

“It Might Have a Little to Do with Wish Fulfillment”: The Life-Giving Force of Queer Performance in TTRPG Spaces

Abstract: In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant asserts that “fantasy [can serve] as a life-sustaining defense against the attritions of ordinary violent history,” which is a statement that holds true for many queer role-players in TTRPG spaces (Berlant 2012, 45). Around the table, these worlds enable players to discover and render their identities legible in social utopian spaces and rehearse their performance for life outside of them. Through engaging with scholarship, autoethnographic writing, and cultural production surrounding TTRPGs, queer identity, avatars, and gender performance, this project asserts that TTRPGs function as safe spaces for becoming, due in part to the ability to create an avatar, or “flexible representational stand-in” for the self, that is queer and embodied through role-play (McMillan, 2015 13). This is achieved through tracking the author’s experience of discovering and forming their queer and trans identity through role-playing various characters and disciplining their function through related interdisciplinary theory across queer, feminist, and role-playing studies. Additionally, through utilizing additional ethnographic accounts and analyzing TTRPG-based media in theatre and actual play spaces, this project further establishes how the emancipatory potential in escapist TTRPG fantasy spaces can ultimately alter queer role-players’ engagement with material reality in a world adversarial to their existence and visibility, especially in light of the past few years.

Keywords: tabletop role-playing games, queer community, theatre, identity, trans, gender performance

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when I had to move from my apartment at university back to my hometown with my homo-and-transphobic family, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) became the only way to express my queer identity in the seclusion of my room and on Discord calls with friends from university or those I met on the Internet. For a few hours a week—if scheduling permitted—I could be called he/they pronouns as a litmus test via my characters to see if I wanted to try them on in real life, before going downstairs to hear my father spew transphobic rhetoric about my friends over dinner. There, under the guise of a character trying to become fully machine via body modifications, I could express and live out the desires for medicalized transition that drive my mother into hysteria whenever the word “testosterone” is mentioned. Each time I got on a Discord call, I projected the self into campaigns set in fictional worlds—be it *Dragon Age*, *Magic: The Gathering*, or *League of Legends*—where “fantasy [served] as a life-sustaining defense against the attritions of ordinary violent history” (Berlant 2012, 45). In accordance with Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* and other research, for better or worse, it appeared my experience with escapist, fantastical role-play was not unique in the slightest. Due in part to the ability to create an avatar—which black feminist scholar Uri McMillan asserts as a “flexible representational stand-in” for the self—that is queer and embodied through role-play, TTRPG spaces have become places for queer individuals to come to terms with, explore, or discover non-cisheteronormative identities through escapist fantasy that ultimately alters one’s engagement with material reality in a world adversarial to their existence and visibility (McMillan 2015, 13).¹

1 For purposes of this paper, this specific McMillan’s concept of “avatar” will be referred to as a “character” when not engaging explicitly with scholars and theorists, as the usage of the term in game studies’ history is appropriate of Hindu and Buddhist religious and cultural contexts. For more

Through engaging with scholarship and cultural production surrounding TTRPGs, queer identity, avatar, gender performance, and writing autoethnography, this project highlights TTRPGs' unique function as a "life-sustaining defense" and life-giving force for members of the queer community because it enables people to discover and render their identities legible in social utopian spaces at the table and rehearse their performance for life outside of them (Berlant 2012, 45).

2. BACKGROUND, POSITIONALITY, AND THEORY

As a gay and transmasculine individual from a white middle-class background, my experience with embodying and creating queer characters is by no means universal, as even within my campaigns, what I interrogate via role-play as a pre-medicalized transition and not-fully-out individual is radically different from my friend's as an out and medically transitioning transwoman. However, as asserted by Jack Halberstam, the "figure of transgender embodiment is central to numerous emergent narratives of self and other, [and the] being and becoming" that my embodiment enacts —through the mediation of characters— and falls within lineages of it generating "new narratives of selfhood" (Halberstam 2018, 30). As such, coming to terms with transgender identity will be privileged via autoethnography in this piece. This is not to say that sexuality is not important, but the mutation over time of trans identity is the most in line with my experience, embodies theories of character and avatar most explicitly, and attempts to reassert why and how "the 'T' might in fact be the more fundamental letter" in the LGBT+ acronym that tends to subsume trans presence, importance, and radicality in queer discourse, despite the fact that trans and queerphobia is typically about how people perceive gender nonconformance and transgression (Bey 2021, 4, 13). The prioritizing of the "T" is not only an intervening action, but also is key when thinking about how performance and performativity are constructed, especially in regard to gender.

