Reparative Play in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Popular abstract: This article examines the creation of queer rhetoric through role-play to find the reparative value that *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974-) can potentially provide the queer communities. My work focuses on the concept of reparative play, an adaptation of reparative reading which was first proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1995 (Sedgwick 2003). Reparative reading explores alternatives to heteronormative ideals through the act of reading. Instead of getting caught up in the problematic implications of a text, the alternatives are foregrounded (Sedgwick 2003, 137). Reparative play then expands reparative reading into the realm of play, where one explores the possibility for a sustainable queer livelihood through play (Vist 2018). I conclude with an observation of safety tools designed for tabletop RPGs, that enable reparative play.

This work will be posited alongside an autoethnographic reflection of my own role-play experience as a means of demonstrating reparative play in practice. My work is founded on Sedgwick's (2003) *Touching Feeling*, Kara Stone's (2018) "Time and Reparative Game Design," and Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2010) *The Functions of Role-Playing Games.* These scholars observe role-play as a method of queer performativity and identity exploration. I propose that through the embodiment of a *D&D* character, set in a more accepting world, the players can enact reparative play to give an accurate and positive representation of themselves while promoting alternatives to heteronormative culture.

Keywords: reparative play, *Dungeons & Dragons*, queer identites, asexuality, emancipatory bleed

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1. INTRODUCTION

As queer identities continue to be marginalized in contemporary culture, the spaces for queer discourse in most media are limited. Through queer performativity, members of the queer community have the chance to accurately represent ourselves and overwrite the more harmful stereotypes that are associated with us (Sedgwick 1993, 1). Like film, literature, music, and performance (Jones 2020; Sedgwick 2003; Tau 2021), role-play provides an opportunity for queer performativity, allowing us to create our own progressive discourse (Lasley 2021, 62). Role-play can commonly be found in drag or theatre but more recently it has been popularized through role-playing games (RPGs). *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*), being the most popular RPG to date, is considered a common pastime for people all over the world. However, for some, it is much more than just a game. *D&D* helps people in ways that many of us do not realize.

I identify as asexual, and this aspect of my identity influences how I relate to people and navigate the world. However, aside from maybe Todd Chavez from *BoJack Horseman*, I do not see members of the asexual/ace community adequately represented in popular media. Instances in independent gaming media, such as Parvati Holcomb from *The Outer Words* or the playable class in *Monster Hearts 2*, do accentuate asexuality but I would not consider those examples to be mainstream. In the more mainstream realm, there is an instance in *House M.D.* where the topic of asexuality comes up, but ultimately it was something that Dr. House could cure, which is problematic and how doctors often approach ace community members. As a queer individual, how I tell my story is critical to my self-representation, as no one can tell my story better than I.

That being said, I know that as consumers, media plays a huge role in how we view the world and perceive one another. It becomes detrimental to us as people when the discourse surrounding this same media socializes us into accepting problematic mindsets like gender norms and teaches us how we should act based on the identity assigned to us at birth. The opportunity to play the role of a character

who inhabits a more accepting world can then be used to assist the queer community with the difficulty we may experience in accepting our own identity (Stone 2018), and help to develop us further as people (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Lasley 2021, 51).

To explain how this works, I look at the creation of queer rhetoric through role-play to find the reparative value that *D&D* can potentially provide the queer communities. My work focuses on the concept of reparative play, an adaptation of reparative reading, which was first proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1995 (Sedgwick 2003). Reparative reading explores alternatives to heteronormative ideals through the act of reading. Instead of getting caught up in the problematic implications of a text, the alternatives are foregrounded (Sedgwick 2003, 137). Reparative play then expands reparative reading into the realm of play, where one explores the possibility for a sustainable queer livelihood through play (Vist 2018).

I conclude with an observation of safety tools designed for tabletop RPGs that enable reparative play. This will be posited alongside an autoethnographic reflection of my own role-play experience as a means of demonstrating reparative play in practice. My work is founded on Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*, Kara Stone's "Time and Reparative Game Design," and Sarah Lynne Bowman's *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*. These scholars observe role-play as a method of queer performativity and identity exploration. I propose that through the embodiment of a *D&D* character set in a more accepting world, the players can enact reparative play to give an accurate and positive representation of themselves while promoting alternatives to heteronormative culture.

