RADICAL PLAY: TABLETOP ROLE-PLAY GAMES AND THE QUEER COMMUNITY

by

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Over the past decades, tabletop role-play games have become featured more and more in media resulting in a growing popularity and a growing community. Unlike the past, this new community is more diverse and accepting, especially of the LGBTQ+ community, but this is not currently reflected in research and very few academics are investigating tabletop role-play gaming through a queer lens. The study aims to answer three main research questions: How does the LGBTQ+ community interact with tabletop role-play games? Where and why do queer people play tabletop role-play games? Can tabletop role-play games be considered a queer third place? By analyzing past literature about space and tabletop role-play games, it becomes clear that the definition of space is flexible, that space is shaped by people, and that tabletop role-play games can facilitate personal development. In total, 32 queer adults were surveyed about their identity and experience with tabletop role-play gaming and their answers reveal how queer people have transformed games so that they can connect with themselves and others and imagine worlds where they can exist authentically. This research adds information to a growing field by queering the physical tabletop role-play game space and it serves as evidence for the need of LGBTQ+ spaces and research.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Who I am and Why this Topic

From a young age, children across the world are told stories filled with magical creatures and mystical faraway lands and these tropes have become a staple in the fantasy genre and in our lives. The world of fantasy has always entranced me and I, like many other fantasy lovers, used magical worlds as an escape from the monotony of everyday life. This feeling is what originally drew me to Dungeons and Dragons and other role-playing games, but once I started playing, I also found connection and community. TTRPGs gave me a space where I had the freedom to express my gender and sexuality without judgment. In my first Dungeons and Dragons campaign four years ago, I decided to play a character that uses exclusively they/them pronouns even though I used she/her pronouns and by playing this character I got to dip my toes into expressing myself as nonbinary. Now, I have played other tabletop role-play games that have allowed me to explore different aspects of myself. In my research, I want to find out in what ways tabletop role-play games have impacted the Queer community and provided a space for exploration.

Although my experiences with tabletop role-play games have been nothing but positive, the table role-playing community can still be incredibly exclusive. My perspective as a queer, nonbinary, half Asian American individual directly impacts and informs the work that I do and as a result my research keeps in mind that queer people are not a monolith. My target audience for my research is people in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, although I hope my work can be useful and applicable to other fields, such as sociology and geography. I also would like for anyone interested in this work to be able to read and understand my findings. Even though this is a piece of scholarly research, my focus is not only to theorize new ways of examining tabletop role-play games, but to also showcase LGBTQ+ joy and create a work that people can

see themselves in. I want to make sure my work is accessible, especially for the LGBTQ+ community, because ultimately, I do this work for my community. I want my work to provide evidence for the importance of queer spaces and lead to the creation of LGBTQ+ places that help provide resources and build community.

This paper begins by defining the key terms that will be used and discussed, including queer, third place, and tabletop role-play game. To fully situate these terms, my research, and my findings, I provide historical background to contextualize what queer spaces have looked like and what purpose they have served. Besides LGBTQ+ places, I will explain the history of tabletop role-play games, specifically *Dungeons and Dragons*, arguably the most popular tabletop role-play game in the world. Before explaining the survey part of this research, a literature review is included that goes over the past research on theorizing space and tabletop role-play games. Following that are the methods of this work, which detail the research techniques, analytical framework, recruitment strategies, and safety protocols, and the statistical and thematic results. After discussing the findings, I suggest what future work should be done, why that work must be done, and what the future of queer spaces could be. Based on past research and survey answers, tabletop role-play games can be considered queer third places that foster connection, self-exploration, and radical future imagining.

Conceptual Frameworks

"Queer"

Homosexual, Gay, or Queer? This question has puzzled Queer studies and the LGBTQ+ community in general for decades. Language is ever changing, and this is especially true for identity words and time reshapes and recontextualizes original meanings, especially the term queer. Originally, queer was another word for weird or strange and starting in the late 19th

century the word was used derogatively towards people who did not adhere to heteronormativity. During the 1990s, LGBT theorists and activists reclaimed queer, and it became directly tied to their new political framework, which believed in the fluidity of sexuality, subversive expression, and confronting systems of power (Cohen 438-40). Currently, queer is widely understood as a reclaimed term that everyone can use, but it is important to understand its negative history and because of this it can still be considered harmful by mainly older LGBTQIA+ individuals. This reclaimed, modern, and widespread definition strays from the usage by queer radicals in the 1990s. According to the Cambridge dictionary, "having or relating to a gender identity or a sexuality that does not fit society's traditional ideas about gender or sexuality" ("Queer, *Adj.* (1)") and this reduces the previous definition to simply a synonym for LGBTQ+ or a more inclusive term than gay. In this thesis, I will be using the term queer with this secondary definition to describe the participants in my research, because I do not want to label their political beliefs. Despite this, much of my work is rooted in and the conclusions I come to align with radical Queer theory.

"Third Place"

Coined by Ray Oldenburg, third places are public spaces outside of one's home, the first place, and one's workplace, the second place. Ray Oldenburg is an American professor of Sociology at the University of West Florida and urban sociologist who is most well-known for "The Great Good Place", a book that explores various third places across the world and explains how they are crucial for any great town, city, and even civilization (Oldenburg xxviii). In this book, he argues that America has strayed farther and farther away from community life because of the creation of the suburbs and their lack of communal spaces (Oldenburg 7-8). To combat this, third places are needed so that people have somewhere neutral to talk to people and escape

from other parts of life (Oldenburg 21-26). What makes third places so necessary for the cultivation of connection and culture is that they are publicly accessible to all, and they are an accessible setting for informal life to take place.

Historically, third spaces have been vital for queer survival and have been hubs for revolutionary action, which has made them targets for violence and surveillance. In the 20th century, the most common queer third space was the gay bar and these bars have been safe spaces that not only provide necessary resources and shelter, but also provide community and acceptance. One of the most well-known LGBTQ+ historical events took place in New York City at a bar called the Stonewall Inn that hosted many queer regulars. Located in Greenwich Village, Stonewall Inn, like many other LGBTQ+ friendly bars, had regular police raids where patrons were arrested for public gay behavior and cross-dressing. On June 28th, 1969, the police came to the Stonewall Inn and ordered everyone to leave, but instead of leaving Stonewall's regulars resisted, and violence ensued. These riots continued until July 3, 1969, and this is considered the key turning point in queer history (*Sage Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*). Another contentious queer gathering place was the Compton Cafeteria located in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, California. Predating Stonewall by three years, in August 1966, police came and tried to arrest drag queens and trans sex workers for "female impersonation", but they fought back with their handbags, heels, and hot coffee (*Sage Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*). This event pushed others to stand up and protest the unfair treatment and discrimination of visibly queer people and ultimately it led to the gay rights movement in the 1970s through today.

