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The Queer Potential of TTRPGs

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"a sense of freedom" – C.

"*D&D* is important, diversity is important and representation is important." – R.

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x. Exposé – German

Das bekannteste TTRPG (Table Top Role Playing Game) ist wohl *Dungeons & Dragons* (Abk. *D&D*). Das erste D&D-Regelwerk erschien 1974, 2014 wurde bereits die fünfte Edition des Spiels veröffentlicht. D&D ist bekannt als ein Spiel von und für weiße Männer[1]. Auch Gatekeeping sowie mansplaining sind unter D&D-Spielenden keine unbekannten Phänomene[2]. Mittlerweile gibt es aber subversive Bewegungen, durch die das Spiel inklusiver und queerer gestaltet wird. Pen&Paper Role-Playing Games, auch Table-Top Role Playing Games genannt (Abk. TTRPG), werden von queeren Gruppen gespielt und umgewandelt. So werden unter anderem TTRPGs entwickelt, welche queere Lebensrealitäten miteinbeziehen oder sogar zum Angelpunkt des Spiels gestalten.

Meine Fragestellung bewegt sich im Kontext von Queerness bei TTRPGs wie *Dungeons & Dragons*, welches für viele Rollenspielende die ersten Erfahrungen mit TTRPGs geprägt hat. Konkret geht es um die Unterschiede zwischen nicht explizit queeren Spielen sowie queeren Spielen. Im weiteren wird die Spielerfahrung in Bezug auf Gender in beiden Rahmen untersucht. Ich behandle, inwieweit die Möglichkeit, Gender als Spiel zu erfahren, sich auf spielende Personen auswirkt. Die Relevanz der Arbeit ergibt sich unter anderem durch die fehlende einschlägige Literatur zu diesem potenzialträchtigem Thema.

Mein Forschungsinteresse besteht darin, die Möglichkeiten des Verhandelns queerer Lebenserfahrungen und Utopien im TTRPG als Form des Ausdrucks des queeren Ichs zu untersuchen. Dabei werden Themen wie heteronormative Geschlechterrollen und utopische Weltenerschaffung von Relevanz sein.

Bei TTRPGs können Spieler*innen sich einen Charakter erstellen, durch den sie in die Rolle einer anderen Identität schlüpfen können. Je vielschichtiger der Charakter ist, desto vielschichtiger und immersiver kann das Spiel werden.
So besteht Möglichkeit, durch „Hineinfühlen" Verständnis für andere und sich selbst zu entwickeln. Durch den relativen „safe space"[3] des Spiels können Menschen für eine kurze Momentaufnahme ohne Konsequenzen in eine andere Rolle/Identität schlüpfen. Klarerweise

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[1] Clements, "Dungeons & Discourse: Intersectional Identities in Dungeons & Dragons."
[2] Schirmer, "DBAD! Gatekeeping and Exclusion in Table Top Gaming."
[3] Lichtenstein, "Queer Players Find More than a Game in Dungeons & Dragons - They Find a Safe Space."

muss dabei bewusst sein, dass es nicht dasselbe ist, wie tatsächlich das eigene Leben in dieser Rolle zu verbringen. Die Möglichkeiten der Selbsterfahrung und Empathieentwicklung werde ich in dieser Master-Arbeit weiter erforschen.

Zielsetzung:

Mein Ziel ist es, herauszufinden, wie queere Personen kritische Sichtweisen auf heteronormative Geschlechternormen im Spiel miteinbeziehen (können) und welchen Einfluss dieser Faktor auf die Spielerfahrung sowie die Spielenden selbst hat.

Mein Fragestellung lautet:

Wie wirkt sich das Verhandeln von queeren Sichtweisen und Lebensrealitäten in Table Top RPGs auf die Spielerfahrung von spielenden Personen sowie die Spielenden selbst aus?

Forschungsstand:

Die Forschung zur Relevanz von Repräsentation im Pen & Paper - Rollenspiel sowie zum feministischen, inklusiven und queeren Potenzial des Spiels hat erst in den letzten Jahren begonnen, sich in der Wissenschaft zu etablieren. TTRPGs sind im Verhältnis zu Videospielen relativ wenig erforscht, obwohl es sie bereits seit den 1960er Jahren gibt. Veröffentlicht wurden u.a. ein Sammelband zu den transmedialen Grundlagen der Rollenspielforschung[4] mit einem Überblick der bisherigen Rollenspielstudien in vielen Wissenschaften wie etwa Soziologie, Literatur und Cultural Studies sowie einige wenige Artikel zur Behandlung von Race, Gewalt, Repräsentation und Moral. Zu Queerness in TTRPG gibt es kaum einschlägige wissenschaftliche Behandlungen.

Wichtig wird es deswegen sein, populärwissenschaftliche Quellen miteinzubeziehen, da so mehrere Aspekte des Pen & Paper - Rollenspiels in aktuellen Debatten über Repräsentation, Diversität, Inklusivität und Queerness beleuchtet werden können. Diese Begriffe werden auch auf Plattformen bzw. in Podcasts und Blogs mit den Themenschwerpunkten Table Top Role Playing Games, *Dungeons & Dragons*, Geekdom oder Fantasy Worlds verhandelt.

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[4] Zagal and Deterding, *Role-Playing Game Studies*.

Herausstechend ist hierbei das populärwissenschaftliche Sammelband „Roll Inclusive: *Diversity und Repräsentation im Rollenspiel*", in welchem Artikel zur Wichtigkeit von Repräsentation gesammelt wurden. Dieses Sammelband liefert wichtiges Basiswissen zur inklusiven Gestaltung des Tischs[5] und war der erste Inspirationsfunke zu dieser Arbeit.

Einschlägige Literatur aus vielen Themen stellt Hintergrundwissen, darunter Basisliteratur zu Rassismus, Gender, (kulturelle) Repräsentation und dem pädagogischen Wert von Role Playing Games. Auch Regelwerke von TTRPGs wie *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* und *Monsterhearts 2* werden in die Analyse miteinbezogen.

Methode und Vorhaben:
Zuerst werde ich durch Literaturrecherche grundlegendes Wissen zur Thematik zusammentragen und erörtern.
Danach werde ich eine mixed-method-Methode anwenden, in der zwei unterschiedliche Methoden tragende Rollen spielen werden: Expert*inneninterviews und Vergleichende Analyse.

Im ersten Schritt werde ich Expert*inneninterviews mit Menschen, die Table-Top RPGs spielen und sich mit dem Label „queer" identifizieren, führen. Ich werde Personen befragen, die TTRPGs queer spielen bzw. queere Lebensrealitäten durch das Spielen für sich verhandeln konnten.
In der vergleichenden Analyse werde ich vorhandenes Material (Podcast bzw. Aufnahmen auf Plattformen wie youtube.com oder twitch.com) von TTRPG-Kampagnen (Spiele, die über mehrere Sessions gespielt werden) oder One-Shots (für gewöhnlich eine Session lang) beleuchten und vergleichen. Manche Spiele haben explizit queere Hintergründe und Einflüsse, andere nicht. Durch den Vergleich werden Unterschiede herausgearbeitet.

Schlussendlich werde ich die gesammelten Informationen auswerten, um meine Fragestellung zu beleuchten.
Praxisrelevanz, Transparenz und Interaktion sind für mich zentral, die Generalisierbarkeit der Ergebnisse wird nur sekundär angestrebt.

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[5] Hiermit ist gemeint, eine inklusive Atmosphäre zu schaffen, damit alle Spielenden sich am Spieltisch wohl fühlen können.

xx. Exposé – English

The most famous TT RPG (Table Top Role Playing Game) is probably *Dungeons & Dragons* (abbr.: *D&D*). Its first rulebook was published in 1974 and by 2014, the fifth Edition of the game was released. D&D is known as a game from and for white men[6]. Gatekeeping and mansplaining are well known phenomenon for *D&D*-players[7]. But recently, subversive movements have established themselves. They configure the game to be more inclusive and queer. Pen & Paper Role Playing Games, also called Table-Top Role Playing Games (abbr. TTRPG), are being played and transformed by queer groups. For example, TTRPGs are being created that include queer realities of life or even make them the crucial point of the game.

My question lies within the context of the queerness of TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which has shaped the first experiences with TTRPGs for many players. Explicitly, I am interested in the differences between queer and non-queer games. Therefore I will explore gaming experiences in both contexts. Further, I will research to which extent the possibility of experiencing gender in a game context affects queer players. After my initial dive into the topic I realized that only a limited amount of relevant secondary literature exists. I see a lot of potential within this realm, which is why I have chosen this topic.

My research interest consists in exploring the possibilities of negotiating queer realities and utopias within TTRPGs as the expression of a queer self. Topics like heteronormative gender roles and utopian world creation will be of relevance.

In TTRPGs, players can create a character, slip into a different identity and see the world through different eyes. The more complex a character is, the more complex and immersive the games can become. Consequently, building empathy leads to the possibilities of creating an understanding for others and the self. The relative "safe space"[8] in the game helps players to slip into a role or different identity without any real-life consequences for a short period of time. Obviously, this is not the same as realizing this role in real life. However, these

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[6] Clements, "Dungeons & Discourse: Intersectional Identities in Dungeons & Dragons."
[7] Schirmer, "DBAD! Gatekeeping and Exclusion in Table Top Gaming."
[8] Lichtenstein, "Queer Players Find More than a Game in Dungeons & Dragons - They Find a Safe Space."

possibilities of self-exploration and the development of empathy do matter, which is why I will research them in this master thesis.

Objective:

It is my objective to find out how queer people (can) include critical views on heteronormative gender roles when playing TTRPGs and to what extent this factor influences the player's gaming experience and their identity.

My main question, therefore, is:

How does the negotiation of queer perspectives and realities in TTRPGs affect the gaming experience of queer players as well as the player's identity?

State of Research

The academic research field concerning the importance of representation within TTRPGs as well as the field of the feminist, inclusive and queer potential of these games has only recently started to establish. Even though TTRPGs have existed since the 1960s, they are a lot less researched than video games. Some published works, such as an anthology concerning transmedial basics of the role play experience (including an overview of role play studies in disciplines such as Social Studies, Literature Studies and Cultural Studies[9]) as well as a limited amount of articles regarding race, violence, representation and morals within the realm of TTRPGs exist. Concerning queerness, very little relevant scientific secondary literature exists.

Therefore, it will be important to include sources from popular sciences into my work. This will also ensure that aspects such as diversity, inclusivity, and queerness in TTRPGs will be emphasized. These topics are often treated on internet-platforms, podcasts and blogs with main topics like Table Top Role Playing Games, Dungeons & Dragons, Geekdom or Fantasy Worlds.

Outstanding to me is the popular-scientific anthology „Roll Inclusive: Diversity und Repräsentation im Rollenspiel" (English: Roll Inclusive: Diversity and representation within role playing games". It includes articles regarding the importance of representation. The

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[9] Zagal and Deterding, *Role-Playing Game Studies*.

anthology provided me with important basic knowledge regarding the inclusivity of a game table and was the initial spark for this thesis.

Relevant literature from different fields will provide background knowledge. These fields include race, gender, (cultural) representation, and the pedagogical potential of role playing games. Additionally, rulebooks of TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* und *Monsterhearts 2* will be included in my research.

Method and plan:

First, I will collect and discuss basic knowledge through literature research. Next, I will apply a mixed method using both expert interviews and comparative analysis.

In the first step, I will conduct expert interviews with people that play Table-Top RPGs and identify as queer. My aim is to interview people regarding how they play TTRPGs in a queer way and how they are able to deal with queer life realities within the game.

Afterwards, in the comparative analysis, I will analyze and compare existing material (podcasts, recordings on platforms such as Twitch.tv and YouTube.com) of TTRPG campaigns, which are played over several sessions, or TTRPG One-Shots, which are played within one session. Some games have explicitly queer backgrounds and influences, others don't. Through comparing them I will work out differences between queer games and hetermonormative games and their influences on queer peoples' gaming experiences.

Lastly, I will evaluate the collected information to answer my main question.

Practical relevance, transparence and interaction play integral roles to my research, generalizability of the results is only secondary.

INTRODUCTION

This is very cliché, but I started playing *Dungeons & Dragons* because my - male - partner did. It was his new creative outlet and finally-something-to-do-again during the first two years of the COVID19-pandemic (which I desperately wished I would not have to mention in my thesis but this is our current reality). He started playing as a player character (PC) and then continued on to start being the gamemaster to his first game (or: "DM" – Dungeon Master) one year later in 2021, which is still rolling (pun intended) now, late-2022. Naturally, that lead to me not only being his sounding board when it came to a lot of his plot and worldbuilding ideas but also becoming an infrequent - but enthusiastic - player myself.

The idea for my thesis started to form when one of our co-players brought along a book called *Roll Inclusive: Diversity und Repräsentation im Rollenspiel*[10] to a session. He thought I might like to look through it. It includes 17 essays on why representation, inclusion and diversity matters and how we can work towards these goals on the table as well as in the game. Before, I did not know how diverse the world of TTRPGs is. I never gave it a thought that there might be different ways of playing. I knew that there were other games such as *Pathfinder,* but I did not know that people made efforts to make the game more inclusive and less heteronormative. I wanted to be a part of this effort. It sparked the idea of writing a thesis on TTRPGs.

At first, I played with the idea of creating a game that would be educational for the stereotypical player (white, male, cis, Western) and for their development of empathy towards people that are marginalized (sometimes in multiple ways). After some research, I realized the high horse I was sitting on: How could I, as a queer newbie-player, have the tools, knowledge or audacity to start educating others on how to play D&D to *educate the people*. Also, I believe that TTRPGs do not primarily have the focus of education, but of fun immersion in a different world or identity, which is why I shied away from focusing solely on the educational aspect. This is when I started my research, like any responsible adult and serious scientist would do, on YouTube.com. There, I stumbled upon the video "Why Is D&D So Popular With LGBT Nerds?"[11]. In the video, experts like queer TTRPG streamers were interviewed regarding topics like identity and identity exploration, media representation and its importance for interesting story lines, representation, anti-discrimination and homebrewed content.

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[10] Falkenhagen et al., *Roll Inclusive.*
[11] Rowan, "Why Is D&D So Popular With LGBT Nerds?"

I started to ponder on ideas of letting queer players talk about their experiences concerning identity when playing TTRPGs. The first step, however, would be to understand whether and how queer identities can be expressed, experimented with and experienced in TTRPGs.

I believe that this topic is of relevance because queer people lack opportunities of experimenting with identity because there is a justified fear of not only being bullied[12], but even physically attacked[13] when doing so in the real world and in public. There is a lack of academic interest in this topic, as, in my initial research, I have only found three papers[14] that focus on queerness and TTRPGs.

It is my goal to figure out how queer gaming can help release the burden of expressing heteronormative gender roles for queer players in and outside of the game; how these utopias and fictional worlds help to express the queer self; and what influence these experiences have on the gaming experience of a player and on the player's identity itself. I want to know how and to what extent queer players experiment with identity when playing TTRPGs.

My main question, therefore, is:
How does the negotiation of queer perspectives and realities in TTRPGs affect the gaming experience of queer players as well as the player's identity itself?

Method

I will discuss the question with a mixed-method-approach. Firstly, I will create a framework of what a "queer gaming experience" consists of and showcase the current state of research. Then I will interview queer gamers that have negotiated their queer identity through playing TTRPGs to figure out how the gaming experience has affected their identity expression. I assume that queer players explore identity through playing TTRPGs and that playing role playing games (abbr. RPGs) has helped them to realize or specify their queerness and/or has had influence in the presentation of their own queerness in real life. I aim to find out whether

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[12] "LGBTQ+ Bullying."
[13] Flores et al., "Victimization Rates and Traits of Sexual and Gender Minorities in the United States."
[14] Sullivan, "Players in Control"; Shepherd, "Roll for Identity"; Clements, "Dungeons & Discourse: Intersectional Identities in Dungeons & Dragons."

my assumptions on a queer gaming experience and its impact on queer peoples' lives are true.

In the last step I will analyze video content of TTRPG-sessions that are available to me via the internet (e.g. streams, YouTube videos) to figure out how queer gaming experiences are negotiated in existing games and whether there are clear boundaries between queer and heteronormative ways of playing TTRPGs.

I.   THEORY

1.1. What are TTRPGs?

Mackay defines TTRPGs as "an episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved"[15]. To rephrase, a group of people, usually consisting of one gamemaster (DM for Dungeon Master in *Dungeons & Dragons*, GM for Gay or Game Master, narrator,…) and one or multiple players (PC for player character) coming together to create a story. [16]The outcome of certain situations and actions is influenced by the rules of the game and the gamemasters' judgement, which will - often randomized by a dice roll - lead to either success or failure. Fortunately, there is more than one way to achieve ones goal – creativity in problem-solving is encouraged. In contrast to LARPs (Live Action Role Playing games), the players do not fully play out the situations. They often play their characters but are not forced to do so – some chose to talk about their character in first person, others in third person. The players usually sit around a table and create the plot in their heads, and sometimes the imagination is aided by things like miniatures of characters and battle maps.

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[15] Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 5.
[16] Other constellations do exist, such as games without GMs or games for only one player.

An advantage to this type of game is the bonds formed amongst players.[17] These bonds can create a trusting environment in which mutual support is key and in which exploring identity is possible.

A more extensive explanation of how TTRPGs work will be given in chapter 1.1.2.

1.1.1. The evolution of TTRPGs

Historically, TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* have favored "the *accuracy* of simulation over the *ethics* of simulation"[18]. This "accuracy" towards canonical works of fantasy and fictional worlds in (White) culture (e.g. *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*) and classic Western fantasy tropes that game realms are based on is used as an excuse to reiterate problematic misogynistic, heteronormative, homophobic and racist stereotypes. This has especially been a problem in the 1970s and 1980s, when rule books for TTRPGs were published and spread widely for the first time. Canonical fantasy literature as well as rule books have been written predominantly by White, Western, male (gaming) authors that value "accuracy" (using either biological or genre-specific excuses) to create problematic rules for TTRPGs (e.g. female characters were automatically weaker than male characters and had the possibility to "seduce" or "charm" - only! - male characters).

It was not only the RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* that included sexist and homophobic tropes. Stenros and Sihvonen have outlined the way representation has changed in TTRPG rule books since they first came up in the 1970s in the article "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books.". I will outline their findings briefly because it is important to know the genealogy in order to understand why the interest in TTRPGs as potential for identity finding and as comment on society has only just started to develop.[19]

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[17] Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett, "Table-Top Role-Playing Games as a Therapeutic Intervention with Adults to Increase Social Connectedness," 17.
[18] Trammel, "Misgyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons."
[19] For a more detailed discussion, see Stenros and Sihvonen: "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books." Also for a more detailed discussion on the white, male history of TTRPGs see G.A. Fine's *A Shared Fantasy (1983).*

When TTRPGs were invented, characters were usually not multifaceted and storylines not multilayers. Rather, to "conquer and slay" was in the foreground, often congruent with single-dimensional characters.

> „In the dawn of role-playing games play consisted mainly of fighting, exploration of space and adventure, and character development referred to measurable statistics, not growth of a personality. Considering the context where role-playing games emerged – a male-dominated wargaming community [, this is not surprising.]"[20]

In the 1980s, queer sexualities started to play a role in TTRPGs, but not in a positive way: they were mostly depicted as villainous, abominations. One prolific example is the game *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend*, published in 1988: its source book lists transsexuality, asexuality, gayness, bisexuality, fetishes and voyeurism as sexual disorders, next to necrophily.[21]

In the 1990s, this biased representation started to slowly change. Because queerness was easier and less conspicuous to portray positively in theses genres, it was mostly negotiated in subculture-genres like horror and cyberpunk. There, references to queer characters were often vague and coded as to not antagonize conservative players. The more mainstream fantasy genre still lacked descriptions of anything but heteronormative genders and sexualities.