2. REPARATIVE PLAY

At its core, reparative reading is placing focus on a positive framing of a story with the intention of constructing a more optimistic view for our future. Ellis Hanson describes it best by saying "a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life. . . In other words, we rebuild our immediate surroundings. . . [and our] belief in a future," (Hanson 2011, 105). For the queer community, reparative reading is a frame through which we can see and access progressive representation, which positively frames our values, within narratives. Sedgwick's reparative reading of *In Search of Lost Time* points out how it would not have been possible for the narrator to take joy in the truths he came across if he were being held back by a heterotypical family (Sedgwick 2003, 147-48). This reading reframes the heterotypical family as restrictive and favours an alternative to this heteronormative value. Similarly, the reparative reading of queer characters in ideal situations allows us to see potential changes for our world to bring these ideals to fruition. In terms of reparative play, we can see that it has similar aspects to reparative reading as a frame of interpretation, but its focus as an object text is performance centred around queerness, which is visible in the gaming communities.

Queer performativity uses performance in a way that allows people to question the restrictions of traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations. We can then see a useful application for reparative reading when it is applied to queer performativity, the former being used as an interpretation for the latter. As such, Kara Stone (2018) notes a link between the reparative and the performative:

> Reparative art is a method to work through difficult feelings but is also a method to stay in them as long as they need to be felt . . . Reparative art is not a way to move on from or be cured of mental illness, psycho-social disability, or the states in need of healing, but actually a mode of staying in them. Sometimes that means moving around in them, sometimes being stuck in them. (Stone 2018)

In this manner, queer performativity allows people to "move around" in the discourse they create, with a reparative reading of the context being used to interpret a hopeful image of the future. This performativity acts as a counternarrative to heteronormative culture that develops sustainable motives, or practices, for the queer community (Tytler 2022, 248; Vist 2018). This reparative reading frame can be present elsewhere, like podcasts or drag shows. However, in this article, I observe this reframing potential with tabletop RPGs being the primary media site. Seeing how queer performativity can be used as the performative of a reparative practice, we can direct our focus to the culmination of these two practices: reparative play (Vist 2018).

Reparative play, like reparative reading, is an idealistic interpretation of the story that transpires. Unlike reparative reading, which lacks a performative aspect, reparative play is enacted by queer performativity so that the player is healing by exacting their autonomy through their actions. By formulating psychological problems and solutions for both the characters and their players, and showing how they fail or succeed in the actions they take, the enactment of particular values and behaviors can be experienced (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014, 31; Payne 1989, 28). This creation of discourse can help them reimagine the world in a positive light and change how they view their positionality in and alongside the world's problems (Muñoz 2009, 28). Elektra Diakolambrianou notes that "reality is not objective but socially constructed, and thus having narratives is our way of maintaining and organizing our personal reality and making sense of our experiences" (Diakolambrianou 2021).

Engaging with the rhetoric of these types of narratives might let the players resolve tensions they experience in the world (Lasley 2021, 58; Payne 1989, 29). These liberating actions taken by role-players allow for the freeing cathartic experience known as emancipatory bleed. When said players steer themselves into situations where they can fight oppression, Jonaya Kemper notes how emancipatory bleed becomes a liberating feeling they can acquire through play (Kemper 2020). This liberatory steering then is an available act the players can use to seek out and enact freeing experiences in game (Kemper 2020). Simultaneously, reparative play constructs progressive narratives with the experiential reading it affords players through the performance. Therefore, I situate emancipatory bleed as a potential benefit alongside reparative play and liberatory steering as an available action to enact these benefits during play. Where reparative play is conducive to a rhetorical experience that formulates progressive stories through play (Stone 2018), the emancipatory bleed felt in these experiences can be greatly beneficial to the player's sense of empowerment (Kemper 2020).

