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SAME TIME NEXT WEEK: AN ANALYSIS OF QUEER TEMPORALITY IN TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING

Delenn Ganyo-Roalsvig

Abstract

The popular improv storytelling game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and other tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) provide players with a chance to step into the shoes of an adventurer as they navigate a fantastical world, letting a twenty-sided die decide between their character's success and failure. This article explores how the actual play podcast *The Adventure Zone* and other TTRPGs can be read through the lens of queer theory via 1) Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, 2) Halberstam's rejection of chronological signifiers and Muñoz's uninhibited fictive utopias, 3) memory and trauma, and 4) queer kinships. This research asserts that queer time defines the imaginative and creative experience of immersing oneself in tabletop role-playing as well as shaping the lives of the player characters (PCs) embodied. Ultimately, this article analyzes why non-normative time is not only a crucial component in the pacing of an effective campaign, but also a relevant lens of analysis for evaluating the queer experiences fostered by TTRPGs since *Dungeons & Dragons* hit the shelves in 1974.

Keywords

TTRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, D&D, actual play, *The Adventure Zone*, queer time, queer utopia, memory, trauma

Roll for Chronology

In the popular improv storytelling game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), busy school and work schedules intersect while dice rolls dictate life and death. This system and other tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) provide players with a chance to step into the shoes of an adventurer as they navigate a fantastical world, letting a twenty-sided die decide between their character's success and failure. During my freshman year of college, I started listening to the actual-play TTRPG podcast *The Adventure Zone: Balance* (2014), a comedy production by McElroy brothers Griffin, Justin, and

Travis, and their father Clint.¹ In the show, Griffin took on the role of game master (GM) to lead his family members through a story of treasure-hunting, memory wipes, and powerful community. Inspired to try TTRPGs for ourselves, by winter semester of that year four of my close friends and I were meeting once a week on Sundays in our college dorm to role-play as Southern belles, flirt with raunchy rogues, and occasionally cry real tears over fictional deaths. I, like Griffin, was the GM of our game, writing the story and voice acting as each of the many non-player characters (NPCs), while my friends were along for the emotional roller-coaster ride.

Nearly a decade of gameplay and friendship has stemmed from binge listening to a family of four as they pretended to save a fictional universe in *The Adventure Zone: Balance*. Our own subsequent role-playing experience impacted us in meaningful and long-lasting ways. My players have gone on to become GMs for their own games, co-write original musicals about tabletop, and foster community for storytellers from New York to Los Angeles. Furthermore, all five members of my group identify as LGBTQ+, with player identities evolving over the years to now include every letter of the acronym. The musical that emerged, *Homebrewed: A Musical Quest*, is a coming-out story based in a knockoff *Dungeons & Dragons* universe—artfully renamed to avoid Wizards of the Coast cease and desist letters. Like the plot lines of the tabletop podcast that brought us together, the community I forged at eighteen was both thoroughly queer and thoroughly intertwined with TTRPGs.

I do not believe that this correlation is pure coincidence. I argue that through the performance of an alternate self in a safe environment, role-play can allow queer and questioning people to smooth their path in either confirming or ruling out marginalized identities without the implications and consequences that these experiments would present in the real world. The chance to take on a player character (PC) of one's own design and live uninhibited as this fictive and additional self has magnetized many members of the LGBTQ+ community to tabletop gaming and TTRPG media consumption. Though not many peer-reviewed surveys exist regarding the demographic makeup of tabletop communities and audiences, a 2022 fan census entitled "DnDaddiesnDemographics" shows that half of the viewers of the podcast *Dungeons and Daddies* (2019) identify as queer²; this audience may not be representative of tabletop players at large, but it does provide one example of queer viewers flocking to actual-play media. Meanwhile, a Substack survey by user Sable GM entitled "Dungeons and Genders" polled 227 tabletop players; the results indicate nearly a quarter of surveyed players identified as transgender and/or nonbinary, with 15% of these total players aligning with the label of trans woman.³ I've seen the same trends in the private games I have played or guest-starred in since I rolled my first D20, hosted by friends of friends in my collegiate sphere.

Drawing upon foundational concepts in queer theory, I believe that TTRPG performance and play lends itself to echo the concepts of several queer theorists. I further argue that there are key elements of queer time that facilitate players' exploration of queer identity in TTRPGs. Through a close reading of *The Adventure Zone: Balance* (hereafter referred to as *Balance*), I highlight the aspects of the podcast that both implicitly and explicitly promised a queer experience to my gaggle of college students first dipping their toes into TTRPG. The *Balance* actual-play show—recordings of a real improvisational game played around microphones—directly translated into queer exploration for college-aged geeks. In what follows, I explore how TTRPGs can be read through the lens of queer theory via 1) Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, 2) Halberstam's rejection of

¹ Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, & Clint McElroy, *The Adventure Zone: Balance*, 2014, podcast, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/adventure-zone-zone/>.

² *DnDaddiesnDemographics: A Largely Pointless Exercise*, 2022, <https://dndndemographics.carrrd.co/>.

³ Sable GM, "Dungeons and Genders," *Substack*, June 13, 2022, <https://sablegm.substack.com/p/dungeons-and-genders>.

chronological signifiers and Muñoz's uninhibited fictive utopias, 3) memory and trauma, and 4) queer kinships. I assert that queer time defines the imaginative and creative experience of immersing oneself in tabletop role-playing as well as shaping the lives of the player characters embodied. Ultimately, I analyze why non-normative time is not only a crucial component in the pacing of an effective campaign, but also a relevant lens of analysis for evaluating the queer experiences fostered by TTRPGs since *Dungeons & Dragons* hit the shelves in 1974.

Role-Playing Gender

When a trans person first realizes their sex at birth does not match their gender identity, a moment sometimes called "cracking their egg," the way in which they begin to communicate their new gender is often unpracticed, like a newborn deer standing on wobbling legs. Eyeliner is uneven and eyeshadow too heavy, vocal cadence forced too high or low to sound organic. The performance of womanhood or manhood might be perceived as novice but can grow over time into something that better meshes with societal standards to "pass" more convincingly—time's progression and iteration crafts a different gender performance. Judith Butler first introduced their paradigm-shifting concept of gender performativity in 1988,⁴ then later expanded on the concept in their 1990 book *Gender Trouble*.⁵ In this writing, they describe individuals as engaging in an ongoing "construction" of womanhood by shaping factors such as juridical powers rather than an innate being. They argue that one is influenced into womanhood by contexts around them and they perform the role in order to appease social standards.