Later in the 1990s, the rise of the internet brought along a new era of fan-made additions to existing games. For example, homebrewed content such as supplements to existing games and entirely new rule books and games were introduced. Then, "[i]n the early 2000s, the representation of queer identities in RPGs proliferated."[22]

Even though Stenros and Sihvonen argue in 2015 that queer experiences were erased in TTRPGs for a long time, they have found new evidence four years later that queer storylines have existed since at least the 1970s:

> Linguist and author M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) was a trailblazer in setting design and the first fully realised RPG world, *Tékumel*. The rulebook argues for developing coherent complexes for players to explore, and one of the examples is "The Tomb of Mnekshétra, the Lesbian Mistress of Queen Nayári of the Silken Thighs" (Barker 1975, 102)[23]

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[20] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons."
[21] Jaquays, *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend.*, 71.
[22] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons."
[23] Sihvonen and Stenros, "On the Importance of Queer Romances."

The authors argue that, while queer story lines have existed for a long time, early TTRPG experiences preferred combat-heavy plots because they are rooted in war games and strategy games. Anything that did not focus on strategic or combat related content was not important to the game in the beginning. Over time, though, storylines and roleplaying became more important.

A lot has changed since the first Edition of the D&D rulebook was published in the 1970s. The newest Edition (5e) has been generally complemented for its more inclusive nature. The mono-dimensional nature of TTRPGs (with the focus on combat situations and war simulations) has changed. Now, societal issues and social structures often play a bigger role in the world building, leading to multi-layered characters and gameplay. Representation and identification are more important to the game because they are more important to players.

Because of the open world building character of TTRPGs, many possibilities exist for improving representation and inclusion. As Aaron Trammell states, "[t]his task is one that must be taken up by all members of the community. It means not considering these discussions as solely for 'social justice warriors',…"[24].

It is the responsibility of all players and creators of TTRPGs to create a more inclusive game on the table as well as in the fictional game itself. There are many different approaches, including both "top-to-bottom" and "grassroot", that support one another to develop more inclusive game systems. The "top-to-bottom" method is represented by publishing diverse rule books and campaigns. "Grassroot" methods are exemplified by players creating "home-brewed" characters, rules or even whole rule systems. As Stenros and Sihvonen write: "[T]he influence of player practices has grown, especially as the significance of the internet has increased (…) It is evident that the more adventurous material usually emerges from fan forums."[25]

Culturally, RPGs are gaining more and more interest as well as notoriety in mainstream-media. According to Shepherd, this "explosion in popularity (…) can be attributed to the rise of live streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv, the release of the game's (i.e. *Dungeons &*

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[24] Trammel, "Misgyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons."
[25] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons."

Dragons, note by me) fifth edition (…), which was aimed at accessibility for new players, and the growing mainstream popularity of nerd culture"[26]. Even though the representation of TTRPGs in TV and films have been somewhat stereotypical in the early 2000s, this should not hide the fact that TTRPGs are gaining popularity and getting more diverse.

1.1.2. How do TTRPGs work? A short introduction on the example of Dungeons & Dragons[27]

Dungeons & Dragons is by far the most represented TTRPG in mainstream media and has had tremendous commercial success since it was first published in 1974. Even though there have been controversies concerning representation, the newest version, "5e" - or the 5th edition, published in 2014, has given the game new wind: rules have been simplified and many of the controversial characteristics (e.g. racist and misogynistic notions) have been rectified. *Wizard of the Coast*, the publishing company, is working continuously on making the game more inclusive, notably also because the gaming community is holding them accountable for missteps.

Many other TTRPGs, also homebrewed ones (i.e. player-created and not part of official source books), are similar to the game system of *D&D.* That is why I will introduce the rules on the example of this game.

Setting up the game

As Shepherd has summarized fittingly: "This game is a unique system that involves improvisational storytelling, game mechanics, and a large amount of player autonomy."[28] The storytelling is cooperative, as the story is developed by the players together. There is no specific limit to the amount of players that can play together, although usually, a party consists of 4-7 people.

The rulebooks bring structure into the imagined world and help determine the outcome of actions using dice. But who imagines the world?

There are two roles in *D&D*:

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[26] Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 1.
[27] based on Shepherd, "Roll for Identity"
[28] Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 10.

- Dungeon Master (also DM) who is the main world creator, chief story teller, referee and plays all NPCs or non-player-characters
- Player, controls a single character (PC or player character)

The players create their characters on the base of different classes, races, backgrounds, spells and items that are listed in the rulebooks and create their core statistics (such as strength, stealth and wisdom) according to the background, personality and/or history of their character. These statistics, give the game structure because they create a framework for what is possible and what is not. In general, people can create a multifaceted character, i.e. a representation of themselves or someone with aspects of a person they want to act out and explore.

PCs can level up after certain goals are accomplished (usually the defeat of an enemy in battle).

Game Play

The game play goes as follows: the DM describes a scene and the players decide how their PC reacts. If there is a chance of failure on that action (e.g. listening in on a conversation unnoticed) the DM might ask for a skill check for the relevant ability with a D20 or a 20-sided dice (e.g. "stealth check", which means that they have to roll their twenty-sided die, add or substract their personal ability in the category "stealth", which has been developed when the character was created before the game started). The player needs to role a number that is higher than the number the DM has set in their head in order to succeed (in this case: listen in unnoticed) or fail (in this case: get noticed while listening in). Depending on the role outcome, the story will carry on accordingly.

A campaign can have different goals and may not end after one single quest (they usually do not). Instead, the players meet in multiple sessions to continue a story. The DM gives the players certain "hooks" which offer the players different paths from which they can chose. Depending on their choices, the story can alter and transform. Together, the DMs and the player's choices create a storyline.

The party continuously creates an interactive story (usually verbally) in a collaborative matter.

It is important to note that each group can interpret the rules as they wish, which means that each group plays slightly differently. Often, the DM will use a mix of official content, non-official content and homebrewed (or self-made) content to create their own storyline and game structure. For example, in the old versions of D&D, some ability modifiers were based

on the sex of the character. Some DMs chose to ignore these modifiers. (In *D&D 5e*, this does not occur anymore).

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that D&D is only one of many game systems that exist. Many mechanisms that I have described are generally similar in many TTRPGs (roleplaying a setting in an interactive matter, rolling dice to decide the outcome of an action,…), but if we look closer, subtle differences, such as other consequences for failed rolls (or actions), change a game dramatically.

Many indie games designate themselves to be "Powered by the Apocalypse" (abbr. PbtA), a design framework that is based on Vincent and Meguey Baker's Apocalypse World. Apocalypse World is a collaborative story-telling system that puts focus on relationship dynamics and storytelling and less so on battles and fighting[29]. Mechanical influences include: playbooks with designated roles of characters; a gameplay that is based around moves; a game that is structured around one narrator and several players; and a less complicated dice system than many other TTRPGs apply. Games that are "Powered by the Apocalypse" are not an official part of a brand. Instead, authors label their games as such to show that their game has certain qualities and mechanics that are often found within these games. As the Bakers have written: „'Powered by the Apocalypse' isn't the name of a category of games, a set of games' features, or the thrust of any games' design. (…) If you've created a game inspired by Apocalypse World, and would like to publish it, please do."[30] As Berge has described fittingly, PbtA is a way that „independent TRPG designers have developed a shared toolkit for supporting queer narrative play."[31]

What makes TTRPGs a perfect vehicle for queer exploration of identity?

Playing a character in TTRPGs does not only mean that one can explore an identity different that their own, but possibly even identities one fears to inhabit in their current-state society. In their Master Thesis "Not Just Roleplay: How Rules Shape Identity Exploration and Community Creation in LARP and Tabletop Games", Vinca Merriman sought to understand how game rules could influence the exploration of an identity, identity performance and strategies of social interaction. They argue that the current research on table top role playing games suggests "that roleplaying games help players explore aspects of their own identity

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[29] See Berge, "Monster Power. Rebel Heart. Gay Sword.," 182.
[30] Baker and Baker, "An Open Letter Re: Powered by the Apocalypse."
[31] Berge, "Monster Power. Rebel Heart. Gay Sword.," 183.

that might be difficult to explore in the real world."[32] They conclude that the rules shape the space for exploration of identity. For example, the rulebooks help to differentiate between player and character, which helps the group of players to explore moralities and aspects of self that they might not feel is intrinsic to them. If the world building is close to our own world, it might lead to players being encouraged to examine the identity of their character in the game as well as their own identity. Merriman continues to state that in future work, it would be interesting to explore whether:

> players shape their characters in order to explore questions they may or characteristics they may have built their character around in the first place or do they grow more in line with what their character needs based on in-game circumstance? In depth interviews with these players about their existing characters along with observation of their playstyles and analysis of their character build could be a way to answer some of these questions.[33]

One aspect of TTRPGs that might inhibit exploration of identity is that analog games are less anonymous than digital games. The table needs to be a relatively safe space for the players, which means that the support of the group is necessary to be able to explore identity. If the DM does not create situations in which playing out the character is possible (generally known as "down-time" or time that is not specifically structured to continue the goals of the campaign), players will not be able to fill out their characters and roleplay them in an extensive way. TTRPGs are a collaborative experience. Even though the DM relinquishes their power over the game partly, they still have more influence over the storyline than the other players. If they refuse to create plots or let plots emerge that discuss gender, it is impossible to explore aspect of that identity within the game. Also, the other players need to be willing to engage while roleplaying with others' characters' identities. Without these collaborative moments, engaging with identity will not be possible.[34]

The agency of creating a character and having narrative control over it brings attachment to the character. Without narration, created through interaction with the other players, this will not be possible. Shepherd sums it up perfectly when they write:

> Dungeons and Dragons, and similar tabletop roleplaying games are a clear vehicle for expressing and understanding identity through three key aspects: the creation of characters, the atmosphere of the players involved in the game, and the scenarios being played out at the table.[35]

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[32] Merriman, "Not Just Roleplay," 1.
[33] Merriman, 45.
[34] See Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 70.
[35] Shepherd, 44.

It is also important to note that the table "isn't necessarily a safe space when it's with unsafe players or DMs."[36] The possibility of playing online has been explored more during the COVID-19 pandemic.[37] For queer TTRPG-players, it can be easier to explore identity when playing with (queer) strangers. Without ones' friends around, there is no (or at least less) fear of being rejected or risk of hurt.

1.1.3. *RPG does not equal RPG – differences in TTRPG and (MM)ORPG*

One study on representation of the LGBTQ- community in the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) World of Warcraft found out that,

> "[a]lthough sexuality was an important identifier for participants, gaymer identity was tied less to a queer sexuality than to a queer sensibility. (…) That is, gaymers privileged an appreciation of and attentiveness to the artifice (and humor) of gender and sexual norms"[38].

The expectations of an appreciation of and attentiveness to the artifice of gender and sexual norms on games are presumably less easily met in online games (games that are programmed by a small group of people to be consumed by a big group of people that need to be financially feasible in a capitalist society) than in TTRPGs. Often, they fall in to the trap of tokenizing as well as stereotyping queer characters and thus, doing the opposite of the (presumed) intent - creating more queer visibility.[39]

It is important to state that, in comparison to video games, the small scale of each individual TTRPG gives the players more flexibility and authority over what the game develops to be, leading to more potential for transformative power. As Nielson writes about the constraints of MMORPGs and other video games:

> In an ideal world players would develop their own games, thus, having complete "design authority." One of the benefits to non-computerized *Dungeons & Dragons* games, for instance, is the ability for players to create their own worlds, but even in this game, time constraints and the fantasy genre limit players. (...) We cannot ignore that in-game player harassment and stereotypical representations of race, gender, and sexuality occur and are part of the gameworld

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[36] Rowan, "Why Is D&D So Popular With LGBT Nerds?" [34:39]
[37] Walker, "How COVID Helped Tabletop RPGs Go Mainstream."
[38] Shaw, "Talking to Gaymers," 69.
[39] Shaw, "Talking to Gaymers."

and gaming community. These limitations, however, do not mean that RPGs lack any potential for transformative power.[40]

The core rules of TTRPGs are formed (and published) by a small group of people just as video games are programmed by a small group of people. All RPGs are "giving the players the opportunity to 'play who they are' in the digital world [or on the table, added by author], whether they are able, or even desire, to explore this identity offline [or outside of the fictional world, SH]."[41] Still, TTRPGs are more fluid and easily changed. The players have more influence on their game experience and can change rules as well as their in-game-environment. As Stenros and Sihvonen state: (…) [I]n analog role-playing games the character has a stronger presence and is more personal as players have more agency in their creation and actions."[42]

The rulebooks are generally important textual starting points and guidelines for the creation of a TTRPG game, but are not determining factors the way a story arc is determining in a traditional digital game context. They are easily adapted to create queer gaming experiences and thus has the potential for experiencing queer realities (personal experiences as well as societal utopias) in a relatively safe environment. "[T]he allure of roleplaying games such as Dungeons and Dragons [derives from their promises of an] ability to escape reality and take control of a character (…). The consumer can become someone totally different, or simply become an idealized version of themselves."[43]

But what exactly is a "queer gaming experience"? And how do these possibilities help to negotiate the expression of the queer self outside of the heteronormative pressure of society? What complications do players experience when trying to play with identity?

To understand what queer gaming means, I review theoretical frameworks of queer theory and the concept of projective reflection as well as Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy.

[40] Nielson, "Identity Performance in Role Playing Games," 48.
[41] Nielson, 47.
[42] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons."
[43] Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 9.

1.2. Literature Review:

Before heading into this chapter, it is important to note the double meaning of queer, of which both are important for the analysis. Firstly, queer is a way of deviating from the norm, a way of destabilizing the status quo to reimagine what - in this case - TTRPGs can be. Queering undermines conventions, overthrows normative boundaries and challenges dichotomies. As Sihvonen and Stenros state: "While queer theory is largely opposed to the permanence that 'identity' implies and prioritises acts of becoming, we cannot ignore play by and about characters and themes (self)identified as somehow queer."[44]

Secondly, queer refers to "subjects, mechanics, and representation inclusive of LGBTQ identities"[45]. In other words, games, characters, mechanics and narratives that are related to the queer community are also of importance when wanting to figure out the potential of games specifically for this community, even though they might not be opposed to permanence the way queer theory is.

1.2.2. Queer Theory, the concept of narrative empathy, queer gaming

Queer Theory analyzes normal (normative) social and sexual (gendered) structures in communities. As Stewart sums it up, following Martin's understanding of queer theory in *Femininity played straight: the significance of being Lesbian*:

> Queer theory and politics necessarily celebrate transgression in the form of visible difference from norms. These 'Norms' are then exposed to *be* norms, not natures or inevitabilities. Gender and sexual identities are seen, in much of this work, to be demonstrably defiant definitions and configurations.[46]

The most obvious way in which transgressions can be celebrated is in character development. Not only can characters show a variety of identities, they also create a possibility for narrative empathy, a concept developed by Susanne Keen. Shepherd explores the relationship that occurs between the consumer of a fictional world and the characters within this work:

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[44] Sihvonen and Stenros, "On the Importance of Queer Romances."
[45] Sihvonen and Stenros.
[46] Richards, Bouman, and Barker, *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, 62.

> [T]he person becomes attached to [their] character and they begin to move from feeling sympathetic emotions regarding the circumstances of the character to an empathetic response. [… In TTRPGs, t]he players are able to participate in a collaborative storytelling experience in which they have ultimate say over their individual character's actions while the other players and the dungeon master build the story around them, which creates an empathetic response whenever a player's character experiences any emotionally powerful or intense moment.[47]

According to Keen, one feels sympathy *for* a person and empathy is feeling *what* a person feels. The latter can lead to identification with a character. Empathetic narrative techniques in novels include: the genre, setting and time period (or narrative situation); narratives that are focused on characters inner lives rather than plot-laden stories; and the first person narration. In TTRPGs, a player can figure out whether their own identity has many similarities or whether they don't identify as much with the character. If a reader's (or player's) empathic response is too intense, these feelings might lead to the person turning away from the object, leading to a distancing effect, instead of feeling sympathy. Furthermore, Keen questions whether narrative empathy can "call to us across boundaries of difference"[48], but I argue that it is helpful to figure out one's own identity.

The element of identity becomes ever present in TTRPGs, since the players have control over their character to a large extent. The active role of the players means that the audience (in some cases: readers; in our case: players) is no longer passive. Instead there is a participatory element that reinforces the empathetic response and can even lead to identification with the character.

In games, norms do not only get reiterated or transgressed solely through *characters*, it is more complex: For example, *narrative structures* and *game mechanics* also play an important part in creating queer game experiences, meaning experiences that transcend the heteronormative standards.
One of the standards that is challenged in games to create a queer gaming experience is the trope of the singular climactic moment. If it is violated, binaries as well as heteronormative standards are questioned.[49]

The lack of a singular climactic moment is structurally integral to TTRPGs, making it inherently queer in this certain aspect. But, are there other game mechanics that either make

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[47] Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 9.ff
[48] Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 223.
[49] Chess, "The Queer Case of Video Games."

queer gaming possible or essential to TTRPGs? This is one of the questions I intend to research through watching TTRPG campaigns as well as through expert interviews. I will further try to find out, if there are detectable differences between queer and normative ways of playing TTRPGs.

Simulation Games or: How do identities get explored?

According to sociologist Gary Alan Fine,

> … each gaming group interprets, defines, and transforms cultural elements in its sphere of knowledge into the cultural framework of an imagined society. Fantasy games consist of players and referees collectively constructing history and biography for their society and characters. These "experiences" can then be meaningfully referred to by members of the group.[50]

In "Shared Fantasy", Fine wants to answer the questions of *why* and *how* players come together to create a shared fantasy as a collective achievement. Much of Fine's cultural analysis is outdated (the book was published in 1983 and stereotypes D&D-players as mostly male geeks with aggressive tendencies) and written through a heteronormative lens. The description, though, of what TTRPGs are in their core, is still somewhat accurate. He describes TTRPGs as "a hybrid of war games, educational simulation games, and folie á deux."[51].

Shah, Foster and Barany have developed the concept of projective reflection as the mechanism of facilitating learning as identity change through game-based learning. Even though their work focuses on the way identity can be regulated through certain games, some of the theoretical framework still also applies to simulation games that are not intended to be educational. The basics are constructed around the idea of players who "engage in self-transformation or identity change in immersive interactive environments such as games."[52] They make clear that identity change needs to include "intentional student reflection on a starting self, through possible selves, and on the new self that emerges at the end of a game experience"[53].

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[50] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 2.
[51] Fine, 6. Additionally, I want to draw attention to the problematic use of a delusional disorder as metaphor for a game.
[52] Shah, Foster, and Barany, "Projective Reflection: Facilitating Learning as Identity Exploration Through Game-Based Learning," 257.
[53] Shah, Foster, and Barany, 259.

This student reflection is how "learning" can be defined generally. It involves playing with identities in a setting in which the learner (or player) has real choices (upon their character's development) as well as ample "opportunity to mediate on the relationship between new identities and old ones"[54]. The opportunities usually show themselves during the "downtime" of TTRPG-sessions, but can also be part of the main quests.

According to Shah et al., identity change is tracked along four constructs: knowledge, shifts in interest and valuing that are personally relevant, regulated actions (i.e. actions that are focused on a specific goal), and shifts in self-perception and self-definition.[55]

TTRPG-players do not necessarily actively use their gaming experiences to find their own queer identity or have this identity quest as their main goal when playing, but it is a side benefit. Tracking identity change along these four constructs helps me to analyze the interviews.

