argument that in order to challenge dominant, harmful representations, we must dissolve our stereotypes by embracing and producing diverse representations in our media.[146] Hall's theory of representation is echoed in feminist scholarship, such as Sylvia Wynter's formulation of 'genres of human' corresponding to markers of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, etc.[147] Wynter develops this concept with the argument that certain genres of humans are over-represented, such as the genre of 'Man' being so

[146] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998).
[147] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR* 3, no. 3 (2003), p. 257–337.

central to theories of humanity that it theoretically stands in for the entire category of 'humans.'[148]

Hall's phenomenology of hegemonic representations and Wynter's theory on the over-representation of human genres align with what ludic scholar Whitney "Strix" Beltrán calls *defaultism*, the process by which particular representations become part of the status quo such that when aspects of our characterizations remain undefined (such as when characters' racial or sexual identities are not expressed), we fall back on what is familiar and deemed 'normal' (i.e. white, cisgender, heterosexual man). In an essay published in *Reactor* magazine (formerly *Tor*), Beltrán expresses the implications of relying on *defaultism* and the exciting avenues for diversity and inclusivity that open when we reject this principle in our games and playspaces and instead embrace the fantastical potential of minority-inspired settings:

> When defaultism is the norm, vast groups of people and entire cultures are left unexplored and unused in games. These are lost opportunities to engage our imagination, to roam in rich, fertile and vibrant territory. Simultaneously, lack of representation makes the role-playing hobby harder to access for minorities. Without seeing themselves in these stories, why would they participate? . . . Specifically employing minority settings in RPGs is an easy and direct way to punch through defaultism. Changing the setting . . . can deeply enrich the storytelling while also making the game accessible to a wider

[148] In her discussion of Wynter's theory, feminist scholar Emily Anne Parker explains that the genre of Man is inextricably connected to a philosophy of whiteness as its foundation, directly connecting the sustenance of heteropatriarchy with continued adherence to the norms and standards of whiteness (Emily Anne Parker, "The Human as Double Bind: Sylvia Wynter and the Genre of 'Man'," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2018), p. 439-449).

> audience, signaling to underrepresented groups that the narratives that speak to them are part of the fabric of the game. It's a win-win.[149]

As Beltrán states, the easiest way we can avoid defaultism is by diversifying the settings in which we tell our stories and amplifying the narrative perspectives and storytelling traditions of those groups whose representations in fantasy have been relegated to denigrating depictions as martial races, matriarchal slavers, or otherwise entirely overlooked. Challenging defaultism in fantasy requires us to change not only the ways in which fantasy minorities are portrayed in our games, but also who has a hand in shaping those games. Theorizing from the standpoint of Quare studies—a uniquely POC-oriented "'theory in the flesh,' focusing on the lived experience, the body, and difference within and between groups"[150]—performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson asserts that:

> People have a need to exercise control over the production of their images so that they feel empowered. For the disenfranchised, the recognition, construction and maintenance of self-image and cultural identity function to sustain, even when social systems fail to do so.[151]

Given the disenfranchisement of BIPOC within the fantasy genre and their historic relegation to stereotypic portrayals through controlling images, Johnson's argument directs us toward a radical reconstruction of fantasy, one in which the perspectives of minority artists, designers, and creators are not only taken seriously, but become central to the stories being told.

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[149] Whitney Strix Beltrán, "Why Minority Settings in RPGs Matter," *Reactor Mag*, April 27, 2015.
[150] Morgan Klaus Scheurerman, "'Quare' studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother," published on personal blog, *Reading List*, 2020.

[151] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001), p. 11.

D&D 5e was explicitly designed to be the most accessible and easy-to-learn version of the game, one which purported to correct the errors of the past, partly through the diversification of its writers. However, as we've examined in this section, many of the problematic mainstays of the series remained unchanged in the updated edition, or only altered in such a way that the Tolkienian status quo was preserved. To the credit of *D&D*, Wizards of the Coast, and their audience, this form of fantasy may feel comfortable, familiar, and even fun. However, the failure to make substantive changes to RPGs (particularly in the realms of race and representation) left many TRPG enthusiasts disillusioned with the fantasy genre's project to portray settings that could truly be called 'otherworldly.'

In response, the past decade has seen a steady rollout of published and in-progress RPG projects—primarily driven by BIPOC writers, artists, and game designers—inspired by the landscapes, mythologies, and peoples of non-European regions of the world. Leading the vanguard of these new wave fantasies are BIPOC TRPG enthusiasts who have worked within and around popular commercial RPG spaces for years and who have chosen to develop new games which divert from fantasy's Euro-centric origins. For example, RPGs like *Into the Mother Lands*[152] have been popularized via actual-play streaming on *Twitch*, introducing many in the TRPG community to Afro-fantasy and Afrofuturist stories and exploring the potentials of settings and systems inspired by genres that center African and Afro-descendent perspectives. Following

[152] *Into the Mother Lands* is an Afrofuturist sci-fi TRPG created by Tanya DePass and developed by B. Dave Walters, Gabe Hicks, Jasmine Bhullar, Eugenio Vargas, Synxiec, Allie Bustion, Cassie Walker, Ify Nwadiwe, Noordin Ali, Mario Ortegon, and Omega Jones. According to the *Into the Mother Lands RPG* website, "A thousand years ago, African Emperor Mansa Musa sent an expedition to "the New World" that never arrived. In the mythos of Into the Mother lands, these explorers were instead transported to a strange new world far, far away. Over the centuries, the descendants of Mansa Musa still struggle to flourish on Musalia, a world that was once alien to them but is now home. In this all-new TTRPG, you'll learn about their diverse cultures, see what terrifying enemies await them, and find out if they can continue to survive on their adopted homeworld."

this lineage is *The Wagadu Chronicles*[153], both a pen and paper TRPG and a recently released virtual MMORPG set in the magical realm of Wagadu, which derives its ecological, artistic, and mythological inspirations from African ethnic groups such as the Yoruba in Nigeria and the Maasai in Kenya. *The Wagadu Chronicles* originally began as a supplement for *D&D 5e*, and the creators and developers of *Into the Mother Lands* are mostly former and/or current collaborators with Wizards of the Coast/*D&D*. The popularity and prestige of these titles demonstrate the depth of interest, on behalf of game designers and fans, to have their identities faithfully and respectfully reflected in the games that they play.

Game designers working in both the digital and tabletop spaces have taken to exploring other types of minority settings, taking a transnational, historiographic approach to representation in games. 2018's *Mulaka* vibrantly renders the landscapes and wildlife of northern Mexico as it follows a shaman from the Indigenous Tarahumara culture in their quest to defeat monsters inspired by Indigenous folklore, drawing upon magics inspired by Indigenous mythologies.[154] 2017's *A Thousand Thousand Islands* is a collection of zines which "draws from the overlapping material cultures, lived stories, and mythistories of that region of the world variously called Indochina, Suvarnabhumi, and the Nusantara -- Southeast Asia."[155] Other artists have recognized the opportunity to elevate settings within the U.S. which have been racialized and minoritized by processes of white supremacy. For instance, John Gregory and Steven Bramlett's *Lowcountry Crawl* is another zine that embraces Southern Gothic aesthetics and folklores to depict settings from "little sandbars that come and go with erosion, to larger islands with established vegetation," exploring how "the forces of erosion, habitation, agriculture, and

[153] Alan Cudicio, *The Wagadu Chronicles* (Berlin, Germany: Twin Drums, 2022).
[154] Lienzo, *Mulaka* (Chihuahua, MX: Lienzo, 2018).
[155] Mun Kao and Zedeck Siew, *A Thousand Thousand Islands* (Centaur Games, 2017).

the fishing industry have all contributed to this ever-changing landscape."[156] *Urban Shadows* is another example in this vein, designed by Andrew Medeiros and Mark Díaz Truman with the intent of capturing the complexity of navigating diverse ethnic identities in urban American environments while blending in traditional fantasy elements like vampires, faeries, and wizards.[157]

I will take a moment to note the fact that a considerable number of these diverse RPG projects take the zine as their preferred artistic medium. The zine is a favored medium for communication, art, and community-building in many feminist spaces, and I believe that its overlapping uses in RPG spaces are not coincidental. As zine scholar Alison Piepmeier argues in *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, zines enact what bell hooks describes as "a pedagogy of hope":[158]

> Zine making allows women, gender minorities, and other marginalized people to engage in creative self-expression, to speak for themselves in a society that often silences them. Zines allow makers to critique, question, resist, and reappropriate the patriarchal mass media by taking the means of production into their own hands. Zines are a powerful medium for advocacy and social change. They are at once personal and political . . . often, they are made collectively or in community with others.[159]

While the next chapter will explore the community-building capacity of RPGs in much greater detail, the multifaceted nature of the zine makes it a fruitful medium for identity expression, particularly for those expressing or exploring marginalized identities. This is part of

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[156] John Gregory and Steven Bramlett, *Lowcountry Crawl: A Southern Gothic RPG Zine* (Technical Grimoire Games, 2023).
[157] Andrew Medeiros and Mark Díaz Truman, *Urban Shadows (2nd Edition)* (Magpie Games, 2022).
[158] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[159] Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

what makes them so desirable as an artistic medium to creators of RPGs, which—as we have discussed extensively—are themselves deeply invested in the expression, performance, and exploration of identity. Through RPGs like those mentioned in this section, roleplayers can delve into those aspects of their identities which they may be deterred from expressing in their mundane lives or which may be inaccessible due to processes of alienation from and erasure of culture. RPGs offer an access point to tap into a performance of cultural and racial identity, an opportunity which can feel just as critical and life-changing as the experiences of queer players portraying queer characters. Larp theorist Jonaya Kemper calls this phenomenon *emancipatory bleed* and writes in the Nordic Larp blog that the "near invisible and quite heavy load" of carrying the double-consciousness of marginalized racial identity "can be lessened and enhanced through the use of [roleplay] and the resulting bleed."[160]

To conclude this section, I once again refer to the work of José Esteban Muñoz, whose theory of *disidentification* I find profoundly applicable to this discussion. According to Muñoz, queer people have the capacity to recycle "damaged stereotypes" as "powerful and seductive sites of self-creation."[161] When queer and underrepresented people play with their portrayals in media in this way, they can transform what were previously problematic elements of their representations by revolutionarily reclaiming them. Through performance—and particularly through roleplay—disidentifications take those representations that have caused us harm and repurposes them as powerful refusals of that harm, boldly insisting on the validity of marginalized perspectives on marginalized identities. Indeed, Muñoz states that any "queer

[160] Jonaya Kemper, "The Battle of Primrose Park: Playing for Emancipatory Bleed in Fortune & Felicity," *Nordic Larp*, June 21, 2017.
[161] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colo and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

performance . . . is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance."[162]

Conclusion

It is through a process of performing *a* self that we come to more fully understand *our*selves. Enacting selves other than—but embodied by—ourselves presents us with a way of reorienting our senses of self. Portraying a character in an RPG is like holding up a sort of Lacanian, multidimensional, funhouse-type mirror; we get the experience of seeing and feeling a warped, altered version of ourselves, and having that experience allows us to better recognize the parts of ourselves that feel truest, or noblest, or kindest. When a player acts out her character boldly confronting a transphobe challenging their identity, or when that character awakens a new magical ability after meeting their ancestors in their ethnic homeland, those experiences stick with that player and shift the ways in which she perceives and navigates through her mundane world. As much as we put pieces of ourselves into our characters and desire chances to see ourselves reflected positively in our characters, our characters can also reveal to us parts of ourselves that we didn't know about or didn't know that we wanted to know more about.

Evidently, these games have always been sites where participants have toyed with the imaginative potential of alternate identities; it's just that now, there is a much greater *diversity* of participants partaking in that fantasy. RPGs and the creative worldbuilding that they encourage allow people to envision themselves (or versions of themselves) in worlds where they would not be excluded from their favorite hobbies or from society at large for their identities. The character that a queer or BIPOC person plays is her gateway to a realm of social- and self-acceptance, a

[162] Ibid., xiv.

lens through which her image is refracting into something admirable, aspirational, or otherworldly. Ultimately, the result of playing with identity is a sort of queer acceptance, a form of play in which one's selfhood is simultaneously disrupted and reified in a demonstration of identity's fragility and fundamentality. Once a player has accepted and experimented with the tensions within herself, she may then turn toward unraveling the dynamics between herself and others.

CHAPTER TWO

Building Communities

Starting in infancy, games are some of the first ways that we interface with the world around us and learn to understand our place and the place of others in it. Some of the first games we ever play could be classified as role-playing games. For example, a game like 'Shop' teaches young people not only about the process of selecting and purchasing goods, but also about the duties of the cashier, the proper behaviors and mannerisms with which to approach the shopping transaction, and the limits of what can and cannot feasibly be bought. Playing with others in infancy also gives us one of our first opportunities to establish how decision-making can function beyond the individual level. We do not play role-playing games in isolation. Indeed, this is what distinguishes what we call role-playing games from individual games of pretend in such early forms of play.[1]

Games offer one of the first sites where individuals get to practice what psychologist Hannes Rakoczy calls *collective intentionality*. According to Rakoczy, collective intentionality occurs when more than one person agrees to abide by a particular set of terms for a particular goal. Practicing collective intentionality in childhood games is one of the first times people experience what Rakoczy calls the 'we' intentionality in which individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger, inclusive 'we' with shared goals, values, and practices. In "Play, Games, and the Development of Collective Intentionality," he writes that "collective intentionality with the creation of status functions is what lies at the heart of institutional reality. Status functions create

[1] Michael J. Tresca, "Live-Action Roleplaying Games," in *The Evolution of Fantasy Roleplaying Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Press, 201).

institutional facts."[2] In brief, games have the power of creation, a unique quality of generativity that awakens not only one's sense of being part of a collective, but also the potential to re/shape how that collective organizes and understands itself.

One of the qualities that makes RPGs unique is the constant and multi-faceted exercise of collective intentionality. These games are not designed to be played alone.[3] Additionally, RPGs are not competitive games. They rely on collaboration amongst players to propel the story and achieve narrative resolution. In *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*, Sarah Lynne Bowman describes how "RPGs allow individuals to participate in the construction of their own narratives in a group practice of co-creation . . . though an author might have created the original world in which the action takes place, the majority of the story develops through a continual process of involved interaction and creativity on the part of participants."[4]

RPGs are always spaces-in-formation or spaces-in-development where the rules, ideas, and structures governing the game can be rewritten or re/interpreted at any time by communicating with fellow players. The narrative and world of the game are also not shaped solely by one player, not even the game master. Participants in the game work together to determine how the world will look, what the political organization of the imagined space will be, which identities exist or are salient, how people traverse through the world, etc. This chapter seeks to explore Markus Montola's secondary frame of play: the game frame, inhabited by

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[2] Hannes Rakoczy, "Play, Games, and the Development of Collective Intentionality," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development,* no. 115 (2007).
[3] Although I make this point for the sake of this chapter's argument, I will acknowledge that it is possible to play a TTRPG alone, particularly those that are designed without a game master. However, I find that RPGs become remarkably less fun when played this way, and the many constructive elements they promote fall to the wayside for the sake of a singular player's performance of a narrative that could just as easily be transcribed as a novel.
[4] Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010).

players. Here, we will examine how role-playing games have functioned as sites of solace for players, as opportunities to collectively dream of alternate world and as spaces for practicing how to radically, holistically take care of one another. This chapter's focus is on community, which conceptually extends beyond merely forming a relationship with whom/what is proximate and moves toward a relational matrix characterized by care and solidarity, what some feminist scholars like Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher characterize as a sort of 'care web':

> In the most general sense, care is a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.[5]

We will begin with two vignettes from the history of TRPGs that demonstrate how role-players have rallied together across space and time to care for their community members, secure the longevity of that community, and protect the art form that they feel best allows them to express their identities and feel communal solidarity despite challenges from both public and private entities. Our first story begins in 1979, less than five years after the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* . . .

Playing with the Devil

In August of 1979 sixteen-year-old University of Michigan student James Dallas Egbert went missing from his dorm, inadvertently igniting a years-long moral panic that would consume religious fanatics across the United States. Dallas was widely memorialized as a scientific child

[5] Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, ed. E.K. Abel and N.K. Nelson (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 41.

prodigy, having been recruited at age 12 to repair computers for the U.S. Air Force.[6] Posthumous examination of Dallas' personal affects indicate that he regularly used drugs (and likely used his knowledge of chemistry to manufacture them himself), strongly suggest that Dallas was likely either gay or bisexual (after disappearing, he would flee to stay with a 20-year-old gay lover in East Lansing, and his recovered poems suggest non-heterosexual interest in male peers), and he was also diagnosed by an MSU psychologist with severe clinical depression attributed to "parental pressure, criticism, academic pressure . . . the constant demand to be a star."[7] However, none of these facts were ultimately reported as cause for Dallas's disappearance by William Dear, the lead investigator that Dallas's parents hired to handle the case.

It was well known among Dallas's peers that he played *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was also well known that students at MSU liked to enact their *D&D* games as prototypical larps, performing for and with each other in the steam tunnels under the university buildings. Before disappearing, Dallas left a contingency suicide note in his dorm room (written with his left hand to throw off handwriting analysts) and a series of pins on a bulletin board which Dear eventually realized formed a map of the underground steam tunnels through which Dallas had fled. The connection with the steam tunnels was enough for Dear to generate the theory that Dallas's disappearance was linked to his involvement with *D&D*, and Dear would appear on local and later national television to claim that Dallas had become a victim of a highly dangerous fantasy game, one which could warp the mind and erase one's autonomy.[8] According to Dear,

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[6] Shaun Hately, "The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III," *Places to Go, People to Be: The Online Magazine for Roleplayers* 6 (1999).
[7] William C. Dear, *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1991).
[8] Carla Hall, "Into the Dragon's Lair," *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1984.

> Dallas might actually have begun to live this game, not just to play it. Dungeons and Dragons could have absorbed him so much that his mind had slipped through the fragile barrier between reality and fantasy, and he no longer existed in the world we inhabit.[9]

Dear's provocative theory coincided with growing fears spurred by the media about mind control, satanic cults, and demonic influence on America's youth by way of popular media like heavy metal music. Eventually, local news teams began reporting on other disappearances, suicides, and homicides that were allegedly linked to participation in RPGs, and the sensationalism of these stories propelled them onto prime-time, nationwide news broadcasts. Rather than considering the myriad social factors that contribute to youth suicide (particularly that of queer youth, whom we already know have vested interests in the explorative, performative aspects of RPGs), parents were easily swayed by the news media to identify RPGs as the common thread running through these various cases. Consequently, an otherwise unremarkable case of child disappearance (the 80s would be full of them) thus became national news, framed within the context of *D&D* and the 'dangerous' influence of role-playing games.