In their seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler notes how "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1999, 43-44). This congealing and repeated stylization in TTRPG spaces happens from session to session via role-play performances that construct gender for both the character and their originator in ways that can facilitate self-understanding. Highlighting how queer characters shifted in meaning and intention for me in coming to know myself is illustrative of its function as a vehicle for self-expression and knowledge. To provide a fuller picture of the phenomena, experiences from other ethnographic accounts of queer characters in TTRPGs will also be incorporated into the conversation.

My experience with queer characters is one of always incomplete being and becoming, but without those characters, I do not know if I would know myself the way I do now. As a child, I was the strange kid who didn't put their name in video games; part of it was because of a childish *Matrix*-like notion that if I died in the game I would die in real life, but part of me never connected with the female I saw on screen and picked the most generic white girl names like Stacy or Laura to distance myself from those pixels who couldn't be me. It was like that up until I first started playing *D&D* in college. Then, I knew I was some form of trans, but was stuck in a relationship and environment that was read as cisheteronormative, and I played the feminine characters I thought I had to. Some years-and-a-half later, I played a one-shot of *Cyberpunk 2022* with some college friends in April 2020. It was my first time playing a TTRPG in some time and I had, at this point, been quarantined at my childhood home for a little over a month. In the face of my declining mental health, one of my genderfluid friends who, at the time, was only presenting as masculine, put on feminine airs in voice and character choice for the game.

info see: de Wildt, Lars, et al. "(Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar."

I don't know why, but something clicked that I was allowed to do that too—that I could unabashedly play with and across gender around the table like that— so I did.

The timespan I have spent playing *D&D*, somewhat ironically, lines up with the recent boom in TTRPG scholarship in the past few years, in large part due to the cultural capital they've obtained from *Stranger Things*, and actual play podcasts like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*. With a wider emergence into mainstream pop culture spaces, role-playing games have become a more active sphere of academic discourse and have expanded their reach in game studies, performance studies, on occasion queer theory and analysis, and subsequently a number of edited collections like *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2021) have been released. This being said, there are several seminal texts in sociology like Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), game studies like Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) and several works by Sarah Lynne Bowman, including *Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (2010), that have laid the foundations for young scholars' Master's theses that examine TTRPGs and identity construction through close readings of content, ethnography, and theory (see e.g., Rogers 2020; Shepherd 2021; Bosstick 2021).

Avatar is a concept that, while central in video game studies, does not appear in as much TTRPG scholarship; however, it has also been thoroughly interrogated, especially in terms of race politics by scholars of and about the internet, like Lisa Nakamura, and within performance studies by scholars like Uri McMillan. As a lot of role-playing game scholarship is centered in digital spaces and MMORPG spheres like *World of Warcraft* and other video games, the most overlap of avatar discussions are found within this role-playing game subsection through works of scholars like Jamie Banks. For example, in her seminal essay "Race In/For Cyberspace," Nakamura highlights the "unprecedented possibilities ... for [people to] contro[l] the conditions of their own self-representations in ways impossible in face to face interaction" on the Internet which is enabled by the "ability to physically 'set' one's gender, race, and physical appearance ... [and subsequent] require[ment] to project a version of the self which is inherently theatrical" online (Nakamura 2001, 660, 662).

As such, online avatars can be complicit in both appropriative or liberatory practices, depending on the user. On the one hand, avatars may be utilized in identity tourism, a practice where, typically white people, create online avatars of races and genders not their own and effectively "reduc[e] non-white identity positions to part of a costume or masquerade to be used by curious vacationers in cyberspace" as a form of appropriation (Nakamura 2001, 666). On the other hand, utilizing avatars can "publiciz[e] bodies and lives previously unrepresented by the [people] living them" in a reparative practice taken up by typically invisible groups, like pregnant women, online to build community and have increased visible representation for it (Nakamura 2008, 170). Jamie Banks' work examines similar concepts of avatar, like Nakamura, in her study of MMORPG spaces where four types of relationships between in-game avatars and their player characters —avatar-as-object, avatar-as-me, avatar-as-symbiote, and avatar-as-other— are theorized (Banks 2015). As such, Banks examines how a relationship may develop between player and avatar, largely based on a player's motivations and agenda, personally and creatively, whether that means using the avatar as a tool to win the game, to serve as a digital doppelgänger to navigate within, as a collaborator in self-making, or as a social agent independent of the self in-world (Banks 2015). Similar to the idea of an avatar-as-symbiote in digital spaces to make the self, in performance studies spaces, McMillan asserts that avatars enable black "women [to] engage in spectacular, shocking, and even unlawful role-play," "highligh[t] (and stretc[h]) the subordinate roles available to black women," and "transubstantiate themselves into porous beings with the capacity to mutate across time" (McMillan 2015, 12, 14). Thus, the avatar serves as a second-self and a site of personal recalibration that can imbue