This gradually acquired idea of one's gender is a lifelong crawl towards something that labels may fail to fully articulate, but one that is nonetheless important to understanding oneself in relation to the world. Gender is a performance, a stage-show of sorts, but one necessary to identity construction and present in interactions with others and society. I argue that a tabletop role-playing game can serve as one's dress rehearsal of gender, rather than a debut performance with a sold-out audience. Through this, players can test their inner comfort regarding self-identifying with a new gender, making it easier both to come to terms with one's identity and to share that identity with others. Conversely and additionally, *Balance* serves as illustration of the ability to live and play fictional queer experiences without the necessitation of it translating to a real-world change of identity.

Judith Butler's gender performativity or simply gender performance can parallel the adoption of a player character (PC) during a tabletop roleplaying game. Butler speaks of becoming a woman as comprised of repeated behaviors structured around societal forces and interpretations—or the "stylized repetition of acts" across time and space,⁶ to which I posit that transgender TTRPG players are granted a lower-impact venue for practicing their own evolving genders. The acting of a role-play entails a similar set of intentional and repeated bouts of performance, but there is more leniency for this fictional self to not match the day-to-day behaviors and body stylization of the real-world player. Simultaneously, they are granted the opportunity to embody their PC as a depiction of themselves that is bespoke according to their own customizations.

In a group who is accepting and welcoming of sexual and gender diversity, there is little risk of danger in-universe for individuals to buck norms of identity and to align oneself with non-normative

⁴ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 519.

performances. Butler identifies the practice of gendered actions and stylized displays, as well as the solidifying of a gender performance, as occurring “within a highly rigid frame... congeal[ing] over time to produce the appearance of substance.”⁷ As the world of the gameplay is one of fiction, there is less power to the shaping factors that might influence one’s choices of what gendered actions to take within this performance—in this, the regulatory frame that Butler identifies becomes less rigid.

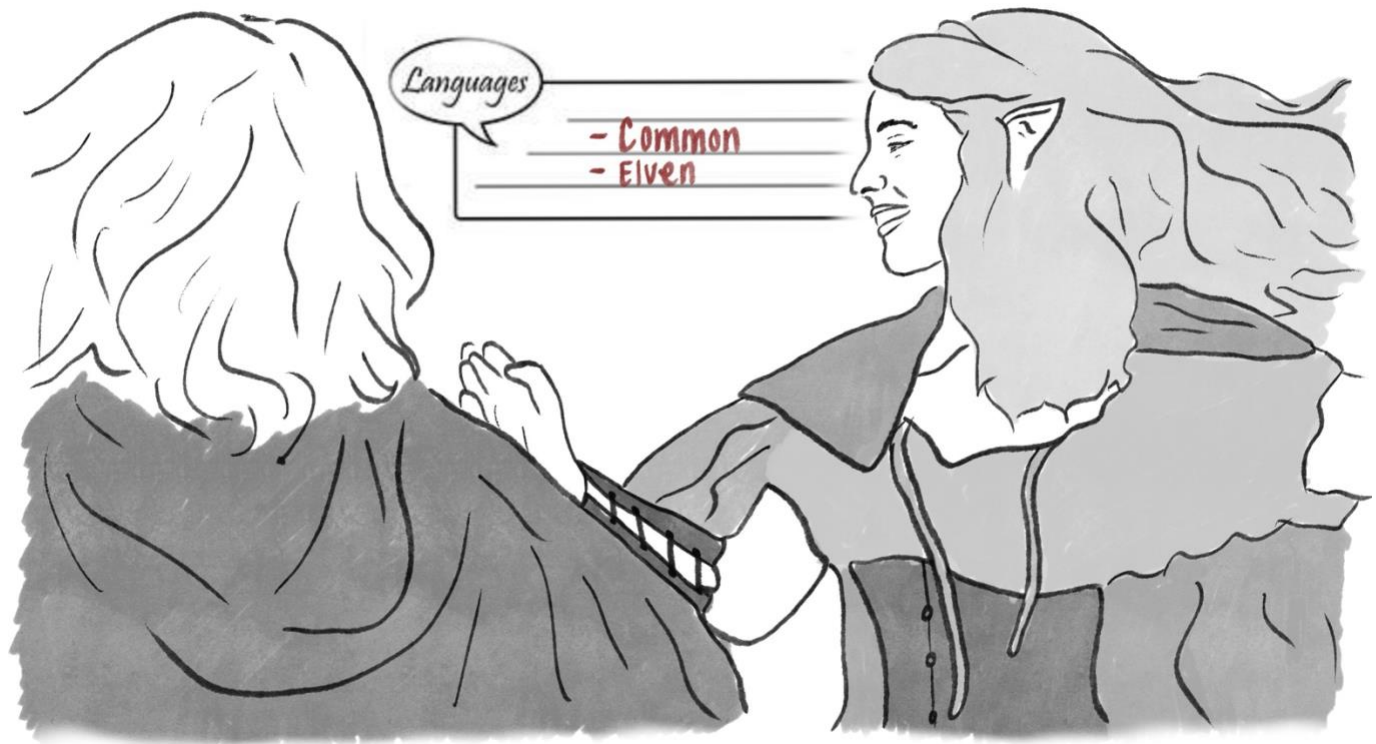


Figure 1: Player characters Appleonia and Robin from the film “Homebrewed: A Musical Quest,” the latter of whose story arc centers around Robin’s player Sam coming out as a transmasculine nonbinary person. Art by Delenn Ganyo-Roalsvig.

This is shown in *Balance* by the presence of an NPC named Lup who openly presents as a transgender woman and experiences no in-game persecution due to the gender-affirming nature of all the players. Griffin’s portrayal of Lup is focused on her as a sibling of Justin’s PC Taako rather than emphasizing her transness, mentioning it only once, briefly and in a straightforward manner during a narrative aside in episode 60.⁸ Griffin’s character voice for Lup is more closely approximating Taako’s own hoarse cadence, showing a common accent courtesy of their shared upbringing. Lup is not cast as a caricature of femininity by a male player, but rather as a full person

⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

⁸ Griffin McElroy, host, “The Stolen Century: Chapter One,” *The Adventure Zone*, episode 60, *Maximum Fun*, April 13, 2017, 16:58, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/adventure-zone-ep-60-stolen-century-chapter-one/>.

who happens to be a transgender woman. The scaffolding of gender expectations is deconstructed by players' desire for creativity in their play-acting of alternative selves.