The narrative of role-playing games as dangerous, potentially corruptive influences on America's youth was promoted most powerfully by conservative evangelicals who would stretch the original theory into the idea that the spells and monsters presented in *D&D* were, in fact, *real* and that children could use these games to practice witchcraft and commune with the devil. Perhaps none championed this claim as ardently as anti-occult activist Patricia "Pat" Pulling, the founder of B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons),[10] an advocacy group committed

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[9] William C. Dear, *The Dungeon Master*, 45.

[10] Pat Pulling founded BADD after her son Irving "Bink" Pulling committed suicide in June 1982. Bink was an active RPG player, and Pat later confessed that she was directly influenced by news coverage precipitating from the Egbert case to believe that Bink had been possessed by a demonic force and that *D&D* was solely responsible for his

to supporting judicial cases and lobbying legislators for the regulation of role-playing games.[11] BADD's campaign occupied a lot of airtime throughout the 1980s. Pat Pulling appeared on a 1985 episode of *60 Minutes* which also featured *D&D* creator Gary Gygax dismissing BADD's claims as "witch-hunting balderdash."[12] In 1987, *Entertainment Tonight* hosted a two-part special called "Games That Kill" hosted by Geraldo Rivera, who announced that "over ninety deaths [had] been linked to fantasy role-playing games."[13] All this screentime gave Pulling and BADD ample license to spread the claim that RPGs encourage "demonology, witchcraft, voodoo, murder, rape, blasphemy, suicide, assassination, insanity, sex perversion, homosexuality, prostitution, satanic type rituals, gambling, barbarism, cannibalism, sadism, desecration, demon summoning, necromantics, divination and other teachings."[14] Such a laundry list of deviant behavior would be sure to provoke alarm in almost anyone who heard it, but Christian evangelicals were the most invested in the connections between RPGs and their suggested negative influences. Fears were so widespread that even academic theologians expressed genuine concern over youth participation in RPGS:

> Our children are growing up in a very hazardous world. Not only are they forced to pick their way through a complex maze of conflicting values at school, in the neighborhood, and out in the marketplace, but they are even being assaulted in the "safety" of their own homes . . . Amazingly, though, the chief weapon used in this spiritual raid on our children is a game—just a simple little game. It is called *Dungeons and Dragons*. Even more than

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suicide. In the historiography of RPGs, I understand Pat Pulling as an Anita Bryant-type figure. (Patricia Pulling, *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989), 5.)

[11] Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons* (Swindon, UK: Mongoose Publishing, 2011).

[12] Paul LaFarge, "Destroy All Monsters," *The Believer Magazine*, September 20, 2008.

[13] Nicholas Orndorff, "Games: Odds Are, They're Harmless," *Charleston Gazette*, December 27, 1998.

[14] David Waldon, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (2015).

> simple cartoons, toys, comics, books, videos, and music, this simple little game has served to make our children a "generation at risk."[15]

The narrative of a 'generation at risk' of corruption via RPGs became reflected not only in religious circles and by broadcasting companies, but also in policies advocated by community leaders. In her book *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, Tipper Gore—then-wife of Tennessee senator Al Gore—described the suicide of Bink Pulling, branded *D&D* an "occult-themed game," and quoted Pat Pulling in claiming that the game "has been linked to nearly fifty teenage suicides and homicides."[16] Assertions that fantasy RPGs contributed to criminality found especially strong purchase in schools with parent-teacher associations. In the wake of Pulling's campaigning through BADD, schools in Connecticut, Vermont, New York, Virginia, Colorado, Wisconsin, California, Ohio, and New Mexico banned organized on-campus play of *D&D* and doubled down on pedagogical practices based on evangelical educational models.[17]

This episode of American history, marked by its fervent conservatism, anxious religiosity, and fearfulness of youth gaming culture came to be colloquially known as the 'Satanic Panic.' Scholars like philosopher Sarah Hughes identify the height of the Satanic Panic as occurring in the 1980s, coinciding with a rapid ascendence in popularity for the RPG genre (after being mostly relegated to niche gaming subcultures throughout the late 1970s).[18] In 1982, the same year that Bink Pulling committed suicide, sales of *D&D* products rose to $22 million, up from

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[15] Peter Leithart and George Grant, *A Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons: The Catechism of the New Age* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1988), 1.
[16] Tipper Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1987), 88.
[17] Daniel Martin and Gary Alan Fine, "Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Is 'Dungeons and Dragons' a Breeding Ground for the Devil?," in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1991), 110-11.
[18] Sarah A. Hughes, "American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970-2000" (PhD. Diss., Temple University, 2015).

$14 million the year before.[19] Religious studies scholar Joseph Laycock meticulously traces the history of the Satanic Panic in his book-length treatment of the topic, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*. Starting on the cover, Laycock identifies the Satanic Panic the way many retrospective scholars now do: as a moral panic. According to Laycock, "the rhetoric used by BADD was a classic example of a moral panic in that it presented a massive social problem where, empirically and statistically, no problem existed."[20] Nowadays, it is easy to identify the events of the Satanic Panic as a textbook example of moral panic. Sociologist Stanley Cohen's 1972 definition of the concept in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* almost seems to have precisely predicted the component elements of the Satanic Panic a decade before its proper start:

> A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions . . . the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.[21]

The phenomenology of moral panics has been thoroughly researched, particularly in the field of sociology. Scholars often pay special attention to moral panics involving young people as these also seem to be the ones which garner the most media attention and outrage from adults concerned about younger generations. Moral panics function in dubious ways, typically seeking

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[19] [19] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic Over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 130.
[20] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 119.
[21] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The creation of the Mods and Rockers (Third Edition)* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

to stoke fear about media, art, or technology that is unfamiliar to a general populus. It is a discomfort with the sensation of unfamiliarity that excites the 'panic' response, but it is the seduction of taking a 'morally upstanding' stance that can drive people to rally around a cause. And make no mistake: moral panics *are* a seductive enterprise. Media studies scholar Toby Miller describes the allure of moral panics as follows:

> Moral panics tend to function synecdochally: part of society is used to represent (or perhaps distort) a wider problem—youth violence is a suitable case for panic about citizenship, whereas systemic class inequality is not; adolescent behavior and cultural style are questionable, but capitalist degeneracy is not . . . Islamic violence is problematic, Protestant violence is not. Particular kinds of individuals are labeled as dangerous to social well-being because of their deviance from agreed-upon norms of the general good.[22]

Inciting a moral panic serves to reinforce hegemony just as much as it obfuscates the social and systemic ails of a crumbling political infrastructure. In the case of the Satanic Panic, mainstream media seems to have hyper-fixated on a handful of violent cases tangentially linked to RPGs and the potential of extradimensional mind control to conceal the U.S.'s very real Cold War-era mind control experiments and rationalize religiously motivated Reagan-era domestic terrorism. The political promise of a moral panic is to scapegoat an (often already marginalized) community and create so much discourse, upset, and alarm around an otherwise inoffensive interest that a public becomes so distracted by an easy-to-isolate phenomenon upon which they

[22] Toby Miller, "Tracking Moral Panic as a Concept," in *The Ashgate Companion to Moral Panics*, ed. Charles Krinsky (London, Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 38-9.

can heap moral blame for society's downfall that they forget to question who actually has the political influence to right society's wrongs.

Moral panics are notably *not* a relic of the past. In the last year, many parents, politicians, and pastors have chosen to provoke social anxieties about drag performers and transgender folx, often accusing people who exhibit these deviant expressions of gender and sexuality of 'grooming' children and inducing 'gender confusion.'[23] Performing in drag or being transgender are in no way new or even 'modern' phenomena, nor are the attacks and accusations of sexual violence leveled at members of these communities, but the excessive attention given to these expressions of identity in the past few years by high-profile public figures has driven an exceptional upsurge in anti-queer legislation.[24] Heinous accusations which deploy the language of sexual violence (i.e. 'grooming') have produced real, physical violence, especially for queer educators who push back against discriminatory policies only to find their schools and classrooms as targets of mass shootings and bomb threats.[25]

An interesting tactic of moral panics is placing emphasis on protecting children. Feminist scholars have identified children as an oppressed group given their powerlessness in affecting the policies that shape their lives and the instability of their social positions, particularly in times of moral panic.[26] Moral entrepreneurs will often project their social anxieties onto a never-ending quest to 'protect the children,' bolstering their position by connecting it to children's supposed

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[23] Allyn Walker, "Transphobic discourse and moral panic convergence: A content analysis of my hate mail," *Criminology* 61, no. 4 (2023).
[24] Melissa Block, "Accusations of 'grooming' are the latest political attack – with homophobic origins," *NPR*, May 11, 2022.
[25] Taylor Lorenz, "Meet the woman behind *Libs of TikTok*, secretly fueling the right's outrage machine," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2022.
[26] Oksana Duchak, "Marginalization of Young People in Society," *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 29 (2014): 70-79.

moral purity and infallibility.[27] Curiously, the logic of moral entrepreneurs often frames children as simultaneous victims and perpetrators of whatever produced the panic: children are at once the victims of demonic possession *and* Satan's allies in spreading infernal influence; children are at once subjected to 'gender ideology' *and* work to corrupt their peers by rousing 'gender confusion.' Joseph Laycock addresses children's frequent entanglements in moral panics and theorizes that the reason they are so often implicated in moral panic comes from the state's need to dictate and reinforce the status quo by discouraging imaginative alterity:

> It is in the interest of any hegemonic institution, religious or otherwise, to discourage imagination. Hegemony can be resisted only if we can imagine new possibilities. In this sense, fantasy role-playing games, along with novels, films, and other imaginary worlds, provide mental agency . . . It is for this reason that fiction and fantasy have been regarded as especially dangerous in the hands of those members of society deemed most important to control, such as children, women, and adolescents.[28]

What results from a moral panic? For society at large, generally nothing; after all, moral panics are first and foremost a tool of distraction and misdirection by the state meant to maintain the status quo by redirecting attention and outrage onto something that is usually largely harmless.[29] For the group toward which panic is directed, however, the aftermath most often means *social alienation* and *radicalization*. When a community becomes the target of a moral panic, even politically disaffected members of that community must awaken to the machinations

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[27] Ian Butler, "Child Protection and Moral Panic," in *Revisiting Moral Panics*, ed. Viviene E. Cree, Gary Clapton, and Mark Smith (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2015), 74.
[28] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 215.
[29] Morena Tartari, "Women and Children First: Contemporary Italian Moral Panics and the Role of the State," in *Revisiting Moral Panics*, ed. Viviene E. Cree, Gary Clapton, and Mark Smith (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2015), 16.

of the political operation against them. RPG enthusiasts of the 1980s knew that claims made about their games in the news media were bogus—no one was actually casting spells or conjuring demons through their *Player's Handbook*. But propagandized claims are often enough to turn people away from members of their communities, leaving those individuals in these targeted communities isolated from social life. Criminologist Alan Grattan describes this process as *negative counter modernization*:

> In many cases these negative, and sometimes violent, counter modernisation responses are directed, in both an inter- and intra-communal context, towards the perceived 'other.' Often, this is directed towards those who have been labelled or perceived either to be different or deemed to be responsible for communal and/or individual uncertainty and insecurity e.g. the migrant worker, asylum seeker, the non-believer, the outsider.[30]

However, just as moral panics bring together reactionaries on the side of punitive moral regulation, I suggest it also has the adverse effect of tightening bonds within communities of social outsiders in resistance to moral policing. RPG enthusiasts could have very well (and almost did) witness the downfall of their hobby and the destruction of their communities at the hands of moral entrepreneurs, but *D&D* is alive and well today, and the RPG community is as large and diverse as it's ever been. Endless news coverage around the dangers of *D&D* exposed many people to RPGs who otherwise may have never interacted with them, and through their own games, they discovered that RPGs are not only fantastic sites for personal discovery, but that they also came with an impassioned (and politically opinionated) community.

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[30] Alan Grattan, "The Alienation and Radicalisation of Youth: A 'New Moral Panic'?," *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations* 8, no. 3 (2008): 257.

The aftermath of the Satanic Panic was the first example of how the RPG community came together to buttress itself in the face of institutional adversity, but it would not be the last. Our next story jumps to very recent events in the history of RPGs to explore the ways in which RPG enthusiasts would once again protect their communities from institutional influences that sought to restrain and control them. Only this time, the conflict was intra-communal and initiated *by Dungeons & Dragons* . . .

Playing with the System

The Open Game License (OGL) is a public copyright license that allows third-party creators to modify, copy, and redistribute content from published games (usually the game mechanics). The first OGL was developed by Wizards of the Coast (WotC), a TRPG publishing company founded in 1990 by Richard Adkison. Wizards of the Coast began its life as a TRPG publisher, but the unprecedented success of Richard Garfield's *Magic: The Gathering* collectible card game (originally published and distributed by WotC in 1993) provided the company the financial wherewithal to acquire Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), the publishing company founded by Gary Gygax which originally produced *Dungeons & Dragons*. In 1999, Wizards of the Coast was itself acquired by and made into a subsidiary of Hasbro, where the company has seen record success in the TRPG market.

A significant portion of *D&D*'s success can be traced to the creation and preservation of the Open Game License (OGL). This license afforded third-party creators outside of WotC the legal right to draw upon and replicate selected game elements (like *D&D*'s races, classes, spells, and core rules of gameplay) from the *Dungeons & Dragons* System Reference Document (SRD) in their own creative content. This would allow artists and creators to produce their own gaming content that would be compatible with *D&D*'s core mechanics. The license also allowed creators

to sell their content without needing permission from or exclusive contracts with Wizards (as long as the content produced followed the rules set out in the OGL and SRD).[31]

Thousands of creators and TRPG enthusiasts used the content of the SRD and permissions of the OGL to create their own supplemental content with *D&D*'s rules. Fans created their own spells, magic items, armor, weapons, classes, subclasses, feats, races, and subraces to feature in their own full-length adventure modules, one-shot adventures, or supplemental guides for players and Dungeon Masters. These practices are so commonplace that fan communities regularly recognize and use the term *homebrew* (AKA *house rules*) to describe any *D&D* content not officially created or published by Wizards of the Coast.[32] This kind of content has always existed around TRPGs and *D&D* specifically. Games scholar Paul Mason explains in his "Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory" that despite Gary Gygax's own insistence that players follow a "standardized, 'authorized' set of rules," many fanzines "emerged to a large extent as a result of players' desires for a consistent game that worked."[33] Lee Gold, the founding editor of the highly influential *D&D* fanzine *Alarums & Excursions* explicitly stated that part of the zine's original purpose was to allow members of the TRPG community to exchange ideas about how to make their games more interesting, inclusive, and immersive.[34]

The OGL proved fruitful beyond its use by independent creators; it also spawned entire companies. TRPG publisher Paizo burst onto the RPG scene in 2009 with the release of

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[31] Wizards of the Coast, "System Reference Document 5.0," January 30, 2023.
[32] Ivan Abadier, "Great Dungeons and Dragons Homebrew Rules You Should Try," *GameRant*, November 23, 2023.
[33] Paul Mason, "In Search of the Self: A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination* (Finland: Ministry of Education, 2004), 2.
[34] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 32.

Pathfinder, a brand new TRPG that emerged from *D&D*'s 3.5 edition SRD.[35] Pathfinder found critical success with its modified version of *D&D 3.5e*, selling more copies of its *Core Rulebook* than the *Dungeon's & Dragons Player's Handbook* in the four-year period between *Pathfinder*'s release and the announcement of *D&D*'s 5th edition.[36] Other companies, like Kobold Press, became so popular simply by producing and publishing supplemental material for *D&D 5e* that WotC commissioned the company to create two official *D&D* adventures: *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* and *The Rise of Tiamat*.[37] Online marketplaces like the Dungeon Master's Guild or DriveThru RPG host thousands of supplementary titles by thousands of creators, again ranging from full-length adventures to maps and audio files and even play aids like spell cards.[38]

The importance of the OGL to the TRPG community cannot be understated. For decades, this license allowed creators to modify their games and gain compensation for their creative labor. The OGL was a document of legal permission from Wizards of the Coast that permitted players to alter the ways that they played their games and imagined their worlds. The value of this permissibility for players who wanted to play *D&D* but did not see their identities reflected in the game's settings and core mechanics is immeasurable. It should be noted that without the OGL, supplements like Gabe Hicks' *Class Modifier Module* and entire RPGs like *The Wagadu Chronicles* (both mentioned in Chapter 1) could not exist. The preservation of the Open Gaming License created real value for creators and community members who were dissatisfied with the game as-is and sought to share ways to alter the game for more accessible, inclusive, and representative play.

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[35] John Baichtal, "No D&D 4E for Paizo?!?," *Wired.com* (Conde Nast), March 25, 2008.
[36] Jeremy Forbing, "Dungeons & Dragons Next Edition Out Next Summer 2014," *Guardian Liberty Voice*, December 22, 2013.
[37] Ed Grabianowski, "The New D&D Adventures Will Include All the Dragons," *io9*, May 31, 2014.
[38] Steve Wieck, Mike Todd, and Chris McDonough, "DriveThru RPG" (Wolves of Freeport, 2004).

This is why, in early 2023, the RPG community was torn asunder following rumors that the OGL would be overturned. At the end of the previous year, Hasbro CEO Chris Cocks (former president of Wizards of the Coast 2016-2022) and Cynthia Williams (current CEO and President of WotC) hosted a 'fireside chat' outlining the company's strategy for shareholder investment growth in 2023. Part of their plan involved unifying the brand's game products, entertainment media, personal accessories, and collectables into the "next generation of D&D" under the codename *One D&D*.[39] Longtime fans of the game suspected that this codename was a cover for the next edition of *D&D*, prompting fears that the company would be revisiting and potentially revising its OGL. A couple weeks after the fireside chat, *io9* reporter Linda Codega leaked a draft of a new OGL (called OGL 1.1.) to the public, and the outcome would be disastrous.[40]

OGL 1.1 invalidated the original OGL, meaning that it could no longer be used toward the creation and dissemination of *D&D*-related content. The document stated that WotC must be notified about and receive a report on the earnings of all monetized content, and a royalty fee would need to be paid by creators earning a certain amount from products which used the OGL. The new OGL also claimed that Wizards had the right to use *all OGL content* however they saw fit.[41] As University of Calgary Communications student Luke Pye summarized, OGL 1.1 would "reduce the publisher's/creator's rights to content generated, proposed a royalty structure that was unfavourable to creators, and a subscription pyramid for access to added content that would traditionally be a one-time investment as a rulebook."[42]

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[39] MrFJLonghair, "Hasbro USB Fireside Chat – Full Webinar. No Commentary, No Frills + No end Credits," *YouTube*, December 9, 2022.
[40] Linda Codega, "Why Are Dungeons & Dragons Fans So Upset?," *Gizmodo*, January 27, 2023.
[41] Benjamin Abbott, "D&D OGL Controversy, explained – all the drama explained, and why you should care," *GamesRadar*, January 30, 2023.
[42] Luke Pye, "Dungeons and Dragons and the Critical Failure: A Thematic Analysis of the TTRPG Communities Reception of the Leaked OGL 1.1.," *The Motley: Undergraduate Journal* 1, no. 2 (2023): 86.