3. SO, WHY *D&D*?

According to Michelle Nephew, *D&D* is the ideal setting to navigate cultural taboos because the game allows players to easily enact a form of wish fulfillment since they are always viewed as the "good guys" (Nephew 2006, 126). Additionally, it is worth noting that "gender and film scholar Doty insists on studying mainstream texts and argues that these are more likely and more productive sources for queer readings precisely because they reach wider audiences" (Ouellette 2014, 36). As we can observe in modern media, *D&D* is a staple in the RPG community, reaches wide audiences, and is an ideal example through which I can explore the concept of reparative play for creating progressive queer experiences in an RPG format. On top of that, opportunities for reparative play arise in RPGs played by the queer community because "The worlds that queer gamers play in are inherently queer, inherently different, and inherently optimistic" (Codega 2020; England 2021). This phenomenon of queergaming, as coined by Edmond Y. Chang (2017, 18), is why I focus on the more popular game *D&D* as opposed to lesser known indie games made by queer designers. Even in games where the source material can initially be problematic, there is still potential to create progressive queer discourse through reparative

play when played by members of the queer community (Sedgwick 2003, 146).

While previous versions of the game have been restrictive with their character creation affordances, like class requirements and race options, newer editions make diverse character options more accessible. *D&D* fifth edition's free-flowing rules and heavy reliance on world-building contribute two key elements towards the act of reparative play: 1) it affords individuals room to craft their own stories within a greater arching narrative, and 2) it encourages the use of personalized characters—often avatars of the players—as a way for them to exist in a safe space. As such, the positionality and purpose with which a player approaches the game will heavily influence the reparative play they experience from it (Moriarity 2019). The improvised experience of the game allows players to act and present themselves as they please while exploring queer themes (Stenrose and Sihvonen 2019). Through this freedom, the role-playing aspect of *D&D* can be used as a productive and entertaining tool to facilitate reparative play.

The social benefits of *D&D* have been reported previously, even if the players did not realize that they were already taking part in a form of reparative play. Taliesin Jaffe touches on reparative play, with his bisexual genderfluid character Mollymauk Tealeaf on the *D&D* podcast *Critical Role*, saying how it allows him to explore a life he had considered (Kenreck 2018). Joan Moriarity, in her article "How My Role-playing Game Character Showed Me I Could be a Woman," discusses at length how tabletop RPGs were crucial to her journey of self-discovery (Moriarity 2019). In a similar vein, game designer Josephine Baird describes the alibi that *D&D* gave her to take part in her own gender performativity in high school (Baird 2021, 100), while Ally Beardsley's portrayal of their trans character, Pete Conlan, on the *D&D* podcast *Dimension 20*, explored the life of a person who has undergone gender-affirmation surgery before Beardsley underwent their own (Hanna 2020). These tabletop RPG narratives help to normalize queerness and enable reparative play while emancipatory bleed empowers the players (Kemper 2017).

4. TOOLS FOR PLAY

While playing *D&D* has the potential to allow for a shared space where the players can act more freely and comfortably than they would otherwise (Cazeneuve 2018, 4), this is not a guarantee. If we wish to employ reparative play effectively, there are scholars and game designers developing tools to facilitate this play. These tools allow us to assist players in accepting their queer identity and allow them to portray themselves as they see fit.

Axiel Cazeneuve, for one, brings up some initial strategies to make room for more gender exploration in role-play through the use of pronouns. Creating a world where every character is referred to as "they/them" or every character can be referred to with any pronouns, "he/him, she/her, xe/xem," makes room for those who wish to transcend the gender norms by which their characters could be constricted (Cazeneuve 2018, 4-6).

Kemper explains how members of marginalized communities steer for survival, where they navigate the game in a manner that does not bring up any disparaging or insensitive subject matter (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020). This steering, in *D&D*'s case, would be excluding racist content, like the Hadozee race option (Hall 2022), which has been banned from my table as it would be triggering and act as a barrier to reparative play. The way that this is often achieved is a practice known as Session 0 in which the group gathers before the play and begins to discuss their boundaries and expectations, what they are okay with experiencing, and what they hope to achieve in the play. While events that violate the players' boundaries may never occur to begin with, this practice ensures everyone that the players will collectively be steering away from any potential triggers, as the group is obligated to maintain these rules. Session 0 has become such common practice that it was included as part of the official guidelines

in the *D&D* module *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* as a precaution for running a horror game safely (Schneider et al. 2021, 186). Session 0 also assists in working towards the design goal and ensuring the sustainability of the endeavour. Here, the players might create characters that work well together and are willing to assist each other in meeting their socio-emotional needs, which can aid in their reparative play as everyone is looking for an experience and willing to help each other attain it.