As a PC is controlled, voiced, and embodied by the player themselves, each of these characters provides an opportunity for the player to embrace this fictional creation as an alternate depiction of themselves. Not all players take this venue, but those who choose to do so can search for internal truths and engage in gender or identity practice through their PC. And though the PC is intentionally drafted and fabricated, as Butler writes, "to claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality."⁹ The PC personality might be compartmentalized from the persona that goes about day-to-day life and built separately from this mundane self, but it can nonetheless be representative of something real. The payoff for the trans player is that through the embodiment of a gender other than one's assigned sex at birth, they are granted a path of exploration and a venue for practicing womanhood, manhood, or any other gender variant that does not hold the potential friction or even danger of a real-world coming out. Through every dice throw, line of dialogue, and vocal inflection, players can construct an alternate version of themselves—an idea I will refer to as the other self in this article.

This framework of TTRPG as a dress rehearsal extends beyond genderqueerness and into the LGBTQ+ community at large. Each participant assumes another name and personality for the duration of gameplay, leaving behind at least some aspects of the mundane self—some more than others, but all to some extent. This makes the other self an integral part of the player experience regardless of identity. This new other self is typically crafted explicitly by the player, resulting in an intentional performance. By performing behaviors and dialogue associated with same-gender attraction, closeted or unaware players are able to get a taste of living in an alternate queer existence. Treating these encounters as data points, a questioning player can determine whether these trial runs are something they wish to repeat in the real world and thereby further their processes of self-discovery.

The in-game role-play of queer courtship encourages the exploration of a new version of one's self within a fictional environment, practicing queer behaviors in a context that may feel more safe. Butler describes gender as "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts" within aforementioned rigid framework.¹⁰ Like gender, the persona of sexual queerness can also emerge through bodily stylization, such as fashion choices or color-coded accessories, as well as repeated acts—which can include explicit actions of same-sex intimacy but also identifiable body language and certain accents. These signals that ping a fine-tuned "gaydar" are frequently styles and acts of sexual queerness. In time, the testing of the waters of same-sex attraction can congeal, a process described as "sedimentation" by Butler when applied to gender matters,¹¹ into the embrace of a queer identity. The performance of an other self provides a venue to explore and embody what might become a future identity, one that is openly LGBTQ+. Player characters are able to emerge from their fictional closets as a trial run of their player to follow in their footsteps.

Straight and cisgender individuals role-playing a queer experience can provide value in two ways: first, by allowing one to live in the shoes of someone LGBTQ+, minimizing the cognitive gap and othering that can emerge between cis-het people and their queer neighbors. This can certainly pose risks of tokenizing or furthering stereotypes through inappropriate performances, even of othering other players in the group who might be closeted and upset by their fellow player's portrayal. Justin

⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997), 36.

apologizes to the audience for initially taking on a cliché and flamboyant gay accent for his character Taako, noting his faux pas in the same commentary episode that he declares the elf canonically gay.¹² However, the opportunity can also foster empathy and community by demonstrating that the presence of queerness does not have to fundamentally revolutionize one's gameplay. Justin goes on to say, "I like the idea of playing somebody who's really different from me and has, like, a different perspective."¹³ Sitting in someone else's shoes and perspective can work wonders in practicing sympathy for those from different backgrounds.

Simultaneously, for questioning or uncertain cis-het individuals, role-playing queer stories can also provide the data points needed to solidly arrive at the conclusion that one is cisgender or straight without it being based purely on default. Queer gameplay can serve to prove a null hypothesis, ruling out an LGBTQ+ identity. Justin describes his Taako as "a gay guy" in the aforementioned commentary episode entitled "The The Adventure Zone Zone,"¹⁴ and over the course of the campaign this gay guy enters a relationship with a male-presenting NPC named Kravitz who is the embodiment of the Grim Reaper. Taako further expresses that he is "not a man" under a truth-telling spell in episode twenty-one.¹⁵ In spite of both being seemingly genderqueer and harboring same-sex attractions, Taako is played by a cisgender and heterosexual player. This goes beyond just Taako to include other queer characters including Lup; Carey and Killian Fangbattle, a lesbian couple who work as part of the Bureau of Balance; and Sloane and Hurley, a second sapphic couple—all four NPCs voiced by Griffin. In spite of this diverse cast of queer characters, none of the four McElroy players have publicly self-identified as LGBTQ+.

However, it is reasonable to believe that these players have acquired a greater understanding of and confidence in their own cisgender and heterosexual identities, having tested the waters of queerness, rather than operating on a societally-prescribed assumption of straightness. It still represents a congealing of identity, but one arriving at a different conclusion—this experimental gender or sexual performance is discrete and will not be adapted to the self outside of gameplay. Additionally, as a popular and published podcast, these depictions signal to the diverse listener base that tabletop gaming can offer the same queer experience to them. The promise of a comfortable queer existence, where I can be not only a lesbian but a lesbian with a crossbow and an English accent, is what magnetized me to start my first home-brew campaign and what's kept me returning to game tables whenever possible.

The ability to have these queer experimentations and experiences can be dually attributed to the modern game materials and to the historical ability of many players and their GMs to operate outside of regulations governing their play. As Michael Stokes (2017) has shown, the previous editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* did not invite a transgender experience into the regulating rules, initially calling for characters to be one of two genders, something that has evolved to now explicitly prompt for queer narratives in the most recent handbook.¹⁶ The third edition game manual establishes the binary of male and female options for characters, juxtaposing the fifth edition of the player's handbook that cites a number of genderqueer experiences as prompts for character design. For example, the most recent edition of *The Player's Handbook* now states that players "don't need

¹² Griffin McElroy, host, "The The Adventure Zone Zone," *The Adventure Zone*, Maximum Fun, March 17, 2016, 22:40, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/adventure-zone-zone/>.

¹³ McElroy, "The The Adventure Zone Zone," 23:15.

¹⁴ McElroy, "The The Adventure Zone Zone," 22:20.

¹⁵ Griffin McElroy, host, "Petals to the Metal: Chapter Four," *The Adventure Zone*, episode 21, Maximum Fun, August 13, 2015, 21:05, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/ep-21-petals-metal-chapter-four/>.