The community backlash was almost instantaneous. Fans gathered on social media platforms and forums to vocalize their disapproval of the new OGL and mobilize against WotC for daring to restrict creators' rights. Community members penned an open letter to WotC called 'Open DND' which garnered over 70,000 signatures in its first few days of publication.[43] Community content creators, including Kobold Press, announced that they would be officially breaking away from *D&D*, going so far as to create an entirely new gaming system.[44] Paizo devised a new license called the Open RPG Creative License (ORC License) that would work for any RPG and function in perpetuity, directly rebutting Wizards' claims to content produced under the OGL.[45] Fans and creatives within the RPG community were outraged, as can be seen in the following except from the aforementioned open letter:

> Nothing about this new license is 'open.' It chokes the vibrant community that has flourished under the original license. No matter the creator, it locks everyone into a new contract that restricts their work, makes it mandatory to report their projects and revenues to Wizards of the Coast, and gives WotC the legal right to reproduce and resell creators' content without permission or Compensation [original capitalization].[46]

Some of the greatest concerns raised over OGL 1.1 were those regarding ownership of intellectual property and accreditation for creators who produced content under the OGL. Concerns like these echo conversations in feminist scholarly methodology, which frequently concerns itself over its citational frameworks. As pedagogical scholar Pat Thomson writes in her

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[43] Benjamin Abbott, "More than 60,000 people sign open letter condemning new D&D license," *GamesRadar*, January 10, 2023.
[44] Kobold Press, "Raising Our Flag," *Kobold Press*, January 10, 2023.
[45] Robin Valentine, "The creators of Pathfinder have released their own version of D&D's controversial OGL – and it could have a huge impact on all tabletop RPGs," *PC Gamer*, July 5, 2023.
[46] Mike Holik, "OpenDND," *Open DND*, January 8, 2023.

blog, "who cites who is not a neutral game."[47] In the knowledge-making tradition of the academy, women—and especially Black, Indigenous, and women of color—have been systemically excluded from generalized forms of knowledge production and publication as discriminatory citational practices reproduce institutional racism and sexism.[48]

By creating what Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne call "citation cartels," (usually white male) academicians boost those works which most concur with their own and that are produced by scholars which most resemble themselves, leading to an exclusion of particular voices and bodies from the epistemology of the academy.[49] I suspect that many of the anxieties around OGL 1.1 came from creators who were worried that their original works would be subsumed by WotC in a scheme where they were both excluded from community recognition *and* had to pay licensing fees just to have their identities erased. What was at risk for these creators was the perpetuation of systems that abet what Patricia Hill Collins calls "subjugated knowledge."[50] After living so long under the freedom of OGL 1.0, creators feared that their contributions to game-making and worldbuilding would simply become grist for the content mill as part of Wizards' "naked cash grab."[51]

In heartening contrast to the inner workings of the academy, RPG creators and consumers alike rallied to uplift their subjugated creatives and protect the art that allowed them to see versions of themselves in their games. In the wake of the OGL 1.1 controversy (as it's now

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[47] Pat Thomson, "for the reader – citations, reference lists, tables of contents, and indexes," *PatThomson.net*, April 16, 2018.
[48] Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain, "#CommunicationSoWhite," *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 254.
[49] Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne, "Citation Matters: Mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement,'" *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 7 (2017): 955.
[50] Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251.
[51] Thomas Wilde, "Analysis: Nobody could dethrone 'Dungeons & Dragons' except Wizards of the Coast – and it may have just done that," *GeekWire*, January 23, 2023.

known a year later), tabletop companies like Paizo and Chaosium have experienced a surge in interest,[52] while *D&D Beyond* (WotC's flagship *D&D* content website, media library, and player aid) faced website crashes due to subscription cancelations.[53] A survey of *D&D Beyond* users revealed that 88% didn't want to use the new OGL, and 89% were dissatisfied with the revocation of the old OGL.[54] Community calls to boycott and divest from WotC gained massive support as community members built and shared guidelines for leaving Wizards behind for good.[55] Community mobilization tactics like these have been supported by feminist scholars for several decades, most notably those working in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement for Palestinian liberation.[56] And these community mobilization tactics worked—Wizards of the Coast eventually backed down and stated that they would not change the OGL and that the entire SRD would be made freely available under the Creative Commons.[57]

The OGL 1.1 controversy sparked a revolution within the RPG community, one which demonstrated that participants in RPGs are not only attentive to the wellbeing of their community, but also willing to take action when the systems in place begin to disadvantage those who contribute most to the community. Observing the OGL controversy as it occurred truly felt like history in the making for those of us within the RPG community. As utopian game scholar Kelsey Paige Mason puts it in their deeply nuanced and thoroughly researched chronology of the fiasco,

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[52] Julia Anderson, "D&D's OGL Controversy Has Pathfinder Selling Out at a Mind-Blowing Rate," *CBR*, January 26, 2023.
[53] Tara McCauley, "D&D Beyond's Account Management Page Crashes as Users Cancel En Masse," *CBR*, January 13, 2023.
[54] Kyle Brink, "OGL 1.0a & Creative Commons," *D&D Beyond*, January 27, 2023.
[55] Northwest_Quest, "Boycott Wizards of the Coast," *Reddit: r/DnD*, January 12, 2023.
[56] Kevin Bruyneel, Jodi Dean, Jack Jackson, Dana M. Olwan, Corey Robin, William Clare Roberts, C. Heike Schotten, and Jakeet Singh, "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) and Political Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 18: 448-476.
[57] DND Beyond Staff, "An Update on the Open Game License (OGL)," *D&D Beyond*, January 13, 2023.

> What was thought to be an unshakeable monopoly of the TTRPG community—one which survived the Satanic Panic and the many controversies over discriminatory source materials—[was] struggling to regain trust with creators, players, GMs, and influencers who have either sworn off playing and purchasing *D&D* products entirely or who argue that *D&D* is their game—not Wizards'.[58]

Just as the RPG community was tested before by the external pressures of moral panic, its unity was tested once again in the wake of institutional regression into imbalanced hegemonic power hierarchies. RPG enthusiasts recognized their own power in the creation and curation of consumer culture and resolved to make a change by mobilizing and taking direct action against corporate structures that sought to alter their systems of liberated creation. For members of the RPG community, the OGL felt something like a foundational political document, a peace brokered long ago between artists, creators, and designers to respect and acknowledge each other's works for the sake of bettering a game they all loved. When Chris Cocks, Cynthia Williams, and other corporate leaders challenged the perpetuity of that founding treatise, RPG enthusiasts felt understandably betrayed and reacted accordingly (revolutionarily) to retain their legitimacy, their dignity, and their recognition. They demanded what bell hooks calls a "dialogue" with those in power, which "implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination."[59]

In refusing a status of creative subjugation, participants in RPGs also re/discovered the unity of their community, solemnly committing (at least for a time) to uplift each other's works

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[58] Kelsey Paige Mason, "Just Make Believe: Assumed Neutrality, Archetypical Exceptionalism, and Performative Progressivism in Dungeons and Dragons," *Vector: A Magazine of the British Science Fiction Association* 294 (2023).

[59] bell hooks, quoted in Patricia Hill Collins, "Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology," in *Feminisms*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 200.

and reinforce support for creative labor. The OGL controversy brought together many RPG players who otherwise may not have pursued participation in the same playspaces but who recognized in one another a resolute dedication to both the wondrous and exploratory potential of collectively imagined fantasy, and the radical recognition of RPGs as ownerless art. The collaborative storytelling structure of RPGs is such that, as Sarah Lynne Bowman reminds us, our stories and games are generated in active, involved processes of co-creation. Preserving the integrity of narrative co-creation within the creatively liberated system of the OGL 1.0 means more stories, more perspectives, and players unifying not necessarily because they're playing the same game (since the game looks different at every table), but because they have agreed to uphold a system which is beneficial to the collective.

Could the system be better? Certainly! An anarchic perspective might posit that RPGs would be better as decentralized art projects presented in a shared repository of games, but I think that sharing a game system is most conducive to bringing people together—it's only that (for now), Wizards of the Coast owns "the world's most popular RPG" system. Even if we have not achieved RPG communist utopia, it's uplifting to see RPG fans protecting the policies that safeguard the sanctity of independent/collaborative creative labor within the systems that bring them together. What the OGL 1.1 controversy reveals to me is that, even if the greatest, most foundational institutions of the RPG genre (namely *D&D* and WotC) should fall, the community has a direction and drive for its futurity. Our next section examines some of the theory that helps explain how cultural objects like the OGL come to hold such sway over the RPG community, and how this community came to share such a well-defined, interdependent culture in the first place.

Playing with the Culture

The RPG community can best be understood as a type of subculture. Sociological scholars frequently take interest in subcultural studies and define subcultures as cultural formations marked by a "set of shared discourses, social languages, values and ideologies"[60] In *Shared Fantasy,* Gary Alan Fine firmly identifies TRPGs (then commonly known as 'Fantasy Role-Play Games' (FRPs)) as subcultural practice. Fine gestures to subcultural practices such as shared "cant, in-jokes, and common expressions"[61] as evidence that TRPG communities fit his definition of subculture:

> For a subculture to exist, one must be able to cite networks of communication through which common information is transmitted. Second, one needs to show that [RPG] gamers identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture. Finally, the subsociety must be identified as such by those outside of the group, which increases the perception of common interests of the group members and increases solidarity.[62]

Performance studies scholar Daniel Mackay elaborates on Fine's interpretation of RPGs as subcultural practice by highlighting how RPGs function as performative texts. According to Mackay, TRPGs form subcultures through the creation of games played by small groups of players performing: for themselves, for their play groups, for their shared subcultural communities at conventions, and for the public at large.[63] Mackay's argument develops the idea

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[60] Rusty Souleymamov, David J. Brennan, Carmen H. Logie, Dan Allman, Shelley L. Craig, and Perry N. Halkitis, "Party-n-Play and Online Information and Communication Technologies: A Socio-Linguistic Perspective," *Sexualities* 24, no. 3 (2020): 17.
[61] Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy,* 32
[62] Ibid., 26.
[63] Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (Jefferson: McFarland Press, 2001).

that RPG groups are not isolationist subcultures, instead deliberately reaching out to other RPG players for the sake of seeking and expanding their communities.

Part of what facilitates the process of community formation among role-players is the fact that they all belong to the same fandom. Fan studies is the emerging field which interprets and analyzes some subcultures as fanatic subcultures or *fandoms*. Fan studies scholar Karen Hellekson offers three criteria for defining fans: (1) fans are fans of something; (2) they engage in activities related to this thing; and (3) they create and pass along a culture that lays down behavioral codes and social practices (which are often informed by the object of fandom).[64] Belonging to a fandom can make it much easier to form communal bonds with fellow fans due to shared cultural scripts, established networks of communication, and unifying central interests that draw members of these communities closer together.[65]

Fans occupy a queer locus in popular culture in the sense that they disrupt and upset the power dynamics between producers and consumers of media. On the one hand, some scholars in the field of fan studies advance the theory that fans are an exploited group made subservient to the media of which they are fans. The consumerist market seeks to profit from fans by inciting them to consume fannish products, and producers of media get to disseminate their works through fans without attribution, recognition, or payment given to participants in fan culture. This interpretation of fandom presents fans as oppressed by the same systems that originally drew them together, in this case TRPGs and their derivative transmedia content. This reading of fandom is often the one intuitively adopted by producers of media, as was demonstrated in the

[64] Karen Hellekson, "A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 113-118.
[65] Dick Hebdige, "Posing…Threats, Striking…Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display," in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 1997), 404.

aforementioned OGL 1.1 controversy—WotC anticipated that their fans would remain loyal to the *D&D* brand despite the company's expressed intent to extract value from fans' creative labor.

Conversely, other fan studies scholars perceive fans as powerful shapers of the media landscape. Fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins makes the case that fandom functions as a method of expressing dissention toward popular media because "fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media."[66] In his analysis of fan behavior, Jenkins invokes social science scholar Michel de Certeau's (somewhat derogatory) notion of *textual poaching* to describe how fans repurpose texts for their own ends: "Readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it for themselves."[67] While the poaching metaphor frames fans in a decidedly disreputable light, I believe that we could just as easily apply a Marxist analysis which reframes fans as a marginalized class within their own subcultures, but who have the capacity to seize interpretive influence over the media they consume through group solidarity and revolutionary action against the corporate class which hoards the 'legitimate' means of RPG production, publication, and promotion.

Indeed, theories from fan studies scholarship are becoming increasingly influential in analyses of political mobilization and participatory politics.[68] Media and culture studies scholar Anne Kustritz makes a case for how fan subcultures engage in community organizing practices

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[66] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.
[67] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 174.
[68] Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, "Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 10 (2012); Clara Juarez Miro, "Who are the people? Using fandom research to study populist supporters," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45, no. 1 (2021).

as a way of confronting "modern copyright and intellectual property regimes, which seek to isolate . . . one snapshot in the development of human imagination into private property." Kustritz goes on to describe how political mobilizations within fan communities typically manifest in "folk practices with an interactive, collective approach to cultural production and reproduction" which "place precedence on all people's ability to become authors of their own culture and insert themselves into the ongoing narrative flow that makes sense of and shapes the world around us."[69] Again, scholarship directs us to understand fandom as a classed phenomenon stemming from power imbalances in cultural production and influence which motivates individuals to collaborate in building their own opportunities for cultural meaning-making.

In turn, analyzing fandom alongside the gendered, raced, and sexualized dynamics that inform subculture formation offers us an inlet through which to interpret RPG communities as queer subcultures. The following two sections of this chapter are devoted to exploring two of the primary reasons why queer people so often engage in RPGs and what value these games can bring to queer lives. Queer cultural theorist João Florêncio describes how queer subcultures often develop as alternatives to kinship-based notions of community, "ensuring the reproduction and survival of queer bodies and ways of living" by protecting "the subcultural subjectivities of queer folk who participate in them."[70] In addition to the shared consumer choices, languages, and rituals that constitute the RPG subculture, this group is united through its shared spaces and the significance of those spaces in both individual and communal contexts.

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[69] Anne Kustritz, "Fandom/Fan Cultures," in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex, and Sexuality* (New York, Routledge, 2017), 250.
[70] João Florêncio, "Chemsex subcultures: Subcultural reproduction and queer survival," *Sexualities* 26, no. 5-6 (2023): 556-573.

According to communications scholar Ken Gelder, subcultures exist as their own "social worlds which come into being as heterotopias through processes of creative self-imagination, self-distinction, and self-realization."[71] Chapter 3 will more thoroughly examine Foucault's concept of heterotopia and the importance of space to the project of queer world-making, but for now, it will suffice to note that the subcultural spaces that queer people can carve out through participation in role-play can and do offer affirmation of queer identity and the capacity to participate in political resistance to capitalist modes of cultural production and consumption. Having established the RPG community as a form of subculture, we will now turn to examine precisely how this subculture ensures "the reproduction and survival of queer bodies," primarily in the forms of collective escape and communal healing.

Playing with Escapist Intentions

There is an impulse to escape that beats within the heart of fantasy and that is felt most strongly by queer people. As writer and performer Ro White remarks, "the queer drive towards escapism is a longstanding cultural marker."[72] Across spans of time and geographic space, queer and marginalized people have sought escape from stifling mores and the oppressive regimes that enforce them. Indeed, in any space where an identity is othered, those who occupy that identity will intuitively be inclined to flee, escape, or otherwise transform their reality by grafting a new one onto their experience of mundanity.

Cultural studies scholar Ronald Cummings identifies the queer escapist impulse as a transnational phenomenon in his discussion of 18th century Caribbean marronage as a practice aligned with queer subjectivity. According to Cummings, "the paradoxes and tensions of

[71] Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[72] Ro White, "What Is Cottagecore and Why Do Young Queer People Love It?," *Autostraddle*, September 30, 2020.

belonging and non-belonging" which mark maroon communities and compel them toward escapist community formations are legible within a queer framework of spatial and temporal resistance to oppressive hegemony.[73] Similarly, anthropologist Sofian Merabet's *Queer Beirut* explores the concept of "zones of encounter," which Merabet describes as "particular urban locations that foster attempts, with various levels of success, to transcend spatio-temporal fixities" and establish a "homosexual sphere" in which Lebanese queers can recognize each other and carve out a slice of time and space where they may escape into their identities.[74] In revisiting the scholarship of Brazilian scholar-activist Beatriz Nascimento, Black feminist anthropologist Christen Anne Smith illuminates how the establishment of maroon communities in the Caribbean or zones of encounter in Beirut are mirrored in the Afro-Brazilian concept of *quilombos*, spaces of resistance and periodic escape to which enslaved Africans could retreat:

> Quilombos are not only physical and cultural spaces that are materially tangible historically and today but also trans-temporal, trans-spatial spaces of Black liberation that Black people in Brazil have articulated in response to the conditions of subjugation . . . Black Brazilian scholar-activists began to look to the quilombo as a clear example of a diachronic Black identity and a viable, uniquely Afro-Brazilian model of social organization, state building and self-determination.[75]

These examples of transnational queer escape speak to the historic legacy of culturally situated queer escapism, but these practices are not relegated to the past and are also observable within homonationalist contexts. Perhaps the most prominent example of temporary queer escape

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[73] Ronald Cummings, "(Trans)Nationalisms, Marronage, and Queer Caribbean Subjectivity," *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (2010): 170.
[74] Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 5, 112.
[75] Christen Anne Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Model of Black Atlantic Liberation: Remembering Beatriz Nascimento," *Meridians* 14, no. 2 (2016): 78.

in the modern American context is the gay bar, which has long served dualistic purposes as a protective refuge and an exploratory, adventurous otherworld into which queer folks can escape.[76] Another contemporary example of queer escapism that is less materially tangible than the gay bar but just as affectively powerful is the 'cottagecore' lifestyle, a fantasy particularly prominent among lesbian women involving a flight from urbanity and a retreat to a farm or forest where queer people could provide for themselves with a vegetable garden or a beekeeping business.[77] As writer Vienna Austin summarizes, "there is no implication of queer oppression on a cottagecore farm, and the gay bar scene provides a space where queer people are free from a broader cis-heteronormative society, albeit temporarily."[78] The tendency to desire an escape from this life into one which is freer, richer, and more vibrant and expressive appears to be a trans-temporal, universal phenomenon for queer folks.