If these rules are broken, the Dungeon Master (DM)—the player with the most authority—can stop the game. However, if it comes to it, the players can enact their own agency and quit a game that they do not wish to be a part of anymore. One safety tool for these moments would be an X-Card placed on the table that a player can touch at any time to alert everyone of their discomfort (Cook 2019, 6). The DM's intervention would be some initial warning; however, if a player needs to intervene, that would be more serious, as they do not trust the DM to stop the play. In this case, the setup needs to be re-examined and the game will potentially need to end.

With regard to character creation, Bowman takes a typological approach to the characters that a player might design, classifying them based on how the character is derived from aspects of the player. I find this useful as it helps me organize the approaches that players, who want to employ reparative play, might take to the game, as well as the portrayal of their character. While there are trillions of possible variations in the characters that could be created, I want to make note of the nine types that Bowman examines relative to the player, which I believe would be ideal for reparative play. To summarize, these are the Doppelganger Self, the Devoid Self, the Augmented Self, the Fragmented Self, the Repressed Self, the Idealized Self, the Oppositional Self, the Experimental Self, and the Taboo Self (Bowman 2010, 155-56). These character types are not mutually exclusive of each other and there are large areas for potential overlap between two or more of them while embodying a single character. I do not have the space to go into detail with every one of these character types, but I personally found the Doppelganger Self most useful when enacting reparative play by telling one's own story.

The Doppelganger Self is made to act and think like its player, as though the player has been put in the context in which the character finds itself. This character type provides the player with more self-awareness of their own perspective than would typically be the case if the player were trying to figure out how a different character would act. This is a very common character to make for beginners, as they would have an easier time navigating the world when they are not preoccupied with the dissonance that comes between a player's wants and a character's wants. While more experienced players often disapprove of this type, feeling like it is not role-playing if you are playing yourself, Bowman notes, "The similarity between the primary self and the persona can also work to enhance self-esteem, offering an 'ordinary' person the opportunity to do extraordinary things and make a difference in crisis situations" (Bowman 2010, 155-56).

5. RPG PRAXIS AS RESEARCH

In terms of my own autoethnographic approach, I found the Doppelganger Self insightful for when I decided to play an asexual firbolg named Vander Annamson. Vander was the son of the giant god and was tasked with uniting the giant kingdoms. He was forced to marry one heir from each kingdom and through this I was able to create a new narrative for myself with Vander. I treated each relationship I was in as queer platonic instead of doing the whole "yes, and…" of improv when another character flirted with me. Even though I was not romantically or sexually attracted to my partners, I was still able to be good friends with them and that was more functional for me as a member of those relationships. Through this character, I created my own narrative where asexuality was approached as a positive alternative to the heteronormative ideal.

This benefited me greatly because I was able to create a piece of media, in my own canon at least, where an asexual character, like me, had a fulfilling existence without a sexual or romantic partner (Kemper 2020). This is in line with larp designers Laura Wood and Quinn D, who note how the separation of sexual and romantic attraction in how these aspects are experienced by the character is useful for designing a character for the desired play that the player wishes to take part in (Wood and D 2021). Considering aspects of my identity this way aided in creating a character who was more attuned to the way I felt about the world. In cooperation with my fellow players, I was able to "steer" away from any social pressure to pursue romance and felt supported in my exploration of asexual identity. Having this type of self-representation (Kemper 2020) gave me the rhetorical support I needed to begin openly identifying as ace, and with that came a greater degree of fulfillment in my social relationships.

6. CONCLUSION

Over the course of this essay, I have looked at the use of *D&D* as a tool for facilitating reparative play. Setting up the concept of reparative play from Sedgwick's reparative reading, I showed how the alternative frame of play could better accommodate the performativity necessary to help normalize, and develop progressive discourse around, queer identity. Through the application of the tools presented, I illustrated how one might approach reparative play in RPGs in my autoethnography. I have found that *D&D*, along with other RPGs, has great untapped potential for progressive change through reparative play and it will all start with players coming together to imagine a brave new world.

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