To this day, LGBTQIA+ people still gather together in public community spaces. This still includes bar spaces, although the dynamics are shifting, and the number of gay bars continues to dwindle. According to one study, gay bars declined by 41% between 2002 to 2019,

but fortunately, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number is going back up again (Mattson). Conducted by Greggor Mattson, an associate professor of sociology at Oberlin College, the research also found that although the number of bars that specifically serve cisgender gay men is declining, more and more bars that are inclusive of all genders and races are opening (Mattson). Beyond the gay bar, schools are also increasingly providing spaces for LGBTQ+ students, which is facilitated by the introduction of gender and sexuality alliances and other clubs (Rodriguez). With the rise of technology, many people have opted for online spaces instead, because it can be more accessible, it can allow for one to not be publicly out while being in the community, it can make finding community easier, and it can be more comfortable to experiment with one's identity (Miller). As the landscape of queer third spaces continues to change with time, the definition of what counts as a third space could and possibly should change too.

"TTRPGs"

Even though tabletop role-play games are much more common and popular now, many people still do not know what a tabletop role-play game is. Also referred to as a TTRPG, tabletop role-play games are cooperative, structured storytelling games where players create characters to embody and then explore a world through conversation. They often use dice and pen and paper and reference a sourcebook that commonly at least details the core rules, character archetypes, and examples of play. It is common for players to build off of rules and create their own games based off of the mechanics from commercially available games, which is referred to as homebrewing. Unlike most board games or video games, in TTRPGs, there is no specific goal to achieve to win, instead, the goal of the game is to become immersed in the narrative and the world. Dr. Joseph Laycock, an associate professor of psychology at Texas State University, explains that "Role-playing can be understood as a collective act in which an alternate reality is

temporarily made present" (99). Most games are also played over the course of multiple different days that are often called sessions, and the overarching game they play is called a campaign. In many TTRPGs, there are not only players acting as individual characters, but there is also a game or dungeon master who does not play one specific character and instead acts as a narrator and a stand-in for any nonplayer characters that players may meet in the story. Typically, the game master also gets the final say on the game mechanics and is in charge of creating the basic world and planning the rudimentary premise and encounters in each game session.

The History of D&D

Considered the first commercially available and modern tabletop role-play game, Dungeons and Dragons is one of the most well-known TTRPGs. Prior to Dungeons and Dragons, Ernest Gary Gygax, one of the co-creators, created a medieval-themed wargame titled Chainmail. What set Chainmail apart from past wargames was not only its fantasy element but also the concept of "heroes" that individually fight and determine the result of the battle (Laycock 58-59). Using Chainmail as inspiration, David Arneson modified his game Blackmoor, which introduced the concept of leveling up and indoor settings, such as castles (Laycock 61). Later, at a convention they met and decided to collaborate on a new game that combined concepts from both Chainmail and Blackmoor, which would lead to the creation of Original Dungeons and Dragons. Also known as D&D, this game introduced the idea of classes, which is the role one takes in their group or party, such as wizard, cleric, or fighter, and races, which is the type of fantasy creature one is, such as human, dwarf, and elf. Originally published in 1974, Dungeons and Dragons has gone through nine different editions, and each edition has added changes to game mechanics, new classes, new races, new worlds, and more. Only 15 years after the publishing of the Original D&D in 1989, there were over 300 similar tabletop role-playing

games that were available to the public (Laycock 67), and Dungeons and Dragons continues to be a successful game.

From *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* to *Stranger Things* to *SNL*, Dungeons and Dragons has been depicted in the media time and time again, and as a result, a stereotype has stuck: white, young, impressionable, pervy, nerdy boys in a basement. Although this stereotype is far from representative of the current community, the TTRPG community is still majority white men, and many of them continue to use misogynistic and racist rhetoric that was originally in the game. The first D&D sourcebook makes clear the audience for this game is men only, which is seen in the use of men when describing the races, the use of only he/him pronouns, and the title itself, Men & Magic. Following editions begin to mention female characters, but the rules reinforce stereotypes about women, specifically the rules give women a lower maximum strength, height, and weight than men, which implies that all women are inferior to men (Garcia 238). The diminishing of women is not exclusive to the text of the sourcebooks; the illustrations of characters depict women as either overly sexualized, damsels in distress, or hideous creatures. Consistently across all of the sourcebooks, the number of women pictured is fewer than men, and the largest percentage is only 44 percent (Garcia 239). Despite the fact that women did play the game, D&D did not acknowledge this until later, and when women were included, they were reduced to objects for men to look at or destroy.

The assumptions made about women within Dungeons and Dragons sourcebooks and the community at large not only affect cisgender women, but they also affect people who express their gender outside of traditional, societal roles. The relegation of femininity to only being objects to be rescued, seduced, or killed in D&D limits what kind of roles people who are not men can take. Not only is the oversexualization of women in the sourcebooks dehumanizing,

coupled with the male assumed audience, it also assumes that the reader is a heterosexual male and that women are specifically sexual objects for men only. Even though LGBTQ+ people are not specifically excluded and called out, queerness is never mentioned, and this can make it seem like D&D is not a space for LGBTQ+ people to express themselves. After many editions, Dungeons and Dragons finally mentioned that players can design their characters however they like and can push the gender binary in the 5th edition, published in 2014. Even though this was very progressive for the time and an important acknowledgement of the existence and experiences of queer players, the wording of the statement is outdated, uses problematic terms such as "hermaphroditic", and lumps gender expression and sexuality together (Harper et al. 173). This alienating history makes clear that D&D is not a game that was designed for queer people in mind and still arguably is not.

The rules and images in the sourcebooks often also reaffirmed racist ideas, for example, the different races are given different inherent abilities, and some are even given limits on their roles or levels, which feeds into the idea that distinct groups of people are "genetically" better or worse at something because of their race. Even within a manmade fantasy context, the creators of D&D added racism to their world, for example, other races have a prejudice against Orcs because they are seen as savages. Racism is also seen in some supplemental books that use Asian and Middle Eastern cultural stereotypes as a model, such as *Oriental Adventures* from 1985 and the expansion *Al-Qadim* from 1992 (Garcia 241). Unfortunately, racist stereotypes continue to plague Dungeons and Dragons and only three years ago Wizards of the Coast, the company that now owns D&D, published *Spelljammer: Adventures in Space*, a new campaign book, which included a rerelease of the "race" called the Hadozee, monkey like creatures that were once enslaved, which directly parallels American slavery and continues the racist comparison of black

people to monkeys (*Spelljammer*). Wizards of the Coast has since apologized and taken back the publishing of the Hadozee, but this makes clear that the D&D community is not as progressive or inclusive as it could be. The historical and continuing racism and sexism in D&D material and in the community actively prevent people from wanting to join.