It should be no surprise, then, that queer individuals are prone to incorporating elements of escapism into their fictions and artistic media. Film theorist Richard Dyer suggests that "entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide," and the idea of constructing these alternate realities has some self-evident appeal for queer audiences.[79] Analyses of escapism as a recurrent theme in queer art have found purchase in disciplines like film and media studies, but as we have demonstrated in exploring historical-material examples of queer escapism, this concept has interdisciplinary and intersectional applications. Film and media studies scholar Caetlin Benson-Allot makes a case for broadly incorporating escapism into our cultural analyses and critiques,

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[76] Theodore Greene, "'You're Dancing on My Seat!': Queer Subcultures and the Production of Places in Contemporary Gay Bars," *Subcultures: Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 54 (2022): 138.
[77] Nadia Learner Fortea, "The Wilderness as a Queer Refuge: A Multimedia Exploration from the 19th Century to Present Day" (PhD. Diss, Universitat de Barcelona, 2023).
[78] Vienna Austin, "Dorfromantik, Townscaper, and Queer Escapism," *POME Mag,* August 11, 2022.
[79] Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.

writing that "escapism provides a respite from the pull of the present and offers a perspective from which to contemplate it afresh. It is not a retreat into distraction but a temporal form of self-care."[80]

I emphasize the need to incorporate escapism into our discourses around queer subjectivities because, as feminist film theorist Jackie Stacey notes, "'escapism' has been applied to forms of popular culture in order to dismiss them as being unworthy of critical or academic attention."[81] Relegating escapism and serious analysis of escapist media to a condition of intellectual frivolity contributes to the ideological dimension of queer oppression by implicitly ascribing a quality of inconsequentiality to queer narratives. A neoliberal academician may understand escapism as trivial given its supposed opposition to realism and pragmatic discourses about 'what really matters,' but Benson-Allot reminds us that "those few critics who have written on escapism persuasively note that escape must always be understood in terms of its indirect object: escape from what?"[82] What is at stake in feminist and queer analyses of escapist art is a collective acknowledgement that something pervasive and otherwise inescapable in our societies drives queer people to create their own (real or imagined) spaces where they have an opportunity to exist unburdened by contestations of conformity. Older models of complete social escape (like marronage and quilombo) are complicated by the omnipresence of modernity and continuous subjugation to global structures of capitalist productivity and presence (both material and virtual). Within the constraints of modernity, media (including RPGs) offer a new way for queer people to escape and develop community with one another.

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[80] Caetlin Benson-Allot, "On Platforms: In Praise of Escapism," *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2020): 79.
[81] Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 90.
[82] Caetlin Benson-Allot, "On Platforms," 74.

This is part of the reason why queer scholars have read queer and escapist intentions in texts that do not contain explicit messages about race, gender, sexuality, et cetera: in the absence of cultural representation or spaces to which they can turn to find themselves, queer folks will map their own narratives onto those which may not have been crafted with them in mind. Dramaturg Sean O'Connor remarks that queer people "are practiced at interpreting art, never taking anything at face value and locating themselves within texts that seem, superficially, to exclude them. We have had no choice but to read ourselves in[to] works."[83] This instinct to 'read ourselves into work' has produced a repertoire of queer reading practices that allow queer people to locate themselves in media. In his 2002 essay "'My Beautiful Wickedness': *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy," Alexander Doty uses queer reading strategies to depict Dorothy's adventures through Oz as an extended metaphor for discovering her budding (lesbian) sexuality.[84] Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill Hermann-Wilmarth make a similar case for queerly reading *Where the Wild Things Are*, which they argue sees protagonist Max "creating a queered hybrid world that draws on traditional places of home and those communities created through shared subjectivities."[85] Queer studies scholar Alex Henderson calls these kinds of narratives "portal fantasies," a subgenre characterized by "its themes of displacement, liminality, and 'strange' children coming-of-age in even stranger otherworlds" and which is frequently visited by queer readings.[86] Role-players also employ these queer reading practices when they project queer expressions of place and identity into their games and playspaces, rewriting their games'

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[83] Sean O'Connor, *Straight Acting: Popular Gay Drama from Wilde to Rattigan* (London: Routledge, 1998).
[84] Alexander Doty, "'My Beautiful Wickedness': *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy," in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[85] Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill Hermann-Wilmarth, "Already on the Shelf: Queer Readings of Award-Winning Children's Literature," *Journal of Literary Research* 45, no. 2 (2013): 154.
[86] Alex Henderson, "Queer Allegory and Queer Actuality in *Every Heart a Doorway*" (Master's Thesis, University of Canberra, 2020; Other prominent portal fantasies include C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Seanan McGuire's *Wayward Children*, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart*, and many others.

intended narratives and worlds to suit the queer desire to escape into a fantasy where their identities can be liberated (see Chapter 1, *Transgression*). Feminist game studies scholar Bonnie Ruberg invites us to understand how we can read queerness into narratives that are not explicitly queer through the concept of *queer resonances*:

> These moments of resonance are points of relationality, moments where the structures and messages of [fictional stories] echo and are echoed by the structures of queer thinking. To resonate does not simply mean to replicate; resonances still allow for differences and even contradiction. At the places where video games and queerness meet one another, they reverberate, calling to one another and calling to us to make new meanings by reading them in tandem.[87]

Queer role-players are so often inclined to resonate with portal fantasies because, as author A.J. Hackwith observes, though the escapist elements of portal fantasy can appeal to all sorts of people, there is a particular potential in these stories for queer youth who already find themselves othered in their mundane lives and for whom escape to a fantastical otherworld can be especially appealing.[88] This is what makes RPGs such a compelling site for queer escape: they bring the portal fantasy out of the realm of imagination, escapism out of its corner of intellectual marginality, and make manifest the chance to experience one's queerness in community with others. Through role-play, queer people can envision themselves in these fantastical otherworlds and perform a fantasy of queer acceptance that is embodied and supported by fellow players in the game, all while demonstrating the value of escapism for personal discovery and community formation. These games offer a unique space that is always still in formation for developing

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[87] Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 20.
[88] A.J. Hackwith, "Through Doorways: Portal Fantasies and Queer Escape," *Reactor Mag*, October 21, 2019.

realities that are not rooted in concepts of colonialism and domination, and which are inherently communal and collaborative. As Vienna Austin writes about their experience playing 'escapist' games:

> While playing the game, I could always imagine myself in a better world amongst the small towns and lavender fields I had placed. Free of the plights of my life, I would live blissfully and peacefully amongst friends in a beautiful cottage in town, I would read queer books while lying in the impossibly idyllic forests that inevitably sprawl across the landscape in each playthrough, I would be happy amongst [my] community.[89]

The queer compulsion to exist in an idyllic wilderness speaks to the simplicity of the queer longing to belong. When queer folks play RPGs, they can temporarily occupy an imagined space where their mundane struggles are nonexistent and where their communities thrive in worlds of abundance and opportunity. These stories are not trivial or inconsequential for the queer people that experience them; these spaces and the time spent within them are formative and life-affirming, and they should be respected, replicated, and critiqued as such. In writing on the emotional impact of fairy tales, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim argues that "while the fantasy is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us."[90] The following section explores precisely how powerful these 'good feelings' conjured through our stories can be, as well as how role-play offers a locus for learning to deal with 'bad feelings' too.

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[89] Vienna Austin, "Queer Escapism."
[90] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1975), 127.

Playing with Therapeutic Intentions

Moving from the realm of the theoretical visited in our discussion of RPGs as escapist fantasy, we may now turn toward examining the practical applications of RPGs in psychological settings as therapy. The past decade has witnessed an increase in scholarship and anecdotal evidence about individuals finding their mental wellbeing improved after playing RPGs, a phenomenon now colloquially known as 'healing through RPGs.'[91] This amplified attention to the cognitive and psychosocial benefits of RPGs comes from researchers' realizations that many of the core components and skills needed to play these games have a lot of overlap with the strategies that therapists use to treat a wide array of mental health conditions. Additionally, the already-collaborative nature of these games makes them ideal for group therapies, situating the RPG-as-therapeutic-tool in a long legacy of therapeutic practices that center group performance.[92]

The genealogy of roleplay in therapy can perhaps best be traced back to the establishment of *psychodrama*. Developed in the early 20th century by Jacob L. Moreno and Zerka Toeman Moreno, psychodrama is a kind of group therapy that borrows elements of theater and sees participants re/enacting real-life situations or internal mental conflicts. Participants adopt the

[91] Joshua D. Crigger, "An exploration of embodiment, narrative identity, and healing in Dungeons and Dragons" (Master's Thesis, James Madison University, 2021).

[92] I will take a moment to pause before we get much farther into this section to address the potentially problematic implication that queer people *ought to* seek therapy or that there is something essential about the quality of queerness that makes queer folks more prone to mental illness. While LGBTQ+ individuals do consistently demonstrate greater prevalences of mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders than their non-queer counterparts, this is almost always attributed to social (rather than biological) determinants of health. Queer people exist in a society that fundamentally devalues their existence, and which would often see them erased from existence; it makes sense that this population may experience more psychological duress. However, I want to actively resist historic narratives that dangerously medicalize queerness, and I in no way intend to imply that queerness is a communicable or curable condition; there is nothing to cure about queerness. My treatment of therapy in this section is one which acknowledges the power of experiencing and verbalizing feelings to better understand oneself. Anyone can go to therapy and improve as an individual and as a social being, regardless of pre-existing psychosocial conditions.

roles of people or personas in another participant's life, giving them the opportunity to dramatize their experiences and reflect on their behavior and how it reads from an external perspective.[93] A comparable therapeutic technique is psychiatrist Alfred Adler's practice of *acting as-if*, inspired by philosopher Hans Vaihinger's 'philosophy of as-if.'[94] In the Adlerian practice of acting as-if, a patient is encouraged to regularly act out desirable behavior *as if* it were natural, organic, or routine, and "by acting and thus feeling differently . . . the patient eventually actualizes as a different person – the person imagined through the 'final fictional goal.'"[95] Modern applications of these therapeutic traditions often draw upon Carl Jung's concept of *archetypes*, aspects of self that form part of a universal collective unconscious and that individuals embody at different times to portray or enact different behaviors or attitudes.[96] Our previous discussions of immersion and identity development reinforce the validity of transformative therapeutic practices like acting as-if and the power that archetypes have for re/shaping our self-perception (see Chapter 1, *Playing with Identity*).

Another performative therapy that centers roleplay and collaborative storytelling is the *theatre of the oppressed*, developed in Brazil by drama theorist Augusto Boal and inspired by fellow Brazilian Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.[97] In the theatre of the oppressed, the audience becomes active and its members are humanized as 'spect-actors,' eliminating the performative hierarchy of theatre between actors and audience and inviting spect-actors to

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[93] Peter Felix Kellerman, *Focus on Psychodrama: The Therapeutic Aspects of Psychodrama* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1992).
[94] Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. Charles Kay Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1924).
[95] Michelle Millar Fisher, "Acting As If: On Trench Coats, Tracksuits, and the Counterfeit Self," *Vestoj Magazine*, January 2, 2018.
[96] Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1959).
[97] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

participate in and transform the unfolding narrative.[98] It's interesting to note that many of the psychiatrists who developed techniques to engage clients performatively in therapy (like Adler and Boal) also professed socialist political ideologies throughout their lives and often understood therapy as a way to amplify the interconnectedness between individuals and society, as well as the reciprocal ethical and moral obligations between them. These techniques invite and encourage participants to critically analyze and reflect upon the therapeutic intervention rather than unquestioningly accepting a psychiatrist's prescribed perspective. These therapeutic innovations also radically uphold the agency and self-evaluation of their participants, ceding some of psychology's totalizing essentialism in favor of cooperatively constructing a client's psychological narrative.

Practices like psychodrama or acting as-if have fallen out of style in contemporary therapy, but roleplay has retained its lasting presence. Roleplay therapy is a contemporarily common therapeutic technique with well-established benefits that utilizes dramatic re/enactment between practitioners and patients to improve participants' abilities to understand their emotions, potential triggers, or to model ideal behaviors and practice skill-building in a safe, controlled environment.[99] Roleplay is so effective in therapy because its performative quality naturally lends itself to the establishment of *aesthetic distance*, a point of cognitive perception and analysis at which "one retains the role of the over-distanced, cognitive observer and the role of the under-distanced, affective actor."[100] Returning to a point made earlier in Chapter 1, roleplaying allows a participant to hold their multiple identities simultaneously, acting through a

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[98] Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, "From Theatre of the Oppressed," in *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 352.
[99] Mark Matthews, Geri Gay, and Gavin Doherty, "Taking Part: Role-Play in the Design of Therapeutic Systems," *CHI '14: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Toronto, 2014).
[100] R.J. Landy, *Drama Therapy: Concepts, Theories, and Practices* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1994), 114.

role and observing themselves in that role all at once. Achieving and maintaining this level of aesthetic distance is critical to the efficacy of performative interventions like drama therapy or roleplay therapy as it allows participants the greatest amount of reflective potential in understanding their emotions or behavior following a scene or session.[101] For individuals who struggle with regulating or understanding their behavior and emotions during social encounters, the aesthetic distance offered by playing a character in an RPG affords a safe, controlled way to simulate and practice scenarios from the mundane (talking to a stranger), to the extraordinary (directly negotiating with political leaders), to the emotionally fraught (comforting a friend in the wake of loss and grief):

> They use this [character] buffer to help go through situations or process feelings they may not feel entirely comfortable doing in real life yet. By using these characters, clients have a safe space in which they can test how things could go if they behaved a certain way. Whether these behaviors are positive or negative, the client will be able to see the direct consequences of their actions.[102]

The versatility of roleplay as a method makes it applicable in a variety of therapeutic methods, ranging from psychodrama and the Jungian traditions we've already discussed, to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and play therapy.[103] Because of the nearly infinite imaginative potential of the content in fantasy RPGs, clinicians gain "the ability to write and tailor a narrative around the client and the client's specific situation," affording a greater level of

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[101] Judith Glass, "Working Toward Aesthetic Distance: Drama Therapy for Adult Victims of Trauma," in *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors*, ed. Lois Carey (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 58.
[102] Raul Gutiérrez, "Therapy & Dragons: A look into the Possible Applications of Table Top Role Playing Games in Therapy with Adolescents" (Master's Thesis, California State University – San Bernadino, 2017).
[103] Daniel Luccas Arenas, Anna Viduani, and Renata Brasil Araujo, "Therapeutic Use of Role-Playing Game (RPG) in Mental Health: A Scoping Review," *Simulations and Gaming* 53, no. 3 (2022): 285-311.

precision in the thematic content of a role-played scenario.[104] Indeed, role-play's potential therapeutic applications are innumerable, and research has identified that therapeutic role-playing games tend to work especially well for those who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other trauma, and depression.[105] Demonstrated psychological benefits of playing RPGs in clinical settings include enhanced expression of alter egos, personal growth regarding the meaning of life, increased strategic thinking and planning, and heightened value placed on having a diverse group of friends.[106] The increasing body of research on RPGs as therapeutic practice has resulted in the publication of guides and manuals for implementing and further integrating TRPGs in broader behavioral therapies, like Megan A. Connell's *Guide for the Clinician Game Master*.[107]

In many ways, this wealth of research simply serves to reaffirm what a lot of role-players already knew: RPGs are an overlooked and underutilized way to explore and identify our emotions and improve mental wellbeing while building community. They allow us to unpack our traumas, confront our anxieties, practice problem-solving and conflict-resolution, all while providing a built-in element of community support, helping combat feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression. The group aspect of RPG therapy should not be overlooked as group therapies are particularly effective at promoting camaraderie, accountability, confidence, self-

[104] Raul Gutiérrez, "Therapy & Dragons," 25.
[105] Elizabeth D. Kilmer, Adam D. Davis, Jared N. Kilmer, and Adam R. Johns, "Case Conceptualization and Treatment Planning in Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games," in *Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games: The Game to Grow Method* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 113-138.
[106] David Louis Wilson, "An exploratory study on the players of 'Dungeons & Dragons'" (PhD. Diss., Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA, 2007).
[107] Megan A. Connell, *Tabletop Role-Playing Therapy: A Guide for the Clinician Game Master* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023).

discovery, and acceptance of different perspectives. [108] In yet another exploratory study on the psychosocial benefits of RPGs, participants "cited role-playing as a means to promote new and lasting relationships with other people."[109] Part of playing TRPGs involves constantly confronting challenges or obstacles that individual characters cannot overcome alone. Effective communication is deeply important in collaborating with other players to solve problems, and role-players get ample practice at resolving problems creatively with one another. In Aidan Cipolla's study about the power of RPGs for exploring mental health issues, they relate the therapeutic benefits of RPGs to the benefits of establishing escapist communities discussed in the preceding section:

> One participant had significant difficulty with bullying and maintaining friendships as a teenager due to being on the Autism spectrum. They said that the *D&D* group they joined as a young adult provided a safe space to "unmask" and practice social situations that caused them anxiety. This benefit was compounded by the fact that others in the group had similar difficulties, which resulted in an accommodating and supportive environment for self-expression.[110]

Inhabiting these spaces and fostering these relationships could be interpreted as meaningful simply on the basis that collaboration and connection are healthy, but they can be critically important for individuals at the margins of society, particularly queer and disabled folks and people whose struggles with mental health arise from existing in a chronically disempowering world. The following sections concern how playing RPGs can prove especially

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[108] J. Frank, "7 Benefits of Group Therapy," *Citizen Advocates*, August 20, 2020.
[109] Michael S. Sargent, "Exploring mental dungeons and slaying psychic dragons: an exploratory study" (Master's Thesis, Smith College, 2014).
[110] Aidan Cipolla, "Fantasy Escapism: Using Role-Playing Games to Explore Mental Health and Gender Identity," *English Summer Fellows @ Ursinus College* (2023): 10.

helpful at bringing together the most marginalized in our society, drawing upon our established theories of escape and evidence of psychosocial significance.