liberatory and revolutionary power in black feminist performance and performativity where they can inscribe their own endings, meanings, and places in history and culture.

3. CULTIVATING QUEEN CHARACTERS AND SEVERAL SELVES

Creating a queer avatar, or character in TTRPGs, looks different for everyone and these variances are categorized by Sarah Lynne Bowman in her seminal work, *Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (2010), into the ‘Nine Types of Player-Characters’ that players used to navigate identity, rules, relationships, and social worlds, which ethnography projects and other scholarly endeavors have further substantiated (Bowman 2010, 164-176). For example, in Nathaniel Rogers’ ethnographic study of queer women playing *D&D*, he points to how some players create characters that “have parallels to [themselves] ... [which] makes them relatable” and “create[s] a sense of affinity and verisimilitude” between player and character, which mirror Bowman’s Doppelgänger Self (Rogers 2020, 33). Some of Rogers’ other interlocutors enact Augmented or Devoid versions of the Doppelgänger self-insert, where the player “forwards or withdraws elements of their [real world] personality or identity to highlight a different facet of self” in-game as part of their process (Rogers 2020, 36).

Other scholars point to how players may “experiment by adopting personas different from themselves [which may be] ones that they perhaps have coveted or even feared in life” which serves as Bowman’s Idealized or Experimental Selves that can simulate embodied becoming or are means to just play around with (Tynes 2010, 225). My first real queer character in a TTRPG space was an example of Bowman’s Fragmented Self, which arose out of a “psychological [and] spiritual need inherent ... at the moment of creation” (Bowman 2010, 167-170) to accentuate and explore my repressed queer identity and took the form of a closeted gay mage named Lucius who was operating within a homebrew *Dragon Age* setting for *D&D* 5E. While there was not much narrative time and space for him to be gay—in terms of his sexuality—so much of his driving angst, unintentionally and subconsciously, ended up being about queer temporality. Not all of it was my choice of course, as halfway through the campaign, he contracted a degenerative disease known as the “taint” from the blood and fluids of an enemy known as the darkspawn. While Lucius underwent a ritual to stave off the effects, the corruption is latent in his degenerating body until he becomes one of them, effectively killing him in the end. While the “taint” is by no means an exact fantasy HIV/AIDS analog, the shifted temporality of queer life as a result of degenerative illness became a focal point of the character and his fears about legacies and lineage.

Nakamura’s work and McMillan’s theorization of the avatar speak to their power as “mediums—between the spiritual and earthly as well as the abstract and the real—and the uses of those mediums, as well as their attendant meanings, continue to morph” and have real-world impacts when they’re continuously enacted in cultural production (McMillan 2015, 11). The fluidity of avatars and what they have to do and say about the self is what makes them integral to discussions of queer performance in TTRPG spaces and ties them to other works of queer theory. For me, in a horribly Foucauldian way, Lucius’s anxieties about filial obligations to the lineage and the similar ones of another one of my queer characters—an aristocratic double-agent and flamboyantly gay heir apparent Dmitri—became vehicles to explore my own. Coming from a middle-class, conservative, Italian American family, they, like the bourgeoisie of the Victorian era, have “staked [our family’s] life and its death on sex by making it responsible for its future welfare” (Foucault 1978, 124).