Side benefits

Educational simulation games are usually more structured than TTRPGs and help students deal with real life situations. Fine states that simulations games (such as many TTRPGs) include three components that are not included in explicitly educational simulation games:

- Pure flight of fantasy
- Embodying a person rather than just a position in society
- A game that is less structured and does not have a finite goal that is supposed to be achieved by the players.

Rather, the players get to have a say in what the goals of the game and/or their characters are. This freedom leads to the possibility of a personal identity quest within TTRPGs.

I believe that these simulations are also applicable to the possibility of creating queer spaces in a heteronormative world. They can enable players to find their identity in a less constricted or dangerous surrounding. This surrounding generally also creates "[t]he possibility of ‚engrossment'—distancing oneself from the ‚serious' world— [and] produces the ‚fun'. (…) However, recognizing the enjoyment inherent in playing the game does not mean that

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[54] Gee, *Good Video Games + Good Learning*, 222.
[55] Shah, Foster, and Barany, "Projective Reflection: Facilitating Learning as Identity Exploration Through Game-Based Learning," 260.f

gaming is unrelated to the ‚serious world.'"[56] Fine continues to state that the relations to reality are mainly recognized as "side benefits" to the fun of a game session. The importance of these side benefits for identity quests of queer players are what will be further investigated in the interviews.

1.3. Framework

1.3.1. Framework : academic literature

Most of the discussions on TTRPGs in an academic context so far have taken place in North America. Unsurprisingly, my first search machine researches trying to find literature from other countries (e.g. "Dungeons and Dragons in Latin America queer", "Asia D&D queer"), have shown tokenistic and exoticizing tendencies. I wished for non-Eurocentric results but found mostly (I assume White) people trying to figure out how to create an "Asian/South American/…" setting for stories. Some articles describe the racist problems of TTRPGs, originating in its roots as a game based on Western fantasy literature. Other forms of discrimination or queer possibilities did not pop up in my results as much.

These results as well as my language skills underline that my thesis will also have a Eurocentric perspective. Not wanting to generalize, it is important to put emphasis on the fact that I work within a North American and European framework in my thesis.

There are three more recent works on the TTRPG *Dungeons and Dragons* that build a foundation to my thesis. All three thesis's were written at universities in the USA.

- "Players in Control: Narrative, New Media, and *Dungeons and Dragons*", an MA-thesis by Stephanie Sullivan
- "Roll for Identity: A Study of Tabletop Roleplaying Games and Exploring Identity", an MA-thesis by Toriana Shepherd.
- "Dungeons & Discourse: Intersectional Identities in Dungeons and Dragons" by Philip J. Clements.

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[56] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 53.

"Players in Control: Narrative, New Media, and *Dungeons and Dragons*" lays groundwork on D&D as narrative creation and narrative engagement and focuses on collective story writing and the way new media can influence contemporary campaigns of D&D. Sullivan conducted an observational and partly participatory study. There is a lack of diversity, as the group they focused on consisted of five White male players.

Sullivan states: "Only through lived experiences do people build the connections necessary to understand abstract principles, and society (…) is structured as a series of games that actually create these associative structures."[57] As TTRPGs are often played out in a fleshed out world (that can be historical, contemporary, utopian,…), players can explore different roles in different societies as they act out their characters. Generally, the worlds do have at least a resemblance to the players' societies, since it is hard for humans to come up with a society that is completely different from their own, let alone play out characters in such a surrounding. Because of the similarities, players can draw comparisons to the real world and the way their character would be treated within it. If the world building of the campaign happens to be more foreign or utopian to the players reality, they can, for example, explore how their character would develop without these constraints or rules and can possibly correlate their findings to their own queer identity search.

"Roll for Identity: A Study of Tabletop Roleplaying Games and Exploring Identity" is a thesis that "seeks to expand of these previous works by bringing the conversation of identity into the space of *Dungeons and Dragons* while also bringing a distinct focus into racial, neurodiverse and queer identities"[58]. In their research, Shepherd uses queer theory and adaptation theory as well as Shira Chess' theory of the narrative structure of queer games, Suzanne Keen's *theory of narrative empathy* and Jackson Lears text *Fables of Abundance* as theoretical background. Then, they continue to analyze a *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign they DM themselves while also interviewing the other participants about the way they play with identity in the game. They conclude that "*Dungeons and Dragons* is something that can no longer be ignored by American Studies scholarship. It is a game that is actively shaping and being shaped by the changing American culture."[59] They also deduce

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[57] Sullivan, "Players in Control," 28.
[58] Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 15.
[59] Shepherd, 69.

that *Dungeons & Dragons* can help the players to understand their own identity and practice empathy as well as normalize identity play at the table, if the DM and the players are willing to make space for these discussions.

In "Dungeons & Discourse: Intersectional Identities in Dungeons and Dragons", Philip J. Clements writes about nerd culture on the example of D&D and how these spheres are often misogynistic and racist. They write that, according to US (pop) culture, "being 'nerdy' is in some respects the whitest way of being white."[60] and continue to extensively show in which ways and through which media (rulebooks as well as representation of D&D in movies, on TV, in comics) sexist and racist tropes and stereotypes are reiterated or questioned. They also analyze the way "D&D is a space where (…) sometimes, unexamined ideas about race and gender are questioned. D&D is a space of play, and that can include playing with, and even subverting, dominant cultural narratives."[61] The table is usually a safe space for players, making it easier to play through uncomfortable experiences than they would be in real life. This is why D&D can "be a place for serious social discourse, where players and their characters ask probing questions about uncomfortable social realities through the lens of fantasy."[62]

One important source is Analoggamestudies.org, an online "journal dedicated to the academic and popular study of games containing a substantial analog component." (https://analoggamestudies.org/about/our-mission/, 12.07.2022) Some articles on *Analoggamestudies.org* critically approach the heteronormative structures and subversive possibilities of TTRPGs, including "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books" (Stenros & Sihvonen, 2015) and "Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons" (Trammel 2014).

Differentiation:

While Shepherd lay groundwork on the importance of TTRPGs in the Academic Sphere as well as the principle possibilities of exploring identity, in this work I will analyze what mechanisms are used in queer gaming and try to navigate a definition of a queer gaming experience. I will also interview queer players to figure out what impact the game

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[60] Clements, "Dungeons & Discourse: Intersectional Identities in Dungeons & Dragons," 2.
[61] Clements, 1.
[62] Clements, 5.

experiences have had on them as a form of exploring their own gender identity (i.e. if the understanding and expression of their identity has changed because of their in game experiences).

1.3.2. Framework : non-academic literature

A myriad of online content like blog entries or Youtube.com-videos exist about queer gaming experiences and the position of the queer community within the subculture of TTRPGs. It is important to include these texts and the voices of queer players in my research, as online journals and blogs are often a way for queer players to create safe spaces in which they show their voice and share their ideas with a large audience.

Sources include videos on Youtube.com as well as articles on www.dicebreaker.com and other online gaming magazines or blogs.

According to Isabelle Lichtenstein, "Between the roleplaying aspects of the base game, the ubiquitous representation of queer stories and an increasingly inclusive foundational framework, Dungeons & Dragons has become not only an enjoyable game for LGBTQ+ players but a queer wonderland."[63]
Rowan Ellis also argues that there has been a boom of queer players within the last few years. This leads to more queer content created by independent creators who design TTRPGs like *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* and *Monsterhearts*, that "aim to give a specifically queer role playing experience."[64] They argue that TTRPGs appeal to the queer community because it is a way of exploring their identity in a safe space. The makers of D&D specifically have been working on inclusion as well. For example, in the *D&D Player's Handbook* of the newest version (5e), "[y]ou don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender"[65] when creating your character.
Generally, exploration is easier in this environment than in video games, where choices are limited, and in theater, where bodies are limiting and type-casting is a common practice. Additionally, there are little real life stakes. This distancing from dangers and fears as well

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[63] Lichtenstein, "Queer Players Find More than a Game in Dungeons & Dragons - They Find a Safe Space."
[64] Rowan, "Why Is D&D So Popular With LGBT Nerds?" [4:41]
[65] *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 121.

as physical presence can empower someone to become whatever they want. Rowan adds that they chose their name from a character that they played.

As more and more articles about queer table top games are published, queer perspectives are added that showcase why these two realms fit together so well. In "Queer tabletop games are having a moment", Lindsay Eanet writes that another inherently queer aspect of TTRPGs is the way a party forms out of necessity quickly: "It's natural that so many queer TTRPGs would center the theme of found family, also an essential part of the TTRPG experience"[66]. Ruby Lavin was interviewed for the article and adds: "It's always the hard part about D&D — *figure out why you're hanging out*. If you think about it for 10 seconds, it's going to be a found family." (ibid) The community ethos is not only found within the story, but also on the table. Collaborative creation process are often integral to queer TTRPGs when the setting is created by the group and not only the MC (or DM) and relationships and the way they evolve are at the core of the game's intent. Non-combat resolutions are more often offered than in traditional TTRPGs.

Dominique Dickey, who has worked on a multitude of TTRPGs, was also interviewed in the article. Dickey emphasizes the possibility of exploring empathy and identity through playing RPGs:

> In RPGs, there is an almost bottomless capacity to build empathy (…) It's one thing to read about someone with a different experience, and it's another thing to become that person. Queer RPGs by queer creators give queer players and GMs room for self expression, but also give people who are not queer or may not know they're queer yet the opportunity to explore that. (ibid)

Eanet's article clearly showcases that informal texts about queer TTRPGs are important to create a full picture of how and why TTRPGs have the potential for exploring queer identity. It also indicates that focusing solely on academic texts would not be able to highlight queer people's view on the opportunities gained from playing TTRPGs and would potentially even silence queer voices, as they are marginalized within the academic realm.

To summarize, Sullivan has explored D&D as a playground for narrative creation and engagement, Shepherd has expanded topic by bringing the conversation of identity into play and Clements has explored misogynistic and racist problems within the TTRPG community but has also shown the possibility of serious social discourse within this realm. With the following interviews, I will explore these personal possibilities for queer people. Many

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[66] Eanet, "Queer Tabletop Games Are Having a Moment."

online resources, outline the increasingly inclusive framework of TTRPGs, possibilities of exploration of identity and the community aspect that is inherent to TTRPGs.

As stated, it is important to highlight queer voices in this realm so that the academic realm does not lose its connection to the queer perspective, as it is a marginalized voice already. With my interviews, I will analyze in which way the aspects of exploration of identity and community influence queer players' gaming experience and whether and in which way these aspects have an impact on their own identity. Through exploring queer people's experience by conducting interviews, I hope to close this gap.

II. INTERVIEWS

I follow Philipp Mayring's method of the qualitative content analysis[67] for the analysis of the interviews. The interpretation follows an inductive category search, meaning that the categories are not fixed before the expert interviews, but develop during their interpretation afterwards.

According to Mayring (Mayring, 32), the method is structured along three main steps:

1.) **Source study**
2.) Explicit and in-depth analysis of **preconceptions**, questions and theoretical background
3.) Process of **interpretation** und understanding the multi-layered material.

2.1. Source Study

2.1.1. Definition of the Material:

I have conducted six one-on-one expert interviews with players of TTRPGs. All interviews were conducted via video-conference. Five of the interviewees identify as queer in some way, one person is questioning. The people include one cis-gender, bisexual woman, one

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[67] Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*.

lesbian nonbinary person, two transgender men, one queer person and one questioning person. All of the interviewees were in their early twenties to early thirties and white. Four people lived in Germany, one in Austria and one in the USA. Some of the interviewees asked for more specific information on the interview in advance, so I sent them the general topics I was going to address. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes. To protect the interviewees' identities, I do not add the transcripts to the addendum.

2.1.2. Analysis of the development of situation

The interviews were voluntary. They were sourced via a call on Instagram, looking for queer people (in any form) that play TTRPGs. One of the interviewees answered to my original post, the others answered to my call through re-posts of my original post on Instagram and sent me private messages. The interviews were semi-structured. I had a guideline of questions but their wording and order varied. The questions were phrased as open questions so the interviewee could answer them freely and include any associations.

Generally, it was important to me to make the interviewees feel comfortable in the interview setting and give them the possibility to express themselves openly. All of the interviewees were informed that they could contact me in case they want to include, specify or exclude any of their remarks after the interview via any media they wished. I also welcomed them to critique me if there is anything that was problematic concerning the interview. The interviews were conducted via online-meeting (either *Zoom* or *Skype*) and were recorded with permission, then transcribed. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees so they could read through them and add follow-up-remarks if wished.

2.1.3. Preconceptions, questions and theoretical background

Preconceptions:

Before conducting the interviews, I hoped that the interviewees would state that TTRPGs helped them to a certain extent to explore their gender identity through playing characters that fit their own identity (and not their identity assigned at birth). I believed that this would also include a preference for "down-time", meaning that they enjoy role-playing in character more than combat or puzzle solving. In hindsight, I realize that these preconceptions not only

constrain what gender means and how it can be expressed (because one can not only explore identity through playing *themselves* but also through expressing certain parts of themselves or finding differences and dissonances between their character and themselves). I also realized that believing down-time to be the preferred part of playing TTRPGs objectified and flattened my view on the interviews to a certain extent since it excluded the multifaceted identity and reasons for playing TTRPGs of queer players (also outside of their queerness). Conducting the interviews helped me to detach my personal preconceptions from my main question, thus helping me to broaden my understanding of the topic.

Questions:

I have compiled the interview questions along the questions of Shepherd[68] but tweaked them to fit my main question. My interviews included and were lead along the following questions:

> **Please describe your LGBTQIA+ / queer identity to me**
>
> **How do you thing D&D has affected you?**
> > Can you remember any moments in a game session that have had a big impact on you (or your identity)?
> > Are there moments where you examine your identity due to situations in-game?
> > Have you changed in your everyday-life because of your experiences in-game?
>
> **Which characters in the game do you usually play or are you usually drawn to?**
> > Which characters do you play right now? Describe your character/s.
> > What is it like to interact with the other players as your character?
> > What does it feel like to play as that character?
> > Have you learned anything about yourself through playing your characters?
> > Do your characters change based on in-game circumstances?
> > Describe to me how you built a character.
> > Do you shape your characters in order to figure out some part of your identity?
> > Can you give me an example?
> > How would you describe your play-style?
>
> **Any narrative structures or game mechanisms specifically?**
>
> **What is it like to participate in TTRPGs with other members of the LGBTQIA+-community / with people that are not part of (said?) community?**
> > Are there any differences in game play between different communities?
> > Does playing TTRPGs feel like a safe space for you?
> > What are your opinions on TTRPGs being a safe space for the queer community?
>
> **Do you have any additional thoughts, comments, questions, concerns for me as a research investigator?**

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[68] Shepherd, "Roll for Identity," 19.

Often, I did not have to ask questions explicitly because the answers were included in responses to other questions. Some questions were excluded in certain interviews because I realized during the first interviews that the answers did not fit within my scope of interest, would not lead to anything important within it or were too complicated to be asked in that setting. For example, I stopped asking about narrative structures or game mechanisms they enjoyed specifically, because the question was too theoretical and the interviewees were not able to answer this without being stumped or feeling confused about the question.

Theoretical background

The interviews include information on the lived experience of queer people when playing TTRPGs. According to academic literature[69], TTRPGs and other Role-Playing Games have historically excluded non-heteronormative experiences but are getting more inclusive in recent years. Queer theory aims to find out how norms are transgressed in different media. In this context I interpret whether and how identity quests can be an important factor in playing TTRPGs for exploring queerness. I also analyze whether there are any similarities in game-play between the interviewees and in which ways queerness and the queer community play a role in their games.

2.2. Interpretation (Summary, Explication, Structuring)

2.2.1. Summary

I will give a short summary of each interview to create context. The order of the interviewees is based on the order I conducted the interviews in. I categorized the summaries by three topics, since I realized that these were the main three categories the interviewees talked about: The player's TTRPG-experience, the influence on real life, and their experience within the group of players.

I only use the first letter of the interviewees' names to protect their privacy.

When conducting an interview in German, I informed the interviewees that I would translate their quotes myself. I also offered them that they could read the translations in case they would like to check if the translation is OK for them.

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[69] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*; Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons."

Interviewee 1: F.

F. is a cis-gender, questioning man in his early thirties that cross-dresses infrequently as a woman. His preferred pronouns are he/him. He lives in Germany and has been playing TTRPGs such as *Shadowrun*, *Vampyre – The Masquerade*, *DSA* (*Das Schwarze Auge*) and *D&D* for 20 years. It is a big part of his everyday life.

F. stated that he was bullied in school for traits that he (or others) considered feminine, such as being interested in music, painting and playing theatre or "dancing in a feminine way" rather than playing soccer. That was the first time he wondered whether life would be easier and happier as a girl. He said that these feelings did not disappear after having left school, but that he processed the conflicts and problems he has met. At university, he felt the freedom to express himself more experimentally and started to cross-dress as a woman from time to time. On the one hand, he stated that he did not feel uncomfortable being read as a man, on the other hand, he also said: "wenn ich jetzt irgendwie einen Genie und einen Wunsch frei hätte und dann halt so sagen könnte ‚okay, du kannst von heute auf morgen, hast einen anderen Körper und keiner stellt das irgendwie in Frage', dann würde ich das machen."[70]

TTRPGs

F. started playing TTRPGs with peers in his theatre group during high school. He mostly played female characters with high social competence that did not focus on fighting. He did, however, consider himself a "Power Gamer", which means that he likes to optimize his character and their statistics to gain the best advantage during in-game situations such as puzzles and battles. Creating his characters, F. often starts out with a mechanic concept that sounds interesting and rounds out the personality of the character with influences from (niche) literature. Notable characters he mentioned were an infiltrator and disguise expert (that he started playing before exploring his own identity), a transgender dwarf in the closet and an anarchistic, female orc. F. enjoys playing in settings that are fantasy- or sci-fi-based, but does feel that it would be boring to play in a realistic setting because: "Realität hab ich ja im echten Leben, die muss ich nicht spielen."[71] He likes playing down-time, in which he often learns more about his own character as well as others.

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[70] Translation: if I would have a genie and one wish, and if I could say: 'okay, starting tomorrow, you can hava a different body and nobody would question anything", I would do it.
[71] Translation: I have reality in real life, I don't feel the need to play it.

Influence on real life

TTRPGs have been an outlet for F. to explore his female side. He almost always plays female characters, which can give him gender-euphoria from time to time. Having realized this has made things clear for him about his own gender identity. For example, he enjoyed it when one (male) player asked him: "Hey, ich fände es cool wenn mein Charakter in einer Beziehung wäre, wärst du dafür offen?"[72]

He also thinks playing TTRPGs has helped him to train feminine speaking patterns and body language. He said that *passing* is an important factor to him, partly because of the factor of safety, partly because of his perfectionism.

Additionally, he has met new friends.

Group

F. mostly plays within a long standing pool of friends and acquaintances. They sometimes have longstanding campaigns, sometimes hop in- and out of campaigns. It was important to F. to state that they are usually a group of German, White, cis-gender men and that the pool of players is not very diverse. One of the players has portrayed a powerful, Black character that likes to instigate fights with the authorities. F. has not stated whether he found this problematic, but having mentioned it, it does imply that there is some thought going into this situation.

He feels that the table is a safe space for him because he either plays within the pool of people that he knows and likes or he plays with strangers online. In the latter situation, he said he can just log out and never see them again in case he feels uncomfortable. His friends often play queer characters, which is normal to them. They mostly play in a utopian setting in which queerness is normalized, but other factors (such as race) are still being discriminated against. In their campaigns, they like to fight against evil (which is sometimes not as easy in real life) in battles but also in society. For example, they have built a soup kitchen for the poor in one of their campaigns.