Playing with Outcasts

It's no secret that role-playing games tend to attract players who could easily be called social outcasts. In analyzing the portrayals of role-players in film and television, psychologist Noirin Curran discovers that "from early on in the conception of these games, there has been an enduring stereotype of role-players as being 'nerdy.' Individuals who engage in the action of playing a role-playing game are regularly portrayed by the media as being unpopular . . . with poor social skills and little interest in [their] personal appearance."[111] Such depictions produced a powerfully enduring image of role-players as social outsiders expelled from inclusion within popular culture due to niche interests in both the fantastical/supernatural *and* the mathematical/mechanical. These expressions of 'queer' interests motivated researchers in the 1990s like Lisa DeRenard and Linda Mannik Kline to initiate studies investigating the social situatedness of RPG players, which did find that role-players felt a stronger sense of cultural estrangement than non-role-players.[112] However, research and inquiries into the social ostracization of role-players most often sought to understand why they *fled from* popular culture rather than choosing to examine why individuals experiencing cultural estrangement *turned to* RPGs.

We have already begun to interrogate this latter question, finding answers in the escapist and therapeutic potentials of RPGs which make them ideal outlets for both individual expression

[111] Noirin Curran, "Stereotypes and Individuals Differences in Role-playing Games," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2 (2011): 46.
[112] Lisa A. DeRenard and Linda Mannik Kline, "Alienation and the Game Dungeons and Dragons," *Psychological Report* 66 (1990): 1219-1222.

and communal engagement. Indeed, these games can come to function as spaces of sanctuary for individuals struggling to understand or conform to social expectations or nuanced expressions of social aptitude. The lowered stakes of role-playing social encounters in RPGs leaves room for practice, reflection, and reorientation, offering role-players not only an opportunity to simulate stressful social scenarios, but also a supportive community that will listen to and work with them—an interpersonal luxury often withheld from those (usually queer and disabled) individuals that society tends to overlook, disregard, or silence. In his master's thesis exploring the effectiveness of RPGs for treating psychosocial difficulties, psychological clinician Michael Sargent quotes one of the participants in his study as saying that that they "tended to avoid people and tended to be very much a loner, but when I had this community it's like, 'Hey there's all these people I can interact with and safely, I don't have to worry about getting fired or beat up, I'm not going to get looked at weird.' It's just, you know, you're expected to be weird."[113]

This makes the work of organizations that implement role-play as a therapeutic or escapist practice so valuable, particularly for adolescents who require higher levels of engagement due to their developmental difficulties with effectively and consistently translating thoughts and feelings into words.[114] For example, nonprofit organizations like Game to Grow have realized the vision of mobilizing RPGs as community-building practice, creating "social flourishing groups" that "help build social confidence, reduce isolation, and form friendships that last."[115] They have also collaborated with therapists and child psychiatrists to develop a carefully and thoughtfully designed adventure module for use specifically as a social-skills intervention

[113] Michael S. Sargent, "Exploring mental dungeons and slaying psychic dragons: an exploratory study" (Master's Thesis, Smith College, 2014).
[114] Brijin Johnson Gardner, "Play Therapy with Adolescents," in *Play Therapy: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*, ed. David A. Crenshaw and Anne L. Stewart (New York: The Guildford Press, 2015), 439-451.
[115] Kam Burns, "How Therapists Are Using Tabletop Games to Help People," *Wired*, October 22, 2022.

"to help kids connect with their parents, their friends, and the world around them" while they "learn communication and collaboration skills, develop frustration tolerance and emotional resilience, and build empathy for others."[116] While Game to Grow and similar organizations (like Geek Therapeutics or RPG Therapeutics, LLC) do not require medical diagnoses, their clients are often individuals experiencing autism, ADHD, anxiety, depression, and other psychosocial needs. According to Game to Grow co-founder Adam Johns, "even when kids report that they're doing fine [in everyday life], a lot of times that's because they've never had an opportunity to know what it is to have a friend and know what it is to feel connected. When they come to our groups they build that connectedness, they build that opportunity for relationship with other kids."[117]

Game to Grow and other organizations like it are actively and presently demonstrating how playing RPGs has both short-term and long-term psychosocial benefits for role-players who participate in them, and the work of these organizations contributes to an ongoing resistance against characterizations of RPGs as being themselves socially isolating (a narrative with origins in the politically misdirected upset of the Satanic Panic). However, in recounting RPGs' demonstrable benefits, I also hope to resist narratives that role-play's therapeutic effectiveness is limited to the populations of predominantly young white men that many of these scholarly studies take as their research subjects. This problem is recurrent in sociological work on subcultural communities, as explained by gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam:

> Almost all of the early work on subcultures . . . has presumed the dominance of males in subcultural activity and has studied youth groups as the most lively producers of new

[116] Game to Grow, *Critical Core* (Kirkland, WA: Game to Grow, 2023).
[117] Adam Johns, interviewed by Andrew Gebhart, "The Dungeons & Dragons game rescuing kids from their social anxieties," *CNET*, August 10, 2019.

> cultural styles. The subcultures which I want to examine . . . are neither male nor necessarily young and they are less likely to be co-opted or absorbed back into dominant culture because they were never offered membership in dominant groups in the first place.[118]

While scholarship exists attesting to the applicability of RPGs as instruments of individual and interpersonal healing among nonwhite, nonmale groups, not enough attention has been devoted to the specific pertinence of RPGs to those truly outcast by society, shunned by kith and kin and cruelly deprived of intimacy and social support. These individuals who are shoved to the social margins are arguably the ones most in need of the imaginative, exploratory, and communal securities that RPGs provide. In his book length treatment on the subject of queer youth suicide and the unlivable conditions on the outskirts of acceptable sociability, sexuality studies scholar Rob Cover explains:

> Queer youth isolation was first identified by Eric Rofes, who suggested that "estrangement from the traditional support systems within our culture"[119] was one of the major factors contributing to lesbian/gay suicides. The resulting logical argument is therefore that greater access to lesbian/gay-specific social institutions, venues, support groups, and cultural practices provides means for developing resilience against queer youth vulnerability and suicide risk.[120]

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[118] Jack Halberstam, "What's That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003).
[119] Eric Rofes, *"I Thought People Like That Killed Themselves": Lesbians, Gay Men, and Suicide* (Mechanicsville, VA: Grey Fox Press, 1983), 47.
[120] Rob Cover, "Community: Homonormativity, Exclusion and Relative Misery," in *Queer Youth Suicide, Cultural, and Identity: Unlivable Lives?* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 118.

I contend that RPGs can be another one of these venues, support groups, and cultural practices providing psychosocial sanctuary for at-risk queer youth, adolescents, and adults, and fortunately other queer ludic scholars seem to agree. Sociologically oriented ludic research finds that RPG players are more likely to come from marginalized communities and have physical/personal challenges than gamers who play other genres/kinds of games, typically because RPGs give them a greater sense of sociability and self-expression.[121] The language most commonly associated with this phenomenon is that of RPGs as *safe spaces*, "a place where anything you say will be met with love."[122] While the sociolinguistic ontology of 'safe space' discourse is often in dispute within feminist and queer scholarship for its foregrounding of social difference and binary logics of safe-unsafe/inclusive-exclusive, anecdotal experience can help us avoid overintellectualizing the inter/personal significance of having a space where one's identity and vulnerability are embraced and encouraged.[123] The increased presence of queer role-players in the RPG community has led to the establishment of queer-specific RPG collectives (such as Calgary's "Queer Questing & Allies Tabletop RPGs" group or New York City's "NYC LGBTQ Dungeons & Dragons/RPG Group"), and RPG play groups regularly find themselves meeting at local queer community centers (like LGBT+ Family & Games in Almonte Springs, Florida) or in online spaces (like queer RPG Discord servers). For queer people in search of community, RPG collectives and play groups like these can be some of the most accessible, inclusive, and

[121] Dmitri Williams, Tracy L.M. Kennedy, and Robert J. Moore, "Behind the Avatar: The Patterns, Practices, and Functions of Role Playing in MMOs," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2011): 171-200.
[122] Elizabeth Sampat, "Safe Spaces for Queerness and Games Against Suffering," in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBT Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 120.
[123] The Roestone Collective, "Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization," *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 46, no. 5 (2014): 1346-1365.

supportive social networks they can encounter, creating new kinship formations through shared subcultural practice and the mutual desire to escape into a better world.

This desire does not exist in abstraction; rather, it is created by the invisibilizing and disempowering social institutions that reduce humans to minoritized and marginalized subjects perceived as inherently disposable and exploitable in service of a one-way distribution of capital. Perhaps none are so socially ostracized or deprived of liberty, mobility, and community as incarcerated individuals. The criminal legal systems of capitalist countries are designed to support the exploitative economic infrastructure by providing what is essentially slave labor to countless corporations and erasing those deemed socially undesirable from public consciousness by literally disappearing them into the torturous, regimented, highly surveilled, and deeply isolating conditions of prisons. Incarcerated individuals are cast out from society and denied conditions conducive to prosocial solidarity at every level of their existences.

These circumstances make journalist Keri Blakinger's beautifully written story about Tony Ford, Billy Wardlow, and the other men who play *Dungeon's & Dragons* on death row at the Allan B. Polunksy Unit in Livingston, Texas so heart-wrenching and emotionally gripping. In the 2023 article, Blakinger captures the experiences of prisoners on death row who pour their hours upon hours of solitude dreaming of better worlds and telling stories to each other where their embodied avatars get the opportunity to be complex, multidimensional, and experience lives apart from the droning, dreadful reality of death row. According to Blakinger, "the games served as their life-skills course, anger-management class and drug counseling, too . . . a lot of the men on the row came to prison at a young age and never had a chance to be adults in the free

world."[124] She goes on to recount the exasperating lengths these role-players go to engage in their passion, escape into different worlds, and heal from past hurt, some of which I re-capture here to underscore the tenacity of spirit with which they play:

> Playing *Dungeons & Dragons* is more difficult in prison than almost anywhere else . . . players can't just look up the game rules online. The hard-bound manuals that detail settings, characters and spells are expensive and can be difficult to get past mailroom censors. Some states ban books about the game altogether, while others prohibit anything with a hard cover. Books with maps are generally forbidden, and dice are often considered contraband, because they can be used for gambling. Prisoners frequently replace them with game spinners crafted out of paper and typewriter parts . . . they had to rely on a variety of clandestine communications, including written messages called "kites," passed from cell to cell.[125]

Blakinger goes on in the same piece to write about how the role-players on the row "opened up [through their characters] about problems they would never otherwise discuss—abusive parents, fractured childhoods, drug addictions" and how "their lives in the game world led to the sort of friendships solitary confinement usually prevents."[126] I relay Blakinger's narrative so emphatically because I think no other story so poignantly captures how profound the impacts of participating in role-play can be and how meaningful these games can become to those most removed from the center of the sociological imagination.

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[124] Keri Blakinger, "The Dungeons & Dragons Players of Death Row," *New York Times/The Marshall Project*, October 31, 2023.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.

Feminist literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us to "consider the margins" and that "the oppressed . . . can speak and know their conditions."[127] In the sections to come and in the following chapter, I hope to keep the subaltern close(r) to the center of the argument I am developing about the personal and political stakes of participating in RPGs. As Blakinger espouses, these games can serve to sustain in even the most inhumane conditions, and that is because RPGs always necessarily maintain an attentiveness to the humanity of their players and their potential to grow, change, and transcend the boundaries of their social and material realities.

Playing with Care

One of the primary aspects of role-playing games that attracts so many marginalized and minority players is their malleability and adaptability in consideration of the needs of role-players. Playing any RPG always involves dividing one's attention between her character's needs, desires, and actions amidst the fantastical, imaginative, co-authored story unfolding in the diegetic frame *and* one's own corporeal and psychic needs, desires, and actions in the game frame (inhabited by players). This means that in-game, in-character performance is always bound by and entangled with a player's attitude, behavior, and comfortability toward the role-play. This simple observation about the nature of role-play was surprisingly overlooked in early iterations of RPG play, likely because the largely homogenous (cis, straight, white male) audience for these games often existed in similar social circumstances with pre-game familiarity between the players at the table. Playing with people one would be intimately familiar with in the era before mental health and disability awareness/accommodation entered the realm of social normativity

[127] Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2010).

meant that role-players would just assume that everyone at the table was having a good time unless they voluntarily and explicitly stated otherwise.

RPGs have historically been inconsiderate of players with non-normative physical embodiments and underrecognized mental-social-emotional needs. These games tend to thrive on intricately designed rule systems, which are helpful for determining how to mechanically interpret the near-infinite possibilities for what player-characters might do or how the game world may respond to them, but which are often contained in textbook-sized tomes that can be inaccessible for many role-players, particularly those who struggle with regulating attention and focus. This devotion to and admiration for complex rulesets comes from RPGs' inheritance from wargames, which are themselves notoriously convoluted with endless restrictions, contingencies, and specifications for what is or is not possible in those games. Absent from these dense rulebooks and player guides, however, are recommendations for how to include visually impaired or hard-of-hearing players or in-game representations of disabled or disordered characters.

Fortunately, today's more widespread awareness of others' (and our own) social-emotional states and the pro-social desire to be inclusive and accommodating has meant that RPGs published in the 21st century tend to demonstrate a greater awareness of players' multiple and shifting needs. In fact, the most recent (5th) edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was explicitly designed with inclusivity in mind, aiming to simplify the rules of combat and character creation to make the game more accessible for a larger audience. One 5th edition sourcebook, 2020's *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything*, offers some explicit guidance on caring for players. In particular, the sourcebook recommends running a *Session 0*, a preliminary session held before the campaign gets underway to identify players' expectations, needs, and desires during play.

Tasha's recommends establishing a "social contract" expressing that players should agree to respect each other as well as the time and material resources people contribute to making the game a "first and foremost fun-for-all experience."[128] Establishing norms around the table that players' needs will be met and their choices will be respected fosters an environment where everyone can feel comfortable expressing themselves. When this norm-setting occurs as a group discussion rather than a top-down imposition, it creates a sense of collective ownership and investment over the game and the game's world, extending autonomy to players by allowing them to be seen and heard.

The same sourcebook also includes guidance on establishing thematic restrictions, noting that "every member of the group has hard and soft limits, and it behooves everyone in the group to know what they are."[129] 2021's *Candlekeep Mysteries* continues the conversation about player limits, advising Dungeon Masters to be aware of players' "phobias and triggers," as well as distinguishing different ways to introduce dramatic or stressful events for players while keeping everyone at the table "relaxed and having fun."[130] Independent creatives in the TRPG community have rearticulated these hard and soft limits as *lines*—content that will be avoided and omitted from gameplay—and *veils*—content which is assumed to be part of the game world (i.e. sex or gore) but which is not addressed or narrated in-game, typically resolved with a 'fade to black.'[131] Indeed, much of the work elaborating how to make RPGs more conscientious of players' needs comes from independent creators working within the guidelines of the OGL, such as Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain whose *Consent in Gaming* guide relates advice on gathering

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[128] Jeremy Crawford, "Dungeon Master's Tools," *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2020), 140.
[129] Ibid., 141.
[130] *Candlekeep Mysteries* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2021), 4.
[131] Bee Zelda, "Guest Blog: An Introduction to Lines and Veils," *Roll20 Blog*, June 29, 2021.

informed participant consent for thematic content that regularly features in RPGs.[132] Other creatives have worked to compile this kind of information and make it readily and freely available for game masters and players, like Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk who created the TTRPG Safety Toolkit.[133]

The term '*safety tools*' has become common parlance in the RPG community as these instruments and methods have been broadly discussed in online RPG spaces like blogs, forums, and video content. Safety tools are collections of question prompts, devices, and practices that support ongoing enjoyment of the role-play, even when the narrative begins to veer toward themes and scenarios that may upset or discomfort players.[134] One popular example is the X-card, which is simply a card or sheet of paper with an X drawn on it that players can tap or raise to nonverbally signal discomfort with the content being discussed and that they would like to discontinue the current scene.[135] Part of the magic of role-play is the seamlessness with which players can pass between the performance of in-game activity as their characters and the real-time, mundane aspects of their material and social realities. This intrinsic characteristic of role-play—the capacity to move in and out of the game with basically no interruption to the flow of gameplay—allows participants to pause, leave, or rewind the game whenever in-game or out-of-game circumstances compel them to do so.

Another example of a safety tool is the C.A.T.S. (content, aim, tone, subject matter) model for summarizing the content and themes of an upcoming session for players, effectively functioning as a more holistic content warning that allows players to prepare appropriately for

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[132] Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain, *Consent in Gaming* (Overland Park, KS: Monte Cook Games, 2019).
[133] Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk, "TTRPG Safety Toolkit,"
[134] Thomas Weinberger, "Safety Tools for Tabletop RPGs," *DramaDice*,
[135] John Stavropoulos, "X-Card," http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg.

the textual material they may encounter.[136] Other safety measures GMs can implement include maintaining an open-door policy that permits players to step away from the session whenever they feel the need, conducting check-ins throughout the session to ensure player comfort, and holding a discursive debrief following a session to ease any emotional tensions and address any less-than-pleasant player experiences. These safety tools are broadly applicable to basically all TRPG play styles, and they are system-agnostic, meaning that they can be implemented regardless of the specific RPG a group decides to play.

Safety tools are wonderful, widely used ways of ensuring players' emotional comfortability during play, and role-players have also developed ways to be attentive to the physical and psychic wellbeing of their fellow players. For example, practices like providing and sharing snacks or taking group breaks during sessions have become normative and sometimes expected in RPG spaces. Some role-playing groups—particularly those who play the game in therapeutic settings—have also proactively augmented the accessibility of their games by incorporating devices like large-print character sheets, Braille dice, fidget toys, and shared session notes.[137] These simple additions to the game can be meaningful accommodations for players who would otherwise struggle with the physical presence and mental attentiveness required to remain engaged in game sessions that typically last for hours. The prevalence of these practices speaks to the level of care and inclusivity that role-players seek to cultivate in their playspaces, and I would go so far as to contend that RPGs are at the forefront of modeling what good disability advocacy and inclusion looks like at the interpersonal level.

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[136] Patrick O'Leary, "C.A.T.S.," https://200wordrpg.github.io/2016/supplement/2016/04/12/CATS.html.
[137] Elizabeth D. Kilmer et. al., *Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games*, 126.