Considered an art by some and collective madness by others, Dungeons and Dragons has been incredibly controversial since it first came out. Starting in the 1980s, there was a widespread fear of the rise of satanism and ritual abuse in the United States of America and how this would corrupt children and traditional values, which led to increased religious conservatism. Dubbed the Satanic Panic, fantasy role-play games became a target for blame, and Americans thought that D&D specifically was "a dangerous religious movement masquerading as entertainment" (Laycock 75). One group that led the campaign against D&D is BADD, Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons, who used specific court cases where young adults blamed their characters in role-play games for their violent actions to convince parents that D&D caused children to have premarital sex, partake in drugs, and commit crimes (Laycock 149-51). They also claimed that role-playing was psychologically damaging because it would lead people to not know the difference between the real world and the imagined worlds in games. Because of this, D&D gained the reputation of being morally wrong because it promoted sinful behavior and a disdain for God's real world.

Dungeons and Dragons has continued to be profitable and beloved, but in the modern day, there are many more tabletop role-playing games to choose from. The range of TTRPG genres has expanded, and now there are not only new fantasy games, but also science fiction, dystopian, horror, romance, mystery, and historical games too. This shift in genre first started in the late 1980s, where urban fantasy and more narrative-focused games became favored (Laycock

177). These games were typically darker in their themes and, “not only retained the cynicism and anxieties of the modern world but enhanced and accentuated them” (Laycock 178-179). With the expansion of genres, there has also been a growing number of games that do not include a combat element, unlike the games they originally draw inspiration from. Later in the 21st century, TTRPGs started to become more and more specifically designed to be inclusive, including being more inclusive of queerness. One example of a popular game that incorporates queer themes is Monsterhearts, which is based on the personal queer experiences of the creator, Avery Adler, and includes a section in the sourcebook on how to explore LGBTQ+ themes through the game. Another more obvious example is Thirsty Sword Lesbians where all the characters and the world itself is explicitly queer. Besides sexuality, there are new TTRPGs that delve into gender identity, such as Sleepaway, which includes an expansive list of abstract concepts to describe gender categories, such as “A Cloud Over the Sun” and “Lighthouse in the Darkness”. These nontraditional gender categories help to make the game more inclusive to nonbinary individuals, and they push players to think about gender outside of the binary in a fun way. All of these examples show the growing normalization of queer existence and experience in the world of tabletop role-play games, and they reflect how the world generally has become more welcoming too.

Literature Review

Examining Space

One of the key concepts explored in this study is space, but space has been defined and redefined over and over again. In Ray Oldenburg's definition of place, he defines space as purely physical, but he also recognizes how space can be used to express power. He claims that, "The environment, as I've said, is a tyrannical force but, increasingly, human beings are the real tyrants, for the environment is increasingly fashioned by them" (295 Oldenburg). This statement starts to acknowledge how space is manufactured by humans for humans. Since The Great Good Place was published, other scholars have analyzed and critiqued its claims from different fields and perspectives, including a feminist lens. Using this perspective, it becomes clear that the use of space and space itself is shaped by gender and economic, social, and political forces (2). This is further explored in a paper titled "Feminist Perspectives on Third Places", which states that gender is embodied and performed in third places, both in normative ways dictated by the space but also in nonnormative ways were the function of space is reworked and reframed by women for women, which is not considered in Oldenburg's work (11-12). This perspective expands the definition of space beyond the inherently tangible and imagines space as a feeling, a tool of power, and a practice.

Using the concept of space as an expression of power, queer studies has delved deeper into how space manifests and who space is predominantly imagined and made for. Historically queer space has been understood in the binary of heterosexual or homosexual (Oswin 91) and as inclusive places that directly oppose heterosexually produced space (Goh 465-66). In recent research this notion has become more and more opposed and contested. For example, Natalie Oswin, a geography associate professor at the University of Toronto, complicates this binary in

her article “Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space” and asserts that queer space implies a specifically white homogeneity (93). Similarly, Kian Goh, an Assistant Professor of Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, highlights how queer urban space is also classed, which complicates who “queer spaces” actually includes (Goh 466). These works show how even within “inclusive” queer spaces there are people who are still excluded in order to maintain power structures and they begin the conversation as to how to combat this.

Within literature on specifically queer places, space has been classified as physical, but its definition is flexible. Written by Jack Halberstam, a prolific author and professor of gender studies at Columbia University, his definition is: “Queer Space’ refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (Halberstam 6). Under this definition, Halberstam imagines queer space as a kind of possibility space that facilitates a specific way of life and thinking. Another definition of space is explored in the article, “There’s No Such Thing as a Gay Bar: Co-Sexuality and the Neoliberal Branding of Queer Spaces”, which describes space as “active, embodied, and tension-filled” (Branton and Compton). Based on this definition, spaces and their norms become in flux and binaries of a space become clearer and more questionable, such as safe versus unsafe sexual expression.

Three places where the definitions of queer space have been explored in academia are nightclubs, schools, and the internet. In her book *Feels Right: Black Queer Woman and the Politics of Partying in Chicago*, Kemi Adeyemi explores the exclusion of Black Queer women in club spaces and what it means to feel good versus feel right within a space. Unlike the other works, Adeyemi’s book also gives an embodied answer to how excluded members of the

LGBTQ+ community can reorganize and take back space for themselves (Adeyemi). One work that explores queer spaces in schools is the book, Critical Concepts in Queer Studies and Education: An International Guide for the Twenty-first Century, and they look at space as a non-fixed "manifestation of power" that can normalize difference and "disrupt the dominant order" (Rodriguez et al.). From online chat rooms to social media, queer youth have used the internet as an accessible and malleable space to explore their identity, find community, and raise awareness for LGBTQ+ issues (Miller). Across queer spaces, it becomes clear that queer space is considered to be resilient, adaptable, and resistant to cisheteropatriarchal standards.