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[72] Translation: Hey, I would like it if my character would be in a romantic relationship, would you be open to that?

Interviewee 2 – K.

K. is a Cisgender, bisexual women in her twenties. She lives in Germany and has been playing TTRPGs for 2 years, notably *Dungeons & Dragons* in a relatively big group of seven people (DM included). She went to catholic school in a small town and was never confronted with topics like gender and sexuality during that time. Only at university did she start to explore her identity as a bisexual woman. She is also exploring whether she is on the asexual spectrum. K. would not describe herself to be part of the queer community. For example, she would not join protests or rallies because it is not for her ("Das ist nicht meine Welt"). She believes that it is not important to work on naming her exact sexuality.

TTRPGs

K. has only played one TTRPG so far, which is *D&D*. Her character is a male cleric. He was raised in a very protective environment but had to leave his family after receiving his powers. Now, he explores the world and himself and is constantly overwhelmed with his role as a hero and when it comes to topics like gender and sexuality. K. would say that her character differs mostly from the cleric's. She even said that it is sometimes hard to play him because his moral values differ greatly from hers, and she often is in inner conflict with the cleric. However, K. did say that they are similar insofar as they are both on the journey to find out more about their own identity. Additionally, the character has made a big development throughout the story. K. said that she did not know that the cleric could turn into what he is today, filling her with pride.

K. enjoys happy interactions, "wo ich nicht das Gefühl habe: ‚Oh mein Gott, ich muss mich jetzt mal eben einschließen gehen. Schon wieder in meinen Kleiderschrank krabbeln.'"[73] She already has made plans for her next character, who is also queer, but does not want to abandon her cleric at the moment.

Influence on real life

K. does not believe that there are a lot of influences on her real life when it comes to playing D&D concerning her identity. Playing queer characters and having queer people in her group, however, has helped her to feel more comfortable talking about topics related to

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[73] Translation: Where I don't have the feeling: 'oh my god, I need to lock myself in. Crawl back into the closet again.

gender and sexuality and to deal with these topics generally. Also, she feels that it gives her a sense of queer community even though she would not necessarily describe herself as queer-community-seeking.

Group

The group that K. plays in consists of queer people and allies. Sexuality and gender are usually not a topics in their campaign, even though the characters do have relationships and the DM introduces many queer NPCs. Generally, they play within a utopian fantasy setting where gender and sexuality are not discriminated against, so as to not trigger trauma responses from players. They do, however, discriminate against other traits such as race (e.g. dwarfs). K. has not specified whether all players are white or not.

In their campaign, they have about 30% battles and 70% other interactions. They play on zoom and use break-out-rooms for dialogues that are not supposed to be heard by others, which is interesting mechanically but also leads to long gameplay that can get boring for the other players.

K. would not mind playing with strangers as long as they enjoy roleplaying and don't have a problem with queerness. However, she also said that she would not be friends with people who would have a problem with queerness, implying that she would only play with friends. The table is a safe space for K., however, she would not talk about deep topics with each of the groups' members individually.

Interviewee 3: M.

M. is a Russian-German transgender man in his mid-twenties, living in Germany. He was depressed as a teenager, was bullied by his peers for having short hair and button-up-shirts and being of Russian descent. He moved out of his family's home when he was 16 years old. Later on, he realized that he was transgender but was not able to articulate it to his conservative family. Only after finishing high school did he find a community that he felt safe enough to come out to. He is part of the Furry subculture. Just like F., he has started playing D&D because of the theatre group at his school.

TTRPGs

M. was introduced to TTRPGs, specifically *D&D,* after finishing high-school. He has been playing for about eight years. He plays campaigns but also a lot of One-Shots (a game that

is finished in one session) because of time limitations. Additionally, he has DMed One-Shots and a campaign during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020/2021). He likes to play characters that do not look human like cats, birds, insects and amphibious animals. The characters are often androgynous and don't have sexual identifiers.

At the time of the interview, M. was playing in a small campaign of three players (including the DM). He plays a bisexual barbarian/bard-halfling whose personal goal it is to open up a bar just like his mother, whom he is not able to see anymore. M. identifies with his character in respect of having to separate himself from family and coming to terms with it.

M. enjoys being able to act more freely while playing TTRPGs than he is able to in real life.

Influence on Real Life

Playing TTRPGs has helped M. to express his identity without any danger of being outed unwillingly. It has helped him to be more relaxed and more open about his own identity. M. believes, though, that this is not mainly contributed to TTRPGs, but to his new surroundings. He has started to come out to some people; for example, his friends and his current work place.

However, TTRPGs have helped him figure out nuances of who he is, in which skin he feels the most comfortable, and to feel more accepted. TTRPGs also give him the confidence and courage to counter discriminatory slurs and not be affected by them as much. He said this is because he was able to practice and try out unpleasant situations and dialogues with real people in a fictional world. He has also been able to sense out peoples' standpoint on gender identities by their reaction to him playing male and/or non-human characters.

Group

The current group that M. plays in consists of only two other players. The second character is played by his best friend. She plays a Tabaxi-fighter that is looking up to M's character, the halfling, as a mentor. Queer topics do not play a big role but are present in the background. They explicitly chose to play in a utopian setting without queer discrimination so as to find refuge from real life, as M. struggles with discriminatory slurs and comments in real life.

M. usually plays *D&D* with people that he knows, but has no problem playing with strangers and has done so during an exchange semester at university. They became friends and he is still in contact with some of the other players.

In his experience, cisgender people tend to play themselves (personality and gender-wise) more than queer people, but he also thinks that this can be contributed to the player's lack of experience.

Interviewee 4: S.

S. is a transgender man in his mid-twenties that lives in Germany and has been playing TTRPGs for over 10 years. His friend group is very queer-friendly. He enjoys playing TTRPGs with people that he feels safe with and those that do have a certain knowledge about queerness. S. also DMs but feels that it can be overwhelming. However, he enjoys the players' enjoyment of exploring themselves.

TTRPGs

S. started playing when a colleague at university invited him to join the party (i.e. group). He has played the 2nd and 5th edition of *D&D* as well as other TTRPGs like *Pathfinder* and *Shadowrun*. He started playing *D&D 5e* with a closer group of friends around the same time when he started to come out as a transgender man. It is important to him to feel safe while playing TTRPGs and for him to feel able to discuss queer topics. He also values good communication, open discussions, and not having to hold back any part of himself. Role playing feels very personal to him, which is why it is important that his fellow players are open-minded allies or queer themselves. For example, he explained that he once played a male elf when he was still presenting female and his fellow players questioned this decision, which made him feel uncomfortable.

S.'s characters include a female Aasimar-paladin that he played before his outing and has stayed female, even though the group discussed briefly, whether the character should transition. He shares a motherly nature with his character and feels that it is nice to keep that part of his history with him after coming out. He has also played a female mage in the very beginning of his TTRPG-journey and a nonbinary elf when he started to explore his own gender. In his second group (Shadowrun) he plays a Tiefling-like character that is trans and was not out to the other characters at first. Since they played online and did not see each other, S. believes that the pitch of this voice was also low enough for people not to second guess either (character or himself) of their gender as male, which, in his words, was a "power-fantasy".

He likes to play colorful characters where he can express a part of himself that he is still exploring in real life. He said the only character he has yet to play is a "cis-dude" (Cis-guy), but he is not very interested in it.

Also, S. enjoys battles, especially when strong female characters are involved, but also likes to play down-time when it fits his character because he likes getting to know the characters and ultimately the players better through roleplaying.

Influence on real life

Even though S. does not try to play himself when playing TTRPGs, he said that there is always some part of himself represented in his characters. This means that he sometimes realizes and learns things about himself when his character reacts a certain way to in-game-situations. For example, his Paladin-character once had to stand up against advice from the godly figure tied to him, meaning that he had to revolt against authority. S. realized that this is also something that is hard for him, as he always was the "good kid" and it was often hard for him to allow himself to be his authentic self (also regarding his queerness) and felt that he pressured himself into "always doing everything the right way." ("Ich muss alles richtig machen.") He also learns to be more accepting of conflict. Still, he needs aftercare when it comes to conflict situations with other PCs. He does need check-ins with the other players to make sure that there is no conflict between them in real life. S. was able to differentiate himself from his female characters, thus learning more about his gender identity. He also learned to deal better with his gender-dysphoria regarding clothing.

Group

S. has two regular groups, one group plays D&D, the other Shadowrun. In S.'s regular D&D-group there are many queer people and they also often have queer topics in their game. The campaign is still set in a classic fantasy-setting but is customized to their liking to feel like a safe space, which means, in this case, that there is no or little queer discrimination and queerness is normalized. S. feels that they play a very nuanced game where characters are not necessarily "just evil" or "just good". They also involve topics like neopronouns for dwarfs in their game. This group has always felt safe to S., which is why he has played with gender identities through PCs before coming out during sessions. Nevertheless, he said that queerness is so normalized in his group that he never felt unsure about being able to come out to them. As a result, he also never felt the need to first try out certain situations in character to check his surroundings' attitude concerning transgender people. However, he

does stress that playing TTRPGs is an opportunity to try out different things in a short amount of time and a safe space.

The *Shadowrun*-group has been meeting digitally for about two years and is a less queer space. It is "sehr wertschätzend was so Rollenspiel angeht, also wir spielen super langsam"[74]. When playing with a more heteronormative group, S. feels that it can be less relaxed and he sometimes has to explain more things about his character. He stated that this is something that is everyday life to him so it does not bother him too much. He takes these situation as training situations to leave his comfort zone. However, it does take away the fun of playing to some extent.

S. believes that the game table can be a safe space for queer people, but he does stress that the most important aspect is who the other players are. Not only should they be queer (-friendly), but they should be able to communicate well about expectations and what role they can fulfill in the group. S. believes that talking about consent is closely related to queer topics, since talking about consent and rules can create a safe space. It also helps him as a player to feel valued by the DM.

Interviewee 5: C.

C. is a questioning / non-binary person that lives in Austria. They use they/them and she/her pronouns. For this interview, it was important to C. that I use both pronouns, which is why I will use them alternately in each chapter. She has been playing TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Call of Ctulhu* and *How to be a Hero* for 5 years. She struggles sometimes to move away from certain societal expectations and "scripts". She believes that playing TTRPGs has given her freedom in many aspects and that the potential for joyful moments is underestimated by people that do not play.

TTRPGs

C. has played in one 2.5-year-long campaign and numerous One-Shots. They tend to create characters according to a feeling that they want to express. They believe that every character that they create has some part of their own identity in them, as they need a connection to be able to react in character. Their characters often change spontaneously according to what they feels is more fun to play or what makes more sense for the story. They say: "da habe

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[74] Translation: very appreciative when it comes to roleplay, which is why we play very slowly.

ich lernen müssen, mich auf das einzulassen, dass was anders wird, als ich es mir ursprünglich gedacht habe (lacht). So ist es ja auch mit der eigenen Identität, manchmal ist es was anderes, als es ursprünglich gedacht war, oder?"[75] Their character in the campaign was a female Genasi-druid that was raised in an Air-Genasi-tribe, living in a tower that changes location. After a traumatic event, she was saved by animals and then raised by druids. Because of her background, the Genasi never felt quite at home anywhere, was socially awkward and had a hard time building friendships or relationships. The druid was asexual and pansexual. Having a preference concerning gender when it comes to romantic relationships was not a concept the character grew up with. C. says that they did not know that nonbinary or agender existed when playing their character, but believes that the character might be on that spectrum in retrospect.

C. also played a warlock, a rogue and other classes. One character was supposed to be a lone wolf but quickly changed into taking care of everybody's safety.

C. enjoys finding out more about other characters' backstories as well as the world that was built around them. They are often the first person to initiate role-play situations and especially like two-person situations because it is easier to find out more about the other person than in group settings. They also value humor and fun while playing.

Influence on real life

Playing the Genasi-druid helped C. to figure out more about her identity as a person on the asexual spectrum. She realized that her character does not have a concept of sexuality because of its upbringing, and when this came up during role play, C. enjoyed the relaxation of not having to understand any subtexts or respond in an expected, heteronormative way.

It was also an outlet to let out C.'s childlike side, as she has had to grow up too early. It also helped her to hide herself less and be herself around other people.

She believes that playing a non-binary character also helped her to work on her own expectations on and clichés about what being nonbinary looks like. She felt she put herself and her character to the test on "real" nonbinariness, stuck herself into a box and tried to prove something. She only played this character once or twice and believes that it would have turned out differently in a queerer group. Generally, she often notices moments that feel impactful to her when playing and examine that feeling afterwards.

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[75] Translation: I had to learn to engage in things turning out differently (laughs). Sometimes it's also like that with ones' own identity: it's different from what you expected, isn't it?

Group

C. is not sure whether they were the only queer person playing in the campaign, but they say that queerness was not a topic while playing. They assumed the table to be a heteronormative space. Since the character grew up in a different setting, it met a totally different world. The group did take the character's identity as "quirks". C. hopes that they can play in a queer group at some point, as they think that they will be able to let themselves be more open and vulnerable, feel safer and be able to explore different aspects of identity and talk about them on an eye-to-eye-level out-of-game as well. Playing in the heteronormative situation left them feeling insecure. They say that trying out a queer character would feel a lot more rewarding and useful if the other players also embrace or support play with identity.

The group also did not have any rules about consent while playing, which has led to triggering situations for C. They have had to address their own boundaries later in the game, but believe that the DM would not have asked on his own.

Interviewee 6: R.

R. is a nonbinary lesbian with mainly they/them-pronouns. They live in the USA. They started playing TTRPGs nine years ago and found TTRPGs through their ex-boyfriend, when they played *Savage Worlds*, a riff off *D&D 5e*. They say that *D&D* gets a bad reputation for being nerdy, but the aspect of cooperative storytelling is actually a great "safe way for people to express gender and express sexuality before they're ready to come to terms with it in a present and real setting."

TTRPGs

R. plays D&D regularly with two groups. They play a female cleric at a high level that is learning to understand her emotions and express herself more openly in one group and a non-binary character in the other. They enjoy playing with a queer group since they feel understood and don't need to specify certain things concerning gender expression. R. has only played female characters before starting their queer journey but believe that they have still experimented with gender expression with the way they portrayed those characters. They like to play characters that they would still have fun playing when they have a bad day. That way, they are sometimes able to work things out in-game. They once tried playing the exact opposite of themselves and said that it was "one of the most mentally challenging

things that I've had to do." R. says that they can't *not* be gay in a D&D game. Also, they enjoy a good balance between puzzles, combat and personal interaction like flirting in-game.

Influence on real life

When playing D&D, R. sometimes gets to play out certain situations like being misgendered, which has led to interesting discussions in-game. They believe that "there's always going to be something of your outside person that informs decisions that you make in-game". They said that through the safe-space of the table, they were able to figure out their flirting style (even though they say that the process was sometimes cringy) and that they have learned to feel more self-assured regarding having a high moral compass. Before, they often felt that this would turn people away from them. Now, it is easier for R. to be themselves and not feel judged by others for certain jokes or ways of acting. They said that having people around you that care for you beyond the table is a precious experience. They added: "I think playing D&D allowed me to like myself, I understand that I do really care a lot more than probably I let on and allowed me to care a lot less about things that don't matter as much."

When being asked about certain moments that have had an impact on their real life, they remembered two instances. Firstly, the first time their character died, since they have not had to deal with death in their personal life yet. Their party derailed the campaign to give them a proper burial. Secondly, the first time they got to create romantic situations with a female character when playing a female character themselves. They believe that, in light of the lack of positive representation in media ("the dead-lesbian-trope is really, really rough"), this was an opportunity to portray lesbian characters in a positive way.

Group

When R. started playing TTRPGs, they played in a rather heteronormative setting. According to R., their first group, made up of mostly cis-men, was hyper-aggressive and did play a rather simple "hack-and-slash"-version of a TTRPG. Stereotypical roles were played, R. did not feel comfortable starting discussions about deeper topics and the binary was never broken:

> "First bit of D&D was very combat-heavy. Pretty hyper-masculine even though we had a couple of people who weren't, you know, super duper hyper-masculine themselves but just a lot of those types of characters. And the bad guy was always a guy and the person in distress was always female and it, you know, just very typical RPG elements. While as now, you know, we see a lot of difference in gender and it's, it's diplomacy combined with a lot of compassion for characters."

It did not feel like a safe space for them.

Since then, their surroundings have changed a lot and they play mainly with other queer people and allies. They usually put a lot of queer tones into their games, like romancing other people of the same sex, rolling for "hotness", and staying away from the "murder hobo" trope that their first group used to follow. Also, they care more about the consequences of their actions and the world-setting in general as well as role-playing and the inner workings of their characters, which they get to explore more openly and extensively. Within this group, R. has found a comfortable space in which they talk about the things that are bothering them. Having conflicts in-game has turned into an important lesson in game as they have lost some of the anxiety of people not turning up anymore after conflict.

Consent is an integral part of their games. In one group, they have content warnings before each session. Open communication allows the DM to create a compelling story that is engaging but still has the right amount of conflict and fear without anybody being triggered. There is also check-ins after something intense has happened. R. believes that this is a really good practice (not just in *D&D*). In their experience, "there has been less consent discussions in non-queer spaced and non-ally spaces than in the queer spaces."

2.2.2. Qualitative content analysis

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them and extrapolated four main questions. Since my sample of six people is relatively small, the main questions were relatively easy to deduct. The four questions are based on the players' emphasis in their answers and reactions to questions. I combined two analysis approaches: The questions that had the most reactions (Frequenzanalyse[76]) and that were the most surprising or interesting (Valenz- und Intensitätsanalyse[77]) were structured into the following main answers (or categories). I will extrapolate and structure my analysis along these categories:

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[76] Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*, 15.
[77] Mayring, 15-16.

> **- In which way has playing TTRPGs affected the players' real life, relating to queerness?**
> *-- Category: sense of queer community*
> *-- Category: training real-life situations*
> *-- Category: learning things about themselves*
>
> **- In which way has their queerness affected the player's character development?**
> *-- Category: personal identity is part of the character*
> *-- Category: identity quest is part of the character*
>
> **- In which way did the players include queerness in their game?**
> *--Category: the players did not include queerness*
> *-- Category: the player does state that queerness is not very relevant to playing TTRPGs*
> *--Category: playing a queer character*
> *--Category: queer relationships*
> *--Category: queerness is normalized in the game-world*
>
> **- What is their experience towards the group(s) relating to queerness and safe spaces?**
> *-- Category: Friend groups turn into safe space – tables*
> *-- Category: Queer spaces are safe spaces*
> *-- Category: Queerness is not (always) an important factor*
> *-- Category: Non-queer spaces did not feel safe*

- In which ways has playing TTRPGs affected the players' real life, relating to queerness?

Games can be a pastime that is unrelated to reality. But, they can also help to practice real-life situations or explore identity in a safe environment. All interviewees have experienced this to a certain extent.

-- Category: sense of (queer) community

R. and S. have noted that they have learned to deal better with conflicts through playing TTRPGs. They have learned that conflicts do not necessarily lead to abandonment and that the other player will still show up afterwards. This has helped them to deal with topics like anxiety about conflicts and feeling safe in a community. For example, S. does so through after care with the other person:

> Und dann streite ich mich ja quasi in Character mit einer Person, die ich eigentlich gerne mag, und das fällt mir zum Beispiel ziemlich schwer. Dann ist es halt auch wichtig noch so ein bisschen, ja wie so eine Nachsorge, also wir müssen uns dann nachher noch darüber unterhalten, dass das nicht zwischen uns ist, sondern dass das unsere Characters sind so, das brauche ich auf jeden Fall immer, dass ich dann auch wieder runterkomme, (...)[78]

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[78] Translation: And then, for example, I fight with another person in character, that I actually like, so to say, which is really difficult for me. Which is why a little bit of, sort of, aftercare is important. We need to talk

Generally, M. also stated that playing with real-life people instead of just having programmed NPCs (like in computer games) helps him to feel accepted no matter who he is.