¹⁶ Michael Stokes, "Access to the Page: Queer and Disabled Characters in *Dungeons & Dragons*," *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2018/03/blinded-by-the-roll-the-critical-fail-of-disability-in-dd/>.

to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender... You could also play a female character who presents herself as a man, [or] a man who feels trapped in a female body.”¹⁷

The presence of home-brews, or workarounds and exceptions to the rules that prescribe how gameplay functions, have also long been a way for storytelling GMs to sidestep the letter of law ruling *Dungeons & Dragons* and other tabletop adventures. The acceptable nature of artistic liberty in TTRPGs normalizes a level of rejection of the rules, making non-normative even the act of gameplay as it pertains to expectations of behavior and identity. Justin’s experience playing Taako, seeking out a queer persona different from his own straight identity and then thriving in said character’s story, indicates the freedom available within tabletop to shirk the rigidity of social pressures that Butler identifies as prescribing or shaping performances of the self. With creativity and a character sheet, anyone can draft their own other self to explore both caves full of dragons and their own personal relationship with the way they present themselves to the world.

Queer Time and Utopia in Tabletop

The imaginative nature of tabletop role-playing allows players to immerse in a world that is frequently devoid of the limitations imposed by biological time, fictions faceted instead with idyllic social norms that tolerate if not embrace non-normativity. Both Jack Halberstam’s and José Esteban Muñoz’s depictions of queer temporality emerge in the gameplay of *Balance*, showcased in ways that can hold equally true for gameplay in basements, garages, and recording studios throughout the world. Like gender regulations are eased by the fictional world of tabletop, other biological and social realities are similarly mitigated through the imaginary nature of role-play.

While the improvisation of gameplay fosters Butler’s identity performance and allows for creativity in one’s stylized performance across time, the inherent fiction of the play allows for chronology and temporal boundaries to be less fixed than in the real world. The experience of storytelling in *Dungeons & Dragons* provides chronological flexibility, with players not being bound by real-world limitations regarding their gameplay choices. For characters of any gender and sexuality, this flexibility can appear when PCs in their elderly years fight at no disadvantage against antagonists in their prime, as is the case of Clint McElroy’s Merle—and I personally have not come across a campaign either published or by word of mouth where a PC dies of old age. This is not to say it does not happen, simply that it is likely an uncommon storytelling choice.

This is much like what Halberstam describes in *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) as differentiating cis-het time from queer temporality.¹⁸ Halberstam writes about the prevalence of non-chronology in queer life stories, emphasizing the absence of the standard order of life events that emerges for most cis-het individuals. For queer and trans people, often even the most ubiquitous periods of development can become riffle-shuffled—adolescence can re-emerge in a trans person’s thirties with a second puberty induced by hormone replacement therapy, and finding one’s first true love might happen after years of heterosexual marriage when one discovers they are a lesbian or gay man. Queer time does not share the chronology and landmarks of other versions of time, instead dodging cisgender and heterosexual signifiers such as the tick-ticking biological clock of fertile young women.

Much in the same way, characters in a tabletop universe can remain narratively unhindered by limitations like biology, boundaries that are based on one’s own timeline through life. The natural lifespan of non-human characters can be centuries longer than a player’s own life expectancy, and

¹⁷ *Dungeons & Dragons Player’s Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast, 2024), 121.

¹⁸ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Bodies* (New York University Press, 2005).

through the avoidance of certain time-based mandates on behavior and assumptions, the players and their characters step outside of normative time. A player might be granted the opportunity to decide that their character's story ends with starting a family, even if their PC would reasonably have already gone through menopause. The other selves of a tabletop game exist outside of the norms Halberstam observes as defining cisgender and heterosexual existences by nature of them being suspended in a fictional environment that can itself bend time. Both bodily factors such as the so-called biological clocks of those with wombs and that of a consistent and linear chronology are bucked by gameplay where belief is suspended.

The minimized inhibition of a tabletop fiction also ties heavily into the ideas of queer futurity as posited by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (2009).¹⁹ There, in line with Butler, Muñoz references queerness as a performance and evolution, acting towards a future state of being rather than simply existing in the present.²⁰ Just as Butler frames womanhood as an end state of embodiment towards which one is always endeavoring, Muñoz's theoretical framework of queerness also describes a horizon. Muñoz establishes the idea of queerness as an un-actualized ideal, a warm utopian horizon of future uninhibited queerness that reality "may never touch."²¹ Much like an event horizon surrounding a black hole, it is being approached as though it is an asymptote. Time slows as you grow nearer to that pitch-black pit and its bright white halo, and from the perspective of the space-traveler, contact is never made.

This idea intersects with tabletop, as the fictional universe of gameplay serves as a world where queer identity and desires are uninhibited. As the other-self of the player character exists in a fictional world of the GM's creation, players can often step into the shoes of someone uninhibited by transphobia and homophobia—so long as their GM shares these ideologies. Griffin McElroy approximates this fictive utopia for his family members in *Balance*, peppering the non-player characters with LGBTQ+ identities; as the campaign is also a published podcast, the queer representation of the show is dually imbued for the sake of listeners. A 2024 survey of the actual-play show's fans did not query on sexuality but did find that 12.8% of listeners identify as transgender or nonbinary—a significantly larger percentage than the makeup of trans folk in the broader population.²² Although limited, this information seems to indicate a heightened presence of queer individuals within the community of *The Adventure Zone* listeners.

The universe of gameplay can frequently be a socially futuristic world that is post-bigotry, post-identity, and ultimately accepting of characters from all classes and creeds. (Albeit there seems to be a continual in-universe bias against tieflings and goblins as painted by the official Wizards of the Coast materials.) Though the role-play setting is often a Tolkien-esque medieval environment, there is room within the rules of gameplay for the culture of the fantasy worlds to be mismatched with this historical stage. GMs can build their fictive societies as one would expect from a post-futuristic civilization, decades from the reality of modern transphobia and homophobia. There is opportunity for a cosplay of Renaissance attire while maintaining liberal attitudes that could not be found in ye olde days of corsetry and sword-fighting; douse this in wizardry and a whimsical anachronism emerges. Applying Muñoz's utopic queerness, one's alternative gameplay self can be more easily explored and developed because it is embodied and simulated in a world where queerness itself is not a source of conflict, despite ample swords, dragons, and bloodshed. *Balance's* "infinite fucking

¹⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009).

²⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

²¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

²² Ryan Stanton and Mark R. Johnson, "Inclusivity and Diversity in 'Actual Play': Studying 'The Adventure Zone,'" *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 15, no. 3 (2024): 229-245.

imaginosphere"²³ might be set in some variant of the Bronze Age, but it is simultaneously a space where Taako is free to court the Grim Reaper and there are lesbians abound. There are railroad train heists and Battle Wagon races that approximate automobiles, but not a gun in sight. It is like entering a parallel universe or time traveling in both directions at once.

So long as a roleplaying group is accepting of marginal identities, a player can anticipate minimal misgendering of their other-gender player character, an expectation that would likely not be matched in real-life experimentation with a trans identity. Trans NPCs in *Balance* such as Taako's sister Lup never have to face transphobic rhetoric, as the dialogue of the entire universe falls within the control of a single friend group; immersion and suspension of disbelief do not have to entail bigotry. In a similar vein, homosexual flirting is prone to fail for very different and less vulnerable reasons in-game than asking for a same-sex stranger's number in real life. Because rolling a 1 is easier to swallow than personal rejection and poses no risk of bigoted retaliatory violence, a player's inhibitions may be reduced in gameplay.

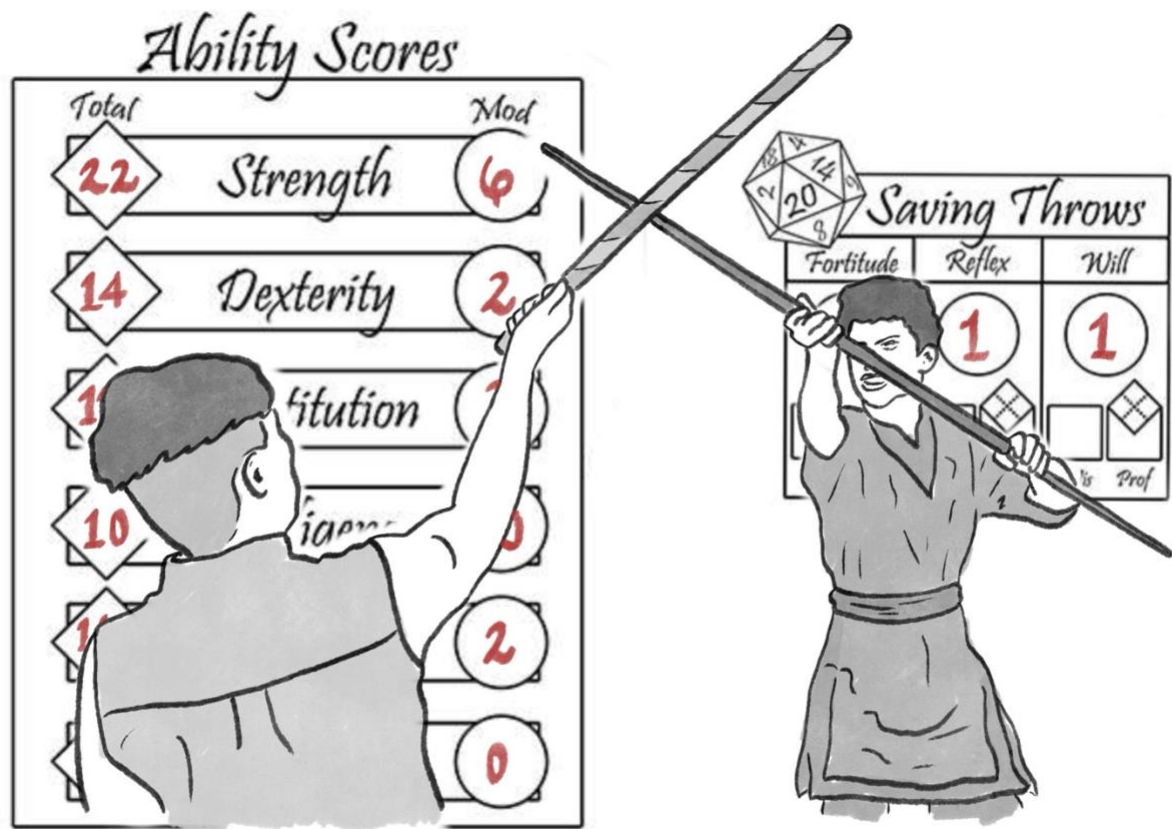


Figure 2: Player character Icarus from "Homebrewed: A Musical Quest." Following the fight pictured, his narrative plot includes his coming-out as an asexual individual. Art by Delenn Ganyo-Roalsvig.

²³ Griffin McElroy, host, "Here There Be Gerblins: Chapter One," *The Adventure Zone*, episode 1, Maximum Fun, December 3, 2014, 30:57, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/ep-1-here-there-be-gerblins-chapter-one/>.

Dice rolls are baked into the mechanics of tabletop, as shown by Aaron Trammell (2014) writing about their interplay with the history of seduction in *Dungeons and Dragons* and its frequent weaponization and commoditization of women.²⁴ However, this is not a universal truth and can be left to the discernment of the GM. Within the *Balance* storytelling and game mechanics, Taako's romance with Kravitz plays out without Griffin going so far as to call for charisma checks or allowing dice rolls to veto the relationship, as both players simply portray their characters as mutually interested—allowing for organic interactions and dialogue that immerses players and listeners rather than breaking a suspended disbelief. Further, no verbal or physical abuse emerges in reaction to this connection, even from antagonists or villains.

Though Justin and Griffin have not come out or otherwise publicly identified as LGBTQ+, the publication of their game and its utopian queer-friendly universe serve as a homing beacon to potential players in their audience who do identify as gay or trans. This is true of many other actual-play universes not otherwise addressed in this paper, from Matthew Mercer's *Critical Role* to Brennan Lee Mulligan's *Dimension 20*, both created as explorative spaces that foster queer performances by players and broadcast to audiences sometimes reaching the hundreds of thousands. These groups of entertainers are comprised of individuals of just about any identity within the rainbow of LGBTQ+ labels—including *Dimension 20*'s "Dungeons & Drag Queens" and *Critical Role*'s queer player Taliesin Jaffe playing both bisexual and genderfluid Mollymauk Tealeaf and asexual Caduceus Clay. Through the collaboration of both queer and straight storytellers, GMs such as McElroy, Mercer, and Mulligan narrate worlds of social openness, featuring violence that is recreational rather than bigoted.