Of all the overlooked and underrepresented aspects of identity in games, game characters, and game mechanics, perhaps the most grievous omission has been the expulsion of disability from our game worlds. This is because, as artist Dianne Carr points out, ability is so natural in games that "it hides in plain sight when it comes to critique or reflection."[138] In recent years, disabled artists and game designers have turned to RPGs as a medium through which they can foster awareness about experiences of living with disabilities, reflecting both an authenticity in disability representation and an affordance for disabled characters to exist in our fantasies.[139] The expansiveness of character creation and representation options in RPGs is such that these games have developed into fully realized opportunities for disabled people to explore their narratives and identities in the same way these games can function to explore aspects of identity like gender, sexuality, or ethnicity (see Chapter 1).[140] Queer and disabled creators and activists have put considerable effort into translating experiences of disability into gameplay mechanics for other disabled individuals to reproduce, repurpose, and play with that aspect of their identities through their characters.[141] One of the most notable examples is the work of Anna Holden, the founder of DnD Disability ("Disability belongs in TTRPGs") and the creator of mechanics for playing characters with Autism, chronic pain, chronic fatigue, and sensory processing disorder, along with items for disabled characters to equip like joint braces or medical bracelets.[142] Another prominent example of an in-game disability aid is Sara Thompson's combat wheelchair,

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[138] Dianne Carr, "Ability, disability, and dead space," *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014).
[139] Rafael Leonardo da Silva, "Designing a Digital Roleplaying Game to Foster Awareness of Hidden Disabilities," *International Journal of Designs for Learning* 11, no. 2 (2020): 55-63.
[140] Sarah Gibbons, "Disability, Neurological Diversity, and Inclusive Play: An Examination of the Social and Political Aspects of the Relationship Between Disability and Games," *Loading…: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2020): 32.
[141] Amber Choo, Özgün Eylül İşcen, Mehdi Karamnejad, "Serious indie games for social awareness: gamifying human characters with disabilities," in *Gamification '13: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Gameful Design, Research, and Applications* (October 2013): 83-86.
[142] Anna Holden, "DnD Disability," in partnership with the Bristol UK Children's Hospital, dnddisability.com.

"designed for both daily activity and the pressures of combat during one's adventures . . . by first-rate artificers and their disabled consultants to ensure high-grade comfort and excellent efficiency."[143]

I will take a moment to note that (excluding Wizards of the Coast's books, of course) the accessibility and advocacy resources mentioned so far in this section have been made freely available online, most often in the form of downloadable PDFs. Indeed, many creators (including Reynolds and Germain, Shaw and Bryant-Monk, Holden, and Thompson) explicitly state that they want to make their projects free and accessible to the whole community. Making resources communally available in this way follows a genealogy tracing back to the inception of RPGs of making these games playable regardless of a role-player's financial means. While one version of these games involves collecting the many sourcebooks, supplemental adventure modules, delicately painted character miniatures and terrain pieces, and custom dice and gaming tables with which one *may* play an RPG, another (equally valid and much more common) version utilizes free-to-access or low-cost materials for facilitating RPG play. Thanks to the preservation of OGL 1.0, the comprehensive *D&D* system reference document (SRD) is freely available online, and the ORC License makes the complete rulesets and contents of sourcebooks for RPGs like *Pathfinder* freely and perpetually accessible to anyone at any time. Other open resources, like map generators, spell card creators, and digital dice embrace RPGs' 'paper-and-pencil' origins and make the game truly playable for no- or low-cost.[144] I suggest that it is precisely this

[143] Sara Thompson, "The Combat Wheelchair."
[144] Nathaniel Bedford, "'I Was Told There'd Be Homebrew': Using Open Resources to Build No Cost/Low Cost TTRPG Events," presented at *All Things Open: Scholarly Communication Events from Kennesaw State University Library System*, October 26, 2023.

level of accessibility and inclusivity of all players and play styles that has allowed these games to flourish under the adverse circumstances of COVID-19.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst school shutdowns, workplace closures, and public health precautions limiting group gatherings, RPG play groups (along with the rest of the world) had to quickly reorient their meeting methods to ensure the safety and security of community members. Fortunately, transitioning to remote play was an overall less fussy process than other regular social rituals that made the switch to virtual spaces (like school and work). For starters, virtual tabletops (VTT) already existed, and had been around since 2012. Utilizing platforms like Roll20, Foundry, Fantasy Grounds, or Astral mitigated the need for a physical tabletop and gathering in-person while preserving the fidelity of in-person play with features such as digital battle maps, player cameras and microphones, digital tokens in place of physical miniatures, etc.[145] Players frequently utilize these platforms in tandem with videoconferencing technologies like Skype, Zoom, and Discord to further facilitate telepresence through video, voice, and text chat.[146] These technologies can generate layered, simultaneous interactions within a role-playing group, particularly with text-based messages passed 'in the background' between GMs and/or players during the role-play.[147]

Remote play was and continues to be an extremely successful endeavor in RPG spaces, remaining in practice at a remarkable rate to this day. Despite the social isolation necessitated by the conditions of the global pandemic, sales of content and materials for *D&D* rose by a reported

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[145] Ye Yuan, Jan Cao, Ruotong Wang, and Svetlana Yarosh, "Tabletop Games in the Age of Remote Collaboration: Design Opportunities for a Socially Connected Game Experience," in *CHI '21: Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no. 436 (2021): 1-14.
[146] Mary Rink, "How Dungeons and Dragons Brought Friends Together During COVID-19," *The Little Rebellion*, December 14, 2020.
[147] Paul Scriven, "From Tabletop to Screen: Playing Dungeons and Dragons during COVID-19," *Societies* 11, no. 4 (2021): 125.

33% in 2020, an incredible increase in revenue at a time when in-person play was impractical and sometimes impossible.[148] Indeed, a considerable proportion of current RPG enthusiasts found their way to these games around the beginning of the COVID pandemic when opportunities for social interaction were limited and RPGs provided an excuse to regularly gather with friends and escape from the reality of the global pandemic. Many game scholars and RPG enthusiasts themselves will attribute their first encounters with RPGs to podcasts, web series, and live-streamed *actual play* shows, a genre of unscripted video media featuring people actually-playing popular RPGs. Some of these actual play shows, like Geek & Sundry's *Critical Role* or Dropout's (formerly College Humor's) *Dimension 20*, amassed massive fan followings as viewers indulged in the voyeuristic pleasure of developing parasocial relationships with players and/or their characters, all while inadvertently building their skills-knowledge of how to play RPGs.[149] Engagement with these shows and podcasts (which were themselves sometimes recorded remotely) primed players for the possibility of remote play and equipped them with examples of how to successfully conduct sessions via teleconferencing platforms.

Of the limited scholarship that currently exists on the experience of remote TRPG play since 2020, nearly all of it places some emphasis on the creation and maintenance of community, and a great deal of it indicates that playing RPGs virtually can sometimes supplement these games' already-discussed psychosocial benefits, even in unintended ways. The technology required for virtual play can sometimes malfunction, and the troubleshooting required to fix it allows players to practice patience and perseverance. Additionally, the often fantastical nature of

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[148] Sarah Whitten, "Dungeons & Dragons had its biggest year ever as Covid forced the game off tables and onto the web," *CNBC*, July 28, 2021.
[149] Sidhu Premeet and Carter Marcus, "The Critical Role of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in D&D's Resurgence," in *DiGRA '20 - Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference: Play Everywhere* (2020).

these games' worlds provides a relieving reprieve from the stress and grief of the pandemic world; further, these games could also function as sites through which to process grief and loss since, in RPGs, "characters can die, too."[150] In a study about the psychosocial/developmental applications of virtual TRPG play, art therapists Per Eisenman and Ally Bernstein remark how virtually playing TRPGs filled a critical gap in the social-emotional developments of youth and adolescents in the absence of their typical sites of interaction and engagement:

> With schools shifting the way education is delivered due to the pandemic, the amount of social interaction is significantly reduced. On the whole, we are spending more time isolated from others, and young people are having fewer opportunities to develop socially. RPGs, a high-interest activity, allow social experiences to happen through telehealth in a way that might be currently impossible in-person.[151]

At time of writing, it seems that so many students and professionals are eager to embrace the collective amnesia about the pandemic that eases their anxieties from the ghastly and indisputable revelation of our society's broken infrastructure. In contrast, role-players generally seem disinclined to simply cede to an insistence on 'business as usual' that makes community steeply inaccessible for those folks—disabled, disowned, incarcerated, unhoused, unwanted folks—who are excluded from 'business as usual.' I contend that this insistence on inclusivity and continued conscientiousness—which, again, is *widely* exhibited across the RPG community––is an insistence on queer futurity and an affirmation of the value of queer lives, a demonstration of otherwise disparate identity groups (role-players and queer folks) overlapping and embracing

[150] Aubrie S. Adams, "Needs Met Through Role-Playing Games: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Dungeons & Dragons," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 12, no. 6 (2013): 69-86.
[151] Per Eisenman and Ally Bernstein, "Bridging the Isolation: Online Dungeons & Dragons as Group Therapy During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Counseling Service of Addison County, Inc.*, March 31, 2021.

one another. My primary argument here is that RPGs are prime sites for practicing and enacting care acts with members of our community in large and small ways through various lenses and modalities. As we have explored in each section of this chapter so far, RPGs implore us to care about the people we play with, to be in community with them and support them as best we can despite any personal, interpersonal, or systemic adversity. The RPG community is strong, vibrant, and growing precisely because of this attentiveness to care, the implicit promise that a role-player will find a system of support at a table, and the ability to actively take accountability to become a better community member.

Playing (Well) with Others

Feminist and queer scholarship frequently take up questions of community formation and communitarianism as part of both ongoing movements toward political organization/mobilization and radical separation from oppressive structures of dominance. Intellectuals within and (more often) beyond the academy seek ways to activate social and political theory for real social change, typically finding that strategies based in cooperation with others are most effective at making manifest feminist fantasies of safeguarding livelihoods. Strategies such as mutual aid and consensus decision-making find purchase particularly in feminist and queer spaces as practices that re/produce communal wellbeing without the imposition of authority or expectation to be subservient to structures of dominance. In other words, feminists seem more apt to recognize that communal wellness involves devising and actually implementing organizational practices based on inclusion and accessibility in which each member of a community has a significant opportunity to share ideas and impact change. As feminist scholar Penny Weiss puts it,

> Having rejected the self-interested, autonomous individual of liberalism as both mythical and undesirable, feminists find that a more social view of the self and a more collective, interdependent, and cooperative model of social relations has an obvious and reasonable appeal.[152]

In this chapter, I have laid out several arguments supporting the idea that RPGs naturally generate cooperative social relations among their players, and that RPG players recognize the personal and political importance of collectivity and interdependence as foundational communal values. The kind of empathetic perspective-taking and radical listening that occurs around the game table is naturally conducive to enhancing sensations of social cohesion while simultaneously mitigating feelings of loneliness. In the RPG blog *No Rerolls*, user Tavendale writes that "gathering around a table with friends, family, or a local gaming group creates a sense of community and fosters connections. In these shared experiences, players build relationships, deepen friendships, and form supportive networks."[153] Having established RPGs' potential for community-building, I now turn my attention toward examining how the values of community formation/function translate between players' individual playgroups into the larger RPG community.

The social-emotional knowledge and skills that individuals develop in RPG playspaces are not restricted to those spaces where they are learned. The nature of social skills acquisition is such that we understand that these skills are transferrable to other areas in our lives. This helps us make sense of a 2021 report in *Social Work with Groups* which demonstrated that, in a study of

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[152] Penny A. Weiss, "Feminist Reflections on Community," in *Feminism and Community*, ed. Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Friedman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 3.
[153] Tavendale, "The Power of Tabletop RPGs in Nurturing Mental Health and Building Connections," *No Rerolls*, May 20, 2023.

an adult roleplaying group, "the participants consistently espoused that the skills learned and practiced in the group helped them with interpersonal issues and conflicts they had in their lives."[154] Although we may first encounter community care practices (like those discussed in the previous section) in RPG spaces, the "passage of knowledge between players" extends beyond our games and into our mundane social interactions.[155]

This concept makes sense both in theory and in practice. If we play an RPG with a fellow player who requires a modified character sheet for their dyslexia, we will be more aware of how the world can be hostile to and easily, favorably adjusted for a dyslexic person. If we become acclimated to receiving a C.A.T.S.-style breakdown of the themes and subject matter for each upcoming session from a game master, we might be more inclined to perceive content warnings favorably and share them ourselves more readily. If our playgroups decide that our games will be conducted through videoconferencing software and exist primarily in virtual space to accommodate players whose health, safety, or access to survival resources necessitates distanced meeting, then we may grow to understand these platforms and their usages more favorably. If we have conversations where we are willing to divulge our vulnerabilities, fears, and triggers with our fellow players, and if those fellow players are willing to listen attentively and adjust their own behaviors and desires to make sure everyone in the game is enjoying themselves, then we may steadily become attuned to the emotional wellbeing of others and more adept at practicing compromise and social cohesion.

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[154] Matthew S. Abbott, Kimberly A. Strauss, and Allen F. Burnett, "Table-top role-playing games as a therapeutic intervention with adults to increase social connectedness," *Social Work with Groups* 45, no. 1 (2021): 16-31.
[155] Bertan Buyukozturk and Heather Shay, "Social Play? The Critical Role of Social Interaction in Geeky Games," *Leisure Sciences* (2022): 1-20.

Cultivating this attentiveness to equity and inclusion naturally engages and amplifies our sense of empathy. RPGs are highly empathic forms of play, first and foremost because of they are based in practices of embodied perspective-taking and role-switching.[156] Immersing ourselves into the experiences of others as we simultaneously feel how those experiences manifest psychosomatically gives us an unparalleled degree of familiarity with others' emotional truths. We have also discussed how the quality or enjoyment of a game session is often reliant upon other players' inclusion and emotional wellbeing, goading players toward heightened awareness of the emotional states of those around them through both verbal and nonverbal communications. Through RPGs, we learn to make concessions and modifications for our fellow players, learning both how our needs and desires can be different from those of the people around us *and* how to become more comfortable adapting to the needs and desires of others.

Aspects of RPG play like these all contribute to its potential for augmenting empathy, which has been reflected in research which shows that "fantasy role-players are actually [scoring] higher in empathy than the general population . . . their experience of creating an online or imaginary 'self' may mean that they have less rigidity in their views of self- and other-based identities."[157] Other research links perspective-taking play to nurturing empathic and prosocial behavior, reinforcing not only the strong potential of RPGs for empathy-building, but also the importance of play at all stages of life as a way of constantly practicing empathy through

[156] Nolan Polkinghorne, "The Fantasy of Community: The Transformative Potential of Table-Top Roleplaying Games" (Master's Thesis, University of Guelph, 2023).
[157] Anissa Rivers, Ian E. Wickramasekera II, Ronald J. Pekala, and Jennifer A. Rivers, "Empathic Features and Absorption in Fantasy Role-Playing," *American Journal of Clincal Hypnosis* 58, no. 3 (2016): 292.

simulation.[158] In one such study, a participant discussed how RPGs helped them simulate and better understand how to handle various social scenarios:

> You get to actually sort of play those out, practice those, say "how could I do this better?" And you actually have the opportunity to do it better. So you kind of re-do it and re-do it. And say, "Hey, this is a better way to get what I want" or a better way to deal with this situation.[159]

This kind of research has led to RPGs being incorporated into several social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula in schools across the U.S. and abroad given their "many emotional benefits, including increased empathy skills, negotiation, problem-solving, teamwork and social maneuvering."[160] Through research and application of RPG theory, scholars and intellectuals working within and outside of academic institutions have also discovered that RPGs can contribute to the development of creative competencies, often complementing other forms of creative or artistic expression through performance, visual/digital art, music, sculpture, writing, etc.[161] The personal investment that RPGs and their imaginative worlds garner can transform these games and their worlds/characters into muses for players' fan art, poetry, songwriting, or general storytelling. The development of creative competencies is notable for the creative worldbuilding work that RPGs encourage and which we will soon discuss in the following chapter as a feature of queer world-making praxis. For now, we can reflect on the work presented in this chapter as an evaluation and demonstration of how RPGs make us better at understanding

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[158] Sue Waite and Sarah Rees, "Practising Empathy: Enacting Alternative Perspective Through Imaginative Play," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 44, no. 1 (2014): 1-18.
[159] Michael S. Sargent, "Exploring mental dungeons and slaying psychic dragons: an exploratory study" (Master's Thesis, Smith College, 2014).
[160] Brian Foglia, interviewed by Paul Darvasi, "How Dungeons & Dragons Can Help Kids Develop Social-Emotional Learning Skills," *KQED*, May 13, 2019.
[161] Ryan Hill, "Exploring the Use of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) to Highlight and Develop Creative Competencies" (Master's Thesis, State University of New York, Buffalo, 2023).

and working with the people around us simply for the sake of being in community and playing well and nicely with one another. In this way, RPGs serve as sites for envisioning and establishing the principles and practices of feminist and queer communitarianism, a unique power which we will continue to explore for the remainder of this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to exploring various facets of the RPG community, outlining how it has successfully opposed efforts across history to dismantle engagement with the RPG hobby, how its existence as a subcultural group allows its members to identify each other and their shared goals—at least some of which include creating spaces for queer escape and healing psychically and spiritually from the isolated hurt of queer existence—and how these games do especially well at integrating players who are often excluded from or not considered for membership in other communities.

Community does not arise spontaneously; rather, it is deliberately and consciously built for particular purposes and with particular inclusions/exclusions in mind. Throughout the past half century, queer creators have steadily entered RPG spaces and reorganized their infrastructure to make these games and the small and large communities that form around them more accessible and inviting for other queer folx. Through acts of radical inclusion and assertion of everyone's right to play, individuals have built spaces where anyone is welcome to dream, become, and experience something other than what they can access in their mundane lives. Members of the RPG community have effectively modeled what it means to intentionally create space for difference as well as developing pro-social conflict resolution strategies for resolving tensions arising from inevitable differences within diverse communities. The principles of acceptance (as explored in Chapter 1) and inclusion (as identified in this chapter) create a

foundation upon which players—by borrowing lessons from their characters and from their fellow players—can envision what it would look like to build a better world.

CHAPTER THREE

Building Worlds

What does it mean to build a world? RPGs make the act of worldbuilding central to play. For aspirant game masters or players looking to start their own RPGs, the first step they often think to take is building their world: fleshing out the core concepts, cosmology, geography, sociology, and history of a totally new world upon which player-characters will enact their desires, subsequently reshaping the world through their choices. Many dozens—if not hundreds or thousands—of RPG worldbuilding guides exist in gaming manuals, RPG sourcebooks, online forums, pamphlets, videos, podcasts, zines, and various other media, all for the purpose of helping RPG players in the process of creating and detailing a fictional setting for their collectively-constructed stories. When playing RPGs, worldbuilding is front-of-mind as each participant is aware—in both the diegetic and game frames—that the choices they make, the ideas they create, and the beliefs they communicate are all contributing to the realities of both the in-game world and the playspaces they inhabit.