From a young age, I cannot count the reminders and expectations levied by my parents, grandparents, and extended family, that my siblings and I need to find good—and of course, preferably Italian or Mediterranean-blooded—cisheteronormative marriages that bear children. As someone who

doesn't want biological children and is gay, I've never quite fit that mold, but would still nod and smile at holidays whenever it emerged as conversations. However, I hadn't fully gripped how much it was impacting my psyche until gay anxiety over progeny became less of a character trait and more of a pattern across all my characters, and role-play gave me the space to enact multiple futures. While these fears aren't ones I discuss with my friends, TTRPGs gave me the place to explore them, under the guises of a game, regardless or not if I was fully aware at the time. Lucius would eventually be trapped in a lavender marriage of his own doing, establishing a progeny, but dying soon after with unrequited love for his best friend unexpressed. Having just killed his twin sister Calpernia for being a cultist in the in-universe equivalent of a neo-Nazism and being the only son with magical potential in a society where class is predicated on magical bloodlines, he was a character who was doomed by the narrative: the personal worst-case scenario. Writing for him, after this decision, became so fully charged with pain that at one point other members of my party had checked on me outside of the game: it was too raw, too visceral.

Having experienced an online stalker from that group, I eventually had to leave the campaign, but it probably did me some good in not consistently putting me in the mental space I feared. It also pushed me to leave more room for hope in my character Dmitri's future, despite another lavender marriage looming overhead, which served almost as a silent prayer that the campaign circumstances would help him circumvent Lucius's fate. Still, continuously forcing me to mentally interrogate questions of queer temporality and progeny, and feeling and witnessing the affect that these imagined futures had on my body as well as my mental and emotional state, helped me realize that I cannot live through these dystopian situations I've forced my characters into. So while Dmitri's campaign ended abruptly due to a breakup, the lack of closure is of some comfort to me, in that he might be able to break out of this cycle and in so doing, I may be able to as well.

Parting with one's gender assigned at birth is never easy, especially when you've been socialized as said gender for over two decades, and what comes with it is a lot of recalibration. Having attended an all-girls Catholic middle and high school, which perpetuated misandry all the while preaching girl and God's power, the idea of being transmasculine was not easy to accept. This is especially the case when increasingly present trans-exclusionary self-proclaimed "feminist" rhetoric paints trans men as individuals who have given into the "allure of escaping womanhood" induced by sympathetic people who "persuad[e you] ... to turn [your]self into [a] son" and join the enemy (Rowling 2020).

So for me, playing queer cis men in TTRPG spaces helped me realize that masculinity is not something inherently damaging or oppressive; it is instead something radical and liberatory that I can design for myself. Having not grown up under society's expectations of manhood, I am still allowed to claim masculinity as my own and embody it in an emancipatory way that can both embrace its joys and work against its patriarchal associations for the betterment of myself and my community. Once I accepted masculinity through characters like Dmitri and Lucius, when new campaigns came about I could then feel safe exploring being transmasculine—which was infinitely more scary for me—and play with that angst in safe spaces. Nath, then, became my embodied character, who is a transmasculine individual who is trying to become fully machine, which served as a metaphor for exploring medicalized transition, falling into and nuancing the tradition originating in Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" that imagines the beings as "fiction mapping[s of] our social and bodily reality and as ... imaginative resource[s]" (Haraway 1999, 272). While Haraway's post-structuralist feminist cyborg envisions it in a "post-gender world," for me, however, it became the very site to navigate my positionality, fears, and desires in a too-obsessed-with-gender world (Haraway 1999, 273).

Similarly, just as a cyborg is an augmented human, Nath, as opposed to the Fragmented Selves of before, instead served as Bowman's Experimental Self, to "overcome deficiencies of [my] 'real

self” achieved through having the metaphorical things I am envious of (Bowman 2010, 172). While that process of being and becoming never really ends, with more peace in my gender identity means new queer characters can emerge for me like Nari, who uses he/they pronouns like me, but his gender isn’t a focal point in his life. As such, areas of my social location, like religious trauma, that went unexamined due to the whole gender conundrum, can now be interrogated in a character in alternate and new form of Fragmented Self that only is possible because of the former Fragmented ones. Regardless of that sort of Self they are, queer characters in TTRPG thus become a means to access interiority and cradle it in one’s hands, but at a distance, to better morph, understand, and accept that fluid essence through the eyes of another and affirmations of party members at one’s table.