Muñoz writes that "the present is not enough" when contemporary society is still toxic and abusive of queerness.²⁵ This is the same truth that magnetizes queer players to the world of tabletop, providing a means of escape from the present in an alternate reality that parallels a potentially unattainable future. Cisgender and heterosexual players, too, are able to indulge in escapism by these same mechanics. In some ways, it is idyllic—Muñoz's unattainable utopia available in micro-doses as reality melts away in favor of friendship and fantasy, and Halberstam's queer chronology dosed out for players of all identities as they quilt together alternative lives with plot points that may be unreachable for them in the reality of the mundane. Ample reason for young queer folks to be drawn into the thrall of tabletop gaming and establish it as a facet of their communities.

Memory Gaps in Fiction

There are also mechanics in TTRPGs that can echo less utopian facets of the queer experience including trauma and exclusion. Clementine Morrigan (2017) posits the idea of a queer time travel of trauma, wherein a person experiences an altered perception of time; this might include when they mentally revisit a point of trauma in their own past—a situation that emerges frequently for disabled and queer people.²⁶ Her concept is paralleled in *Balance* by "The Stolen Century" arc, wherein Griffin's players unlock memories of their characters' past experiences, ones that had previously been entirely erased. For other published tabletop games, flashbacks have been used to pepper in personal history about the characters through a cinematic lens, like the rippling of a screen and crescendo of a harp might signal such a jump in a television program. These moments consist of player's immersion in their character's in-fiction past wherein it is lived as though it is the present,

²⁴ Aaron Trammell, "Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons & Dragons*," *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 3 (2014), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/>.

²⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 27.

²⁶ Clementine Morrigan, "Trauma Time: The Queer Temporalities of the Traumatized Mind," *Somatechnics* 7, no. 1 (2017): 50-58.

perhaps echoing a post-traumatic stress reaction, while those rolling dice in a tabletop game narratively live through their characters' flashbacks in real-time. Time travel and flashbacks in gameplay provide tangible manifestations of Morrigan's queer temporal distortions of trauma, as characters unlock formative and emotionally charged scenes from their lives before the campaign began.

In the case of *Balance*, Griffin designs role-plays of the past to avoid any choices or dice rolls having major effects on the modern gameplay, but they entail the same game mechanics and heightened emotions for the players as a scene in their character's present reality. The role-play is, in effect, a lived experience for the players as well as their characters, and the combination of immersion with improvisation makes it a form of reality for those huddled around their game table. The flashbacks simply provide insight into what happened to a character prior to the more malleable present. For the McElroy players, there is limited indication in any published media that Griffin shared these twists and turns with his players prior to the gameplay, meaning that it was likely a unique discovery for each of the party members—with the exception of what I consider the most heart-wrenching scene of the campaign.

It's episode 66 and the end of The Hundred Years of Wandering, time spent desperately chasing an energy force through universe after universe in hopes of keeping its power from the pursuing Hunger that aims to snuff out all life in the multiverse. The crew of the spaceship Starblaster vote to split this powerful Light of Creation into seven pieces, objects that would become the relics that the McElroy adventuring party would later collect for the Bureau of Balance. But there is one final step that needs to be taken to ensure that these artifacts are truly safe from the Hunger. Lup has already been missing for some time, with her partner Barry Bluejeans and Taako searching desperately for her, when Barry asks: "Taako, what if she's just gone?"²⁷ I remember the goosebumps and clench of my stomach when I heard Taako reply, "Who?"²⁸ Lucretia, the starship's captain, had used the powers of a memory-altering creature called the Voidfish to strip all recollections of the century of wandering and the lives before it from the minds of her crew. No one would know the true importance of the relics, and the Hunger would never find them. But Taako would retain no trace of his bond with his twin sister.

It would only be at the end of the penultimate arc that the memory wipe would be negated, and the memories would come flooding back into the PCs' minds. GM Griffin's choice to center the subsequent and final "Stolen Century" arc on these one hundred years of reclaimed memories demonstrates the clearing up of a static for both the players and characters of *Balance*. Rather than walking through the character's whole life sequence as a chronology and simply telling the player characters when their memories were wiped, Griffin's gameplay is designed to simulate each player character remembering their own past as the memory wipe is undone. In turn, this penultimate chapter serves also as a prequel that provides emotional context to the entire preceding story while simultaneously giving the players insight into a deeper truth about their other selves.

These gaps each represent a lacuna in the character's cohesive life story. For Lup and Taako, these gaps emerge as the censorship and subsequent recovery of memories of their relationship as queer family members. They also appear in Lup's decision to transition from living elf to undead lich along with her partner and fellow crew member Barry—a choice that can be read as trans allegory on top of Lup's literal transgender identity. A discerning comedian might inject a joke about deadnames. By

²⁷ Griffin McElroy, host, "The Stolen Century: Chapter Seven," *The Adventure Zone*, episode 66, Maximum Fun, June 29, 2017, 1:14:20, <https://maximumfun.org/episodes/adventure-zone/adventure-zone-ep-66-stolen-century-chapter-seven/>.

²⁸ McElroy, "The Stolen Century: Chapter Seven," 1:14:24.

this point, the McElroy family had been playing their characters in the *Balance* campaign for three years, had regularly cosplayed their player characters at comic conventions, and had seen their impassioned fans don the same costumes, so these discoveries were personal and impactful for the players. Granted the opportunity to live through these previously unexplored facets of the player character's past, the McElroy players are able to shade in the minutia of what had been previously unknown.

Through this, the listener audience of *Balance* is also able to see illustrated a concept that is almost exclusively cognitive and metaphorical: the intersection of trauma and memory impairment. Because the tabletop universe is a world of fiction, physical laws regarding time can be dissolved to allow time travel and other literal manifestations of what presents as highly theoretical in academic literature regarding the queer theory of time. When evaluating the chronological malleability of tabletop narrative and utopian futurity, characters might be presented as uncovering memories from their earlier experiences or a past life, much in the way that a traumatic memory might be unearthed further along in a healing journey. One step beyond Morrigan's traumatic time machine, the *Balance* players experiencing a flashback to their character's prior experiences are learning details of this event for the first time—not opening a half-healed wound but cutting the flesh anew.