Examining TTRPGs

In academia, tabletop role-play gaming is an under-studied topic and very few researchers have explored the potential of TTRPGs to its fullest extent. One question that is relatively more researched is why people play tabletop role-play games. According to past research, tabletop role-play games can help individuals increase their creativity, empathy, teamwork, and problem-solving capabilities. To measure how tabletop role-play gaming improves creativity, Tsui-shan Chung surveyed 170 people online and administered divergent thinking tests. The results found that people who have played TTRPGs, for any amount of time, scored the highest overall (Chung 64). Although this correlation could be unrelated, other studies have similar conclusions, including Darrin F. Coe's study where he interviewed 16 individuals about their experience with tabletop role-play gaming and a study conducted in Nova Scotia, Canada where 6 young adults were interviewed and given a questionnaire about their personal strengths and general experience playing TTRPGs (Orr et al. 71-72). The first study concluded that TTRPGs could help player's cognitive flexibility (Coe), while the second study recorded that players wanted to exercise their creativity through play (Orr et al. 78). From problem solving

to imagining, these studies show how TTRPGs can help facilitate and better people's ability to be creative in some manner.

Beyond creativity, tabletop role-play games can easily help people develop their social skills, because of the collaborative and communication-oriented nature of TTRPGs. Beyond a creative focus, the study from Nova Scotia also found that another common player focus was social, which includes the creation of new relationships, the deepening of friendships, and becoming more outgoing (Orr et al. 76-77). Published in 2017, Darrin F. Coe concludes that the overarching main drive for continuing to play TTRPGs can be considered "the act of becoming", which includes not only imaginative creativity, but also belonging (Coe). This belonging is facilitated by group bonding and the exercise of empathy and morality common in TTRPGs (Coe 79). Premeet Sidhu and Marcus Carter take this a step further by arguing specifically for transgressive play, which they define as play that pushes boundaries and can be offensive or problematic (Sidhu and Carter 709). Both in their examination of three Dungeons and Dragons groups and their 354 survey responses, they found that transgressive play can give players more agency, allowing them to play the game in new ways, and it led to collaborative negotiation, which push players to learn and expand their playstyle (Sidhu and Carter 720-21). Across many works on the social aspect of playing TTRPGs, it became clear just how crucial it is for play and for creating games that are memorable and emotionally impactful.

Out of this research, academics have applied and studied tabletop role-play gaming in two main contexts: therapy and schooling, and have found that the benefits of playing reflect past research. Published in 2022, a study was done on the therapeutic possibilities of Dungeons and Dragons and three social workers started and observed a game with three participants. After over a year of taking notes on this campaign, they came to the conclusion that D&D helped improve

the participants' prosocial behaviors, including their empathy, confidence, confrontation skills, and decision making, and these newly learned behaviors translated outside of the game too (Abbott et al. 26-28). Similarly, two educators in an article argued that when implemented in the classroom setting, Dungeons and Dragons could increase students' creativity, teamwork skills, communication, decision making, and problem solving (Morgan and Turner 30-31). These two research projects continue the precedent that tabletop role-play gaming is not only a fun hobby, it is also a method for people to improve and learn about themselves, others, and the world.

Besides improving cognitive and social skills, one of the main draws to tabletop role-play games and why people continue to play them is that they facilitate character creation and internal exploration. In 2007, 233 students were tasked with creating a fantasy avatar and then were given a personality test and when compared these characters reflected the traits of the person who created the character. They specifically discovered that extroverts were more likely to create character with high charisma and that societal gender roles were reflected in characters too (Park and Henley 44). These findings are supported by the Nova Scotia study that not only found creative focus in some player's motives, but also found an identity focus where character creation gave children an opportunity to represent different parts of themselves (Orr et al. 77). Through playing a character, players can think about their own identity and contemplate who they are.

Although character creation is a draw for many different people, this can specifically attract queer people because tabletop role-play gaming can provide a unique and safe space to experiment with one's gender or sexuality. Before some come out or come to terms with their queerness, it can be difficult to find a space to comfortably express queerness in public, but role-playing games can provide a semi communal space where gender is inherently understood as

performed. Josephine Baird unpacks this in her article, “Role-playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games”, where she describes role-play as a transformational play container for self-exploration that has the ability to character distance and to enact the taboo (Baird 105). Three key characteristics that make role-play have this unique capability are bleed where real-life and make-believe blend, inter-immersion where one’s role is reflected back to them by other players, and the going in and out of character which allows for self-reflection (Baird 101-2). The article “Reparative Play in *Dungeons & Dragons*” agrees with Baird’s claims and specifically identifies nine different “selves” that players’ characters typically fall into which all in some way let players embody their character and exercise autonomy in a more inclusive world (Femia 81-83). Other common themes found in queer play were community, liberation, inner struggles, and healing from past trauma, which all are examples of how play can reflect the real world (Zabala et al. 5-8). Some games even specifically facilitate gender and sexuality exploration by being explicitly queer, which allows players to imagine futures outside of cisheteropatriarchy more easily.

One of the fundamental texts of game studies is *Homo Ludens* by Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian, who defined the game world as a performative play space apart, known as the “magic circle”, and argued that play is a cultural phenomenon that creates meaning, which is necessary for the establishment of civilization (Huizinga). Using Huizinga’s theory of how play creates meaning and the concept of the magic circle, other academics have built on this to explain how tabletop role-play gaming functions as a place and how play functions. One person who does this work is Jake Montanarini, a lecturer at the Norwich University of the Arts, namely in his study titled “The Space at the Table between Players”. In this study, Montanarini designed his own storytelling card game and based on his observations of the game in play, he theorizes

that the space between players acts as a, “stage upon which our relationships are explored, challenged and celebrated in fairly unique ways” (143). Through this game stage, players can give themselves a purpose and thus meaning. Placed into a queer context, magic circles can facilitate “rehearsals for revolution” where all players take on both the role of actor and spectator and imagined futures can be played out (Kawitzky). Unlike some other tabletop role-play worlds, many queer utopias generated from TTRPGs are directly tied to the real-life marginalization that queer people face and are a practice of resistant customization (Kawitzky). Instead of being disconnected fantasies, queer game worlds are rooted in historical knowledge and personal experience and act as both an imagined and real space of change and possibility.

Outside of traditional games, the play space still exists but is instead dependent on coding. Edmond Y. Chang explains that, “Playing a game is ultimately about learning the rules, the affordances and limitations of the platform, interface, and program, about understanding not the code itself but sensing and manipulating the contours, the structures of the code” (Chang 363). In the context of TTRPGs, learning the rules and structures of the game is crucial not only to play, but also to bend and question the limits of the game. Pushing back against game rules is common in many games, but queer gamers not only break the rules of game but also the rules of society. Considered a “borrowing, appropriating, and repurposing” (Baird 98) games to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, queergaming carves out space for queer expression in places that were designed to exclude, which is an act of transformation. At the *2014 Queerness & Games Conference*, the keynote speech urges players to question the assumptions made in play and inherent political decisions hidden in game design by “mutating, breaking, and twisting games” (Clark and Kopas). This is crucial for gaming to be a viable space for revolutionary imagining and the envisioning of queer utopias.