4. QUEER UTOPIAN PERFORMATIVITY ACROSS THE TABLE

TTRPGs’ power in being a place for queer discovery and utopia is because of its communal setting that fosters and develops its own form of Munoz’s queer utopia, which Felix Rose Kawitzky (2020) asserts in his article, “Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method.” While not conventional “performative space[s] apart” like queer night clubs, around a table players also partake in “the queer practice of forming bubbles of suspended, altered reality ... [which] is rooted in a historical and contemporary necessity to have access to spaces that are not governed by rules that criminalize, threaten, other or ostracize queer lives” (Kawitzky 2020, 132).²

As a space apart, when entering a game, as scholar Sarah Lynne Bowman has attested, players enter a world with a “new set of social rules, both implicit and explicit”; this, in Session 0s and group discussions, rules and boundaries for content —such as whether homophobia and instances thereof are allowed in the game world— are established so players can establish or build utopia in-world (Bowman 2015, para. 4). In role-play spaces, participants can, according to game designer Morya Turkington (2016), “rehearse new ideas and new ways of being with each other” that have inherent political potential (Turkington 95). These spaces, when theorized as queer utopias, enable players —borrowing a lyric from Anaïs Mitchell’s *Hadestown*— to bring “the world [they] dream about [closer to] the one [they] live in now” through practicing and enacting their own queer politics and inviting non-queer players to witness and experience subjectivities different from their own (Mitchell 3:21-24). This subsequently constructed performative utopia “is visual and social realization of [the players’] ideals and [is] dependent for its maintenance upon the community’s acceptance and cooperation,” which is achieved through collaborative gameplay, sincere role-play, and fostering safe spaces to explore the self (Bäcke 2012, 86)

Scholars conducting ethnography on TTRPG spaces like Nathaniel Rogers have noted that when this experience is validated, it encourages “players to pursue increasingly authentic play” (Rogers 2020, 31). For example, in his examination of the actual play podcast *Fast Times at D&D High*, Harold Bosstick notes how TTRPG spaces enable “activ[e] engag[ement] with identity construction through the system of the game primarily because [players and characters] com[e] to feel that this group of people are a safe place for [them] to explore” and to “vicariously experience [things like] male/male romance” (Bosstick 2021, 68). In another ethnography project, Toriana Shepherd notes how TTRPG spaces additionally “allow. . . for the understanding of the importance of normalized identit[ies]”

2 The idea of a “performative space apart” is not only limited to utopias, as other scholars in game studies, have pointed to how a game space can be instead perceived as Foucault’s heterotopia, which similarly is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia” in a place and time apart from normal reality, but still serves as a “reflection of the society in which they exist” (Hutchings & Giardino 2016, 10-1). For purposes of this article, TTRPG spaces are imagined through the concept of utopia, in efforts to continue past literature which focuses on queer utopianism but it could alternatively be (re)theorized through heterotopias.

because game-play allows “identities that challenge the real-world power structures [to be] normalized” in and around the table, be it anything from queer to neurodivergent identities (Shepherd 2021, 68-9). Similarly, studies have shown that many people are “motivated to begin playing [these games] because they recognize either consciously or subconsciously the opportunity to engage in a process that will help facilitate them developing their identity or their state of existence to a more idealized state, or the process of becoming,” which is arguably enabled because of character, community, and embodiment (Coe 2017, 2856). In all these accounts, it is the community and social space of TTRPGs that provide a venue for exploration and acceptance, which cannot be easily achieved or created on one’s own.

This also is not only present in personal accounts or ethnographies, as fantasy’s power to construct queer utopia as a form of escaping a violent world is foregrounded in how the medium is represented in works of culture, such as Qui Nguyen’s widely-produced 2011 play *She Kills Monsters*, where queer characters are enacted for these purposes. Set in Athens, Ohio in 1995, *She Kills Monsters* is about Agnes, an average school teacher, who plays a *D&D* module that her deceased sister, Tilly, put together in order to better understand her. Having seen her sister as “this nerdy little girl who [she] never talked to ... because [they] didn’t live in the same world,” Agnes, through playing the module, ends up learning that her sister was bullied in school for being a lesbian and was in love with one of her classmates, Lilly (Nguyen 2016, 62). There, in the *D&D* world, Tilly, now the Level 20 Paladin Tillius, is dating Lilith, a scantily clad Demon Queen, and she created a world where everyone is queer and can live out their wildest fantasies, or in Lilly’s case, explore what those may be in-world while being in the closet outside of it (Nguyen 2016, 33). When questioned as to why she and her friends escape via *D&D*, Tilly explains that part of it has “to do with wish fulfillment [because then, their wheelchair-using friend] Kelly gets to walk again and ... [she] gets the girl” (Nguyen 2016, 66). Over the course of the play, while Tilly and the DM Chuck constantly remind Agnes that Tillius is not Tilly, because her real sister is deceased, Tillius serves as a “flexible representational stand-in” for her sister’s interiority and reality in a world space where Tilly is able to live without fear (McMillan 2015, 13).