The censorship and burnt holes in the representation of queerness also fit into the historical reception of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a game, as after its 1974 release, it became the source of fear for Christian values in the 1980s as it was whispered about as devil-worshipping. Through these same time periods, sex and sexual content was stripped from the materials that regulated gameplay.²⁹ Aforementioned home-brews or discrepancies from the regulating handbooks were the workaround in order to buck these norms, and player choices to involve sexuality within the game served as subverting the expectation of chaste violence. The presence of anecdotal echoes, but a lack of written evidence for the home-brews supports the existence of the very same lacuna. Just like the *Balance* arc showcases queer individuals whose grasp on their personal history was challenged by powers-that-be, the publishers of *Dungeons & Dragons* themselves participated in the fragmenting of the history of gameplay as it pertains to non-normative sexuality. This alienation could only have contributed to the stigma felt by queer players during the days of the Satanic Panic, which shunned LGBTQ+ lifestyles alongside their laundry list of other supposed abnormalities. In this shattering and condemnation, though, there remained the opportunity to forge community among those like oneself living as outliers.

Fictive Genealogy, Found Family, and Queer Kinship

Because the historical pattern for queer individuals has been disownment and rejection by biological families—a trend that continues all-too-frequently today—queer individuals have taken to forging their own approximations of family with other members of their community. These kinship units can take many forms, but each serves as an intense binding agent between individuals that share no bloodline with one another. Within his chapter of *Unbound Queer Time*, David Matencio Durán (2024) posits a form of this anomalous time existing in the family tree of the rogue archetype, a popular class of character in tabletop.³⁰ Durán tracks the evolution of the class from Spanish picaresque

²⁹ Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books," *Analog Game Studies* 2, no. 5 (2015), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2015/07/out-of-the-dungeons-representations-of-queer-sexuality-in-rpg-source-books/>.

³⁰ David Matencio Durán, "The Rogue as a Queer Agent in Video Games: The Picaresque Novel Legacy," in *Unbound Queer Time in Literature, Cinema, and Video Games*, edited by Juan Francisco Belmonte Ávila and Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo (Routledge, 2024), 176-189.

novels to characters in video games such as *Baldur's Gate* (1998), *Dragon Age* (2009), and *Fire Emblem* (1990), and I connect this in turn to the rogue character of Carey Fangbattle and her mentorship in *Balance*. Frequently portrayed as raunchy and flirtatious thieves who combine pansexuality with pick-up artistry and sleight of hand, even straight rogues might wink at the right time to charm their ways past an armed guard. In Durán's alternative genealogy, the queerness of extramarital sex and crossdressing of the picaresque rogues became explicit LGBTQ+ identities in the video game instances, often positioning modern queer identities as coexisting with other minority traits such as unusual skin tones, sex work, and vampirism.

This is a trend that continues with Dragonborn Carey Fangbattle of the Bureau of Balance, who trains Magnus in his inherited rogue identity, her scaly skin an indication of her status as an outcast among the races of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Her tutelage of Magnus showcases a mentorship and identity lineage flowing from a lesbian teacher into her student. Durán likens this form of inheritance to the progression of rhizomes—the underground stem systems of plants that connect various shoots—with each rogue drawing from instances in the pattern's past and echoing forward into future instances, linking together non-normative individuals from a multitude of times and places. The art of mentorship is that of an artificial lineage, a transference of parental guidance from the trained to the novice. As Durán notes, "every queer rogue borrows elements from their predecessors and adds new elements to the myth."³¹ Magnus, too, is ingratiated into a community through adoption of an identity rather than birthright, demonstrating a kinship beyond familial and generational boundaries—one that, like Halberstam posits of queer time, sidesteps reproductive time as a limitation in how traits might be passed from one person down to another.

Exemplified by a relationship that either expands upon or completely dodges heteronormative family structures, kinship has strong foundations as a tenet of queer theory. Butler writes in the first chapter of *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form* (2022) of many examples of kinship not based in lineage of genetics; in this, they reject the binary distinction between what is considered a real versus a fictive kinship.³² In turn, this concept melds into theory of queer time, chronology, and temporality. As editors Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman summarize in the introduction of the same collection, "kinship theory refuses or queerly eludes sequential orderings."³³ Family, with this understanding, no longer is limited to a parent being reproductively related to their child. Instead, the dynamic can account for relationships from queerplatonic to throuple to extended family but also includes the fictive family units forged within a tabletop game—such as those shared by the adventuring party of *Balance*.

³¹ Durán, "The Rogue as a Queer Agent in Video Games," 176.

³² Judith Butler, "Kinship Beyond the Bloodline," in *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, edited by Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (Duke University Press, 2022), 25–47.

³³ Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction: Kincoherence / Kin-aesthetic / Kinematics," in *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, edited by Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (Duke University Press, 2022), 12.