The majority of research on tabletop role-play games does not acknowledge how the act of playing is shaped by one's identity, even though one's identity impacts one's experiences, sense of self, and more. Although there are many works that delve into tabletop role-play games, queerness, and space and their intersections, very few sources explain how all three interact with each other and are shaped by one another. The goal of this study is to fill this gap and explore how queer people engage with one another and the game itself in tabletop role-play game spaces. By examining the queer experience specifically, this research hopes to show how identity can impact play and how TTRPGs are received and used.

Methods

My research is split into two parts: first, a literature review that will look at and analyze data from past research, including theoretical and experimental-based works, and secondly, surveys of LGBTQ+ volunteers. For all of the sources and data, I analyze using thematic analysis and focus on finding any commonalities with prior research and any patterns in why people choose to play tabletop role-play games and how they interact with the game and other people playing. By analyzing this, I will be able to see what similarities they share with the reasons why third places are important, especially for marginalized groups.

About the Literature Review

To begin, I will closely read materials I have gathered and find relevant information to my research by looking for details that relate to tabletop role-play games, the queer community building, and third spaces. All of my materials are peer reviewed and scholarly sources from mainly sociology and Queer studies. These sources provide a larger context for either my key terms, the history of my area of study, or my findings. In total, I examined 34 different sources, including six books and 28 articles. To choose these sources, I focused on those that either addressed how space is defined and made or how tabletop role-play games are used. One limitation to my literature review is that it focuses on the modern American context, because that is where my research will take place and there is not much information on queer third places from before the 20th century, because the LGBTQ+ community was much smaller and underground then. Overall, there are not any sources that directly address how LGBTQ+ individuals interact with tabletop role-play games as a physical space and what purpose this space serves. By bringing these sources together, I hope to address this and bridge the gap between queer community space research and TTRPG space research.

About the Survey

For the second half of my research, I created a survey on Qualtrics to gather information on the current state of tabletop role-playing games within the queer community. To begin my work, I got approval of my research plan and survey questions from the Institutional Review Board and followed their ethical requirements for research with human subjects. In total, there are 18 questions on the survey: seven yes or no questions, seven multiple-choice questions, and four short-answer questions. Most of the yes or no questions are about whether the survey taker fits the criteria to participate in this study. The multiple-choice questions cover identity, location, and the number of games. For the study to be viable and inclusive, I have included questions on racial identity, gender identity, and sexuality, so that I can see the range of identities my results cover. Most of the short answer questions build off of other multiple choice or yes or no questions, and they ask one to describe in more detail their experience playing tabletop role-play games, including why one decided to play a TTRPG and how one feels when they are actively playing.

The criteria for participants is that they must be a part of the queer community currently and have experience with at least one tabletop role-play game. I did not survey nonqueer people, and because of this, I won't know if tabletop role-play games are played for similar reasons by cisgender, heterosexual people. Even so, there has been previous work surveying and interviewing general TTRPG players on why they play, and my research does not seek to compare the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and those who are not. Another criterion for survey takers is that they are current students at the University of Oregon. As a result, my data will mainly cover left-leaning young white adults who live in Eugene, Oregon, and the Pacific Northwest generally. Due to the age of most participants, the results reflect how young people

are using tabletop role play games, which may be radically different and more flexible than how older generations played. To recruit survey takers, I made and posted posters with a project description, the study's purpose, eligibility requirements, my contact information, and a QR code to the survey on the University of Oregon campus and online. Although I want my results to include a diverse range of identities, there is no way for me to ensure that the sample size will be all-inclusive, and the results of my study are not meant to be perfectly representative.

To ensure participants are informed on what their participation will require and mean, I attached an informed consent form that describes in more specific detail the precautions taken to ensure participants' privacy, my background as a researcher, how the collected information will be used, and any potential risks or benefits. The survey does not collect any email addresses or IP addresses, and the survey link is anonymous. In my final results, I have kept participants anonymous, and their survey answers will be permanently deleted by Qualtrics once the study is completed. In the survey itself, I do not ask for people's names, and the main personal information I ask for is identity information to ensure that survey takers fit the demographic I am looking for and see if there could be any potential biases. All of the data is password protected, and only I will have access to it. There is no compensation for filling out the survey, but I have ensured that participants have access to the finalized work through a blog linked at the end of the survey. The website includes a description of the study, a link to the survey, and will include a reworked and condensed version of the results of my study.

Results

In total, I collected 32 responses over three months. Of these 32 responses, only 27 were viable because they fit the necessary requirements to take the survey. The first questions of the survey ensure that the survey taker has looked at the consent form, has played a tabletop role play game at least once, is at least 18 years old, and is a current University of Oregon Student. Besides the preliminary safety and demographic questions, the survey included the following 12 questions:

1. What is your gender identity?
2. What is your sexual orientation?
3. Do you identify as asexual and/or aromantic?
4. What is your racial identity?
5. How many games have you played before?
6. What tabletop role-play games have you played? Which one is your favorite?
7. Where do you typically play tabletop role-playing games?
8. Why did you decide to play TTRPGs?
9. How would you describe your experience with TTRPGs on a scale of positive to negative?
10. Why would you describe your experience that way?
11. While playing, did you feel comfortable expressing your identity?
12. Why did you feel that way?

Although there are 27 people who fit the demographics for the questions, some people opted out of answering some questions, so the total number of answers varies.

The first four questions gather information on the identities of participants. As predicted, the majority of people who took the survey identified as white, and less than a fourth of participants identified as nonwhite (see fig. 1). This is likely because Eugene, Oregon is not very racially diverse, and the tabletop role-play gaming community has a history of being exclusionary. As a result, the conclusions made about queer tabletop role-play gaming are more

applicable to the white experience. Unlike race, survey takers covered a wide range of gender identities and sexual orientations. For gender, the two most common identity labels were nonbinary and cisgender woman and generally there were more non-cisgender individuals surveyed (see fig. 2). The majority of people surveyed identified as somewhere on the asexual and aromantic spectrum and less than a third of people identified as allosexual and alloromantic (see fig. 3). Overall, the most varied and spread out identity category was sexuality, which included bisexual, lesbian, gay, pansexual, queer, and no label, and no one surveyed identified as heterosexual (see fig. 4). The diversity of gender and sexual orientations allows this study to cover a wider gamut of experience and see how the queer community as a whole may interact with and use tabletop role-playing games.