That is not to say that Tilly fully escapes in her module, as there are moments when reality bleeds through and the bullies materialize to hurl slurs and kill her girlfriend, which highlights that sometimes there are limits to how much one is able to mask with fantasy worlds and characters (Nguyen 2016, 58-60). In the end, the suffering that is often equated with queerness, in both community and outsiders’ imaginings, can seep back into the narrative, but there is a cushion generated through “externalizing and processing traumatic experiences through narrative validation [which] allows TRPG players to integrate difficult experiences productively into their primary identity” (Rogers 2020, 40). While still a site of heavily emotional affect, in TTRPG spaces the “safety ... achieved through validation and authenticity [generates] a ‘performative utopia,’” for players to not only cathartically and therapeutically work through mental and emotional trauma but also “exercis[e] their capacity for imaginative, potentially revolutionary, hoping” (Rogers 2020, 45; Kawitzky 2020, 135).

The capacity for queer hope is intimately tied to ideas of queer joy and love, especially in a world with daily life and media populated by depictions of queer suffering, which can be exercised through emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017). As opposed to bleed in role-play—which refers to the overlap that happens when a role-player’s character’s emotions impact the role-player outside of the game and vice versa—emancipatory bleed is a term coined by game scholar and designer Jonaya Kemper that posits this blurring “can be steered and used for emancipatory purposes by players who live with complex marginalizations” and use “immersion [to work] towards healing self-identified issues” (Kemper 2017). This emancipatory bleed can be experienced in regard to race, which is one area that Kemper posits, detailing how she “g[ave her]self the representation [of people of color that her and her] sister ... did not have as children” via live action role-play, but also can be theorized alongside other

marginalized identities (Kemper 2017). For example, trans writer and gamesmistress Joan Moriarty cites emancipatory bleed when discussing how she experienced comfort in femininity vis-à-vis her *trans Trail of Cthulhu* character, which enabled her to “fe[el] what it was like to be a woman for whom transition was no longer a looming ordeal but a *fait accompli*” (Moriarty 2019). Similarly, emancipatory bleed can enable and enact queer hope for some players through experimenting or discovering one’s sexuality, such as one of Rogers’ interlocutors, Kyashi, who in an interview stated the following:

I had always known that I was gay. I feel like I had known since middle school. I’d had crushes on girls before. So, having a gay character, was kind of like a, “Oh well.” The next thing I know, I’m like “Ah fuck. I’m in love with my roommate. (Rogers 2020, 46)

In a similar way, exchanging in-character flirtatious letters with a single cis-gay man my age who was similarly repressed in Oklahoma during my *Dragon Age* campaign became what I mark as one of my first authentically gay experiences, where my own presentation and people’s perceptions of myself were in alignment. Because I haven’t medically transitioned, mis-gendering is as predictable as the sunrise, if not more frequent, in my life, which means as a queer transmasculine individual, queer men typically do not consider me romantically and if straight men do, it’s because they think me a woman. The isolation and frustration that my linked gender and sexuality constantly cause me relationally isn’t present in role-play experiences where I can project onto a character whose identity is not interrogated and externally evaluated in the way I am. As I’m largely not afforded out of game with the space to experiment with my sexuality while also being true to my gender identity, I can construct moments of utopia because of the distance and intimacy the table provides.

As someone who is also on the asexual spectrum, I struggle with feeling broken in comparison to my allosexual friends because I do not experience sexual and romantic attraction in the same way they do. For me to feel anything in that regard, it usually takes me a good three-to-five business years, so TTRPG spaces can be reparative in not only reminding me of the capability I have for it through experimenting with it, both in and outside of the game world. The game space thus becomes where my authentic self is performed out-of-character and inscribed and altered in-character; it’s a site where I can build long-term platonic relationships with people who are doing the same. As such, this intimacy has made TTRPG spaces one of the few places that I’ve been able to experience attraction to other people. This emancipatory bleed needs to be carefully and ethically mediated in role-playing experiences, but the fact that it exists, regardless of if and how it’s acted upon, can have reparative power that contradicts societal associations and personal trauma with notions of asexuality as lack and malfunction. One of my friends and I almost consistently have in-and-out-of-character chemistry whenever we play together and while I’ve been hesitant to act, the distancing of self and the characters provided by role-play have enabled me to feel safe expressing and reciprocating moments of queer desire. While these queer experiences are either fully fantasy or in the middle ground between it and reality, they once again reassert the how characters in fantasy spaces are not only Berlant’s life-sustaining defenses, but also life-giving potentialities, interrogations, and expressions of interiority.