What we often forget is that the mundane world—just like those in which we situate our fantastical stories—was also *built*. There was nothing predestined about how our world took form. Sure, many of the constituent parts of the world were already present before we made meaning of them, but humans have powerfully and willfully intervened in the worldbuilding process of molding our world into the reality we recognize today. This process has not been values-neutral; the worldmaking process has been carried out largely by those with the power to etch their will onto the archives, and the epistemes of those who lack power have often been

summarily erased from those archives. As critical literary scholar Saidiya Hartman grimly reminds us, we cannot know in the present what we did not (care to) record in the past.[1]

Through the *names* that we give to things and the *things* that we *choose* to name, we have interpreted and reinterpreted the world throughout history, opening new possibilities for being just as we close off others, making certain concepts real while obliterating others or else condemning them to the realm of the literally unthinkable. As logician and language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world . . . what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."[2] We developed all the language with which we relate how we perceive, experience, and describe every sensory, spiritual, imaginative, embodied, and communicable phenomenon; the excess, for which we have no words, ceases to exist in our complex consciousnesses, unable to be named and thus forgotten, disregarded, vanished.

RPGs are games fundamentally based on communication. Roleplay itself is a communicative activity. In roleplay, just as in our mundane lives, we shape the world through our language, through the ideas that we assert *exist* and *are possible*. When we narrate our stories to each other, we are also making claims about the world, and when our language fails to communicate something that we wish we could articulate, RPGs invite us to *invent* new language for the purpose of play. Up to this point, this thesis has been a project of laying bare all the threads that make the experience of playing RPGs meaningful for players on a personal and interpersonal level. This chapter now attempts to pull those threads taut into a tapestry of queer potentiality, one which depicts the path toward realizing the vision of a Queer Roleplaying Game

[1] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.
[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922), 149-150.

Praxis, an enactment of systemic change that could reorganize our world. Here, we are dealing with Markus Montola's primary frame of play: the social frame, inhabited by people. It is in this frame that we, as our mundane selves, make sense of play. This frame both shapes the circumstances of play and reveals the consequences of play, which I argue can shift how we choose to build *this* world. What does it mean to build a world? What better place to search for an answer than in roleplaying games?

Playing with Space

Worlds are always rendered spatially. Space is the *stuff* in a world. A world exists because its matter—material or discursive, tangible or intangible—occupies some space. When we read novels or watch films set in worlds that are not our own, we understand that those worlds have some quality of spatiality that allows their inhabitants to navigate through and interact with them.

Again, the totalizing lens of seriousness compels us to understand space as stable and fixed: what is there is *there*; the landscape exists simply as it does. This spatial logic is comforting in that it absolves individuals of their capacity or responsibility to reshape space; after all, if space is immutable by human intervention, then whatever spatial orientations exist must be ordained by some higher power. Queer theorists, however, are not so quick to absolve humanity of its worldbuilding responsibilities, recognizing not only that we have the power to re/shape space, but also that we are constantly and collectively wielding this power to un/re/make space at levels ranging from the microscopic to the global. According to feminist geographer Doreen Massey, space embodies "the product of interrelations," "spheres of possibility," and is "always under construction" or a "simultaneity of stories-so-far."[3] This poetic

[3] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publishers, 2005), 6.

grounding portrays space as a mutable construction that is (at least partly) maintained, manipulated, and made manifest through consciousness and social interaction.

Feminist scholars like Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes help us make sense of the idea that space is sculpted through interrelation by illuminating how large-scale sites of resistance like "rallies, protests, and blockades" exist because of "the daily actions undertaken by individual Indigenous people, families, and communities [who] often go unacknowledged but are no less vital to colonial processes."[4] Similarly, feminist geographers Michelle Daigle and Margaret Marietta Ramírez situate our capacity to make and unmake space in "the violent conditions of conquest" across history which have produced "geographic sites such as nation-states, borders, private property, reservations, neighborhoods, prisons, schools, and so on fix," which all in one way or another help reproduce and uphold racialized, gendered, and classed practices of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and non/belonging.[5] Chicana studies scholar Mary Pat Brady also follows in this queer tradition of interpreting space as shaped through power and shares the alternative perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and women of color intellectuals who understand space to be imbued with collective possibilities by "seeing and feeling space as performative and participatory."[6]

When we conceptualize space in this way—not as mere fixed material, but rather as being produced by and intricately entangled with processes of interrelation—then we can move toward an understanding of people *and* place as constitutive of space. Our notions of space are

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[4] Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes, "Everyday Decolonization: Living a Decolonial Queer Politics," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2015): 157-158.
[5] Michelle Daigle and Margaret Marietta Ramírez, "Space," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 216
[6] Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.

further complicated when we add this dimension of *people* as an inextricable element of space, but queer theory offers us some frameworks for thinking through the interplay between people and place that produces space. Literary critic Michael Warner melds the material and discursive components of space in his concept of a *public*:

> A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*. [Emphasis original][7]

Participants in RPGs comprise a sort of public, united by their relation to, interpretation of, and address by RPG texts. Indeed, players of any game could be considered to comprise a public. Warner lays out some key rules for identifying a public (as distinguished from *the* public as a sort of imaginary social totality) including self-organization, constitution through mere attention, and creation through the reflexive circulation of discourse. In relating how the space of a public contributes to building the world in which that public exists, Warner explains that "all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address."[8] In other words, the texts circulated by publics and a public's interpretation of those texts all say something about the world in which they exist and are all part of the *space* of that world.

In the primary frame of RPG play, texts (like RPGs) and their interpretations (by the people who play them) convey something about the world in which they exist. In Chapter 1,

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[7] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 50.
[8] Ibid., 81.

when we discussed how women were excluded from early iterations of TRPGs or how monstrous races like Orcs were constructed as amalgamations of harmful racial and ethnic stereotypes, we understood that those representations or the absence thereof communicated something to players about the place of women and racial minorities in our own world (namely, women are not real people, and racial minorities only exist as a scourge). Although women and racial minorities *theoretically* existed as part of the potential public for RPGs, their conspicuous absence or denigrating depiction *effectively* excluded them from that public. On a broader scale, when RPG players as a collective were socially maligned during the Satanic Panic (as discussed in Chapter 2), their inclusion as part of *the* public was openly contested by social leaders like politicians, preachers, and educators.

Philosopher Nancy Fraser explains that in these instances where individuals are implicitly or explicitly excluded from public participation, "members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics."[9] She calls these alternative publics "subaltern counterpublics," by which she means "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[10] Warner renames these 'subaltern publics' as *counterpublics* and expresses his own interpretation the concept as follows:

> A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one . . . The subordinate status of a counterpublic

[9] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 122-23.
[10] Ibid.

> does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways its members' identities are formed and transformed. A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice . . . Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely.[11]

Returning to discussions about subcultural and subaltern identities in Chapter 2, counterpublics give us new language for conceptualizing a distinctly queer spatiality since these are spaces invested in forming new identities and nurturing new worldviews. Counterpublics are the radical spaces in which we refuse dominant discourses and dare to imagine and assert the viability of alternative discourses. Counterpublics give us a space in which we can situate and make sense of transgressive games (see Chapter 1) or changes to games that augment their accessibility for disabled or marginalized players (see Chapter 2). We can read these movements against accepting an RPG as-is through the lens of queer counterpublics, spatial formations that encourage the playful thinking, acting, and being that has precipitated tangible change toward radical inclusivity in the RPG community.

While the counterpublic framework helps us think about how we, as our mundane selves, can affect change, it relegates the spatial status of RPGs to existing merely as texts left to be *interpreted by* counterpublics. The radical argument I attempt to make here is that RPGs are *themselves* spaces that compel us to envision (or even temporarily exist in) alternative worlds. When we play RPGs, we enter what French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault calls a *heterotopia*. Whereas a *utopia* is an idealized or perfected society that stands apart from our own

[11] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 86-88.

world as a "fundamentally unreal space," *heterotopias* are real places that are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia."[12] Heterotopias are mundane spaces, existing in our mundane world, in which we can enact ideals, values, and practices that move us closer to utopia; for Foucault, they are about as close to utopia as we can realistically get. Heterotopias are often marked off in space (and time) through designated points where they begin and end—like playspaces.

When we enter a place called a playspace, we effectively enter a heterotopia—a real (mundane) space bounded by time and place in which our comforts are tended to, our multiple identities are unquestioningly acknowledged, and our wildest fantasies are treated as if they were real. A queer player who feels affirmed and accepted in play may describe their RPG as a utopia, but I contend that what they actually experience is the playspace functioning as a heterotopia. The most magical thing about heterotopias is that they exist in the space of our mundane world; the heterotopia pulls our queer fantasies out of the realm of the elsewhere and otherworldly and places them squarely in our reality. The RPG-as-heterotopia thus rips the fabric of space, exposing its instability and unfixity and grafting new realities onto the one that we experience in our mundane lives.

Heterotopias upset our traditional, logical understandings of space because they introduce the notion that our spaces can hold many multiple symbolic meanings at once. Geographer Edward Soja makes sense of this spatial multiplicity with his theory of *thirdspaces*, locations where the boundaries between spatial binaries like rural/urban, public/private, home/work, and state/body are disrupted in the creation of new spaces that transcend social categorization. Soja argues that we must re/conceive how space structures our realities by drawing attention to the

[12] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1: 22-27.

fact "that all social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived existence, only when they are spatially 'inscribed'—that is *concretely represented*—in the social production of space. Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing 'in' space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. *There is no unspatialized social reality*." [Emphasis original][13]

Playspaces are unique as spatial formations in that they actively, intentionally conjure heterotopias or thirdspaces into being. In this way, playspaces may be conceptualized both as a *secondplace* (contrasted with the mundane in Soja's formulation of spaces) *and* as a thirdspace, since the act of play is itself spatially transcendent. Regardless of whether we elect the framework of *queer counterpublics*, *heterotopias*, or *thirdspaces* to conceptualize the spaces in which we play, we can understand that playing an RPG creates a rupture in our spatial realities, one which reveals the artificiality of our world and our capacities to make new meanings of our spaces. If we can agree to behave according to principles of acceptances and inclusivity in our 'counterpublic, heterotopic thirdspaces,' can't we do so outside of these spaces? After all, where do these spaces end? What's keeping us from steadfastly maintaining our beliefs and values as we traverse between mundane spaces and playspaces?

Playing with Time

Space constitutes one dimension in our conceptualization of the world, and it is often paired with time as comprising the 'fabric of reality' (space-time). It should be no surprise, then, that just like space, time has been a subject of queer re/interpretation, challenging its linearity, continuity, and directionality. If space is the 'stuff' in a world, time is the medium through which

[13] Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1996), 46.

that stuff can shift and change; it is the ceaseless force that both binds and makes possible all our activities, our aspirations, and our very mortality.

Just as space is not a neutral construct, feminist and queer theorists do not interpret time as a neutral force. Queer chronologist Elizabeth Freeman conceptualizes "time as a vector of control" and explains that "the term *temporality* registers the collective patterning of statis and change according to various regimes of power: the politics of our *experience* of time."[14] Freeman is most famous in academic circles for her theorizing on *chrononormativy*, "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."[15] Freeman's chrononormativity is comparable with Jack Halberstam's concept of *reproductive time* which organizes lives around the nuclear family and its routines.[16] These concepts capture how time is (at least partly) socially constructed and laden with cultural values; the passage of time is not a neutral phenomenon for a woman whose "biological clock" is ticking down, or even for "the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practices of childrearing," as well as expected chronologies for graduating school, obtaining an occupation, passing along an inheritance, etc.[17] The way that we organize time in the U.S.—around the 40-hour workweek, in anticipation of personal milestones like marriage and childbirth, and in strict observation of daylight-savings—makes the socially imposed rhythm of a capitalist political economy seem natural and inevitable.

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[14] Elizabeth Freeman, "Temporality," in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 234.
[15] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.
[16] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 5.
[17] Ibid.

Other queer theorists have posited alternative temporal arrangements that capture how the experiences of gendered and racialized minorities deviate from the chrononormative. For example, trans studies scholar Jacob Lau coined the term *trans temporality* to describe the many ways that transgender lives do not align with medical or cisnormative reproductive timelines.[18] Similarly, C. Riley Snorton (also working in the field of trans studies) disrupts our sense of sexual historiography by suggesting in *Black on Both Sides* that the reduction of enslaved Africans to "fungible flesh" in the Middle Passage and their subsequent "ungendering" as chattel sowed the seeds for trans embodiment.[19] Sociological scholars Von E. Nebbitt and Margaret Lombe articulate how urban Black youth and adolescents, especially young women and girls, are stripped of their experiences of adolescence by their subjection to adultification, an ideological bias that places undue familial and social pressure on Black youth in order to render them as more mature and thus more capable of withstanding stricter social punishments.[20] This contributes to the ongoing anti-Black executions of Black youth and adolescents by police, and to the persistence of the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately incarcerates Black and Brown adolescents before actually reaching legal adulthood, which each startingly disrupt someone's experience of time (and mortality).[21]

It makes some sense that queer folks (whose existences are marked by a quality of Otherness) would experience time in an 'Othered' way, out of frequency with the temporality experienced by the state's ideal citizen. In regards to how we can apply queer theories of time to

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[18] Jacob Lau, "Between the Times: Trans-Temporality, and Historical Representation" (Unpublished PhD. Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2016).
[19] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[20] Von E. Nebbitt and Margaret Lombe, "Urban African American adolescents and adultification," *Families in Society* (2010): 211-325.
[21] Amir A. Gilmore and Pamella J. Bettis, "Antiblackness and the Adultification of Black Children in a U.S. Prison Nation," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (2021): 1-32.

the temporalities and worldbuilding of RPGs, we can ground our discussion in the critical discourses of *queer futurity* and the queer *death drive*. These theories are often put in conversation with each other for their dualistic and conflicting visions for the 'queer future' and their alternative directions for understanding queer temporality.

In RPGs, time does not follow the same logics we apply to it in the mundane world. Although we may interpret time as occurring linearly and continuously in the diegesis of a game (i.e. one hour in the game world is the same as one hour in the mundane world), this is not how time actually behaves in the game and social frames of play. In a game like *D&D*, the most explicit guidance a player gets about time is that "a round [of combat] is about 6 seconds in the game world," such that ten rounds of combat take one in-game minute.[22] This fact is not immediately evident to players, however, who may take anywhere from under one minute to upwards of ten minutes in the mundane world deciding and describing what their character does in that 6-second in-game period. In less structured parts of RPG play that center roleplay, exploration, or downtime, many in-game hours, days, or months can be narrated as happening in the span of a few mundane minutes. Time also does not move only in a forward direction in RPGs; if a player decides that they wanted their character to do something retroactively, they can rewind time or 'retcon' the events of the narrative with just a bit of discursive negotiation with other players. Some RPG systems, like the heist-based *Leverage*, make the distortion of time a central mechanic, encouraging players to interrupt ongoing scenes when a character is confronted with a problem to 'flash back' to how the characters have already set themselves up for success.[23] At any given mundane moment of RPG play, diegetic time is stretched, condensed,

[22] Wizards of the Coast, *Player's Handbook*
[23] Cam Banks and Rob Donoghue, *Leverage* (Williams Bay, WI: Margaret Weis Productions, 2010).

elongated, repeated, omitted, inserted, severed, slowed, accelerated, created, and destroyed according to the whims of players and game masters. Already we can see how RPGs fail to adhere to chrononormative temporalities.

The way that time behaves in RPGs has important implications for the worldbuilding of these games. The passage of time in RPGs is a rupture from the way we interpret time in the mundane world, a radical reconceptualization of what the passage of time signifies. If the future is the frontier of queer possibility, as Muñoz argues in *Cruising Utopia*, and if the future can arrive in a matter of moments in an RPG world, we can effectively collapse time and arrive at queer futurity with unprecedented haste. In other words, rather than locating the prospect of queer liberation in the *then-and-there*, RPGs allow us to arrive at the queer horizon *right now*. This ontological folding of time makes the queer future eminently accessible, and I contend that this experiential dissolution of temporality is part of the reason why RPGs are such suitable hosts for queer stories. Despite occurring in accordance with mundane time, RPGs don't have to follow any of the rules of temporal physics: time passes as quickly or slowly as the players say it does. When we ask whether/how we can arrive at the queer future, the answer is yes, and one method is by playing RPGs.

However, there is a competing view of the queer future that may also hold some applicability for RPG play: the idea that there is *No Future*, as articulated by queer theorist Lee Edelman. According to Edelman, the political world is structured in accordance with the values of *reproductive futurism*, a "cultural fantasy" which resolves the disequilibrium between language and world by the perpetual protection and ascendence of "the Child," the mythic

political figure that will save our state and deliver us to a "fullness of meaning."[24] For Edelman, the queer is the *death drive*, a demonic figure/force which poses an apolitical, narcissistic threat to reproductive futurism by disavowing the desire to have a Child and the image of the healing future they promise. Thus, Edelman articulates that the future has no place for queerness and that queer politics must always be grounded in asserting existence in the present; queerness is the death drive, and thus there is no future for queerness.

There is also a death drive in RPGs. While the narratives that players create together can (and presumably do) last forever in the diegesis of the game world, the play of an RPG is always clouded by the miasma of its inevitable finality—at some point, the game ends. Whether it's because the set-aside time block for a session has expired, or because personal or professional responsibilities pull a participant away from the game, or simply because a group fails to continue meeting and advance the narrative, every story in every RPG must eventually come to a close. Many times, this ending is decidedly unceremonious; a perusal of RPG forums and message boards will unearth innumerable complaints that a campaign 'fizzled' or that a group 'didn't work out,' leaving characters and their stories abandoned and perpetually suspended in diegetic time. Metatextually, the death drive manifests as the normative financial impulses of the organizations that design RPGs. As discussed in Chapter 2, large game production studios are already leaning into the tendency to conglomerate and revoke creators' artistic rights to their content. There exists an unsettling unpredictability in the instability OGL (see Chapter 2), which many fear will someday cease to exist in its current form. For RPG enthusiasts, the past year was filled with visions of death and disavowals of 'the future of RPGs.'

[24] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

While I ordinarily align myself in the queer tradition of Muñoz, I think Edelman's theory can be generative here, at least to the extent that it captures the urgency of emphasizing the queer stakes of acting presently rather than expectantly anticipating an as-yet unrealized (or even conceptually unrealizable) queer future. Queer creators evidently also felt this impulse to act presently as they rushed in 2023 to publish their artistic projects before *Wizards of the Coast* could snag them up due to updated copyright laws. And queer players likely also feel this urgency to act queerly *now* while they still can; for queer players who only feel comfortable expressing their queerness in the safe space of an RPG playspace, there is a real urgency to take advantage of every in-game, in-character moment of expressing queerness. The queer future is indeterminate and may not even exist; we must color the present with our queerness and distort time itself to build a world in which our queerness is eternal—if not in this world, then at least in another; the feelings are just as real anyway.