K. stated that having a queer community is not an important factor in her life, but she still feels appreciative of having an opportunity to explore that part of herself when playing *D&D*, She defines playing in a campaign as a way of community-building.

C. shared their regret about not having the opportunity yet to play with a queer group of people but feels that this would be a great opportunity to learn more about their own queerness.

Summing up, playing TTRPGs has helped queer people to connect and to feel comfortable in their connection with other queer people and has helped them to feel safe.

-- Category: training real-life situations

TTRPGs can help to train real-life situations in a safe environment. Most of the players have already used this setting to explore certain situations or explore being their authentic selves in real life. F., who experiments with gender through cross-dressing, has practiced feminine expression: „Und was auf jeden Fall halt auch geholfen hat ist, dass ich wenn ich halt so Sprechweisen oder Körpersprache halt so ein bisschen, also dass ich da dann halt einfach Übung hab, gewissermaßen, weil ich das halt im Rollenspiel auch übe.“[79] M. has learned to feel less influenced by anti-queer slurs. S. enjoys playing with heteronormative groups[80] from time to time to have a relatively safe space to train real-life-settings that are still based on reality. C. tries to mask less and be themselves without a filter. While playing D&D, they can sometimes express this part of themselves already. They are working on translating that into real life.

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about it afterwards, that that did not happen between us, but it's our characters, etc. I definitely need that to calm down.

[79] Translation: And what definitely helped is, when I express ways of talking and body language, I mean, I just have some practice, in a way, because I practice it when role playing.

[80] During my analysis, I will often differentiate between queer and heteronormative groups. While there is a gray-scale, I believe one can differentiate some main traits when it comes to these two extremes:
Queer groups are open to players exploring any form of gender expression and sexual identity and will create an environment that makes it possible for the player to do so, while heteronormative groups will stay within heteronormative tropes of gender and sexual identity and will not invite any gender expression or exploration outside of the binary.

-- *Category: learning things about themselves*

Most players have stated that they learn things about themselves when playing TTRPGs: where certain personality traits come from or even discovering these personality traits altogether, but not necessarily about their queer identity. For some, though, it has had this impact. For example, C. has played a character that did not have an understanding of sexuality because of their upbringing. Feeling relaxed when being able to exclude her character from sexual banter or certain connotations was an important moment in her exploration of being on the asexual spectrum. Additionally, C. notes that she enjoys being able to try out different possibilities of action and reaction when playing TTRPGs. This has led to her being able to express herself authentically without feeling as much pressure of conforming to norms: „in so Rollenspielsituationen [hat] man einfach total viele Möglichkeiten (…), einfach was anderes auszuprobieren eben, und auch anders zu reagieren. Und ich bin jemand, ich habe ganz lange so, mich nicht getraut, von gewissen Skripten abzuweichen."[81]

- In which ways has their queerness affected the player's character development?

All interviewees have stated that, while they do not aim to play themselves, they often include a part of their identity or the exploration of identity in their characters. For some, however, this plays out less explicitly than for others:

-- *Category: personal identity is part of the character*

S. plays a female character that he has already played before coming out. He still is comfortable playing the female character as he defines it as being able to take a part of his past with him („ … so ein Stück Vergangenheit irgendwie noch mitgenommen, das finde ich eigentlich ganz spannend"). He also has played a nonbinary character when he started questioning his socially assigned gender and has since played a male trans-character.

C. has been able to find out more about their asexuality when playing a character that did not have a concept of sex and heteronormative gender roles because of their background: „[Der character] hat von dem überhaupt kein Konzept, also das hat für sie nicht existiert. Und das hat mich total entspannt (…) dass ich das nicht verstehen muss und dass ich da

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[81] Translation: When role playing there are so many possibilities to just try something new, and react differenty. And I am somebody who, for the longest time, did not dare to diverge from certain scripts.

überhaupt nichts damit machen muss."[82] C. states that they could not play a character that does not have some ties to their own personality as they believe that *relating* is the starting point of good role-playing.

R. enjoys playing characters that they would feel comfortable playing even after a long hard day, as they enjoy winding down when playing TTRPGs. Their characters are queer and often playful and quirky, just like themselves. They also state that one does not have to play a character whose identity accords with one's own identity to figure something out about oneself:

„I do think that the ways that I portrayed my female characters helped with that and allowed me to find my masculinity and find the gray area that was between them".

F. usually plays female characters in order to explore their female side and to train female expression.

To summarize, four of six people explicitly include part of their own identity into their characters. However, this does not mean that all their characters are based on their identity. R., for example, has tried to play a character that is the exact opposite of themselves, but has struggled with the concept when roleplaying.

Also, the motivating factor behind playing certain parts of themselves differ. Sometimes, the players see it as an intrinsic part of role-playing, others use it to practice gender expression, and others again like relating to their character in order to make role-playing more intuitive and easier.

-- Category: identity quest is part of the character

Generally, role-playing gives players the possibility to emerge themselves into characters that they (often) create themselves. This means that the character can include as many or as little similarities to the player as they wished. Constantly entering new situations in a relatively open game-space can give a player the opportunity to play out certain things that they might not feel comfortable enough to do in real life (i.e. playing a certain gender, being more - or less - outspoken, confronting, honest, open, etc. than yourself… The possibilities are endless) Obviously, the players still play characters and not themselves. But, as C. has noted, one will always *relate* in one way or another to the character. For some interviewees, these relations were relatively clear:

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[82] Translation: [The character] does not have a concept of that, I mean it didn't exist for her. And that's what totally relaxed me, not having to understand it and not having to do anything with it.

M. avoids including gender-pointers in his characters in general, as he often plays animals. This means that he tends to set aside exploring gender identity and his place in society when playing TTRPGs. Nevertheless, his current PC is dealing with the fact of not being able to return home. M. himself is also dealing with issues regarding not being able to come out to his family and not feeling safe where he was brought up.

K., for whom role-playing and creating complete characters is very important, does not believe that her PCs necessarily portray a part of her queer identity, but rather of the exploration of identity in general. For example, her PC is working on getting comfortable with being gay and coming to terms with playing an important role in the groups' quest, while K. was confronted with topics like gender for the first time at university: „Was mache ich jetzt damit? Und ich denke, da geht es ihm und mir sehr, sehr ähnlich. Also dieses, das, weniger die Identität selbst, aber mehr das Identitätssuchen.“[83]

- In which way did the players include queerness in their game?

-- Category: the players do not include queerness

Players have sometimes actively decided to play non-queer characters because they felt that queer characters would not fit into the group. This only happened in heteronormative spaces. For example, R. states that the first group they played with stayed within the realms of stereotypical gender norms and classical fantasy tropes:

> First bit of D&D was very combat heavy. Pretty hyper-masculine even though we had a couple of people who weren't (…) super-duper masculine themselves but just a lot of these types of characters. And the bad guy was always a guy and the person in distress was always female, (…) just very typical RPG elements.

Once R. played in groups that did not conform to these stereotypes, they felt that role-playing turned more subtle and had more depth.

C. has played queer characters but was often discouraged by their peers: „allein, dass es they/them-pronouns waren, (…) war so eine Unsicherheit. (…)[Ich habe] das Gefühl gehabt ich darf zum Beispiel gar nichts sagen, weil ich nicht will, dass das unangenehm wird oder

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[83] Translation: What do I do now? And I think that is a very similar situation for him and for me. I mean, less identity itself, but more the exploration of identity.

dass jemand aus dem Spielfluss kommt oder so.“[84] This shows that, even though C. wanted to play a queer character, she felt like the other players silenced this part of her PC and she was not able to express queerness in her character because the group was not interested in interacting with it.

Other players do not play an openly queer character for other reasons. For instance, it just does not fit the character the play or because they do not want to or feel the need to openly explore queerness this way when playing TTRPGs.

-- Category: the player does state that queerness is not very relevant to playing TTRPGs

One interviewee states that queerness is not very relevant to them when playing TTRPGs. K. specifically says that, for her, it is not important to be around queer peers when playing TTRPGs:

> Das einzige was mir wirklich wichtig wäre, ist, dass die Leute Spaß wirklich am Spielen haben und sich da gerne rein versetzen. (...) Aber ob die jetzt quer sind oder nicht, ist nicht wichtig. Beziehungsweise. Hätten die da Probleme mit wäre ich wahrscheinlich nicht mit denen befreundet und würde dementsprechend nicht mit den spielen wollen,...[85]

It is more important that the players enjoy role-playing. However, K. does play a gay character and also says that she would not play with people that are not queer-friendly.

-- Category: playing a queer character

All interviewees have, at some point, played queer characters that have helped them to explore queerness or gender identity:

F., who identifies as questioning and crossdresses as a woman from time to time, has played a trans character and mostly plays female characters. Exploring female expression is not the only reason why he plays women. He also identifies with many "female"-considered traits. Roleplaying is a good way to channel this part of himself.

C. has played a non-binary person as well as an asexual character, but was not able to explore their gender identity while playing TTRPGs in a satisfactory way because of group dynamics.

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[84] Translation: even just using they/them pronouns (…) was a source of uncertainty. For example, I felt like I couldn't say anything because I didn't want it to be uncomfortable or to lead somebody to get out of the flow.
[85] Translation: The only thing that is really important to me is that the people enjoy playing and roleplaying (or: empathize). (…) It is not important whether they are queer. If they would have a problem with it I probably would not be friends with them and consequently would not want to play with them…"

R. states that they cannot NOT play queer characters in some way or form as this is part of the fun for them.

K. has played a gay character.

S. has played a nonbinary person as well as a trans-man.

M. is the only person that has not stated to have played a queer character, but he often plays non-human characters and has played a male character before coming out. He says that it has always felt freeing not having to play a cis-woman. Instead, he enjoys playing non-human characters to figure out who he is without limitations:

> Ich will, wenn ich die Chance schon habe was anderes zu spielen, (…) benutze ich das auch, um mich auszuprobieren. Also was passt zu mir überhaupt, was für ein Mensch bin ich denn? Kann ich es durch einen Kenku oder durch einen Echsenmenschen auch zeigen, auch wenn es komplett abstrakt ist? Aber das hat mir da auch ein bisschen geholfen, da so bisschen eine relatable Figur selber zu schaffen und wie sie handeln könnte (...).[86]

-- *Category: in-game (queer) relationships*

Queer relationships can manifest in different ways. Not only can players explore romantic relationships and courtship, but also close personal relationships like friendships and (chosen) family without staying within a heteronormative framework. When it comes to romantic relationships, F. has explored being in a hetero-relationship as a female character and felt gender-euphoria when the other person, playing a male character, asked him about being a couple in-game without any fear of interpersonal irritation because of possible homophobia.

R. says that flirting in-game is one of the most joyous moments when playing, which is why they take every opportunity to do so („If there is somebody to flirt with: I. Want. The. Ability. To. Flirt. With. Them.").

M. is currently playing in a campaign with their best friend whom they are mentoring in game.

Most players have stated that they can explore queerness in a very open way on the table, meaning that they also create queer relationships in-game in some way or form.

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[86] Translation: I want to cease the chance to play something else when I can (…) I use it to figure myself out. What fits me, what kind of human am I? Can I show it even when I play a Kenku or a lizard-person, even though it is completely abstract? But that also helped me a little bit to create a relatable character and how it would act.

-- Category: Queerness is normalized in the game-world

Interviewees have noted that queerness is normalized in many of their campaigns. The reasons behind normalizing queerness are manifold. Some don't want to trigger trauma responses (i.e. in discriminatory settings) or believe that this fact makes the table a safe space. For others, it just makes the game more fun to be able to explore their queer characters more openly and extensively without fear of push-backs in-game.

- What is their relation towards the group(s) relating to queerness and safe spaces?

-- Category: Friend groups turn into safe space – tables

Some of the interviewees play TTRPGs with an already existing group of friends, which they believe is the reason for the group to feel safe for them. K. said (albeit she would not openly talk about queer topics with each individual player): „Ich meine, dort sind viele Leute dabei dich als enge Freunde zählen würde. Dementsprechend automatisch ja."[87] Especially for the interviewees who are openly, comfortably and proudly queer and whose friend group consists of other queer people or allies, the environment is more welcoming and includes queer topics such as queer relationships and identity quests into the game.

-- Category: Queer spaces are safe spaces

Some interviewees have noted that playing with queer people and non-queer allies has made them feel safer and better understood than in heteronormative spaces. As R. points out: „Playing with specific parties has allowed me to feel more comfortable within myself, right? Because I have people that don't make me need to hide. I have people, who also just care about me beyond the game itself, which is a really nice thing."

The players define "safe" as being able to express queer identities through their characters and also knowing that consent is being taken seriously. This means, for example, that they will not have to fear being triggered by certain topics and not fear having to feel uncomfortable/scared/other emotions past a certain, previously discussed point.

Many players have expressed the importance of who the other players are in general. Having a group that they feel safe and valued in has heightened their fun of playing and is the reason why it feels possible for them to explore queer topics.

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[87] Translation: I mean, I would call many of the people there close friends. So consequently, yes.

C. states that they have not yet had the opportunity to play in a queer-friendly group. However, they believe that it would help them to explore topics of gender and sexuality in a more community-based setting, which they would enjoy:

> Ich hab mich nicht hundertprozentig sicher gefühlt und ich glaube, (…) wenn das eine Gruppe wäre, wo man offen über das reden kann, dann kann man es (…) wirklich exploren. (…) Ich glaube (...) richtig öffnen tut sich das dann, wenn man es vielleicht in der Gruppe auch besprechen kann ohne dass man sich jetzt groß outen muss.[88]

-- *Category: Queerness is not (always) an important factor*

Notably, not all players care about their TTRPG-groups being queer-friendly. K. has noted that it is more important that the players enjoy role-playing, and S. has stated that, while he enjoys playing in queer-friendly groups, he also feels that playing in more heteronormative groups can help him to practice real-life-situations and to leave his comfort-zone: „jetzt, verlasse ich meine comfort zone mal und hab dafür auch mal eine ganz andere Welt und ganz andere Mitspieler". Und es ist ja auch so ein bisschen – ja, fast schon Training. Wenn ich jetzt in die echte Welt raus gehe, dann treffe ich ja auch nicht nur Queers."[89]

Additionally, while F.s group is mostly queer-friendly, queerness is not necessarily a big factor in their games. The group consists of mainly cis-het-men and normalizes queer identities. While queer characters do exist, their queerness does not have a big impact on the story.

-- *Category: Non-queer spaces did not feel safe*

Although some interviewees still enjoy playing TTRPGs in heteronormative spaces, most of them have expressed that they have felt less safe than in queer spaces. While S., for example, does enjoy playing in both settings, he still feels like he can be less relaxed in non-queer spaces, implying that he is not able to express himself freely in heternonormative spaces. Additionally, he feels like he has to explain his decisions and his characters' identity more. As already stated, C. also has not felt 100% safe when playing in non-queer spaces, partly because her DM did not ask for any triggers before starting the campaign, but also because other players struggled with things that would have been normal in a queer environment,

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[88] Translation: I did not feel 100% safe and I believe that, if it would be a group in which one can talk openly about these things, then one can really explore it. I believe that it really opens up once one can maybe talk about this in a group without having to have a big outing.

[89] Translation: Now, I leave my comfort zone, and for that I get to play in a different world and with other players. – And it is even a little bit, like, almost practice. It's not like when I go outside into the real world, I only meet queers.

such as they/them-pronouns. R. noted that, while this is not necessarily the other players' fault but stemming from their personal experiences, they do not feel as safe when playing with cis-men. Even before exploring their own queerness, R. has not felt safe when playing TTRPGs with their first, heteronormative group, partly because consent was not discussed. As they put succinctly: „Like, in my experience there has been less consent discussions in non-queer spaces and non-ally spaces than in the queer spaces where consent is discussed more."

Advocating words

After completing my questions, I invited the interviewees to add anything that they felt was missing in the interview relating to TTRPGs and queerness. While some of these comments, such as the question of consent, has already been built into the analysis, I did not want to erase other important, advocating words regarding TTRPGs. Players have stated that people still look down on TTRPGs as part of nerd-culture without really knowing what it is about and how it can augment their personal life:

> C: [D&D ist] etwas, das mir total viel Freiheit gegeben hat. (...) Ich habe das nicht erwartet. (...) [U]nd das alleine finde ich so krass, was das mir, meinem Leben gegeben hat. Weil es war wirklich, einfach, oft ein ganzer Tag, wo ich wer anders sein hab können und wo man woanders war und andere Dinge mal eine Rolle gespielt haben. Und ich glaube, dass das unterschätzt wird, was das ist, wenn man Leuten erzählt, man spielt D&D (...). Viele können sich das nicht vorstellen, was für eine source of joy das sein kann.[90]

> R: But, like, cooperative storytelling is so compelling. And if you can make it more available in queer spaces, I think it's a really safe way for people to express gender and express sexuality before they're ready to come to terms with it in a present and real setting. (…) [R]epresentation matters and it will always matter and the more you can make other people feel seen the better because there's not just one type of person and there will never be one type of person. (…) D&D is important, diversity is important and representation is important. And it's a really good thing for people figuring out themselves.

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[90] Translation: C: "D&D gave me a lot of freedom. (…) I did not expect that. (…) And only the fact what it gave me and my life is astonishing. Because it really was, like, often just a full day during which I was able to be somebody else and at a different place and other things were important. And I think that it is underestimated what it is, when you tell people that you play D&D. (…) Many cannot fathom what a source of joy it can be."

2.2.3. Final Analysis

While all interviewees have a unique stance regarding how they explore queerness when playing TTRPGs, what they do have in common is that it is a part of their roleplaying. To a certain extent, roleplaying will always relate to the player in order to create interesting encounters and situations that feel engaging. When being able to express their queerness as much or as little as they want, players felt the most comfortable and were able to be relaxed and have fun. This means that being able to be themselves can be an important prerequisite for queer players to be able to enjoy playing TTRPGs. As I have already discussed, playing games is often just "for the fun of it" but can have certain additional perks. When one is not able to play the game in a safe environment though, fun will likely not be as easily achievable.

Generally, the group in which the interviewees have played have had an immense impact on their joy of playing and on the game itself. Many players have even stated that playing in a queer-friendly group is important for them to feel safe and to be able to choose a character without having to think twice about the possible negative implications it would have, either regarding group dynamics or even their own emotional and physical safety.

This means that finding a group in which queer people feel safe will not only heighten their fun but can additionally help them to express themselves freely and thus explore identity and sexuality.

When it comes to the question of what specifically differentiates queer TTRPGs from non-queer ones, I have differentiated main traits: Queer groups are open to players exploring any form of gender expression and sexual identity and will create an environment that makes it possible for the player to do so, while heteronormative groups will stay within heteronormative tropes of gender and sexual identity and will not invite any gender expression or exploration outside of the binary. But my interviews have also shown that there is a wide gray scale of characteristics that are not so easily assigned to one form of play or the other.

The interviewees' backgrounds are too diverse to give a definite explanation of this situation. I believe this to be the case because queer experiences differ greatly, which means that there will be very different ways of queer gaming.

Generally, I would argue that R. is the person most immersed in queer culture when it comes to playing TTRPGs. In R.'s groups, they welcome all gender and sexual identities by PCs and discuss subjects such as gender expression, romances and community in-game. They

flirt, create queer relationships, and sometimes even roll for "hotness" (meaning that the characters have a random level of "hotness" that will impact their actions in game). They continuously make sure that all players feel safe by checking in regarding triggers and consent.