While queer characters often serve as a vehicle to come to terms with the self through projection, they are not necessarily always productions of the singular, which occurs when personal characters become public, communal forms of representation, which is a commonplace phenomenon in fandom involvement in actual play content. Tentpole series like *Critical Role*, *Dimension Twenty*, and *The Adventure Zone* that made D&D “cool” to play fall under this genre of actual play where a group of people play TTRPGs for an audience. Due to the fact that this sort of content is largely “created by small, independent creators [—at first, in the cases of shows whose popularity exploded and are

now sponsored—] who don't have to deal with executive oversight ... and worry as much about local censors," actual play content has sizably more queer representation in comparison to other media forms, and subsequently attracts queer audiences (Sowa 2020). Studies have shown that queer representation in "media influence[s] queer people's] self-realization, coming out, and current identities by providing role models and inspiration" and indicates that in the same way queer TTRPG characters can theorize and help understand the self, the same character can help other people do the same, in a different way (Gomillion & Guiliano 2011, 330). This is significant in the case of actual play content because when queer audiences find resonance in a character's journeys, exactly how their story turns out becomes a subject of discourse because it affects a community of projectors now.

For example, in the first campaign of *Critical Role* the bisexual set of twins Vex'ahlia and Vax'ildan both end up in visibly cisheteronormative romances which has caused fights within the fandom. While one camp believes that "the fact they both end up in 'straight' relationships negates their queerness," other fans assert that these complaints are biphobic because people remain "bisexual no matter their relationship status," which produces endless cycles of biphobic discourse (Van Os 2021, 95-6). Similarly, in the second campaign of *Critical Role*, the death of the bisexual genderfluid tiefling, Mollymauk, sparked outrage when audiences felt his death reinforced mass media "Bury Your Gays" tropes of queer suffering unnecessarily while other audiences asserted the death was unintentional because *D&D* is mediated by dice rolls and "his queerness had nothing to do with his death and it could have been any other character" (Van Os 2021, 97-8). In both cases, canonical material in conjunction with fan involvement colors if characters are perceived as authentic, relatable, and able to be incorporated into an understanding of self, which is further shaped by intra-queer identity politics discourse.

An alternative to these debates over whether or not characters that the queer community adopted as their own are harmful or helpful representations is highlighted in *The Adventure Zone*, where the creators inserted an intentionally vague, but still canonical transwoman Lup into the narrative. Because "as straight white men, [the McElroy's] do not have the personal experience to navigate sharing a story that foregrounds Lup's trans identity," they instead "le[ft] room for her story to be expanded by transgender fans, who have the life and experience to delve into any issues she may have faced in coming out and living as her true self" (McMullin & Hibbard 2021, 165). In this case, where Lup might not serve as an avatar, in full, for the creators themselves, they still allow her to be a plural, co-creation in the public eye. In both *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, strong reactions to queer representative figures, despite being controlled and performed by other individuals, highlight their importance in communal identity discourses and understandings, in addition to the ways that the other aforementioned examples can serve the personal.

5. CONCLUSION

Through performing as one's character, watching others performing queer characters, and fostering senses of queer utopia that are safe for expression and exploration, TTRPGs are a unique site of "life-sustaining defense" and life-giving force for members of the queer community (Berlant 2012, 45). Uri McMillan's conception of an avatar's function as a medium is a way to better understand how queer individuals conjure internal experiences and render them external in role-play spaces where real-world meaning can be made legible through character creation and development. While these avatars may shift over time or take forms of different shapes or characters, they all have equal power in making different steps in understanding and accepting self, which is evidenced in ethnographic accounts, cultural depictions, and my own experience. Placing theories of avatar and discussions of character in conversation with queer theory and game studies illuminates how exploring or discovering non-

cisheteronormative identities through TTRPGs is possible. In the end, it's as Tilly said, while queer performance does have "to do with wish fulfillment" it can also alter meaning in the real world, which this project is a small part of through generating new arenas and angles for interdisciplinary discourse and working towards my fellow queers in building our utopias in fantasy and reality (Nguyen 2016, 66).

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