Playing with Reality

Any extended engagement with queer media will reveal that queer folx experience reality differently than others. The topography of space and the passage of time simply feel different for people who identify with some aspect of queerness. Queer people know all too well that there are some spaces that are unsafe for them to enter or certain figures who are dangerous to engage. Since gender and sexuality are so performance-based, queer people are always consciously or subconsciously aware that they must behave, dress, or speak a certain way to gain access to various spaces. Queer people often fail at making meaningful romantic connections in adolescence, and the potential for marriage or childrearing can be variable and conflicting, even within the same country. Queer people are always acutely aware that their rights are perceived as privileges by those in power, and that they can thusly be granted and taken away depending on

the current reigning regime. Sometimes, queer people will not encounter another queer person until they reach adulthood, at which point an internalized queerphobia may have calcified in their spirits and shattered their hopes of ever feeling 'normal.'

Queer people are constantly confronted by a reality that they did not choose, that compels them to restrict themselves in some way, and that often actively works against their interests. We have already explored the typical artistic response to this non-belonging—escapism (see Chapter 2)—but I propose there is a much more powerful way to respond to this reality's violent rejection of queerness: alter reality by playing RPGs. As we've discovered in this chapter so far, RPGs have the power to change the way we experience space (by superimposing a heterotopic otherworld onto our mundane playspaces, creating vibrant, untamed 'thirdspaces') and time (by stretching, condensing, elongating, etc. and simultaneously pulling us closer to queer futurity and rejecting that future for the death drive of the present). Once again, these experiences of shifting space and time do not exist in abstraction; they are not occurring elsewhere or in another time for someone else in a novel, film, portrait, or song. Instead, these experiences of altering reality exist here-and-now, and the effects of these alterations are experienced sensorially, living in our limbs and later retiring to our memories. *Our* realities are changed when we play RPGs.

Feminist sociologist Hilary Rose wrote about the power of art and creativity to challenge our conception of reality in *Love, Power and Knowledge*, a feminist meditation on the social construction of science. In it, she describes the science fiction genre as having created "a sort of dream laboratory" in which "feminisms may try out different wonderful and/or terrifying social projects. In these vivid u/dystopias the reader is invited to play safely and seriously with social possibilities that are otherwise excluded by the immediacy of daily life, by the conventions of the

dominant culture and by fear."[25] Our fictions function as sites where we can fearlessly play with new possibilities for reality, in the process discovering that our own reality is basically just a complex set of social agreements. If we approach RPG play with the intent to practice this kind of utopian thinking (as Muñoz might want us to), we may discover how our reality could be wholly different if we severed ourselves from the systems-level thinking that upholds structures of dominance. Utopian game scholar Kelsey Paige Mason invites us to consider how

> For example, rather than making slight adjustments to combat mechanics, utopian thinking allows us to speculate about what TTRPGs look like without combat mechanics at all, or how to consider combat only as a last resort with lingering consequences. Utopian thinking may even allow us to go beyond the boundaries of the game itself, to think about the larger structures in which it is embedded.[26]

RPGs allow us to create realities we want to live in. In the diegetic frame, this means creating worlds where queer characters can feel comfortable navigating space; as queer game master Jupiter Wildwood puts it, "We don't need fantasy queerphobia here. Games like TTRPG let us imagine different possible futures without feeling burdened by real world realities and barriers."[27] In the game frame, this means that players needs are tended to, and that everyone at the table is treated with care and respect. In the social frame, this means that whatever aspects of RPG play feel life-affirming or conducive to the comfortability of participants do not need to cease to exist when the game session ends. The safety tools we use, the precautions we take in

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[25] Hilary Rose, *Love, Power and Knowledge: Towards a Feminist Transformation oft the Sciences* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 228.
[26] Kelsey Paige Mason, "Just Make Believe: Assumed Neutrality, Archetypical Exceptionalism, and Performative Progressivism in Dungeons and Dragons," *Vector: A Magazine of the British Science Fiction Association* 294 (2023).
[27] Jupiter Wildwood, interviewed by Michelle Villagracia, "Finding queer-friendly spaces in the world of TTRPGs," *CBC*, August 17, 2023.

play, and the recognition of common humanity that we extend to our fellow players need not be relegated solely to the playspace. The boundaries of the playspace are already so liminal and vaguely defined; why not say the playspace extends out to cover the entire world?

When we push the boundaries of our playspaces out into the mundane world, we begin to engage with RPGs in a way that goes beyond Samuel Taylor Coleridge's now-famous notion of "suspension of disbelief." If we can reconceptualize the actions we take and attitudes we cultivate in RPGs as existing within and contributing to the ongoing formation of the mundane world, we allow ourselves to step into what media studies scholar Janet Murray calls "active creation of belief."[28] By playing RPGs,

1. We are collaboratively creating new systems of belief that spawn new realities.
2. We are contributing to the worldmaking process that defines our social order by renegotiating the values upon which our society is premised.
3. We are performing the kind of world-altering magic that many believe only exists in fiction, but which is strongly rooted in reality.

Playing with Magic

If RPGs have such a capacity to wreck and rend our perception of reality, what can we say about the nature of play? What do we call the worldbending phenomenology of reconfiguring space and time around the desires of a few role-players? Thankfully, RPGs (in their engagement with the fictional and fantastical) offer us language to describe this precise phenomenon: magic! Play is magic! It seems so obvious to say, but maybe you're not convinced.

[28] Janet Murray, "Active Creation of Belief," *Humanistic Design for an Emerging Medium*, January 30, 2012.

This section is a slight deviation from the broader argument of this chapter, but it is part of my manifesto on the power and potential of play, so bear with me in this quick detour.

Why are wizards so feared and revered in the fantasy settings of many RPGs? Why have the religious and political forces in the world worked so hard to make us disbelieve in the mystic, folkloric forces that pervade every culture across the globe? **Magic** is the power to rewrite reality, manipulate potentialities, and enact one's will upon the world by means both forceful and mysterious; its methods can be illusory or transmutative, and its capacities range from alluring enchantments to warding abjurations. Every culture across time and space has developed some connection to magic or mysticism, and these connections are often cultivated, associated with, and tended to by the queer. In *Queer Magic: LGBT+ Spirituality and Culture from Around the World*, mysticism scholar Tomás Prower traces the origins of magic in society back to the 'cradle of civilization,' crossing continents and spans of history to trace the existence of the occult. He locates the cross-continental practice of 'magic' as residing most prominently with non-heterosexual, gender nonconforming individuals whose existences outside of predominant social logics often connected them to divinities or otherworldly spiritual forces; their attunement with the unknown granted them access to professions like shaman, spellcaster, healer, fortune teller, and other forms of "magic worker."[29]

The project to dispel magic originates in an Enlightenment-era anxiety to distinguish the 'civilized West' from other barbaric or primordial regions and their populations. Theologian Jason Josephson-Storm recounts how 'modernity' was conceptualized as a rupture from the past

[29] Tomás Prower, *Queer Magic: LGBT+ Spirituality and Culture from Around the World* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Worldwide, Limited, 2018).

by forsaking the magical, a phenomenon he calls "the myth of disenchantment."[30] The advent of the rational, scientific age was marked by the abandonment of the occult and the folkloric, such that "folklore [became] a way to measure a given population's imagined distinctiveness from modern rationality, as the only people who seemed to lack folklore were urban, educated, English Protestants, against whom all others were racialized."[31] These distinctions were drawn particularly prominently in anthropologically situated ethnographic texts which demarcated one of the primary differences between 'us' and 'them' as the persistence or prevalence of magic in a foreign culture.[32] Through such accounts, the magical, the pagan, the ritualistic, and the occult became fetishized and indicative of the non-modern.

This cultural disdain for magic persists into the present where interests in the arcane are chided as childish, frivolous, unproductive, and largely associated with femininity and non-whiteness, further relegating magic to obscurity and distance from the center in structures of dominance. We do not take magic *seriously*, so perhaps we can treat it *playfully*. Magic is an inherently disruptive force for its potential to manipulate the realities that people in power have carefully crafted to protect themselves. The mere suggestion of its existence is enough to upset the elite because it presents an alternative image of the world in which queer people could have just as much power to restructure society as policymakers (and with more immediacy and primordial legitimacy). Magic is intrinsically an insistence on the power of queerness at the personal and political levels; it is a threat to established hegemony and an unavoidable assertion of non-normativity.

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[30] Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
[31] Sydney Sheedy, "Folk Survivals, Spurned Witches, and Thwarted Inheritance, or, What Makes the Occult Queer?," *Arc – The Journal of the School of Religious Studies, McGill University* 50 (2022):
[32] Elsa Richardson, *Second Sight in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 15.

Up to this point, a ludic scholar familiar with the principal texts of the field may be wondering, *where is the Magic Circle?* I've saved discussion of the Magic Circle until this point because I do not take the 'magic' aspect of the Magic Circle as a dismissible or inconsequential turn of phrase. In *Homo Ludens*, founding father of ludology Johan Huizinga introduces the concept of the Magic Circle, describing two types of spaces: the real (mundane) world, where we exist as ourselves, and the fantastical, imagined worlds that exist in the Magic Circle, into which we enter when we play games.[33] In the Magic Circle, we agree to abide by different sets of rules and norms than we do in the real world. We may use different names for each other or occupy roles or statuses that we do not hold in the real world, or that may not even exist. Huizinga argues that our experiences in the Magic Circle transform us, and that the Magic Circle is permeable. Just as we bring our personal understandings of social norms and morality into the games we play, the ways in which those ideas are changed through playing games leave the Magic Circle just as we do, bringing new meaning to the real world and the ways in which we interact with it.

I contend that the 'magic' of the Magic Circle of play—its abilities to project an illusory reality onto our own, to dispel the social statuses of those who enter it, to transmute the values and beliefs of those who pass through it—is very *real*. The Magic Circle's 'magic' is especially real for queer players who are already familiar with feeling outcast, otherworldly, or otherwise expelled to the fringes of mundane society, landing there right alongside the occult and the arcane. When queer folx can enter the Magic Circle and claim with no spuriousness or fallacy that they were *transformed* by their experience in it, that they felt *protected* by it, that they *built a world* within a world and *generated* love and light in that world that *illuminated* own, that *reality*

[33] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press, 1950).

itself was bent and broken and reshaped to make those queer folx feel accepted, included, and *powerful* . . . why would we ever reject that? Isn't it so much easier to believe that there are places and times where magic is possible, and that it is amplified when conducted with others? Isn't it better to live in a world where magic exists, and where we can wield it for purposes like these? Maybe those moms were right during the Satanic Panic; maybe we *can* use these games for the conjuration, transmutation, and evocation of alternate worlds. Maybe magic exists within and somewhere beyond these games.

Playing

Since its introduction to academic discourse and its subsequent proliferation throughout critical social justice theory discourses, the term 'queer' has lived many lives and been applied in a multitude of contexts and served several grammatical uses. We most often encounter 'queer' as an adjective describing particular identities, conditions, statuses, behaviors, and media and ascribing to them a quality of non-normativity, otherness, or deviation from the hegemonic. We also encounter 'queer' as an adverb, modifying other qualities or activities (i.e. 'queerly dressed,' 'read queerly'). Sometimes, we encounter the standalone term 'queer' as a noun, its own distinctive concept which is analogous to what I called 'queerness' in the Introduction to this thesis.

In both academic and non-academic activist frameworks, 'queer' has also been mobilized as a verb denoting action, intent, and interpretive positionality. 'To queer' is to "challenge the dominance of heterosexist structures."[34] Its use as a verb signifies "a distorting, a making the

[34] Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason, "Queer Theory in Practice," in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 165.

solid unstable."[35] 'Queering' is a kind of disruption or intervention, "a complicating of the taken-for-granted [normativity] of everyday practices, spaces, and discourses."[36] Scholars have found it insightful to queer subjects pertaining to gender and sexuality, of course, but also to apply this discursive scaffolding to concepts, places, and institutions extending as far as prisons, Asia, freedom, the family, the Middle Ages, archives, museums, history, goth culture, and the future. At present, *queering* is the best language we have for practicing these kinds of disciplinary disruptions, interventions, and critical analyses, and *queer* is the best referent we have for discussing the non-normative, the sub/altern/ative, and the Other.

Throughout this thesis, my primary aim has been examining the multimodal, multidimensional ways in which playing RPGs allows us to better understand our socially situated selves, improve our relationships to others and our communities, and redefine the worldmaking process by exposing and unsettling the spatio-temporal infrastructures real and imagined worlds (in fact complicating the real/imagined binary). Underlying all my arguments, my anecdotal examples, and my conversations with the scholarly interlocutors I name and cite is the fundamental practice of *play*.

The adaptability of the word 'queer' is itself emblematic of an impulse to play with language that (knowingly or unknowingly) seeps into the texts and dialogues that critical theorists produce. I contend that playing, like queering, is a radical approach to take toward understanding the world and our place in it. Playing, like queering, is liberatory; it rejects the dominating frameworks, institutional impositions, and self-restrictions that come with attempts at

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[35] Stephen Valocchi and Robert J. Corber, *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 25.
[36] Joshua Trey Barnett and Corey W. Johnson, "Queer," in *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Sherwood Thomson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 582.

'rationalizing' issues and discourses. Playing, like queering, opens our limited perspectives to infinite potentialities; role-playing in particular is a practice of compassion, a sublimation of self in service of understanding another. Playing, like queering, challenges the taken-for-granted, the assumed-to-be-true, the 'real'; queer folx understand that, often, what we claim as being 'real' is whatever serves the interest of those with power. We can demonstrate this by turning to history and observing how ideas about what is 'real' have never been stable and are still constantly shifting, usually in favor of capital accumulation and colonialism.

Another aim of this project has been to bring queer studies and queer theory to a place of greater prominence in ludic studies or ludology, and I have worked to accomplish this by pointing out several instances where we can queer the ludic. I want to leave us with a consideration for how we can similarly draw the ludic into the queer, particularly through the application of *playfulness* as an analytic framework that both suspends the 'serious' consequences of critical interrogation and makes possible the theoretical restructuring of our institutions, beliefs, and realities. As previously mentioned, play is in one sense a 'suspension of disbelief,' but it can also be an 'active creation of belief,' a tool for proactively reconceptualizing how we think about ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

Playing, like queering, indicates a sort of praxis, a commitment to action structured by a liberatory theoretical foundation. It is a fundamentally queer way to engage with the world, and it is an approach with applications that extend from the personal to the political and beyond. What would it mean if we started playing with concepts the same way we've become fond of queering them? What does it look like to play with, say, gender and sexuality, or race and representation? What could we achieve by playing with the systems that structure our society, or playing with the outcasts who are omitted and excluded from participation in those structures?

What does it mean to play with a commitment to care and with attentiveness to those around us? How can we play with the ways we build our worlds? Indeed, what would the world be like if we were all just a bit more playful?

Conclusion

Building a world requires more than merely filling its space with physical matter and tracing its changes through the dimension of time. Building a world involves building a reality and interrogating what is 'real' at all. All acts of worldbuilding are in some way derivative of or inspired by how our own world was built: we built political economies to organize our interactions; we developed social codes to distinguish ourselves from others; we have created uncountable theologies that help us make sense of a world which is, in many ways, unknowable. Just as we built this world, we can imagine what it is like to build other worlds. Perhaps we might even begin building those new worlds in the same space and throughout the time in which our own world exists.

It is extremely difficult to imagine worlds that are unlike our own. We often allow our imaginations to become bound by what has been represented as possible or what has been achieved historically. We experience a great deal of struggle in our attempts to alter our realities, sometimes manifesting in big ways like state-toppling revolutions. Other times, all it takes for us to imagine ourselves out of this world and into a new one is to play a game—a game which teaches us how to listen, how to work together, how it might feel to live in a world where our fantasies are fulfilled. Play is more than mere escape: it is a rejection of reality and an insistence that something else is possible, enacted and embodied through the magnificent magic of imagination.

CODA

The Magic Circle as Sacred Site for the Witchcraft of Worldmaking

I would run to the forest of my youth in moments where my queer body and mind felt threatened, criminalized, or ostracized, or when I otherwise needed a respite to experience the freedom of wandering a world without worry like my non-queer peers. If I would journey too far into the forest, however, I would eventually encounter its edge: an expansive, flattened, gray, dead, busy, highway with hundreds of cars flying by at dizzying speeds making a terrible cacophony that disrupted the stillness and silence of the woods. The world would remind me of *its* reality by presenting components of its most violent infrastructures (roads, cars, angry individualistic drivers), and my spell would be broken.

When I was younger, all I could do in that instance was turn back to the forest, which had been stripped of some of its fantasy by its situatedness within the mundane. I did not yet know how to harness the power of the Magic Circle for myself; I did not yet know that its power existed not only in the wild places of the world, but also within its wild souls.

When I enter the Magic Circle now, I know it will hold all of me: all my pain, all my hope, all my queerness, all my dissatisfaction, all my dreams, all my visions of a sparkling future (*not-this . . . what-if . . .*). When I enter a playspace and sit down to play an RPG with my friends, I feel charged with a sense of divine rebellion, imbued with the conviction that whatever stories we tell each other, whatever selves we become in the playspace, and whatever sensations of care we feel we experience are not restricted to the playspace. The nature of the Magic Circle is that it is permeable; its power and potential to transform us is not bound to any space or any time.

Now, wherever I go and whatever time it is, I know that part of me is still in the Magic Circle (the part that's still working to build a sense of identity, community, and world) and the rest of me, the part that moves through the mundane world, has been profoundly transformed by the Magic Circle and by my experiences in it. When I think about it this way, I wonder if it's ever really possible to escape the Magic Circle once we're in it, or if part of its magic always stays shimmering around us like an aura, warding us from what we once feared and empowering us to conjure the courage to face what still frightens us.

No part of building the feminist future or queer utopia that we hope for will be easy. It will take a lot of time and effort to dismantle the disempowering structures within which we have trapped ourselves, and it will require a great deal of care and willingness to help others unlearn the Othering ideologies that produced those structures in the first place. It will require a radical acceptance of self to then learn how to radically include and attend to others, and perhaps only then can we truly begin the work of making the world a better place for everyone to live, a place where all lives are livable. This work will be difficult and at times painful; the temptation to slip into old patterns of habit could be irresistible (because changing is much harder than not-changing). But there is a place that is already prepared to hold all these tensions and smooth them into something sustainable, a place where we already undergo radical transformations, sometimes on a semi-weekly basis: the Magic Circle. I believe that the Magic Circle is powerful and primordial enough to encompass the entire world; it will just take everyone staying playful long enough to sustain it so that its magic can transform us all.

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CHAPTER 3: Building Worlds

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