Figure 1: Gender Identity

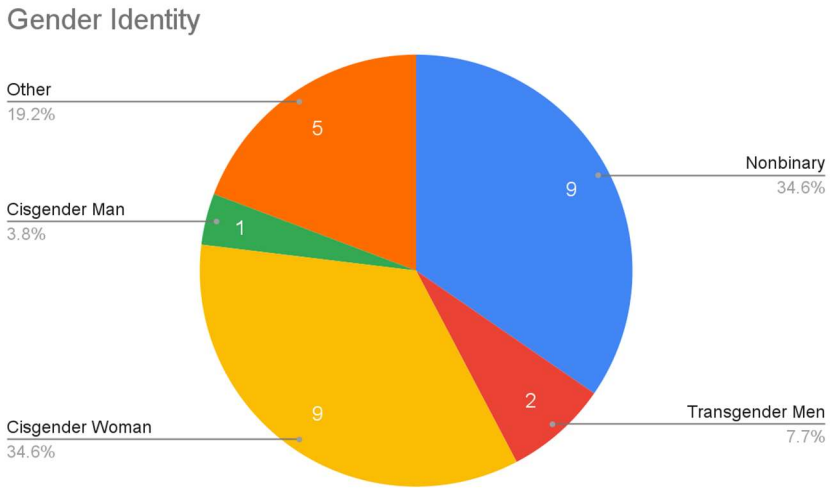


Figure 2: Sexuality

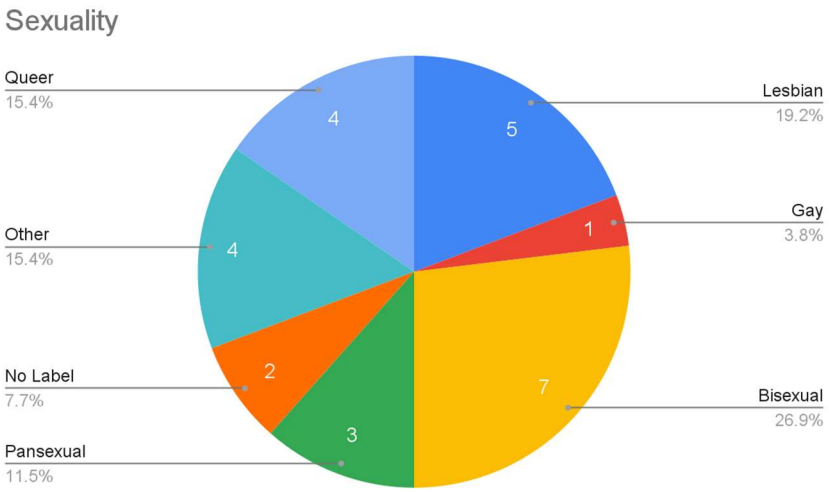


Figure 3: Ace Spectrum

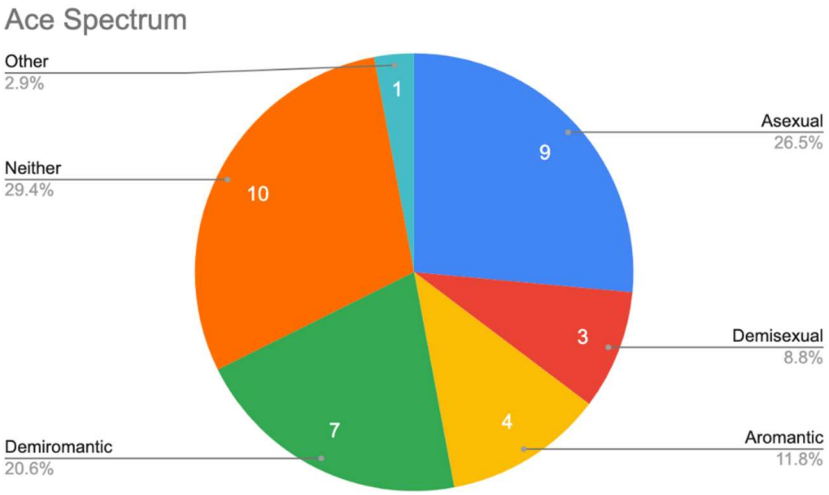
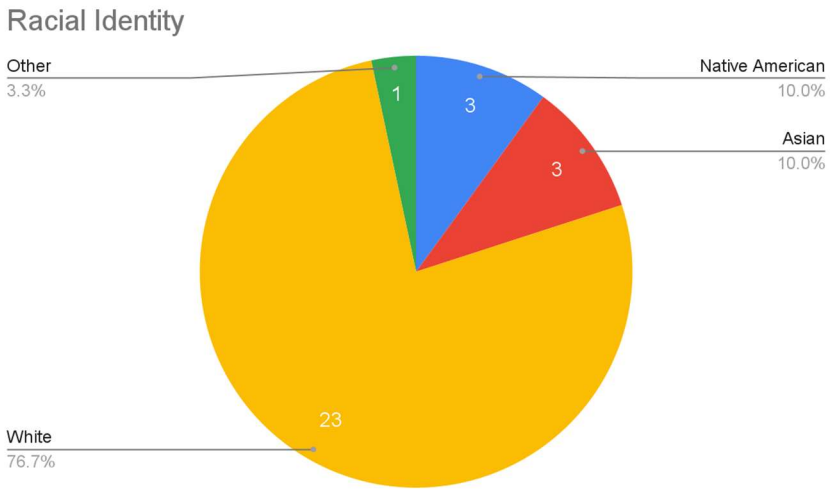


Figure 4: Racial Identity



Following the identity questions, the survey asks participants basic questions about their tabletop role-play gaming experience, including frequency of play, location, and specific games played. The findings of the study are based on the written feedback collected, but no direct quotes are included for the safety of the participants. For the number of games played, the study found that 60 percent of those surveyed have played a tabletop role-play game only one or two times (see fig. 5), and because of this, the overall experience of players is based solely on a few experiences, which may not be representative. Even though most people have only played once or twice, many participants expressed interest in playing again and learning more about TTRPGs. The most common places where players hosted games were at their home or someone else's home. Even though private homes made up half of the locations, the other half are public spaces open to everyone, including online spaces, libraries, game stores, dorm common areas, and club spaces (see fig. 6), which shows that people are playing TTRPGs in public, third places. From fantasy to realism, the games named by survey takers spanned a wide array of genres, although most games had some kind of magical or supernatural element. Some recurring genres were horror, science fiction, comedy, dystopian, cyberpunk, and mystery. Overwhelmingly,

Dungeons and Dragons was the most mentioned tabletop role-play game by far, and 24 out of 25 answers collected included Dungeons and Dragons, and many noted that it was their favorite game. Some other games that were listed multiple times are Pathfinder, Monster of the Week, and homebrewed games. None of the games reported specifically incorporate queer narratives into its game design, rulebook, or themes.