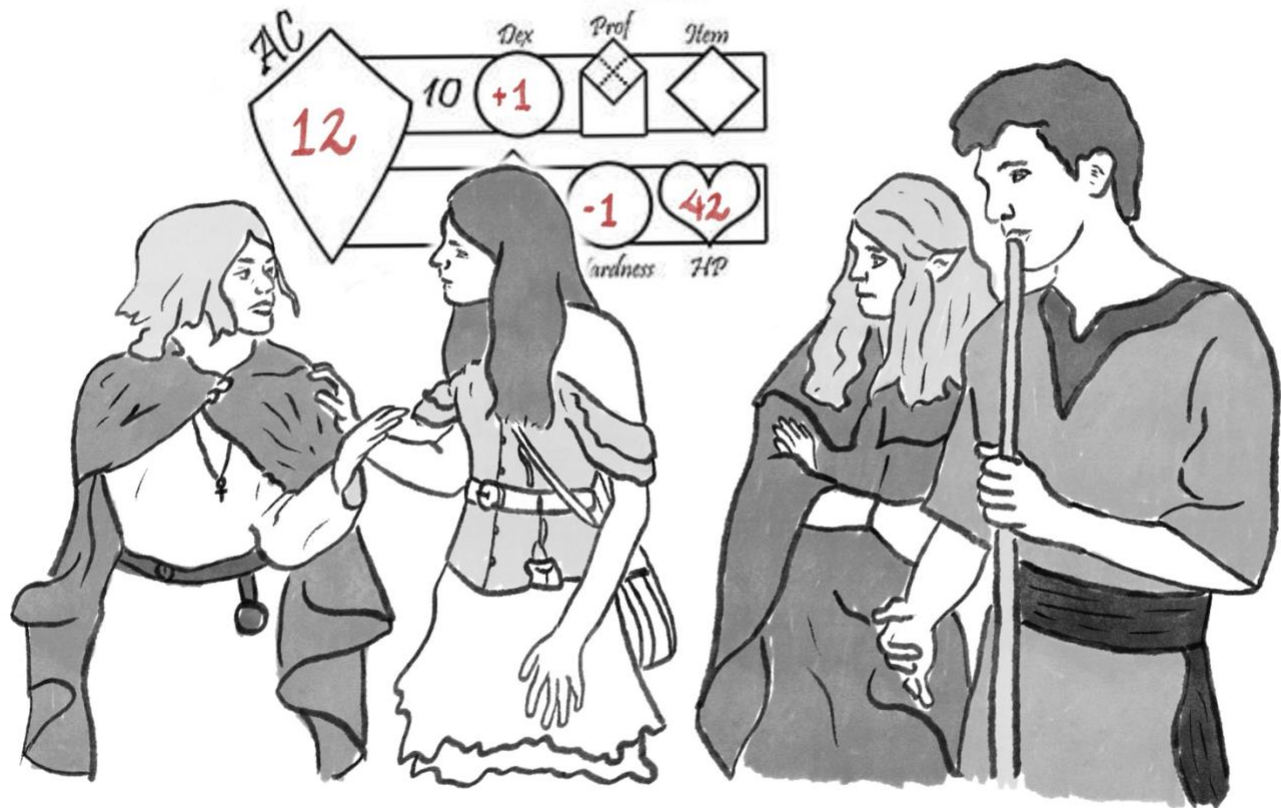


Figure 3: The adventuring party from "Homebrewed: A Musical Quest," representing a close found family unit between four LGBTQ+ players and their tabletop characters. Art by Delenn Ganyo-Roalsvig.

Bonds of queer kinship between individuals without common genealogy share metaphorical overlap with Durán's analysis of rogues throughout history—this time allowing family units of parent, sibling, or child to be taken on by individuals who do not share the chronological relationship to one another that these terms indicate within a nuclear family unit. As the gameplay of tabletop entails collaboration among a group of individuals for a common goal, found families are a well-established habit of *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns, frequently going beyond recurring pattern and into the essence of the experience. Simultaneously, because of the immersive and improvisational nature of the gameplay, a found family in the narrative of a campaign can frequently cross over into a real-world connection for the players with one another.

Both biological and found families play crucial roles across these fictional narratives: players can be related or not related, and their respective characters can also be related or not related, forming a Mendelian Punnett square of relationship combinations. For example, Taako and Lup are siblings played by siblings, while Taako and Magnus are non-siblings played by siblings. Even within a game that is entirely composed of a biological family, there is room for fictive connections that shrug existing familial labels as well as adopting new ones. There is the opportunity for every variant combination of both biological and fictive kinship between characters and players, with the

overwhelming majority of applications being some form of imaginary or adoptive relationship. Even in a tabletop game where neither player nor player character are related in any way through biological relationships, metaphorical kinships that parallel these bonds often emerge. Sisterhood is frequently forged between women who share common experiences, priorities, and often traumas—both between the people rolling for initiative and between the characters they narrate and voice. In each found family unit of PC party members, relationships detach from time or sequence, becoming kinships forged solely through connection, hardship, and trauma.

The GM is particularly detached in familial chronology, as they may be the same age as the majority of their players while playing the role of long-lost father, adoptive daughter, or tyrannical stepmother—sometimes simultaneously. Not only is there an absence of the sequential orderings of a nuclear and heterosexual family unit, but the relationships between the characters are completely invented by the players. Despite this, the interactions in the space of fiction can inform very real and deep bonds between both the player characters and the people who designed and perform as them. The importance of the interactions in informing the real-world relationship trajectory is up to the players, giving them choice in what is fictive and what is genuine. It is uncouth to assume that one's actions in-game are representative of real-world intentions unless otherwise stated. Griffin and Justin might voice the flirtations of a magical gay couple, but that does not imply an incestuous romantic or sexual tension between the biological brothers. At the crux of gameplay is an ever-present ability to choose: not only creating one's character but also deciding whether there are true implications to the dialogue and storytelling of the fiction.

Relationships between characters in a TTRPG also allow players to engage in the play-acting of a courtship that frequently holds no real-world impact—allowing those who are questioning a queer sexuality to begin an experimentation or exploration of identity without the concern of treating a romantic interest as a canary in a coal mine. For those who are using a queer player-character to explore their sexuality, a player's goal may be less about courting their fellow player or GM, their role-play instead serving more as an experiment self-identifying as LGBTQ+. Performing said role for a finite time period each week is a lived experience for the player which provides real insight into one's inner preferences, regardless of romantic intentions or reciprocity. The in-game relationships themselves mean as much or as little as the players mutually decide, but the role-play is inherently a first-person embodiment of a new, customized version of the self and can be an important pathway of exploration.

Conclusion

Whether acting as a PC or a slew of NPCs, players of tabletop immerse themselves in gameplay that is imbued with non-normative relationships to temporality. Queer time provides routes for greater understanding of real-world queer lives through the parallels that emerge in tabletop, from rogues to parental rejection to the performance of a crafted other self. Through the publication and popularization of TTRPGs including *Dungeons & Dragons* as actual-play podcasts, audiences are able to see a model of what gameplay might entail—with liberal game masters signaling opportunities for queer theory to manifest in the mechanics. This, in turn, draws those who are motivated to explore LGBTQ+ identities to do so within the confines of fictional universes and fictive relationships, safely testing the water of queer life in a controlled environment. A bespoke player character might allow players to pantomime a future version themselves where they identify as LGBTQ+; an accepting game master can sketch their players a utopian world approaching Muñoz's queer horizon to play as this other self; and a game culture of found family is able to echo the fictive and non-biological kinship that fills out the family trees of many queer individuals. The theoretical interpretations within

the framework of queer time apply to analysis of all of these experiences, both the embodiments of purely fictive queer identity and those that are explorative of one's own potential queer future. Cumulatively, many facets of queer theory as a framework can be seamlessly applied to tabletop games.

But our hour is up. "Same time next week!"



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