However, it is important to note that this does not mean that they play "the queerest". It is one way of playing TTRPGs that expresses queerness in a way that can be easily read. A certain performativity is part of what will be easily understood as "queerer". Queer culture, advocacy and protest have been embedded in performativity as free expression without fear of repercussions. This has been a common delineator in finding one's own queer identity as well as fights for rights of queer people, such as Balls, Pride Parades, Rallies and Festivals. Additionally, this will also play a big role in the next part of this thesis when it comes to differentiating queer gaming from non-queer gaming by analyzing self-proclaimed queer and other campaigns that have been streamed and are accessible online.

III. ANALYSIS OF RULE BOOKS AND GAME SESSIONS

My first assumption was that there must be a clear differentiation between queer and heteronormative ways of playing TTRPGs. However, after watching the first few sessions of *D&D* campaigns and analyzing rule-books, I realized the intrinsic queerness of TTRPGs when it comes to game mechanics. Firstly, TTRPGs are based on continuous storytelling which is the basis for continuous character development. As discussed, Queerness can be characterized as being opposed to the idea of a permanent identity. In a game that can carry on for many years and in which players often do not know when it will be finished, character development can be a big part of gameplay.

Additionally, I also noticed that there are some characteristics that surface often when it comes to the topic of identity exploration and campaigns that are explicitly tagged as queer. These are mainly identified in what some call the fluff of a game, but also sometimes in the crunch. As Sihvonen and Stenros explain, the fluff is a historically demeaning term for anything that happens outside of the crunch, the bare bones of the game system, including rules, character classes, spells and weapons. Historically, TTRPGs are derived from war

games in which only combat or battle were important. "These RPG rulebooks provided scarce resources for building relationships, interpersonal drama, or cultural exploration."[91] - But they did not inhibit its inclusion in the game play either. Adding atmosphere to a game through including setting such as background, culture, history, character identity and relationships is not necessary to the game, but often it gives it meaning. The fluff can be added to a game through RPG source books but also through developing homebrewed storylines:

> Generally speaking, published tabletop role-play source books have a very heteronormative history, but subtle hints of queer play can be found. In the more recent editions of RPG source books, LGBTQ characters and themes are more visible and afforded, and the possibility of queer romance is present, although still often subdued.[92]

Fluff and crunch do not exclude each other. Some role-play systems include game mechanics that are based on interpersonal relationships. When it comes to widely known TTRPGs, there are possibilities to include fluff into crunch. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, seduction could fall under the ability "charisma", and players can achieve a goal through seducing somebody. Explicitly, queer role-play systems often include abilities in which the fluff is more important to the game itself. In *Monster Hearts*, for example, players can "turn somebody on", "pull strings" and "shut somebody down". The TTRPG *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* includes five statistics: Daring, Grace, Heart, Wit and Spirit. While Daring, Grace and Wit are similar to classic statistics for fighting and solving puzzles, Heart (Emotional Awareness and Persuasiveness) and Spirit (Integrity and Metaphysical Prowess) are based on the moral values of the character.

> To sum up, queer role-play has been possible since the beginning regardless of whether there were cues for it or not. LGBTQ fluff content has also existed in tabletop role-playing game source books since at least 1975. Fluff has been derided in the North American RPG culture, but over the years it has gained prominence in published source books – although the 'core books' usually concentrate more on crunch than fluff. Queer fluff, especially romantic queer fluff, is still relatively rare, but today some kinds of nods towards queer practices in RPGs are found in popular settings. Queer crunch exists but is rare. During the 1990s, queers and queer romances also started to become more commonplace in analog role-playing game settings.[93]

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[91] Sihvonen and Stenros, "On the Importance of Queer Romances."
[92] Sihvonen and Stenros.
[93] Sihvonen and Stenros.

3.1. (Queer) Setting

Often, queer campaigns are not set in classic fantasy settings to remove the pressure of conforming to White, Western ideals of tropes that are based in Western fantasy literature and are full of racist, sexist, classist and xenophobic stereotypes. The medieval default as the *D&D*-setting is a trope that is overused, according to Brennan Lee Mulligan, who was interviewed in Rowan Ellis' YouTube.com-video "Why Is D&D So Popular With LGBT Nerds?". Since T.R.R. Tolkien's work was a big influence for classic TTRPG-settings, Mulligan described that settings like "The Hobbit", in which 14 men go on a quest and no other gender was even mentioned, seem unrealistic and hollow. As Persephone Valentine says in the same video: (…) fantasy as a whole can be stagnant and it's been stagnant for a while and across a lot of media, because it's been the same people and the same viewpoints over and over again." (24:28) As Merriman stated, a close relationship between the real world and the game world might lead to players being more inclined to explore their characters as well as their own identity.[94]

Often, the setting for campaigns with explicitly queer content either consist of a utopian world or a world where queerphobia and discrimination can be defeated as inherent evils: "There's two ways to escape. You can escape to a world that doesn't have the problem, or you can escape to a world where you can solve the problem with magic and swords" (27:37, Mulligan)

According to my research on YouTube.com and other platforms, they are more often set in modern society than games played by non-queer groups. I assume that this is because it can feel more natural to develop role-playing moments and because it is easier to focus on role-playing a character without having to think about possible "historical accuracies" (but this assumption would have to be validized). One question is, though, if queering TTRPGs is possible in an inherently comfortable setting, as a certain amount of discomfort and uncertainty when transgressing norms is necessary and unavoidable.

This is where we circle back to the double meaning of "queer". Queering TTRPGs is a way of going against norms and undermining conventions of the game systems and rules themselves. The more queer possibilities and cues are part of a game, the less one actually "queers the game" while playing, since it is already written into the text. Writing these

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[94] Merriman, "Not Just Roleplay."

disruptions is an act of queering a game, but for the players, it creates something else: possibilities of relatable game play and inclusion of authentic queer representation.

One can also ask in relation to which norms one is queering: The players might not queer a game while playing, but they are transgressing norms of heteronormative games when choosing to play a game that does not follow conventions on a bigger scale. Sihvonen and Stenros sum it up as following:

> Games with queer crunch are queer in the sense that they disrupt norms, make alternatives visible, and confront players' expectations. Games with opt-in queer fluff tend to have heteronormative and sexist baselines, but they are queer in the sense that they are fluid, offering the player the possibility to decide how they want to do or perform their gender and sexuality on that day. We need queering to see and imagine the romantic possibilities that lie beyond the horizon or in the shadows. Even so, in systems of shared storytelling it is not enough to do those acts alone; they need to be visible and legible enough for others to recognise them. And for this we need both crunch and fluff to include cues for queer play.[95]

Queering is an act that will always be important for the development of society, but feeling like one belongs is important to the individuals in that society. There is tension between wanting to belong and feeling relaxed while playing and queering a TTRPG in order to be able to do so.

During my interviews, some characteristics of queer game play have surfaced multiple times:

The game group consists of queer people and allies

Firstly, it is important to many queer people to feel safe when playing TTRPGs. When norms are transgressed, players need to know that they will not be disciplined for it. They need to feel safe on the table in order to be able to explore gender, or as an Lichtenstein expresses on www.dicebreaker.com: "You can be whoever you want in a world that sees you and respects you regardless of your identity - something that can't necessarily be said about the world outside the game."[96]

Additionally, the sense of community that playing TTRPGs can create is very important to individuals. As queer people often do not feel safe in real life, knowing that they can relax is important in order to be able to truly open up and express the authentic queer self or have the courage to transgress from the norm.

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[95] Sihvonen and Stenros, "On the Importance of Queer Romances."
[96] Lichtenstein, "Queer Players Find More than a Game in Dungeons & Dragons - They Find a Safe Space."

Queer narratives and behaviors are accepted

To find a queer and queer-friendly group is a prerequisite for players to be able to relay while playing TTRPGs. Groups that are queer-friendly on the table do not necessarily transfer this openness into the game. They might still play TTRPGs within heteronormative norms and traditional settings. In order for transgressions and identity search to be possible, queer narratives also need to be accepted within the game.

Identities are acknowledged and interacted with

Not only do these queer narratives and behaviors need to be accepted, but they also need to be interacted with. The roleplaying within TTRPGs is a social act in which one needs another person to engage with. If queer topics and narratives are not interacted with, they won't develop significance within the game.

Table Rules are clear

Queer groups are often more sensitive to topics like consent and trigger warnings. They will often make sure that everybody feels safe and valued. In heteronormative games, boundaries are more often presumed because what is socially understood as acceptable is presumed to be universal. In queer groups, this universality is not as fixed and therefore an understanding of the necessity of their situational negotiation is often more prevalent.

Fluff bleeds into Crunch

Another crucial characteristic of queering TTRPGs is the importance of fluff (or "flavor") in queer forms of TTRPG or their playing out. As already delineated, fluff is necessary to incorporate meaningful role-playing and representation of identities in role playing games. Not only does it facilitate possibilities of negotiating identity in game situations, it can also queer the game through taking the place of classic crunch characteristics. In heteronormative TTRPGs, a character's strength and weapons and the outcome of battles are ultimately what advances the quest. Explicitly queer games often focus on personal interactions and create stats that increase their importance for the games' evolvement, as I will outline with two examples: *Monsterhearts* and *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*.

When it comes to *Monsterhearts*, the creator Avery Alder criticizes the way that many games only incorporate queerness in the fluff of a game as queer characters or narratives but don't

integrate queerness into the crunch. Consequently, the "desire"-mechanic in *Monsterhearts* originated in the necessity to "make those mechanics queer"[97].

3.1.1. Queering the Crunch: Monsterhearts, Thirsty Sword Lesbians and others

In 2021, PS Berge contributed the chapter "Monster Power. Rebel Heart. Gay Sword: Queer Structures and Narrative Possibility in PbtA Tabletop Roleplaying Games" to the book "Interactive Storytelling", in which they elaborated on the evolution of TTRPGs and the way queerness evolved into an integral part of some games:

> Much of the scholarship on tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) has focused on representation of queer characters and 'cues' that signal to queer audiences. Yet recent independent TRPGs have moved beyond cues that queer play is merely tolerated and instead integrate ludonarrative structures that actively encourage queer interactions. [98]

Berge states that, so far, scholarship has mainly focused on representation of queerness and queer identity instead of "as a force that disrupts hegemonic structures"[99]. For mainstream TTRPGs it is easier to integrate new races or characters for queer representation in order to be more inviting to queer players, but they struggle to integrate queer game mechanics as an integral and fundamental part of the structure of the game. Some indie games, like *Monsterhearts* and *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, focus on this structural queerness as it is a way of encouraging queer storylines and narratives. Berge describes this as the difference between *providing space* and *encouraging* queerness. Tolerating or encouraging queer existences can be as simple as having a blank line on the character sheet to enter the gender of the character. *Encouraging* the players with thinking about the consequences of choosing a gender for their character and the multiplicity of gender in general, though, "structurally reshapes the game narrative with queer possibility."[100] This can be done, for example, through prompting them with specific gender expressions to choose from.

Berge analysed three queer TTPRG sourcebooks and extrapolated "shared structures that encourage queer narrative possibility: 1) safety tools 2) Conditions 3) personal doom 4) Bonds and 5) drawing from extant media."[101]

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[97] Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 189.
[98] Berge, "Monster Power. Rebel Heart. Gay Sword.," 179.
[99] Berge, 180.
[100] Berge, 181.
[101] Berge, 184.

Together, these mechanisms create a game environment in which personal development and interpersonal relationships are more important structurally than in mainstream TTRPGs. Additionally, respect towards other players' boundaries and creating queer history through expanding the net of queer media are important factors. Queer storylines have been impeded throughout history and there is little queer content in media (such as movies), making it harder for queer people to feel like part of a community or to feel "normal". This is why queer representation matters.

These structures "*open possibilities* for players to safely "bring-your-own-queerness" to the table."[102] Additionally, they anticipate interactions and outcomes such as: encouraging emotions, showcasing messy characters, clarifying power (and danger) of fiction, recognizing tension between community and self, reframing violence and building support between players.

Next, I will analyze *Monsterhearts* and *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* as examples of queer TTRPGs. I have decided for these two games because I found them to be the most mentioned in blog posts and online articles in my research regarding queer TTRPGs.

Monsterhearts

Monsterhearts[103] is a TTRPG that is based on *Powered by the Apocalypse*. It resolves around teenagers that have to survive typical high school dramas, but in addition are monsters such as werewolves, vampires and witches. The game is specifically positioned as queer, which the author, Avery Alder, explains: "it pushes back against the heterosexist framework that underlies so many of our culture's stories. When you play, you contend with all the chaotic possiblity and uncertainty of desire."[104] The author doubles the meaning of "monsters". Firstly, the characters are literal monsters like vampires, including traits like immortality and drinking blood. Secondly, the vampire skin has certain traits like cunningness and being somebody that follows a very loose interpretation of what consent means. The monstrosity of the characters "is also allegorical, standing in for experiences of alienation, shame, queerness, and self-destruction."[105]

To get what a player's character wants, they will have to roll to know their odds at succeeding. The goals of the most famous TTRPGs is usually to kill monsters and defeat

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[102] Berge, 189.
[103] To clarify, I used *Monsterhearts 2* for my interpretation, which is the second edition of the game and more commonly used.
[104] Alder, "Monsterhearts 2," 6.
[105] Alder, 7.

evil through fighting and solving riddles. In *Monsterhearts*, these goals can apply as well, but the way to succeed is different. There are still moments of fighting in which one can "Lash out Physically", but other explicit ways to get what one wants is through "Pulling Strings" or "Turning Someone On". If you do not succeed on these moves, it will have implications on the fluff of the game, such as causing a scene when a roll of dice for "Running Away" does not succeed. One gains experience through failing a roll, "as failure and adversity nudge your character toward growth"[106], or through being manipulated into doing an action somebody else wants you to do (through "Pulling Strings").

The intent of the game is to focus the player's intent on social interaction instead of battle. This way, the fluff of the game turns into its' crunch, putting relationships and identity at the center of attention. As Alder states in an introduction to *Monsterhearts* as an example of queer storytelling, "games are made queer when they have structural queerness. Structural queerness is fundamentally about challenging the frameworks of how stories get told. It's about subverting systems through queer mechanics and creating new ways of seeing desire."[107]

Alder encourages the players to embrace queer content. They also use queer as a double meaning: firstly, to go against norms, and secondly, to explore identity outside of heteronormativity. The rulebook states:

> Queer content will make your game more interesting. It gives you new dimensions of shame, confusion, and desire to explore. It dismantles stale genre conventions and builds new stories out of the pieces. It breathes life into the monstrous. (...)

> So, what does introducing queer content actually mean? There are a few answers. The first is simply trusting and taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the mechanics. A main character can roll to Turn Someone On regardless of respective genders, and the incentive to do so is baked into the core of the game. In situations where a character has embraced a certain sexual identity or label, gay or straight, Turn Someone On can challenge it. Let the dice surprise you and introduce new twists. (...)

> Use the game to explore and challenge your own ideas about gender, sexuality, relationships, what's normal and what's monstrous. [108]

Monsterhearts is an obvious example of the queer potential of TTRPGs. Roleplaying, specifically when interaction with other characters and meaningful interpretation of the player's character are put into focus, gives the players the possibility to experiment with identity. This is especially important when it comes to breaking norms of gender

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[106] Alder, 34.
[107] Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 191.
[108] Alder, "Monsterhearts 2," 36.f

and sexuality in the safe environment of the game's setting. *Monsterhearts'* rulebook is designed to create such a safe environment and animates the players to create a safe space for the players:

> While Alder's work is inspired by her own experiences, it does not invite straight, cis players to become spectators of her queerness. For Alder, this is one of the most important characteristics of analog game design. When asked why she works in the medium of non-digital games, she describes how tabletop role-playing games invite players to become active participants in storytelling. This, says Alder, makes role-playing uniquely suited for expressing the perspectives of marginalized people because "it allows us to tell stories from the margins that aren't for the benefit of the center. This kind of storytelling can only be created. It can't be consumed.[109]

Thirsty Sword Lesbians

This TTRPG, authored by April Kit Walsh, also explicitly aims at telling queer stories with friends. Within the game, one is "part of a community that embodies important ideals worth fighting for, even as you strive to make it better. Misogyny, transphobia, racism, and other forms of bigotry are not the norm here, though they may be the norm elsewhere if the players wish to confront these issues."[110] Also, the "game invites you to feel the deep emotional conflict of your PC and care about the other characters in the game. This is a game about feeling things and forging relationships."[111] It is made clear at the beginning of the rulebook that the role playing game does not focus on fighting and killing evil monsters or saving princesses.[112] Instead, exploring relationships and identities and lifting each other up ("foster an environment where your fellow players feel safe exploring intense feelings and potentially difficult topics."[113]) is at the core. These intentions are also written into the game mechanics of the game, which are, just as *Monsterhearts*, based on *Powered by the Apocalypse*, a "role playing game design framework developed by Meguey Baker and Vincent Baker".[114] For example, game mechanics include "Figure Someone Out" and "Emotional Support". Flirting is invited, and creating a safe environment for emotional roleplay is written into the crunch of the game, as all PCs will gain an experience point at the end of a session for each time a player uses a safety tool (which can be as easy as checking in if all players feel comfortable).

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[109] Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 185.
[110] Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, 5.
[111] Walsh, 7.
[112] Rude, "ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND SWORD FIGHTS: Adventure, Dueling, Dice Rolls, and Kisses Await You in the Thirsty Sword Lesbians Game!"
[113] Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, 7.
[114] Wikipedia, "Powered by the Apocalypse."

Thirsty Sword Lesbians is a game that is specifically designed for queer people and advises players to follow the guidelines listed in Fig.1, explicitly excluding any form of bigotry or unrespectful behavior towards marginalization on the table:
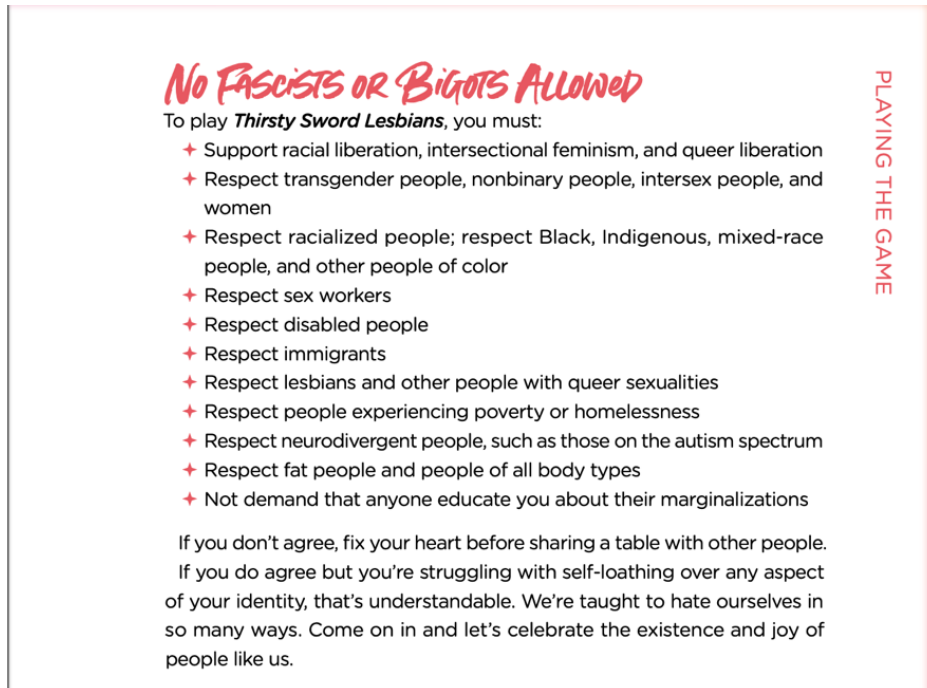

Figure 1: Walsh, Thirsty Sword Lesbians p. 11

Other queer TTRPGs

Berge has stated that "the evolution of queerness in TRPGs, like queer video games, has followed a two-pronged path: 1) industry-supported games have made limited effort towards basic representation while 2) independent TRPGs push the boundaries of queer game possibilities." Queer games are often created independently, meaning that they have been created not by big companies but by individuals or groups that create them without any extensive (corporate) financial backup, but they do sometimes get funded by crowdfunding campaigns. This way of creation is more free when it comes to creative decisions that might not appeal to big masses. Instead, queering can happen with less limitations. It is important to highlight the fact that being able to build a game can still only be done when one has a certain amount of privilege: The creators have to be able to accumulate the knowledge (possibly by having the financial means and paying for courses on, for example, world-building) and have enough free time to build a game.