Figure 5: Number of Games Played

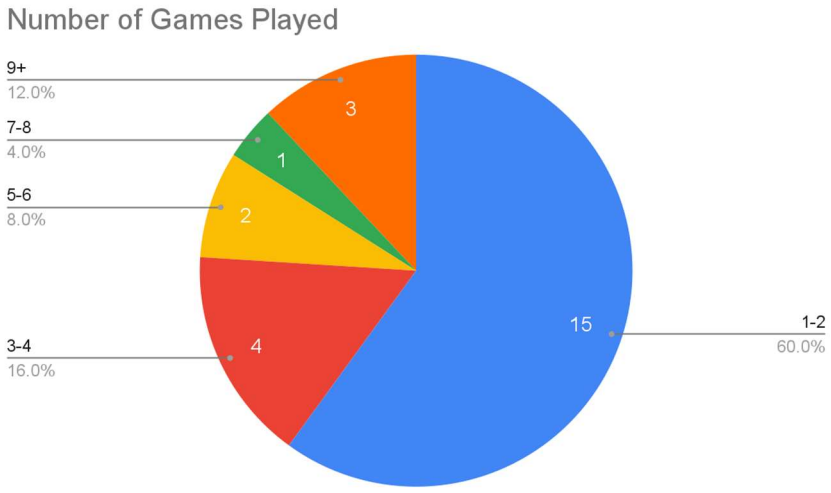
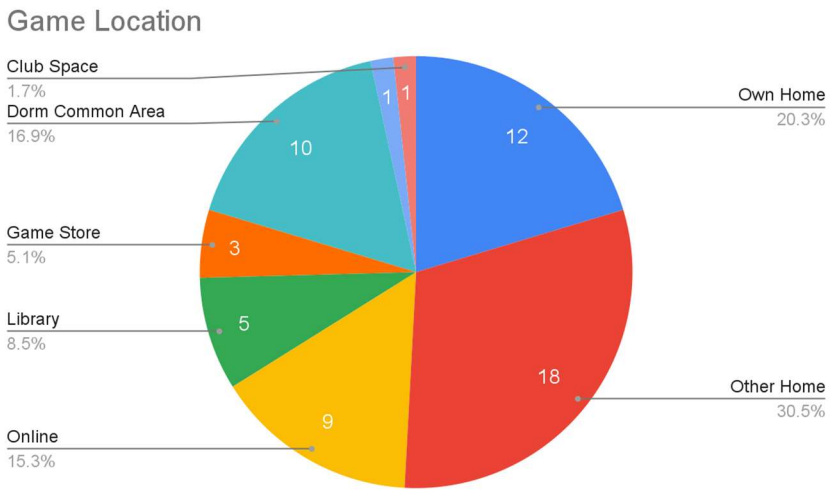


Figure 6: Game Location



The next questions cover the actual experience of playing and uncover why people decide to play and enjoy playing tabletop role-playing games. The motives to first play can be split into

three overarching themes: connection, expression, and interest. Respondents consistently described wanting to bond with people over shared interests through TTRPGs, and many described how their friends, romantic partner, or family convinced them to play, and they agreed so that they could connect with them on a deeper level. Expression can be further divided into two categories, self-expression and creative expression. TTRPGs gave some people a space to truly be themselves, experiment with their pronouns, gender expression, and names, and reflect on different aspects of their personality. Over and over again, people said that they were interested in TTRPGs as an outlet for creativity, whether that be through crafting stories or role-playing. Another common reason was because of a past interest in the fantasy genre in general. Some people also decided to play because of tabletop role-play gaming-related media, such as podcasts, shows, blogs, video games, and books that either mention or focus on TTRPGs. Despite the original focus of tabletop role-play games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, battling is never mentioned as an important draw or factor to playing TTRPGs, and the mechanics of the game are less of a focal point. Unlike the past major draws for playing TTRPGs, currently queer people decide to play because of how the game can be used as a creative outlet that facilitates relationship building and storytelling.

Out of 24 responses, 16 people described their experience as purely positive, and the other respondents described their experience as either somewhat positive or negative, specifically seven people felt somewhat positive and one person felt somewhat negative about their experience. No one described their experience as purely negative. Two of the main reasons why people enjoyed playing is because of the sense of community they got, and they enjoyed the collaborative storytelling process, which is reflected in the main reasons for playing originally. Despite not playing explicitly queer tabletop role-play games, many people reported exploring

their own identity through the game and expressed nonnormative gender or sexuality through their characters, which added to their game experience. On the other hand, the negative responses largely cited game mechanics issues, including clashes in gameplay style among players, unclear rules, too-long sessions, and the dislike of certain elements of play. Some also attributed their bad experience to the unsafe game environment, which led to the disregard of people's identities, homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia.

Similarly, for comfort in identity expression, it was crucial to play with a group that was accepting and respectful of boundaries. Almost 75 percent of the survey takers said they were comfortable with expressing their identity in game and this is because most people played with people they already knew accepted them and were also queer themselves. Many people also believed that the TTRPG community as a whole is predominantly queer and thus felt comfortable playing TTRPGs. Some also did not incorporate their personal identity into their character, so this worry became irrelevant. Even though I kept the question open to experiences about any identity, most of the answers either focused only on sexuality or addressed queerness in general and in both cases neither gender nor other identities are directly addressed. Despite this, there were participants who either explained how they felt comfortable expressing their gender or how they were misgendered during games leading to a negative overall experience. Whether about gender identity or sexuality, the main factor that influenced player experience was the cohort they played with, which shows how crucial social aspect is to the game and its players.

Discussion

The results of the study show that through creating characters, the narrative, and the overall world, tabletop role-play games provide players the tools to explore their relationship with themselves, other players, and society. Seen in both past research and this study, when playing tabletop role-play games, people tend to create characters based on themselves in some way or another. The fictional aspect of playing TTRPGs allows for distance between the character and the player and the player from other players, which gives everyone playing more freedom to explore parts of themselves and their relationship with others in unexpected or novel ways that are not accepted in everyday life. Specifically, TTRPGs can be helpful for people who are experimenting with their gender expression because individuals can easily change their pronouns and imagine a new look for themselves without being questioned, which aligns with the theory of gender as performance. This is reflected in the answers to the experience questions that explained how TTRPG sessions gave them a safe space to express their gender truthfully and without judgement. To allow for authentic characters, many times the world created in the game will be more inclusive and societally nonnormative expressions of sexuality and gender are rendered normal and accepted, and prejudice is obsolete. On the other hand, at times the game's world will mirror society and through the game players can work through real issues, such as discrimination, internalized heteronormativity, and more. Both types of worlds allow players to reflect on their identity and imagine a world where they can express themselves freely. For some, the campaigns they play are less serious, but for others, tabletop role-play gaming can be incredibly personal and an extension of their regular life. Tabletop role-playing is not simply about playing a game, it can also be about giving meaning to people's lives outside of the game and "Games can serve as sites for us to gesture towards queer utopias, to imagine alternative

ways of being and living. For that to happen, we have to interrogate and rethink the work of playing" (Clark and Kopas) and understand that play can have deep meaning.

Despite the variety in the negative and positive answers received about experiences with tabletop role-play games, across all responses, it was clear that how enjoyable a game is entirely depends on the group one plays with. All of the negative experiences were ultimately because of group dynamics, whether that be a clash in gameplay style or personal beliefs. Both cases consist of people who feel isolated from the group and the game because they were not being fully seen and included in some way. In contrast, participants who had positive experiences playing and largely also felt comfortable expressing themselves because they played in groups where their identity was affirmed, and this was often with other LGBTQ+ people. This is also supported by the emphasis on community within the answers as a main draw to playing TTRPGs.

Given these results, the tabletop role-play gaming space can be understood as malleable and as shaped directly by those who interact within it. Not only do players create a story together through play, but they also create a physical space and establish rules and expectations for each other when engaged in play. Unlike traditional third places, tabletop role-play gaming is not bound to a specific space, yet the accepted behaviors within that space do not change when the location changes. Whether clearly written or not, every public place has specific rules, but when people play tabletop role-play games in these spaces, they are making them into a uniquely different space with new rules and functions. By establishing TTRPG gaming spaces within existing third places, players are disrupting and recreating the norms of that space, and this is an act of queer placemaking. The creation of the strong community of queer tabletop role-play gamers proves that the queer community has done the work to reframe and insert themselves into a world where they have historically been excluded.

Traditionally, third places are considered physical, immovable buildings or areas that provide everyone with the space outside of home and work to find and interact with other people. Although tabletop role-play games are not a place themselves, they arguably can become a distinct, separate space within a third place that has its own set of rules and acts as a third place. Besides providing community, TTRPG spaces do fulfill the role of third places because they are a low-profile means for escape and conversation that happens in public. Ray Oldenburg even recognizes the connection between games and third places and states that, "Third places often incorporate these activities and may even emerge around them. Conversation is *a game* that mixes well with many other games according to the manner in which they are played" (Oldenburg 30). Third places are also meant to be a place that everyone can enjoy, which then levels the status and roles of individuals there. Tabletop role-play games do this to an extreme degree by giving everyone the equal ability and responsibility to shape the game through storytelling and character creation, and this can also shape the physical play space as a result.

By reviewing past materials that define how space is imagined and exploring the mechanics and purpose of tabletop role-playing games in addition to surveying the experiences of LGBTQ+ players, it becomes clear that tabletop role-play gaming can provide queer people a third place where they can explore their identity and reimagine the world. Although this study fills a research gap, further work should be done to build upon and affirm or disprove these findings. Due to limited time and the need for approval, the scope of this study is limited, making it difficult to delve deeper into topics and to cover a wide scope of experiences. To get the most responses to this survey, the survey was kept short so that survey takers were more likely to take it, and this research could get more responses in a short span of time. In the future, if someone were to reproduce this work, it should be done on a much larger scale over a longer period, so

there could be more varied answers and more diversity in sample size. Future studies should more closely examine how race impacts how people experience and utilize tabletop role-play games and what stories are crafted. Besides gathering more participants, future researchers should design the survey with more specific questions that build on the ways queer TTRPG players interact with space and the purpose of character and world creation.

Conclusion

Although Queer studies has grown immensely since its creation in the 1970s, it is vital for more work to be done and for the promotion of this area of study. Across the world, research on LGBTQ+ subjects must continue to legitimize the existence of queerness, prevent the erasure of the spectrum of queer experience, and so individuals can see themselves represented authentically. This is especially true for work that legitimizes the importance of queer community spaces. Despite the increase in queer visibility and acceptance, transphobia and homophobia still plague the United States of America and hundreds of queer people die every year as a result. Unfortunately, this will likely become more and more true given America's current political climate and the anti LGBTQ+ legislation that is increasingly being passed.

LGBTQ+ friendly bars will continue to be key spaces where queer folks can find and support each other, but it is also important to maintain and create spaces that are more accessible and open to queer people of all ages too. As queer books and materials become increasingly banned from schools, it will be vital for there to be LGBTQ+ friendly youth spaces outside of school clubs. Not only do these spaces need to be for everyone and outside of academic institutions, but they also will have to become less easily identifiable so that they are less likely to become a target for violence. This could manifest as places that do not identify as LGBTQ+ specific but are, spaces within places for queer people, online spaces, and more. People must also continue to take up space within places that have historically excluded LGBTQ+ individuals, and nonqueer individuals should stand in solidarity with this effort. More than ever all kinds of spaces will become more and more important as safe havens and political organizing hubs, they must be protected so that the queer community and all marginalized people can survive and thrive.

Increasing research in LGBTQIA+ topics and physical queer spaces will not be enough to resist the cisheteropatriarchy and continue the survival of nonnormative expression, people must begin the difficult process of future imagining. Everyone imagines a future where they can be themselves and accomplish their dreams, but for many, this future requires radical change that has never happened before. Labeled as merely a trivial pastime purely for entertainment, tabletop role-play games must be taken into consideration as a significantly generative and potentially powerful tool for revolutionary action. TTRPGs provide a way for people to picture possibilities and then play them out in a way where failure is expected and celebrated as part of the process. Despite the historical exclusion and diminishing of marginalized people, people have taken TTRPGs and reclaimed and reimagined them into worlds that inherently include and center their experience. This change is not only within the game, it also translates to the real world, which is seen in the expanding diversity in the tabletop role-play community and the creation of games that purposefully include. This demonstrates the potential of TTRPGs as an enactor of real and lasting change. Whether through role-play games, writing, art, or other methods, people must begin to imagine a future where everyone is free now.

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