In 2021, Nevyn Holmes wrote an article about queer TTRPGs that let people not only explore imaginary worlds, but „explore different aspects of the human experience through (...) tabletop frameworks. (...) Coming to and engaging with LGBTQ+ RPGs, regardless of who you are, can greatly open your eyes to new ways of thinking about yourself and the world."[115] Queer game settings often create situations in which one can explore romance and break-ups (*This Party Sucks*), flirting (*Coffee Shop AU*) and relationships (*Butterflies & Hurricanes*), but also resistance (*Underground Broadcast*), trauma (*Together We Write Private Cathedrals*) and discriminating healthcare systems (*Lichcraft*).

While specifically queer games exist, it is important to note that there are different ways of exploring identity through TTRPGs. Queer games set an intention that can reflect the topic a player (or game designer) wants to explore, but TTRPGs *generally* invite players to create something of their own and thus queering the game. Even the arguably most famous TTRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, lists as one of its foremost rules that the DM can interpret the rules in a way that fits their situation the most: "(…) as a referee, the DM interprets the rules and decides when to abide by them and when to change them. (…) The D&D rules help you and the other players have a good time but the rules aren't in charge. You're the DM. And *you* are in charge of the game."[116]

There is an inherent queerness to TTRPGs because of their fluid character and the way players create a world and story that they all want to explore together. There are many different ways of queering table top role playing games. The intent of the creators as well as the players can play roles.

3.2. *Critical Role* – Campaign 3 and Monsterhearts

One of the most popular livestream campaigns on *Twitch.tv* is *Critical Role,* a *Dungeons & Dragons* show played by a group of eight popular voice actors, including Matt Mercer, the Dungeons Master (short: DM) of the group. *Twitch.tv* is a streaming platform with an

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[115] Holmes, "6 Queer Tabletop RPGs That Everyone Should Play."
[116] Mearls and Crawford, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, 4.

average of 2.5M viewers/day[117] that is primarily used for streaming video games. Other genres like TTRPG streams are also gaining popularity.

As of April 2022, the channel *Critical Role* has 1.1 million followers on Twitch.tv (with about ½ to one million views per episode of the current, third campaign) as well as 1.67 million subscribers on Youtube.com, with 5.7 million views of episode 1 of Campaign 3 (aired: Oct. 25th 2021) and an estimated average of 1.5-2 million views per episode (episodes air weekly and are approx. 3.5 to 5 hours long).

While there is a lot to say about queer representation in *Critical Role*[118], I will focus on the queer characteristics of the game and PCs themselves. Obviously, I only have limited access to the players personal life stories, so this analysis will be mostly useful in finding out what game mechanics and moments create queer potential as well as potential for identity finding.

Critical Role also has published a One-Shot-Campaign of the TTRPG *Monsterhearts*, DMed by Matt Mercer (just like the long campaigns) and includes several openly queer players (Taliesin Jeffe: bisexual[119], Erika Ishii: pronouns she/they/he[120], genderfluid, bi- or pansexual[121], Ally Beardsley: pronouns they, nonbinary[122]). Additionally, Matt Mercer introduces queer non-player characters in to the game.

Critical Role – Campaign 3

Because of its immense influence on modern TTRPG (there are even story arcs originating in *Critical Role* that were published as playable campaigns by Wizard of the Coast, the publisher of D&D), I will analyze the first 10 episodes of the third campaign of Critical Role, published between Oct. 25th 2021 to Jan. 17th 2022.

Critical Role is known for creating long and extensive campaigns that are intricate and story-based. I watched the first nine episodes of *Critical Role* – Campaign 3, and have tried to find any queer tropes or characteristics in the third campaign. Firstly, I noticed that, even though two player characters introduce themselves with the pronouns: "he/they", this does not have

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[117] "Twitchtracker.Com/Statistics."

[118] see Labit, "The Growth of Queer Representation in Critical Role"; *Matt Talks about Fans Connecting to Characters*.

[119] Deramin, "Transcript: Wednesday Club Ep19: Love Is Love."

[120] "Theerikaishii.", Instagram Bio

[121] Anderson-Minshall, "Queer Genderfluid Actor Erika Ishii's Gamer's Guide to LA."

[122] "Ally Beardsley." Criticalrole.fandom

any implications on the game. In a reddit thread[123] concerning *Critical Role*, there are a lot of sympathetic and understanding voices on the generally low amount of trans NPCs from the fan community. Some comments suggest that it is hard to give the players the information of a character's gender identity without blatantly describing them as "trans". They don't want to mention it *just so it is mentioned,* and simultaneously fear that it might seem tokenistic to do so. One person that DMs TTRPGs themselves wrote: "I have the same...not problem, because it's not a problem, but there's no reason for any of my trans NPCs to tell the PCs until it might come up, so they've met a handful already but they don't 'know' they are." (nightwing2024, Apr. 1st 2021). At the same time, a trans person added to the thread: "I've been hoping since we met Bryce that Matt would one day introduce a trans guy so I could see myself for just a moment. I've known I wasn't cisgender for almost 10 years and not once in my life have I encountered a fictional character in a piece of media that shares my experience." (suburu-stevens, 31.03.2021)

"There are some questions that arise in light of actual play and diversity. It is unclear how to navigate the line between representation and appropriation when the established cast is white and/or straight and/or able-bodied."[124]

The problems that reddit users describe might suggest that queer players are more comfortable and capable playing queer characters. One reason for this could be that they have more knowledge on the correct language around and handling of queer characters and the problem of tokenism does not play a role, so playing queer PCs or NPCs feel more natural to them.

Interpretation

Even though *Critical Role* is commonly known as a safe space for queerness, it is not explicitly queer content. Some characters are queer, but their queerness mostly does not get explored nor does it play an important role in the game. Granted, I only watched the first 10 episodes and the story moves rather slowly, but after watching 30+ hours of the third Critical Role campaign, I did not find anything that seemed queer to me except for the fact that two characters, Ashton Greymoore and Fresh Cut Grass, use the pronouns "he/them".

Critical Role does create media content that normalizes queer characters. According to www.criticalrole.fandom.com, more than 15 queer characters were already introduced in

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[123] reddit.com, "[NO SPOILERS] Matt Just Confirmed That Theres Some Trans Exandrian NPCs on Trans Visibility Day!! (He Replied with the Character List)."

[124] Jones, *Watch Us Roll*, 107.

Campaign 3. During the first ten episodes, however, I did not find any moments in which queerness in any form of way was represented except for being normalized as being part of the game. Possibly, this is the case because the first episodes are more focused on setting the scene and introducing the characters (and their secrets).

Critical Role is supportive of the LGBTQIA+-community and the cast includes queer characters like non-binary-characters and normalizes using they/them-pronouns, but it does not include situations that explicitly deal with queer issues or identities. It is not the flagship of queer representation that it is sometimes portrayed as. *Critical Role* does, however, makes it possible for people to consume content that does not, just like it is often the case in mainstream media, (negatively) stereotype or villainize queer characters, queerbaits or uses harmful tropes like the "Bury Your Gays"-trope (even though *Critical Role* has been accused of this at some point[125]).

One could argue that its visibility and openness about being supportive of the queer community is a good starting point for people to realize that TTRPGs can be a source of feeling a sense of belonging because the cast is respectful of queer identities within the game. However, it is important to state that Campaign Three is a *Dungeons & Dragons* – campaign and not intrinsically queer. *D&D* is rooted in war games and, even though the rulebooks get more inviting to all people over time, at its core the game is about destroying evil and saving people in distress. The characters do go through a character development, but their development is created to enrich the story and is not an integral part of the game mechanism.

Cinderbrush – A Monsterhearts Story (A *Critical Role* One-Shot)

In 2020, the cast of *Critical Role* played a One-Shot of *Monsterhearts 2*[126]. True to the game, Matthew Mercer, the "MC", or Master of Ceremonies, did talk about consent at the beginning of the game. As mentioned, addressing boundaries and consent is something that is explicitly part of many queer TTRPGs, and *Monsterhearts* is a great example of this. Mercer stated that, although some moments might be dark, the people at the table trust each other and know not to cross any lines, but does give the viewers permission to step back if any situation does not feel helpful to their mental health journey.

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[125] the-scarecrowlover, "Matt Mercer - Did He Really 'Bury Your Gays' ?"
[126] Critical Role, "Cinderbrush."

I chose this One-Shot as part of the analysis because of the big influence *Critical Role* currently has on the *Dungeons & Dragons* community, which is why their representation of queerness is especially important and influential.

Avery Alder, the creator of the game, commented on this One-Shot on their twitter.com-account shortly after the video was released on YouTube.com. The author of *Monsterhearts 2* complimented the casts' effort to realize fully interesting characters and not rush through the story, giving characters the possibility to play off of each other and develop relationships. They also gave pointers on what could be done better and how the cast could have shifted „even further into that chaotic disaster story zone"[127]:

> It also feels like one of the key things that sets a game like Monsterhearts apart from a game like D&D: the story doesn't emerge from one person's prep, but from everyone throwing dysfunctional ideas into a blender all at once and then hitting pulse with no lid on.

Alder states that, even though they emphasize Matt Mercer's great skills as DM, *Monsterhearts 2* encourages the DM to be curious and ask questions instead of setting a fully realized game:

> Since this is a game about teenagers trying to figure out their shit, always at risk of losing control of their life, the drama lives in those little questions of HOW you do what you do, and what you FEEL as you do it. Those details belong to the players.

Alder points out that it might be hard to diverge from the pre-planned plot when the episode needs to stay within certain parameters to be released to the public and remain interesting to watch. But to "keep the story feral" and to "ask provocative questions" is what will make the storytelling compelling and surprising for everybody. They conclude:

> Ask provocative questions and build on the answers. Give players the responsibility for narrating their own affect and emotion. Keep the story feral. Play to be surprised about what comes next.

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[127] @lackingceremony (Avery Alder), "I Finished Watching #Cinderbrush Last Night,..."

3.3. Thirsty Sword Lesbians

To deepen my analysis of gameplay and add another viewpoint on queer TTRPGs, I watched a *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* One-Shot played by six people on YouTube.com. The video is called "Thirsty Sword Lesbians One Shot: Runaway Heist" and was released on May 21st 2021 on the channel GutPunchRP. I chose this video because I wanted to analyze a One-Shot so the content I would need to work through would not get out of control and because it was available to me on YouTube.com.

The story is set in the 1980s with an added normalcy about some people carrying swords with them all the time. It starts in a room in which a bride and her friends are getting ready for the wedding.

Story – Short Summary

During the first scene, the bridal party gets introduced and we learn that the bride, Adora, is marrying Chad, the heir to the wealthy "Straight Agenda" at Versailles. While Adora and her friends Thorne, Rose, Kathryn and Diana get ready, Reginald, Chad's dad, pays them a visit and tells them about wanting to gentrify the area. He especially dislikes the gay club around the corner. After he leaves, Maria, the owner of the gay club, comes into the room and begs the bridal party for help because the Straight Agenda is about to bulldoze the club. Additionally, it is suggested that the wedding party is possibly just a front to launder money. There is a third visit of a guest who is sobbing and telling them about Chad and Reginald fighting about something that is in a well-guarded room. The party splits up and Rose and Thorne are getting ready to start a distraction while Diana, Kathryn and Adora mingle into the crowd that is listening to Chad and Reginald shouting. Reginald is upset about a group of wedding crashers that look like Adora's friends and wants them detained. Additionally, there seems to be something missing from the mysterious room. The party meets up again and they flee through a window and work their way to the room. While they are moving, Diana saves Adora from dying multiple times, by which Adora is smitten. The party splits up again. Thorne and Rose successfully corner Chad into giving them the keys to the club and stopping its destruction. After some problem solving and creating a big fire by accident, the other three characters are able to get into the room, distract the beasts (which turn out to be dragons) and take the item in the crate, the Philosopher's Stone, which is the key to the power of the Straight Agenda.

Description of characters - example

In the beginning, the players describe their character and their clothing with great care. Albeit this is something that often happens in TTRPGs, here the clothing and looks have more meaning to the identity of the characters than what is common. For example, Rose is being described as very broad and muscular, having "spend more days at the gym than, like, at the salon for this wedding" (15:52). They are wearing an off-white suit and a half-coat with a red lining.

Thorne is described as wearing a well-fitting, all-black suit with a long cape on one shoulder. "Short, tousled dark hair, striking, high cheekbones, you, know, a very handsome figure." (17:19)

Many layers of queerness are visible within only these two character descriptions. For example, we can already see that there is a connection between Rose and Thorne. Not only do their names correlate, but also their clothes, as they are wearing opposite colors. Later on in the game, it quickly gets clear that the two have been involved in a romantic relationship and are still bonded romantically.

Additionally, the description of Rose as a muscular person that does not care about classically female standards of beauty and is struggling with putting on make-up, aligns with a butch (or less classical female, but rather "male"-presenting) gender performance.

The subtleties

When describing only the plot of the story, the details that make this TTRPG queer are lost. But when we look closer, there are many differences.

Firstly, as already mentioned, the description of clothing and looks have a meaning that can be read and understood when looked at through a queer lens. For example, the character' pronouns are not introduced when the players describe them in the beginning. However, their use of words makes them clear to people who are sensitized to the importance of pronouns. For example, Vic ("visiousfrockery") describes their character "Rose" and uses the pronoun "they" for them. Even though Rose is a typically female name, the other players use the right pronoun for Rose for the entirety of the session.

Secondly, the narrator, Alyx, invited the players for help in creating the world. For example, they ask "drpsychowl", who is playing Adora, to describe her mother when she entered the scene as an NPC. Even though it does depend on the group and game master, it is more common in heteronormative games that the narrator constructs all the NPCs without input from the other players. Alyx, though, invites the players to be a part of the game building,

giving them more power over the situation and the game and creating a story that is created more communal than usually.

Thirdly, the game mechanics are more entangled in the story than they are in mainstream games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. When a person tries something daring and needs to role dice, the result of a dice roll has an impact on the story and does not only state success or failure on an action. For example, when Kathryn rappels down a curtain to escape out of a window, she has to roll to "defy disaster" with the modifier of "Grace" because she acts gracefully according to the verbal description. Kyolacosplay rolls a Nine, which is a success but with a twist: the player has to choose between "a hard choice" or "success with a sacrifice". The narrator then tells them that Kathryn notices a tear in the curtain but she cannot inform those rappelling after her as they are too far away. If Kyolacosplay would have rolled higher, the narrator would have had the opportunity to give the group new information, discover an opportunity or gain a String on someone.

This example shows that narrative and game mechanics are intertwined in the TTRPG *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, just as intended by the PBtA-framwork. The mechanics differ from TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons.* In PBtA-games, the players generally focus more on their role playing, leading to deeper characters and character development as well as intricate connections between characters. The rulebook also encourages flirting (there are even game mechanics for that) and having queer-love experiences in general.

IV. Discussion

Historically, TTRPGs have emerged from war- and strategy games and have been inspired by Western canonical fantasy literature, leading to the incorporation of many problematic and stereotypical fantasy and cultural tropes in sourcebooks (even though there have been some early queer exceptions in counterculture). By the 2010s, TTRPGs had arrived in mainstream media and their mono-dimensional nature changed. Storylines, multi-faceted characters and roleplaying became more important. Additionally, home-brewed content and content created by indie creators has been gaining popularity, leading to more possibilities of inclusion and representation of minorities. Not only have well-known games such as

Dungeons & Dragons worked on including queer representation, but also, game mechanics (such as PbtA) and sourcebooks that focus on queer identity have emerged.

Shaw writes that queer sensibility is more important than explicit queer sexualities to queer gamers[128]. The interviews in this research support this notion. The participatory moment as well as small, chosen groups in which TTRPGs are played, help to create a space in which gender and sexual norms can be handled mindfully. If stereotyping does happen in these groups, an overarching understanding of queerness sets these situations in a different light, often paired with a humorous effect that reflects on heteronormative conventions.

The queer gaming experience can appear in a multitude of ways. One of them emerges from the possibility of creating one's own PC. As Keen has stated, a feeling of sympathy and empathy within a game can lead to character identification.[129] Many queer gamers realize this possibility when creating and playing characters that resemble their own transitional identity. Since TTRPGs include role playing within a simulated world, a player can experience the world through their characters' eyes.

Fine described TTRPGs as a mix of war games, educational simulation games and folie á deux.[130] Arguably, the simulation component is what creates the most possibilities for a queer gaming experience. There are three steps to (educational) simulation games: intentional reflection on self, through possible selves, and the emergence of a possible new self after the game. The first step, intentional reflection on self, is something that queer people inherently deal with because of their divergence from heteronormative society. A possible self is created in a fictional situation on the game table. The experiences that a character has in game can lead to changes and realizations for the player in real life.

Academic papers on queer gaming tend to focus on the lack of queer identities in heteronormative games, but more importantly, they imply that there needs to be something intrinsically, structurally queer about games[131].

I included non-academic texts and lead interviews with six queer people specifically to gain a broader understanding of the topic. It becomes clear that representations matter and should not be treated as the "little brother" to "real queerness". Instead, I argue that it is a **gateway**

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[128] Shaw, "Talking to Gaymers," 69.
[129] Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 223.
[130] Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 6.
[131] For a more detailes analysis, see: Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

for queer people to learn how to express themselves and relate to others in a safe way. That is not to say that queer games are not important. They help creating a queer safe space. Subsequently, when a deeper connection to the queer self is desired, queer games can be a good tool to explore.

Lastly, queer people do tend to incorporate queer game structures even in mainstream games such as D&D, for example during the discussion of consent and boundaries. Within my research, none of the interviewees have played an explicitly queer game. Albeit my sample size is small, it is still important to understand that queerness tends to be played out in mainstream games as well, as players create their game world accordingly to their desires and needs.

After conducting six interviews, I argue that both threads of queerness – a theoretical understanding and a more practical understanding - suit different people and situations better in TTRPGs. One might build on the other, but ultimately, they are interrelated and both aspects are important for queer gamers.

Firstly, representation can create a sense of belonging, an understanding that a space for queer identity does, as a matter of fact, exist. The internet makes it easier for people to create content that represents themselves. Before, media was only accessible through channels like movies and TV-shows, in which, for the longest time, queerness was only represented in a negative way. These channels are in the hands of a few powerful people, which, usually, do not include queer voices. Having the experience of watching a well known TTRPG streaming channel (*Critical Role*) inviting queer players to play *Monsterhearts* shows queer people that safe spaces are being created. This setting exemplifies a safe space for exploring identity and helps to overcome the barrier that was created by an upbringing in a queer-hostile society and culture.

Secondly, in order to be able to freely explore and express oneself outside of hegemonial structures, creating and understanding queer game mechanics is a good tool. Feeling represented and knowing that a queer community exists - and one can be part of it - can lead to the wish to understand one's own standpoint within that community. That is one of the reasons many queer players of TTRPGs seek out a group of queer people to play with. Not only do they feel more safe, but also more able to express themselves freely and be

understood by their peers. Queer game structures create an environment in which aspects of safety, community and interpersonal relationships are focused on and explored.

In the beginning of this work, I have stressed the importance of including informal secondary literature. This opinion turned out to be especially fitting regarding the importance of community and (chosen) family as aspects of TTRPGs. The interview results have clearly delineated that these facets are integral to queer gaming experiences. Without a safe environment and group of players, experimenting with one's own identity in a game situation is hardly possible. Ultimately, people want to have fun when playing a game. This fun can only emerge (within a queer gaming experience) if a common understanding of queerness and safety exists.

Thirdly, feeling represented and being able to explore identity outside of hegemonial structures interrelate. Positive representation of queerness can only happen if that queerness is being explored and expressed.

4.1. Representation and Identity Search

On the one hand, representation means that a wide spectrum of gender-identities is part of a game. Good representation, for most people, is being understood as the gender of a person not consuming their whole identity but rather it being a part of many aspects, or as "CaptivePrey" wrote in a reddit-thread: "That's what representation really is. The character's entire identity is not consumed by their gender identity. They just are, and they still do dope shit because that's what they do."[132] In many D&D story lines, gender will not be of great importance. On the other hand, gender needs to have at least some relevance for the story so exploration of identity can occur. People with little exposure to or understanding of anything outside of the heteronormative and amatonormative world will struggle with representing queer people accurately in their games. For allies and queer people, it can be intimidating to do so if they do not feel safe in their environment, i.e. around the other players. In the instance of games being streamed or published as podcasts, the players might be seen as cringy or weird or even have to endure hate speech. As ThatFreddieIsAJack wrote on

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[132] reddit.com, "[NO SPOILERS] Matt Just Confirmed That Theres Some Trans Exandrian NPCs on Trans Visibility Day!! (He Replied with the Character List)." March 31st, 2021

reddit.com: "I've made the experience that being among other queer folk gives queer players (and dms) the courage to tell blatantly queer stories with queer characters without being seen as cringy or weird."[133]

Within TTRPGs, representation can occur in a small-scale situation. As the game is so flexible, it is easy for players to create a space in which identities are represented in a way that is missed in mainstream media.

Interviewees play mostly mainstream games

An interesting fact is that none of the interviewees stated that they have played queer TTRPGs. Mostly, they play mainstream games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder* and *Shadowrun*, even though sometime players have tried non-queer indie-games. I have not found any conclusive reasons to why that is. Maybe it is easier for players to continue playing TTRPGs that they already know and understand. Maybe queer TTRPGs are not well known enough or don't feel accessible. Maybe other reasons of playing have a higher priority, such as being able to wind down after a long day. Playing queer TTRPGs can require the energy of opening up to unusual social situations and exploring unknown territories of relating to ones' own character and its relations to the other PCs and NPCs. Queer TTRPGs, in that sense, are sometimes walking a tightrope between creating safe spaces and pushing people to step out of comfortable hegemonial structures.

Queer games vs. heternonormative games

My findings have shown that queer games focus on creating environments in which transgressing normative social and gendered structures are prompted. Nevertheless, it is not a foolproof way of exposing and subverting norms, as many players are used to mainstream ways of playing TTRPGs. But they are still able to explore identities there. The point is that queer TTRPGs have different goals than mainstream TTRPGs. At first, it seems like queer TTRPGs are closer related to educational simulation games than other TTRPGs. But on second thought, this is deceiving, as heteronormative games solidify heteronormative views on identities and in this way also simulate real-life-situations. When it is always a woman that needs saving from a dragon or out of a tower, but never a man, it solidifies an understanding of women as weak damsels in distress that need saving by men. It is also a

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[133] reddit.com. Nov. 23rd 2021

form of simulation when normative understandings of relationships, sexuality and gender are perpetuated instead of subverted.

Queer TTRPGs seek to help to unlearn norms. They showcase an alternative to existing structures. They help to unlearn normalized behavior in order for queer people to be able to get in touch with their own identity. As current literature has showcased, queering undermines conventions, overthrows normative boundaries and challenges dichotomies. That is what queer TTRPGs aim to do when they shift the focus of the game from fighting monsters and saving princesses to messy situations and interpersonal relationships.

Following Shah and colleagues understanding of how identity change is tracked, we can better understand the potential of TTRPGs for queer exploration. According to the authors, identity is tracked along four constructs: **knowledge**, **shifts in interest and personally relevant values**, **regulated actions** (i.e. actions that are focused on a specific goal), **and shifts in self-perception and self-definition**.

Queer representation in media can help people to build *knowledge* on queerness and their own identity. Currently, there is a lack of positive queer representation in mainstream media. However, online streaming platforms such as Netflix, YouTube and Twitch.com have diversified consumed content and made consumption according to ones' own interest possible. Even though the portrayal of queerness in media does have certain limitations, it does ameliorate knowledge about queerness to many people that might otherwise not have had access. When it comes to TTRPGs, having well-known groups such as *Critical Role* focusing on inclusivity does help to create a welcoming environment to queer people.

Shifts in interests and valuing that are personally relevant can be supported by the existence of queer channels on streaming platforms. These shifts might also be relevant to a person's interest in TTRPGs because queer TTRPGs could align better with new interests and values. *Regulated actions* can consist of actually playing different characters in TTRPGs and figuring out in which way one identifies with the character. The game-setting can make this action not only enjoyable but also safer because of the regulated surroundings. Even though the action of playing TTRPGs does not necessarily have the singular, specific goal of exploring ones' own identity, it is a side effect that can be easily integrated. Especially explicitly queer TTRPGs like *Monsterhearts* and *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* create game situations in which identification with a character as well as social interactions are related to the core mechanics of the games. Engaging with ones own TTRPG character can *create shifts in self-perception and ultimately self-definition*.

Identity Shift Example: C.

C. has noted that, during their youth, they did not know about non-heteronormative identifiers such as non-binary or asexual. After learning more about queerness (*knowledge*), their *interests shifted* and they started to play more nuanced characters (*regulated action*), even though they did not always label them as queer. Her *self-perception and self-definition* shifted after realizing that she identified with her character in certain in-game situations. When her character did not have to engage in sexual banter because of their backstory, it helped C. to understand themselves better. They now label themselves as being on the asexual spectrum.

Interviews vs. state of research

Shepherd as well as Keen reflected on the possibility of a person getting attached to their character. Through collaborative storytelling, they start to empathize with the character and subsequently experience emotionally powerful moments. Keen stated that this sympathetic response leads to identification with a character. In other words, a person can figure out whether they can identify with certain character traits through playing TTRPGs. Many interviewees have stated that this permeability between real life and game has been an important factor relating to the connection between their queerness and playing TTRPGs.

Their real life was affected by playing TTRPGs because they are able to practice real life situations regarding expressing queerness in a heteronormative world and learn things about themselves. Sometimes, their personal identity or quest for identity is part of the character they are playing, but sometimes queerness is not showcased in their characters or in the games. This highlights how games have different meanings to different people. Some just want to play for recreational fun, to roleplay, to spend time with their friends or to just fight monsters and save the world. As Fine has stated, the relations to reality are mainly recognized as "side benefits" to the fun of a game session. For some, these side benefits (e.g. the possibility of creating queer space in a heteronormative world) are very important factors to their game. Not only is this at the center of explicitly queer TTRPGs, but it also illustrates the potential of TTRPGs for queer gamers to explore identity and their position within society. Some interviewees do not only experiment with identity in game, but also with (queer) relationships.

In my interviews, I have additionally found that TTRPGs have helped the interviewees to create a sense of queer community in their lives. Having the option of normalizing queerness and being able to step into a safe space at the game table are important factors here. This is

something that has not been focused on in already existing literature concerning queerness and TTRPGs.

V. Conclusion

In this thesis, I first introduced TTRPGs and their history as it is important to understand why queerness has only begun to be an interesting topic of research within this realm in the last 20 years and why it is not extensively researched yet. I explained why TTRPGs have theoretical potential for exploring identity on two levels: Structure or game mechanics as well as story and plot that include representation of queerness. With the surge of indie and homebrewed content, even rulebooks of mainstream TTRPGs like D&D resulted in problematic content being revised. Social structures and multi-layered characters emerge from this genesis.

Next, I gave background information on how TTRPGs work in order to help the reader to understand why they are such a good vehicle for queer exploration. They are a collaborative experience in which morality and aspects of self can be explored in a safe space. Opposite to (MM)ORPGs, the players have more flexibility and authority over the game, as the rulebooks are important textual starting points, but players are promoted to adapt them as needed.

I then gave a review on current literature regarding Queer Theory, the concept of narrative empathy and queer gaming. I focused on topics like the fluidity of queerness, possibilities of identification with PCs as well as integrally queer aspects of TTRPGs. I also explained G.A. Fines' understanding of simulation games as an important aspect of TTRPGs through which opportunities of identity exploration and even identity change can arise. After giving an overview of the limited existing academic literature on the possibilities of identity exploration and TTRPGs, I then provided an overview of non-academic views on this topic. I treat topics like the increase of queer representation and the safe-space aspect of playing in chosen group as well as the opportunity of identity exploration. Then, I explored these topics in six expert interviews with queer players of TTRPGs. I learned that playing TTRPGs has helped players to find a community, train real life situations and figure out things about

themselves and their queer identity through creating similarities or explicit differences between the players' and the characters' identity and often playing openly queer characters and sometimes queer relationships. Notably, for some players queerness is not relevant to playing TTRPGs, but all players feel most comfortable playing with other queer people and allies and sometimes even felt unsafe in non-queer spaces.

I then proceeded to analyze rule books and game sessions, discerning that in queer games, the relation between fluff and crunch differs between heteronormative and queer games, as role-playing and storylines play a bigger role in queer gaming and bleed into the crunch. Notably, a queer gaming experience is also characterized and supported by these factors:

- The game group consists of queer people and allies

- Queer narratives and behaviors are accepted

- Identities are acknowledged and interacted with

- Table rules are clear.

Games like *Monsterhearts* and *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* showcase how the crunch is being queered and in what way the core mechanisms and rules are changed in order to focus more on identity and relationships.

To conclude, I revisit my main question and answer it according to my research:

How does the negotiation of queer perspectives and realities in TTRPGs affect the gaming experience of queer players as well as the player's identity itself?

There are three main elements to this question:

1.) How does this negotiation occur and what possibilities of negotiation exist?

2.) How does playing TTRPGs effect the players regarding their gender identity and/or expression?

3.) How does playing a game in a way that identity can be explored affect the gaming experience of queer players?

Just as queerness is a spectrum, people are different when it comes to their motivations behind and ways of playing TTRPGs. That is why it would not be fitting to give singular answers to these questions, as there is a multitude of answers. However, I have found tendencies that can give us a better understanding of the relationship between TTRPGs and queerness.

To answer the first question, the negotiation of queer perspectives can either happen in a grassroot-way or top to bottom. When I started this research, I believed that there was a impermeable line between heteronormative groups that play mainstream TTRPGs like D&D and queer groups that either play mainstream TTRPGs in a queer manner or play queer TTRPGs. But since Table Top Role Playing Games aim to create an environment in which players collectively create a story, even games that are not specifically queer can be enriched by queerness, often in a grassroot-way. Players can create a queer character, role-play non-heteronormative relationships, step out of gender norms and also change the rules of the game to fit their needs, even if the game is not specifically queer. Looking at "top-to-bottom"[134]-ways, queer rulebooks have been published as well, so it is possible to immerse oneself into an already existing framework that breaks with heteronormative standpoints and lenses. Often, these games are not as laissez-faire as mainstream TTRPGs because a more complex level of social engagement is an inherent component of many of them. This can be an important factor for queer players with regard to their choice of framework.

One factor that should not be disregarded is that not all queer people play TTRPGs to explore gender. When I started writing this thesis, it was my assumption that that would be a part of the interest behind playing TTRPGs for all queer players. But some interviewees do not see a direct connection between their identity and their reasons for playing TTRPGs. Even though it is relevant to say that the relationship one feels towards ones' character, either by identifying with them or by not identifying with them, does have some meaning regarding identity, it is not to say that this is either the goal for queer players or has any influence on their real life.

Still, many queer players and game creators do enjoy TTRPGs for the possibilities of exploring gender and identity. Coming back to the question of how gender identity and expression can be affected by playing TTRPGs, I have found that some queer players do not explore that possibility, others do. To feel comfortable enough to explore queerness, all players need to feel safe within the group of players. Queer narratives and behaviors need to be accepted and identities should be acknowledged and interacted with. Additionally, clear table rules need to be negotiated. If a group of people explicitly wants to explore queerness when playing TTRPGs, the possibility of playing queer TTRPGs like *TSL* and *Monsterhearts* exists. These games often focus on personal interactions and have game mechanics that

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[134] To clarify, I only describe queer rulebooks as "top-to-bottom" because the rulebooks give a framework for players. In a way, they could also be called "grassroot", since they are created as an alternative to mainstream TTRPGs.

increase the importance of role-playing, identity and relationships. Still, queer TTRPGs are not very well known and many players stay within the comfortable realm of mainstream games that they are familiar with. One reason behind this could be that being comfortable with the rules of a game gives players the opportunity to focus more on the role-playing instead of the mechanics of the game.

Playing TTRPGs often effects the players regarding their gender identity and/or expression in a subtle way. Many players negotiate their own identity playfully through creating characters that are queer. In the safe space of the game table, they can then act or react in a way that they are not comfortable to do in real life. For some players, this happens unconsciously and they only realize the connection between their character and themselves afterwards. Others consciously chose characters to negotiate and train gender expression in this setting.

Lastly, I ask how playing TTRPGs in a way that identity can be explored affects the gaming experience of queer players. I argue that playing (existing) in a space in which the potential for identity exploration exists, i.e. playing in a safe space with people that accept and support this decision, has a positive impact on queer players. Even if they decide against explicit identity exploration, having the possibilities to do so creates a safe environment in which immersive, fun game play can be developed. As we have discovered, the aspect of immersion and easy-going fun is very important to most interviewees, which is why the potential of identity exploration should always be paired with an eye on the aspect of playfulness. After all, TTRPGs are games. They are meant to be fun.

As was discussed in chapter 3.1.1., so far mainstream media has mainly focused on the representation of queerness and queer identity instead of the disruption of hegemonic heteronormative structures, on which scholarship has focused mainly on. This is why, I worked on combining these two aspects and their impact on queer players as well as their exploration of identity. Within academia, this is a relatively new topic. But as I have showcased, there is a vibrant queer community within TTRPGs, from groups that stream their campaigns, a myriad of articles on blogs and online magazines, to people that create their own (queer) take on TTRPGs and design their own games. I believe that this situation gives an important example on how queer lenses are often excluded from academia. Their inclusion would benefit all, since identity exploration is a topic that is not only important to queer people.

As discussed, there are many ways in which TTRPGs can be helpful to explore identity outside of the heteronormative lens. There is a lot of potential in playing TTRPGs for identity exploration and experimentation. But this potential is not necessarily something that queer people are interested in. For most players, it was not the reason why they started to play. But for many, it turned out to be relevant to their queer journey. It might be in finding accepting friends, figuring out things about themselves through playing queer characters and storylines, or experimenting with non-heteronormative ways of interacting with others.

Outlook:

After having established that there is, indeed, queer potential in regards to Table Top Role Playing Games, the next logical, and maybe most important question is: "What should we do with it (if anything at all)?"

Is this potential something that can be exploited in a capitalistic way? Is it something that needs protection from that exploitation?

Is there a need to propagate this potential? Is there a demand or a lack that could be filled with making this potential better known with members of the queer community?

The examination of these questions is not necessarily an academic one, but, just as the queer potential itself, the answers will grow out of queer communities. Events such as "Storytelling for Patriarchal Survivors"[135] in Vienna, organized by *derknoten.wien* within the framework of "befreiraum22 – Feministische Bildungswerkstatt", a series of workshops, already exist and explore how one can use Table Top Role Playing Games to create a space in which an understanding of identity can be expanded.

As the topic of queerness related to TTRPGs is still relatively young, there is a lot to explore in academia. For example, it would be interesting to investigate how playing queer TTRPGs affects non-queer people, especially non-allies. I wonder how it would affect players and their relationship with queerness and whether it would influence their view on the queer community.

It would be interesting to research this topic outside of Western society. My research was limited to mostly US- and Europe-based literature and media. I also believe that the potential of identity exploration can also benefit other groups such as the youth.

Additionally, exploring the impact of representation in TTRPG rulebooks on queer players could be an interesting topic. There is more to explore regarding the actual ways in which

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[135] https://derknoten.wien/events/storytelling-for-patriarchal-survivors/ - The event was cancelled.

representation can occur, mechanisms that have queer potential and the distribution of impact that these mechanisms have on queer players.

Limits:

Watching sessions that are streamed online always have a theatrical aspect to them. They are not created to play in a small group but also be possibly watched by a big audience. This might change the decision-making process of players so the audience stays interested.

However, there is also an inherent performative aspect to TTRPGs, so the influence of streaming is not clearly identifiable. Nevertheless, watching queer players in a private session might showcase aspects of queer potential that stayed hidden to me.

Additionally, my thesis only includes papers that are available in English and German, which means that I have not been able to research if there are any existing literature or perspectives outside of this realm.

Summary – Scientific Contribution

Before writing this thesis I realized that there is a lack of scientific research concerning queerness and the way its expression can be negotiated in TTRPGs. Through my thesis I found out that TTRPGs can be an impactful way of exploring identity for queer people. Not only can they help them to find safe spaces, they also create spaces in which gender expression can be negotiated. This can be done either through identification with a character or through playing in a setting that pushes them to explore relationships and their impact on others. Explicitly *queer* games often focus on game mechanisms that differ from battle-heavy games and make these negotiations possible. I also found out that many queer players make use of these possibilities in a multitude of ways, but some do not (consciously) explore identity or have the goal to do so through TTRPGs.

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Abstract - German

Diese Arbeit untersucht Möglichkeiten der Erforschung und Verhandlung der queeren Identität durch das Spielen von Table Top Role Playing Games. Dabei wird ein „mixed method approach" angewendet, der Literaturrecherche (welche erklärt, wie sich TTRPGs seit ihrer Geburt verändert haben und wieso sie ein passender Weg für die Erforschung von Gender sind), Expert*inneninterviews von queeren Spielenden, und ein close reading von Regelwerken sowie die Interpretation von Spielvideos beinhaltet. Die erste Annahme einer klaren Trennung zwischen heteronormativen und queeren Arten des Spielens von TTRPGs wird schnell verworfen. Stattdessen werden unterschiedliche Ansätze und queere Aspekte entdeckt, darunter das Bilden von Gemeinschaften („community building"); die Verhandlung des Genderausdrucks durch ein Spiel, das den Fokus auf ein gemeinsames Storytelling setzt; sowie die Erschaffung von queeren Räumen, die normative menschliche Beziehungen sowie Identitäten in Frage stellen.

Abstract - English

This thesis investigates the possibility of exploring and negotiating queer identity through playing Table Top Role Playing Games. It follows a mixed method approach, including literature research (explaining how TTRPGs have changed since their emergence and why they are a fitting way of exploring gender), expert interviews of queer players, and a close reading of rulebooks as well as the interpretation of game play videos. The first assumption of a clear line between heternonormative and queer ways of playing TTRPGs is quickly blurred, making way for different approaches and queer aspects like community-building, negotiation of gender-expression through playing with the focus on communal storytelling, and creating queer spaces that challenge normative relationships and identities.